

# Portugal 2016

*"The word adventure has gotten overused.  
For me, when everything goes wrong – that's when adventure starts."*

**Yvon Chouinard**



## How it all began

Something did go wrong; three times to be exact, and very early on. Before we left even.

We'd booked the ferry way before Christmas to go across on our usual route of Plymouth to Santander, Northern Spain. It's such an easy route for us, Plymouth being only a one hour drive from home, and then a relatively straight forward, if not long, 10 hour drive to Southern Portugal on the other side. A week before we were due to leave we received a text saying our sailing had been cancelled and to ring to arrange an alternative or a full refund. Apparently the ferry for that route had been delayed in dry dock in Poland. We still wanted to go obviously, and being that our time off of work was now set in stone we were keen to leave soon too. Brittany Ferries offered us another sailing on the same day to Bilbao, fifty miles east from our original destination port in Spain. It takes roughly the same amount of time to drive to Portugal from Bilbao as it does from Santander so that was no biggy. Problem was the departure port was Portsmouth instead of Plymouth. The drive to Portsmouth is tedious to be honest; 5 hours of tedious. It's not so bad up to Exeter but then it resorts to A roads, much of which is single carriageway, lots of roundabouts, towns and traffic to wade through. If you were sightseeing, overnighting in wayside country pubs and generally not bound by ferry embarking time deadlines, sure it might be prettier. It was the grit your teeth, knuckle down necessity though if we wanted to get back on our holiday schedule that made it more bearable. Oh and a generous refund, fuel allowance and cabin upgrade from Brittany Ferries helped too! The latter helped with the fact that the crossing was also an extra night on board, although with the crossing predicted to be 'a little bumpy', I wasn't sure how much.

A week later all this fell by the wayside anyway. The 'little bumpy' prediction had been ramped up to a 'lot bumpy with a touch of briny evil' in the Bay of Biscay, so much so that they cancelled the sailing. Another phone call later to Brittany Ferries and we were back to leaving from Plymouth on the same day but this time to Roscoff, Brittany in France. So only an hour's journey now from home but a mere nine hour journey added on to the other side. We were going to have to drive down two thirds of France, plus an extra few in Spain to put us back on course. What the hell; it's an adventure and we were still leaving on the same day so no time waiting to go on holiday at home. It was still going to be bumpy though but not Bay of Biscay bumpy....or so we thought.

Twenty four hours later, and with two days to go, Brittany Ferries disagreed and we were informed of cancellation number three. We had run out of options for our planned departure day and, as I was absorbing all this on the phone with the Brittany Ferries lady, Phil whispered "can we go tomorrow before the predicted storm hits?" Yes was the answer and with that our new tickets were issued and we went into an advanced whirlwind of packing. Surely this crossing would stick?

On our departure day our originally planned leisurely trip into town for last minute supplies and to change Euros was now a swifter one and then with Dillon, our holidaying next door neighbour's cat, now placed into the care of another reliable neighbour, we headed off. We had still half expected to get the dreaded cancellation text but we reached Plymouth with no such unwanted communication. It was finally time to start relaxing and what better way than a now leisurely meal at Samphire, a 100% vegan restaurant in Plymouth. One V-bone vegan steak (with vegan blue cheese, red wine sauce and homemade twice cooked chips), Italian meat ball mania burger and a Snickers cheesecake later, we rolled to the ferry port in every

hope that we would be rocking and rolling on to the ferry with no further delay. We did indeed roll on (we were one of the last to be loaded though after a significant wait dockside), leaving only a few minutes late, and the rocking was far less than anticipated. We basically got on board, went to sleep and woke up in France.

## Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> March

Brittany Ferries have this annoying habit of 'waking you up', supposedly gently with a blast of Bretagne harp music. It only plays, faded up through the ceiling speakers, for about 30 seconds but it's enough to make you tell it to 'va te faire foutre'. They leave it for a bit, just enough to think maybe it was a mistake, before its 'twinky twanky' tones invade once more. It's not bad music but when it's 6.30am, you can't switch it off, you're not generally a morning person and you have at least a nine hour drive ahead, they might as well have sent a raging French man in to the cabin to hit you over the head with a freshly baked baguette. In fact, I would have



preferred that as that would have at least sorted out breakfast too. Okay I admit, at least the music got us out of bed and moving and yes, I also admit we only made it back to the van in time. We were the third off the ferry.....and instantly on the wrong route through the middle of a very quaint but very 'transportationally complex' Bretagne village. Now I am a good navigator. Phil may argue this but put me in the middle of Dartmoor and I don't even need a map. Okay, put me in the middle of France with no map (we had no good maps for France and an electronic device that has a mischievous liking of small obscure routes); well that's really not my fault. With hindsight we should have really just followed the stream of traffic leaving the ferry port but we happily rejoined it, all the more richer and knowledgeable of French rural architecture and the misfalls of trusting technology over common sense. I'm sure I heard my tablet snigger and gaffaw in a French accent.



The journey down continued with no other such diversions. It being Easter Sunday the roads were relatively quiet. Phil had read somewhere that lorries and commercial vehicles weren't allowed on the roads in France on Easter Sunday and this certainly seemed to be the case. Many of the service stations had rows and rows of lorries parked up like they were marooned

on islands surrounded by rivers of roads. In fact it also seemed to be the case on Easter Monday too and as we travelled through Spain.

Once settled into the French roads I took the opportunity to put in a call to my parents. After all the travel changes and cancellations they had been getting anxious for us in only the way parents of a wise old age do. I wanted to reassure them we had arrived, the ferry hadn't sunk, we hadn't been kidnapped by asylum seeking Islamists, and we were driving on the right side of the road. Unfortunately they didn't answer and then I started worrying myself where they could be and why they hadn't answered. Tesco's after all wouldn't have been open today. Then I realised not only were we an hour ahead in France but the clocks had gone forward too over night. I had accidentally put in my own annoying early alarm call. Fortunately they didn't hear it anyway and awoke to find my message relieved that we were finally out of the country but safe. I rang them later for a better chat.

We pushed on; St Brieuc, Rennes, Nantes, Bordeaux. All the while I was being pulled along by the idea of arriving somewhere with a pretty view, opening a bottle of wine (we'd packed that essential beforehand knowing that the shops weren't open) and a bite to eat. Still we pushed on, and near to Bayonne and the Spanish border I realised that Phil had kicked in to his 'gotta get across that border, gotta get around the next corner' mentality. My vision of a relaxed non moving evening disappeared.

We crossed the border and around the next corner before Phil finally, near to dusk, announced that perhaps we should look for somewhere to overnight. My tablet 'rubbed its hands in glee' and with a Basque flurry of mischief pointed out some probable parking spots on the coast. We headed off to discover tiny car parks perched on cliff edges with no camping signs. 2 – 0 to the tablet navigation department then. We were stupid enough to still follow it up the side of a mountain with hope of a quiet spot too but of course the land is never as it seems off a 2D device as compared to a 45 degree slope with no pull in spaces in the dark. In desperation I suggested an industrial estate I have seen nearby. It was empty and with Easter holidays would no doubt remain so the next morning. Although far from salubrious, and so very far from my much anticipated vision of our evening's destination, it was at least private, flat and even had good light. The latter was a great advantage as it was now dark. So here it was we found ourselves cooking up a simple meal and supping red wine whilst viewing the side of a vast wall of industrial chrome and concrete in Northern Spain. We had driven over 600 miles to reach this point.

## **Monday 28<sup>th</sup> March**

It was a strange waking up the next morning. The yellow fluorescence of the industrial estate lighting was gradually absorbed into a grey dawn. For an industrial estate there was quite a lot of birdsong around but then there was a small allotment perched precariously on the steep hillside right beside it. In the light it was a strange mixture of landscapes; here vast white flashy buildings next to steep sided farm and forest land and then this little allotment.

It was the man from the allotment who caused me to have a wee accident and by this I don't mean a little accident. Let me explain. You see our van has many onboard facilities but a toilet is not one of them. So for moments when it is not convenient to use the 'natural conveniences' we both have 'wee bottles'; a 'his and hers' if you like, as different designs are required for anatomical reasons. Besides Phil fills his quicker than me generally so I need my own (although I'm sure he sneaks some in to mine when his is reaching the limit!). Being in



the middle of an industrial estate with no natural cover or places that would be 'environmentally viable' for such endeavours, I took this very morning to making use of my bottle. It was however, as is often the 'sods law' case I might add, just at that moment that Mr Allotment showed up. I didn't see him as I was kind of busy, but Phil announced it in such a way as to lead me to believe he was just about to peer in through the window. I panicked and rushed and in a split second my wee bottle momentarily spilt some of its contents on the floor. The guy didn't come near the van, and who can blame him as the language from within, coupled with the ensuing cleanup effort would have put anyone off.

All this added to the feeling that it was time to push on so after a quick flask of green tea was brewed for the journey, we got on the road. The Tablet suggested a long and winding route in land to return to the motorway but with another all day drive ahead, Phil was having nothing of it. I heard the Tablet swear at him but after a short pause it conceded and sent us back along the beautiful coastline we had arrived on. We were soon back on the 'treadmill' that is the motorway. It wasn't that we weren't interested in the beauty around us. We just had one thing on our minds; sunshine. Here it was chilly and mizzly. We stood more chance of chasing some warmth and sunshine if we hot footed it south.

After the initial beauty of mountain valleys and heading south from St Sebastien towards Victoria Gastez, it turns to long straight flat sections of motorway or duelled road, much of it treeless. The rain in Spain does mostly remain on the plain it seems. It was now bucketing down. We had one small deviation when trying to avoid a new toll motorway. We'd done this section of road, joining Bilbao to Burgos, a few years back and it wasn't tolled but it was fast, so we figured we'd avoid the new tolled section and remain on the old road. However, the 'old road' soon had us heading into the centre of a town and we realised that the toll road was the old road but it had been 'developed' into a toll road. We gritted our teeth and got back on it. For the most part toll roads were, if you were really wanting to get from A to B in the quickest amount of time, cheaper in the long run and certainly easier. We pushed on through the straight plain roads, through the sudden sharp motorway bends around Palencia and onwards past the shiny chrome industrial units and the sleazy out of town 'clubs' advertised with signs showing buxom cartoon style girls with coquette enticing looks on their faces. This whole area is advertised as a service area and although there are numerous cafes and traditional service stations you wonder at the additional services it refers to. One notable club is Club Jamaica, a vast multi storied complex; its shuttered windows intensifying the image of the probably darkened seedy scenes within. This whole area has an almost 'Wild West' feel to it. We once stayed in a campsite in the middle of this area a few years ago. It was out of desperation. We'd driven up from Portugal and it was late. We were in a tent back then and after an initial search for somewhere wild to pitch, it had become clear the options were limited to zero. We then found this campsite and gave in but driving on into the darkness may, in hindsight, have been a better option. We were crammed in so tightly that farting would have been an unsociable option; not that it stopped our neighbours. A trip to the wash block also revealed a family, adults and kids, busy pulling up some of the potted flower displays around the building. They were laughing and joking in I think Spanish, whilst they quite openly bagged their floral swag. The campsite was busy and noisy beyond the 11pm curfew notified on the entrance gates and needless to say we were more than ready to get the 'hell out of dodge' the next morning and head for the more refined Basque region. So it was with relief that, on our journey southwards today, we left this area and entered the more serene, gentle landscape on the approach to the Portuguese border at Vilar Formoso. The road generally becomes quieter once the majority of the traffic has split off and continued on the motorway towards Madrid.

There are, from our years of experience of crossing the border here, a few things that we can share with you about this border town. First off; fill up with fuel here (but not at the first garage you see on the edge of town as that is not so good – go further). It is pretty much the cheapest place you will find along your journey, if not the whole of Portugal/Spain/France. As an example we were seeing diesel at 1.23 euros along the way, but here it was 0.99 euros. That's why we plan to have as little in our tank at the border to ensure a cheap fill up. Secondly have your passports ready but expect to drive past the bored border guards without even a glance. Only once have we been stopped in over 6 years and that was by a rather intense Spanish guard. Perhaps he had only just been posted here and wanted to make an impression. Even so, a couple of abrupt questions later and we were on our way. That said we did see a bit more action this year as we approached the border. A van load of young men had been pulled over on the Spanish side and their van was being given a thorough inspection by guards and dogs. What spurned this sudden security burst of action is unknown. Perhaps boredom or perhaps the young men in the van had just 'looked the sort'; you know like they were having too much fun or something so surely a few small lumps of hashish must have been involved. It was almost sad we didn't get pulled over. I'd love to have had a stroke of the dog and does that mean we looked like we were passed having fun too? I also quite like trying to make people in serious jobs of authority smile. Not in a cocky way but in a way that reminds them they are human and people are sometimes not miserable crooks. It worked the other way round once. We were passing through Dubai airport a few years ago. It is about as squeaky clean and serious as you can get at that airport. Just before we re-boarded the plane we passed through the X-ray metal detector manned by a rather serious looking rotund character. I passed through with no alerts but quite suddenly and unexpectedly the guard let out a loud vocal 'beep' noise. I turned to him as a cheeky grin spread over his face, which broadened as he observed my resulting shocked smile. It just goes to show though, authority or not, a little smile goes a long way.

So yes, back to our present day border crossing. The third, and possibly the most important experience to share is what happens immediately after passing through the border. There you are confronted with big signs warning of automated tolls ahead and that foreigners should pull over at the designated area 11km ahead. Here's the official deal; the designated area is part of a rest area and within this are drive by booths where you are encouraged to enter your payment card details whilst a photo is taken of and your registration number recorded. Then every time you pass under a toll camera you get charged. A couple or so years ago, with the signs having been made bigger and more obvious, we thought we'd better check it out. I was about to put my card in when I backed out as the thought of not only all those overhead toll cameras and charges signs we saw but of the charges that my bank would pile on for every time my card was used abroad. So here's the unofficial deal; don't do it! So what if you missed all those signs saying you should visit the designated area. You were busy putting your unchecked passports away and making sure you were on the right road right? Besides, sure you've been paying tolls. Further down you vigilantly stopped and picked up those tickets and paid for those stretches at the manned pay booths along the way and here are all those receipts officer. You wondered what all those other toll cameras were for? Well to date nobody has ever called us on it and I can guarantee we are all the more richer for it. It means we can spend our well earned cash on buying food from local people in the local community rather than lining the pockets of the tolls, something which most Portuguese don't want anyway.

Over the border the scenery returns for a fair while to mountains around Guarda. This means a return to the more persistent rain that we had temporarily left behind on the Spanish plain. So we can confirm that it doesn't mostly remain on the plain in Spain. That's bollocks. On our first trip to Portugal over 6 years ago we had decided to camp overnight in this mountainous

area. It wasn't the best of ideas at this time of year. We'd had to empty and put on the contents of our clothes bags in order to stay warm and even then we were cold. Even now in our camper van we weren't keen to remain in this chilly, wet environment, so on we drove.

The occasional point of interest or attempt at translating a passing sign with our new found Portuguese skills would take our minds off of the monotony of the tarmac but when things needed an extra point of excitement or distraction I employed a well planned strategy. A colleague had told me about a really good podcast called Serial. I'd downloaded and listened to the first series, a story of a high school murder, whilst driving to and from work. It had been really absorbing. So when the next series was released, the story of an American soldier held by the Taliban for 5 years, I decided to save it for our trip. I'd downloaded as much of the week by week releases available before we left. By the time we'd reached parallel to Lisbon we'd worked our way through them with only our discussion and debate surrounding the story left to amuse us. We'd have to wait for the next releases and a Wi-Fi spot now to download the rest. It was around about this time and with only a couple of hours of light left that we decided to haul into a service station to make a brew and something quick to eat.

Portuguese service stations aren't anywhere near the vision of our overcrowded, noisy, shiny, urbanesque monstrosities in the UK. With the sparse traffic on the motorways, (I've seen more cars on a Cornish country lane in summer), think quiet, calm sanctuaries with the gentle sway of a nearby acacia tree and the melodic burst from a nearby bird cutting through the silence. The toilets are normally empty and clean and the restaurants homely (not that we've ever eaten in one though). In fact as a holiday destination, you'd be better off in a service station than some of the bustling resort hotels; except there is no pool.....oh and I guess the absence of rooms wouldn't be very practical. We don't have that problem as we have our very own travelling room and after cooking up and eating our simple dinner we would have been tempted to have stayed there except that our toll ticket was only valid for 12 hours. As we'd picked it up in the early evening we'd have to be up and off the toll road very early if we remained. We therefore continued on, a slight renewal in energy from the brief stop for food. Into the dark we drove until we'd had enough and pulled off the toll to try and find somewhere suitable to park up and sleep. My tablet once more, I'm sure taking advantage of our vulnerable tiredness, directed us towards an area of green on the map. This turned out to be a cemetery which, although I'm sure would be quiet and without complaint from our neighbours, we didn't think was that suitable or appropriate. A quick drive round in the dark and with our tempers fused by tiredness we decided to head back to the toll, reset our toll ticket time validity and head for the next service station. About 20km down the road we hit it and our heads were finally able to hit the pillow. Another 600 miles or so were under our belt.

## **Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> March**

We awoke the next morning to warmth and sunshine and the thought that we were almost there. We also had a plan; one that had very much played a part in the decision to not continue to drive last night. We were about 50 miles north of Albufeira. Whilst Albufeira's tacky tourist overtones sit way outside of our wild Portuguese ideals, there is one thing there that draws us in like moths to candlelight; Eurasia. For less than 10 euros each Eurasia offers an all you can eat buffet of vegetarian food. The cooking, although not all vegan, is a healthy mixture of Portuguese tradition with Asian influences. We've become regulars there during our time in Portugal and the owner Milla, will often make more of the dishes vegan if she knows we are around. Normally we have to drive 40 miles from the area we predominantly

hang out in to make a visit to Eurasia but today we would be passing pretty much right by. It would be rude not to after all; as Phil put it, and besides, once we set off from the service station, taking the toll free but rather pleasant slower paced IP-1 road, we would pretty much arrive for the lunchtime opening.

We arrived just as they were opening the door and as we sat eating our way through several plates of food we probably made one or too many satisfied noises than were appropriate. We truly felt like our journey 'to arrive' had finished. The food sent us in to a wonderful daze as we slowly cruised under the A22's automated toll cameras, safe in the knowledge that the saved toll charge could go towards our next Eurasia visit. We headed west to the wilder, less tourist infested realms of the Algarve. We had fresh bread, olives, pate (olive) and wine and our one and only intention was to find 'that place' to halt and remain for the rest of the day and night. We tried a spot on the front in Burgau. It wasn't by any means wild, being in the heart of the village, but it had a view of the sea and was surprisingly undisturbed given its location. Unfortunately we discovered the car park to have been consumed by a new building project. With heavy hearts we moved on checking in on a few surf spots on the way for good measure. After another possible overnight spot was also found to be a victim of 'gentrification' and crowds, we committed to a wild spot further west where we were guaranteed there would be no such interference from 'development'. This spot sits inside a wild park area which extends from the south west corner up the west coast. A five minute drive from the road up a rough un-surfaced track takes us into the bush and, if nobody else has got there first, assured solitude and quiet. As we rounded the corner and into the depth of wild vegetation, we both sighed a deep sigh of relief. It was all ours. We pulled over, shut the engine off, got out and just stood for a moment taking in the beautiful silence of nature and the heady aroma of crushed wild herbs underfoot in the warm air. By silence of nature I don't mean complete silence. I mean the quietening of general life that allows the collective humming of bees, the complex symphony of multiple birdsong, and the swoosh and rumble of distant wind and wave to fill your tired human world. The warm sunshine had us unpacking our shorts and flip flops and after a quick post travel sort out of the van (roof rack and surfboards on to the roof, coats and unneeded maps packed away), we set the chairs outside and the wine was uncorked. If we'd thought we'd arrived before, we most definitely had now.

This evening's wine was Casa Ferreirinha Papa Figos ([www.sogrape.pt](http://www.sogrape.pt)) which is a 2014 from the Douro region. It cost 6 euros.

**Papa Figos is one of the rarest birds of the Douro. It is a migratory bird with a bright and attractive plumage. It arrives in the Douro region in the spring when the vines begin to bloom, and it heads south in late summer when the harvest is being prepared. Papa Figos perfectly illustrates this unique wine of Casa Ferreirinha. Its aroma reveals aromas of ripe red fruits. Its palate offers good volume, well integrated acidity and high quality tannins. In order to preserve its highest quality it is produced without cold stabilisation treatment and it is therefore natural that it develops a slight deposit. It must be decanted.**

**I asked Phil what he thought of this wine and here is how the conversation went;**





**Scooby – Give me some tasting notes for this wine.**

**Phil – What do you mean?**

**Scooby – Well how does it compare to our vast spectrum of Portuguese wines knowledge?**

**Phil – It's got that 'Douro' bite.**

**Scooby – What do you mean?**

**Phil – What does any of it mean? It's all bollocks isn't it?.....Okay, so I'm getting strawberry but not just strawberry; strawberry opal fruits. Do you want me to elaborate; see if I can get anything else.**

**Scooby – Yep of course.**

**Phil – Did you ever used to get those leather sandals, you know Jesus Creepers, when you were a kid?**

**Scooby – Yep, I think so.**

**Phil – Well if you were to have a bit of a chew on one of those when they were just about to wear out; on a wet bit that is. Well that's what I get.**

**Scooby – Not very vegan is it? (takes a sip). You know what I f\*\*king get that though.**

With us enjoying this lovely but now slightly soggy Jesus Creeper infused wine, we sat observing a bee buzzing around the outside of the van. It seemed to be checking out the nooks and crannies of the open doors and before long it had crawled into a hole in the back door. Seeing as we'd be shutting that at some point the bee's new residence wasn't too inspired so as soon as we saw it fly out we shut the door to prevent its re-entry. It didn't seem too happy about that and a while later it buzzed around the side door and before we could stop it disappeared into a cosy hole there and just wouldn't come out.

As dark approached and the need to shut the side door increased we became more concerned of effectively 'sealing it in', at least overnight. Phil tried to use a blade of grass to entice it out but just got a bit of a buzz for his efforts. Whilst Phil then left to use the 'facilities', I tried once more with a slightly sturdier bit of grass. Initially my gentle pokes were met with more gentle buzzing but then, bored of no doubt being tickled, the bee clung to the grass and was extracted as I pulled it out. I placed it gently on some nearby grass and then it flew off to join the buzzing collective that, despite the approaching dusk, were still going about their busy bee ways. The door was then shut and we turned in for the night.

## **Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> March**

It's a beautiful thing to wake up surrounded by wild Portuguese shrub and birdsong. It's even more beautiful when you open the door and, despite gathering clouds, the temperature is the same outside as inside and the smell of wild sage, rosemary and a plethora of other herbs and floral aromas swarms in filling the van before you've even got out of bed. First and foremost job is to have a brew whilst you allow nature to gently introduce you to the day. The next job is to think about not having to think about going to work; in fact to plan not to plan to do anything in particular. That's not as easy as it sounds. When everyday life revolves around a set routine of 'must dos' and 'have to dos', it is sometimes hard retraining your brain to accept the possibilities of doing nothing much at all. That said, and probably for that reason, we do still fall into little routines and interestingly enough, it is these little mundane routines that seem to fascinate people the most when considering what it is like to travel and wild camp in a camper van for a few weeks without the added 'comfort' or facilities of staying on campsites.

First off, and seeing as I have already divulged the secrets of the 'wee bottle', where do you go to the loo for more serious 'needs'? Well let me share a big secret here; Portugal does have toilets! In restaurants, supermarkets, public toilets (which incidentally are often a lot cleaner than British public loos), they are there to use for appropriately timed moments. You could say they are the height of wild camping luxury but I have to say 'shitting in the woods' has a lot more going for it than you might imagine. "Ah come on", I hear Phil say, "we don't need to tell anyone this". But I disagree. These are the minutiae details of travel that people want to know but are afraid to ask; except my mum that is who has a genuine interest as to how I cope without a toilet and a shower in the van. Back to the woods.....choose the right spot and you have all the privacy you could wish for. A few years ago we were 'owned' by a dog called Kizzy. Well actually she was a family dog but she, along with her furry sidekick Kenai, used to 'holiday' with Phil and I in Cornwall for up to a month at a time when my mum and dad travelled abroad. The reason I mention Kizzy is because we shared a common concern in the choice of our 'no.2 spots'. Apart from the one time she decided to shit in the waves in the midst of tightly packed summer holidaying bathers, forcing me to wade in trying to chase it to bag it, Kizzy was most discerning of her spots. She would sneak into deep undergrowth, looking over her shoulder to see if anyone was watching, and disappear. The only indication of success being her joyful skip back out a couple of minutes later with her wagging tail held high. Most of the time any retrieval of the results on my behalf was either unnecessary or unfeasible, or both. Now I'm not saying I joyfully exit from the woods with a wagging exuberance (although Phil would sometimes disagree I'm sure). I'm just saying that I too have to find the right spot. Sometimes Kizzy's recces were unsuccessful too. The right spot is important and both mine and Kizzy's rules for this are the same; hidden, private, comfortable and undisturbed. Obvious you might say, but lesser dogs and people have proved that wrong in their choice of location. After choice of location, well yes there are then differences between Kizzy and me in this area; namely a trowel (to bury or to cover over), toilet paper, wet wipes and bags to pick up the paper and wipes. Now before anyone starts shouting at me about the wet wipes; I only use organic, biodegradable, chemical free ones and their use in these situations not only makes for a cleaner backside but means less loo roll is necessary. All bagged up in biodegradable bag and ready for the bin, it is ultimately a lot less offensive than the toilet roll strewn toilet hot spots often seen dotted around the tourist hang outs. I abhor such scenes hence our ethos of bury and bag it. I draw a line at bagging my actual poo though and anyhow I have personally seen evidence of how useful my poo is to the local environment. I once returned to the scene of a previous days ablutions that I'd only been able to cover over with pine needles. Never fear as the whole thing had been eaten. No kidding. There are things out there that will eat any shit; literally. For moments that you really have to go but can't find a 'Kizzy place' and there are no nearby public conveniences; enter the wonders of my poo bucket! Phil hates it. I think he would rather drop his pants in the centre of a football stadium (and he doesn't even really like football) before he'd entertain using the 'poo-buck' and, quite frankly given his negative attitude towards it, I wouldn't let him use it anyway now. I am however very much comforted by its very presence. Poo-buck is quite simply a small bucket (perfectly proportioned to my bottom I might add) with a lid. Inside it you can insert a biodegradable bag and, well the rest you can work out surely? I would only employ it for moments of strong need and as an example, let me demonstrate. Imagine the Tour de France, prime position at the side of the road but no toilets within reach and every nearby possibility already in use by every Frenchman and his baguette, including I might add passing dignitaries and even the Tour riders themselves. We were there for hours beforehand and after. Needs must.

Anyway, time to move on but please do wash your hands first. My mother taught me well after all.

As for other ablutions; teeth cleaning, yes absolutely twice a day without fail. Wild camping or not my electric toothbrush goes with me. I didn't reach the age of 45 with very few fillings (first filling when I was 40) for no reason. It's nice to stay clean and respectable but really in order to do that you don't need to have a shower every day. In fact in the 3 ½ - 4 weeks we are away we don't at all. A wash from the sink in our van is more than adequate to keep ourselves all spingly, sparkly. And as for my hair; it might be down to my midriff but I can assure you after those few weeks of not washing it, it not only smells as good as the day it was washed but it is all the more glossy and flowing for not constantly washing it. People wash their hair too much anyway and then wonder why it gets so greasy or too dry. The key is not only to stop using horrible chemicals on it but to allow your hair to rediscover its natural state by not washing it as much. A few years ago I travelled for a month in the States and didn't wash my hair. When I returned I went to the hairdressers to have a trim and was asked what products I used on my hair as the hairdresser thought it was in a lovely condition. When I sheepishly told her I hadn't washed it, she actually said "well, that explains it then!".

Anyway, I am sure that is enough gory detail for one day and for those of you who've never ever remotely camped or travelled outside of the world of hotels, I hope that's answered (probably quite graphically) some questions about what living in a van for a month entails.

So the mundane routine over with we decided to head out of the wild and down to check out a regular surf spot. Ingrina is a relatively quiet little spot with a small beach, a little cafe and a few spots to park up (overnight too if you aren't too bothered about privacy). You used to be able to pull right up beside the beach for a surf check but upon arrival we discovered more so called 'development' in the form of a new wooden walkway and bollards preventing vehicles now parking there. What a shame. Such measures very rarely improve an area in my opinion. We parked up in the nearby car park and walked down the little path to see what was happening with surf. Phil decided to wait for the tide to push in from low tide hoping it would pick up a bit. Besides the waves were fairly well dominated by a surf school anyway. So we kicked back, got our chairs out, made a cup of tea and sat in the warm sunshine. A blackbird sat on a nearby post and sang its heart out, competing only with the rhythm of the waves and the occasional chatter of passing walkers. It's quite peculiar being about 1000 miles from home and hearing the same sounds as home. The blackbird didn't even have a Portuguese accent.

Phil wandered off for a surf a while later and I continued to sit in the sun writing and enjoying watching and hearing the world pass by. The latter wasn't a problem but the former turned into a problem as I had underestimated the power of the sun and by the time Phil had returned, I was doing a fairly good impression of a lobster. Ironically I'd gone to great lengths to persuade Phil to put sunscreen on his bare head before he left for his surf. The words 'practice what you preach' sprung to mind.

After a quick trip to the shops for fresh veg, we went in search of a new wild spot. Taking a previously unexplored track off the main road we edged over dust and ruts and into the windy hills. The area we found ourselves in was dotted with wind turbines. Near the top of the hill an area opened up off of the road which afforded plenty of parking space. It was right under a group of turbines and we wondered at the noise they might emit, especially whilst we were sleeping. We sat and listened for a while. It was a gently and rhythmic swoosh, not nearly as loud as we imagined but we had some doubts whether if the wind picked up, the predictable rhythm would drive us a little nuts so we explored further on. A little way up we found another spot at a crossroads. It was near turbines still but far enough away as to not cause us as much concern; even when the wind did suddenly pick up. We uncorked this evenings wine offering and sat observing the wide view around us.

### **This evening's wine was Monte da Casteleja Classico Tinto 2013**

A guy pulled up near us in a pick-up. He got out of his van and was disturbingly dressed from head to foot in bee keeping gear. We waved and smiled at him and he returned greetings before un-padlocking a nearby wired off area and driving down the track away from us. He hadn't remarked on our presence and nor did the area seem overrun with bees so we figured we were all good here. He returned a short while later and was less bee keeper attired as he relocked the padlock and drove off, which further assured us. Phil and I have recently been learning Portuguese and took great delight in then using the word abelha (Portuguese for bee) over and over like little kids. We then had a longer than necessary discussion about the 'dropped' sound of the letter H in the word abelha. Admittedly the wine was starting to hit the spot.

A while later, and just before dusk, we were eating our dinner when a fox appeared on the track near the van. We sat in awe watching it slowly search the ground at the side of the track and then move into the shrub. It kept tentatively glancing in our direction as if it passed this way often and wondered at the new arrival on the scene. It was roughly the same size as our British foxes with a generous fluff of tail but it was much paler, almost like it had rolled around in the surrounding dust to match the environment. Like a ghost it suddenly disappeared into the darkening vegetation and we were left with that wonderful warm feeling of having been honoured by nature. Ironically before we'd left for this trip I mentioned I'd like to sit outside more even after dark with coats on if need be. We'd done that a few years ago when camping and a little further down the coast and one night had seen a fox pop up in front of us, stop and look around before casually walking off. I'd told Phil then that I would really like to repeat that experience. Well we weren't sat outside admittedly (by now the wind had picked up significantly) but hey, I got my wish.

As darkness closed in we watched the distant and nearby wind turbine's lights turn from white to red and blink away in unison. The wind had not just strengthened but changed directions slightly and was now hitting us side on. After a short read we succumbed to the swaying waves of wind to send us to sleep.

## **Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> March**

The wind (ventosa in Portuguese I might add for educational value) had not abated overnight. If you are not keen on wind or, perhaps a better way of putting it; if you cannot put up with the chance of constant wind, don't come to this part of Portugal. Luckily we live in Cornwall, where the same rule applies really. You just get used to it. Sometimes it really pisses me off but then I remind myself that the wind was here before me, so get over it.

As we woke up we were greeted by a whole herd of cows jangling past, bells ringing from around their necks. We decided to breakfast at less heady, windy heights so dropped down to sea level in lee of a bit of cliff. As we dropped down to the main road we were greeted by the unfortunate sight of a car crash. Anywhere in the UK and the road would have been blocked off for miles either side but not here. Everything was on shown for all to see including casualties, as cars were directed past. It wasn't very pleasant at all but, as Phil pointed out, perhaps this was the Portuguese real life equivalent of public service announcements. A nice strong cup of tea was needed after that. This was then followed by chai soaked oats prepared the night before and then a mountain of washing up from last night's meal and breakfast



combined. It had got too dark and we were too tiddly and lazy to do it so now we faced the results. Phil commented that maybe we should fit a dishwasher in the van. Aside from the fact that we don't even have one at home, I replied that I was the dishwasher as I passed him another bowl to dry up.

With the surf not affording much opportunity or excitement we decided to go for a little stroll along the coast. Phil asked whether I was going to wear my hiking boots as opposed to my flip flops. It was a stupid question on two counts. Earlier on in this little travel tale I had hinted at Phil's tendency to want to always look around the next corner and then the next, etc, etc. After over 15 years together I had long learnt that a 'little walk' with Phil is never a little walk. No way would I contemplate such an endeavour without breaking out my big boy boots. As if to push the point, I went to slip my flip flops on to go and dig out my hiking boots and one of the toe straps broke. Damn. These were meant to be environmentally industrial flip flops, being made from recycled car tyres. I'd had them for years and they've shown no sign of wear. Indeed that's why I entrust them to such trips but now here, a few days in, and one small part of an otherwise solid pair of flip flops freaks out. I knew when I returned home I'd have to try and mend them but I also knew I'd have to in the meantime buy a cheap replacement pair and that grated me. I'd have to think about that later though as now, on went my trusty hikers.

We followed the obvious track up from the car park and along the coast east. The earth is rocky, dusty and dark red underfoot. The vegetation on either side is spiky and scented. We steadily climb avoiding ball bearing like loose rocks and large grass bearing ants underfoot. Glimpses of blue green sea appear down valley ravines or when the path creeps headily towards the cliff. At these moments Phil pauses to gaze transfixed at the rising line of swell as it breaks into white across its shore heading face. He lets out a satisfying sigh in much the same way that Kizzy would when reaching the top of the dune on the way down to the salty waves and wide expanse of sand below on our home beach. Phil's suggestion to walk this section of coastline had an ulterior motive he has since told me. He'd wanted to check out a secluded but hard to get to point break. Although the lines of swell were peeling majestically down the point, the waves were just tantalising a foot or so too small to make the prospect of riding this point without ripping the fins out of the surfboard a reality. He still seemed to enjoy the observations and the fact that there was nobody else out there proved him correct in his assumptions.

I too had inclinations of an ulterior motive. I knew for instance that Phil's 'little walk' may extend some distance towards the next village along; Burgau. I also knew that at Burgau was a little restaurant called Tomik that served drinks with soya milk and a few vegan food options. I also knew they had Wi-Fi and today was the day of release of the next Serial Series 2 episode. If we happened to walk along this whole section of coastline it would be rude not to have a coffee, a snack and a download surely? As predicted we reached Tomik and enjoyed the wonders before returning to appreciate the opposite walking view.

Back at the car park Miles, our camper, was now nestled close in to another camper. The car park was practically empty but here somebody felt the need to cosy on up to Miles so much so that you could only just open the door. Invasion of personal space is a real hate of mine. I mean it really pisses me off. Ask Phil. I'll go off about it for minutes on end. So I was 'in one' when we arrived at the van and somebody was poking around inside the offending neighbouring van. Then this inoffensive bearded young German guy appears and says hello and asks us whether we had stayed here the night. He enthused with innocent German inquisitiveness that flushed away my stuck up British German occupation fears. That told me. I forgave him.

With the earlier flip flop failure back on my mind (I'd only brought hiking boots, flip flops and running shoes with me), we decided a trip to the major supermarket in Lagos was a good option. Here the chance of a replacement pair along with our evening's meal and wine supplies could combine. Luckily I have small feet as the only flip flops available seem to involve kid's options. Avoiding the outright cartoon styles I landed a pair for €2.99. They would have to do.

The ventosa was still forte (look we are really trying with our Portuguese okay) so a sheltered spot was ideal for our evening's pitch. A study of a map in the supermarket car park led us to try a track again that we had tried a few years ago in our Citroen Berlingo. It had been rutted and uncomfortable and when we were just driving it for sightseeing (our tent was pitched at a nearby campsite) as opposed to finding an isolated parking spot for our van, it was no wonder we had given up. This time we pushed on and very soon the track was far less complex than we imagined. We climbed higher and higher into wild scented lands of herbs and eucalyptus. Sticking to the main drag we finally reached a plateau and an area that opened up into a majestic and wide view southwards and seawards. This was it. There was nobody else here. It was still windy and less sheltered than anticipated but we didn't care. The ground was level, the sun shining and the windy blasts against the van forgiven. Time to uncork once more.



### **This evening's wine was Monte do Alem 2008**

I settled in to the back of the van whilst Phil took off to explore the 'next corner' on foot. A while later he returned to report back. It seemed that we had been missing out on this area over the past few years. Tomorrow we would explore more. For now though Phil noticed a construction near to where we parked and hidden in the bush. He walked in to investigate and came back and announced I had ten guesses on what it was. I tried everything from tent to bird hide to hunters lodge to dog kennel to hay stack. I would never have guessed that somebody had actually built a toilet, wooden seat and all, in the middle of nowhere. It was an undercover affair with a step up that afforded much the same magnificent view we were



enjoying from the van. The toilet seat was perched strongly on top of a Sagres beer crate. Phil was excited about it; like overexcited. I went for a wee and wasn't that impressed to be fair. Phil went to test it and said "that was one of the best shits ever". I think it was a boy thing. Phil is not prone to the whole 'man cave' effect but I have to say I think a touch of it was creeping in here. It was like a man cave, toilet throne thing going on and I didn't get it. It was way too open and exhibitionist for my liking. I'm way sure Kizzy wouldn't have approved. That said I appreciated the thought and engineering but as much as Phil might have been exuberantly wagging his tail over the prospect of tomorrow morning's ablutions, I was going to be following the ghost of Kizzy way into the undergrowth instead.

We enjoyed the view whilst supping our wine and eating our dinner. The sun chased across the green scene below us until it dipped behind the waving pines and eucalyptus to our right. Soon we would be avoiding another evening's washing up and pulling out our head torches to read for a few minutes before the wind lulled us to sleep.



## Friday 1st April

We woke as the sun rose to our left and burst in through the window in deep Dalai Lama orange. The ventosa was less of a rant now and more of a Buddhist chant. We bathed in the warmth inside the van. It hadn't been a particularly warm night so this gentle slow simmer from the sun was very welcome. In fact it was so nice we lazed in rather too long. Whilst we sat around we took in the silence; the slight whoosh of wind, the distant but distinct call of the cuckoo and the old cloud of dust chasing the occasional car up or down the bumpy loose track. A couple of dogs appeared from nowhere chasing rustlings through the eucalyptus nearby. One of them peeled off to come and say hello in only the way a dog does and can get away with. "Hi I'm a dog, stroke me as I just totally invade your space and hey, what's in your van? Let's take a look. Ah okay, not much. Bye". He was off and back with his furry pal. A whistle and an appearance of a woman on the track opposite confirmed that the dogs had ownership of someone. The woman was strolling along downhill on the track with a baby attached to her front and then I noticed another small companion following; a black and white cat tripping along behind. The dogs caught up and they all went merrily down the track. A while later, perhaps 20 minutes or so, they all returned and the woman was carrying a plastic

bag full of stuff. It was a mystery what her 'shopping' may have been as the nearest shop would have been about an hour's walk one way!

Eventually we hauled out, had a freshen up and left our spot to explore the dusty trails northwards. The track we followed was rutted, dusty and bumpy. It went towards a lovely solitary village called Pedralva. From the cloud of following dust the white washed, pristine houses appeared in the valley. They were surrounded by equally pristine and neat strips of ploughed red earth with already emerging greens. It's wonderful to see how the Portuguese seem to embrace and integrate into their lives the production of their own fruit and vegetables. Almost every house has a strip of land, a few fig and orange trees, maybe a few vines, all beautifully tended with strips of wild flowers equally at home amongst it all. You very rarely see monoculture in this area. So many more people seem to take responsibility for feeding themselves and looking after the environment as a result. Admittedly it is the older folk you see out there gently tending their plots or leaning against a fork gazing at the land. Perhaps this is still a hark back to the Salazar years in the 70's and the need to fend for themselves but hopefully in years to come the new 'old folk' of Portugal will also see the importance, civil war or not, of tending the land as individuals.

We climbed out of the valley off of dusty tracks and onto the main road. Miles, our camper, had by now donned his 'Portuguese Camouflage' of fine red dust. Let me tell you a bit about Miles. He was born in February 2004 and we acquired him, after cashing in a long term investment and saving for a fair time, almost 2 years ago. In the latter years of camping in a tent in Portugal, and particularly after a few wet, mud strewn occasions, we had talked at length about getting a camper van. We'd both had camper vans in our youth and had missed the freedom of it in intervening years. Once we'd actually got a reasonable amount of money together, the search for Miles had taken another two years. We'd bought him at a low mileage for £10,500 from a couple of local vets. They seemed sad to see him go but were upgrading to a flashier model. I think they sensed we were right for him as they gave us first refusal and accepted our lower price. We instantly fell in love and Phil will often be heard to exclaim in a very Cornish fashion "he's some boy" at random moments when we are either driving along or even just returning to him after a walk. We called him Miles after Miles Davis because he is a smooth dude, 'Kind of Blue' (the 1959 unchallenged classic from Miles) and he would give us miles and miles of fun. He's one of the last VW T4 models made; an 888 Special which really only means he has electric windows and heated mirrors but he really is special to us. We'd never really wanted an all singing, all dancing camper van; just one that was reliable, practical, comfortable and wouldn't shout out "hey were just camping at the side of the road here"! Miles has an understated grace but sense of reliable adventure about him; a bit like a jazzy trumpet solo breaking away from the smooth groove before seamlessly returning to the gentle head nod of the main rhythm. In terms of comfort he has a comfy back seat that 'rock and rolls' down to an equally comfy bed and the two front seats turn around to accommodate a very sociable four people if necessary or twice the space for us two. There are windows all round which was one of my main desires when searching for a van. If it was a bad rainy day the one thing I didn't want to do is sit in a dark metal box without being able to at least sit and watch the weather and the world go by. I'm an observer; nosey if you like, and the one way windows in the back of Miles very much enable me to carry out such observational nosiness without being discovered.

Miles doesn't have electrical hook up like most. The previous owner, who did the conversion from a mobility vehicle, hadn't felt the need for it, and neither did we. There is a leisure battery that charges as we drive around and powers our water tap, fridge and lighting. We never really use the latter two though but they are there if we need to (wine tends to win over cold beer and candles and head torches over lighting up the inside like Blackpool



illuminations). For water we don't have an in-built tank but a large 25 litre removable container. We prefer that too as it means it is easier to fill and clean. In addition and for back-up we carry two 5 litre containers, again very easy to top up. All of this means we only needed to do a good fill up of water every few days, even possibly only once a week.

This is exactly what we were heading to do now. On the way to Aljezur is a spring and we've got water from here for a few years. It's in a layby with shady trees and picnic benches where quite often Portuguese families will be lunching, with the prerequisite bottle of wine being uncorked. There is also recycling facilities, a very frequent roadside sight, and rubbish bins to enable us to do a little 'van housekeeping' at the same time. As we drew up we noticed this year there was a sign in Portuguese basically saying the water was not for human consumption. We faltered slightly but then noted that a Portuguese family were quite happily washing vegetables and filling vessels. The water looked as clear and pure as usual and so we filled up in the hope that this was another official 'may contain nuts or traces of dairy' moment. It would be a real shame if officialdom decided to limit the use of these frequently seen age old springs as I'm fairly sure the water is about as pure as you can get and probably more so than tap water. The warning sign was also hand stencilled and opposite a restaurant so a certain amount of doubt seeped in whether its use was being discouraged for other reasons.

Quite often there are also taps available for everyone's use in the middle of villages too. They are normally part of the remains of old washing blocks where the ladies of the village used to gather to do their laundry. Once alive with the slap and splash of water and working chatter, now these sociable laundry clubs have been scrubbed of life by the robotic round faces and incessant whirring of the washing machine. Who can blame the ladies as it is so much easier to let the machines take the strain, but the older folks no doubt would miss all the chatter though. Now it is left to the likes of the big white motorhomes driven by continental retirees feeding their water tanks through hosepipes or the rag wearing traveller filling discoloured plastic containers, then strapping them precariously on to the back of a high wheeled old school bus driven straight off the scrapyard, oh yes and of course us. At a push, and if our normal sources of water dried up, there are always supermarket bathrooms. They often seem to have weird designed wash basins with high up taps that would easily fit a large container underneath. It might be a bit inconspicuous but it would do if we had to.

We got to Aljezur, a little further northwards, just after lunchtime and we were hungry. There is a little but well stocked health food store there but we wondered about our timing as shops often close for 'siesta' around now. Luckily the health food store wasn't one of them. Last year they had sold tasty vegan pasty type things and Phil had remembered this as we had headed that way. Unfortunately there was no sign of them today but we stocked up on some treats including some smoked vegan sausages and a lovely bottle of unfiltered red wine at a very reasonable €5.85.

We sat having lunch overlooking the small river in the centre of town. This area had once been a busy port, its strategic importance backed up by the fort perched headily on the sharp rise above us. The flat river plain had however silted up, coastal business returned to the shoreline ports further north and south, and the fort long since crumbled. Aljezur is still a bustling market town though with adjacent strips of farmed land no doubt supplying the central market.

We decided to walk following the course of the now small river coast wards. There was however signs of vegetation and debris washed up into higher branches of the trees along the riverbank indicating perhaps that this now small trickle had only recently shown more raging

tendencies. We reached a track we had driven along many times en route to a nearby beach for surf and we searched for a way to cross the river and turn back towards town. Fifty metres down the road we found the way with a track that then skirted around the bottom reaches of the town and the fort. It took us to a small spring that was said to have been discovered and 'built' during the Islamic period in Portugal around the 11<sup>th</sup> century. From here we took a track that turned steeply up hill, into the old town, and wound our way up to the fort. From inside you can see 360 degrees of the surrounding plain below and the sea and mountains beyond.



Stiff winged storks circled the top of the fort like gliders over a control tower on a rural British aerodrome. Seeing these majestic pterodactyl type creatures from afar has always been transfixing but closer and in eye level flight was even better. The sunshine was catching their undercarriages so much so that I was rooted to the spot for some minutes with camera



pointed skywards whilst Phil continued to explore the fort ruins. At one point he looked over and down towards where Miles was parked exclaiming "E's some boy!" We'd been up here a few years ago but had driven, so it was lovely to descend slowly at an amble along the cobbled narrow streets and back to Miles below. We met a friendly cat along the way too.

Suddenly it was 6pm and thoughts turned to a sleeping spot. Rather than spending

time searching in an area we were less familiar with we decided to just head the 30 minutes south to our favourite wild spot. Once more it was undiscovered by others when we arrived. Our bottle of wine was uncorked and we both went searching for wild rosemary. Unfortunately for an area so scented with heady herbs, we failed to find any and our plans of rosemary infused potatoes for dinner reverted to using some herbs we'd brought with us.

It's always a buzz to use the resources around us but it is for just these occasions our Miles Kitchen carries a small supply of herbs and spices in re-used 35mm film canisters. The vegan sausages we'd bought earlier were lovely but the potatoes and accompanying cabbage were beyond



amazing. We'd done little to the potatoes beyond boiling then slightly sautéing them in olive oil and herbs and the cabbage was just boiled; not generally something that most people would enthuse about but seriously we

could have eaten it twice over. Maybe it's the wine, maybe it's the 'outdoors eating' and fresh air or maybe the fresh produce over here is that much tastier. They were both organic.

### **This evening's wine was Quinta Do Esteveira Reserve 2010**

The front windscreen started to mist up with the cooking efforts inside and the slow drop in temperature outside. A weird thing happens where, all but two areas mist over. The two areas are immediately above a couple of vents and the shape on the windscreen they form first becomes love hearts, like Miles's version of those tacky signs you used to get with lovers names scrawl across the top front of the windscreen. Then they join together and become bum shaped which, I guess is more of a declaration of our childishness!

As darkness fell we listened to Linda Perhac's second and very much more recent album. Her first, *Parallelograms*, was back in the 60's/70's and then she stopped her musical career and became a dental hygienist. Her second album, particularly given the intervening years of not being a musician, is just as atmospheric and even more so by candlelight whilst finishing off a lovely bottle of wine in the wilds of Portugal with my favourite two fellas; Phil and Miles. Sleep came easy soon after.

## **Saturday 2nd April**

The grey dawn day slipped seamlessly into a grey morning. There was a monotone feel to it that even the birds and insects were less happy to sing about. A few sudden thwaps of raindrops on the roof indicated that perhaps our lovely run of dry weather was concluding for now. Phil remarked that we would probably be best to escape the muddy trails soon if rain



was going to stir them up out of their hard packed ruts, so we started to get up and pack up. Miles is pretty 'grrrr' but forcing him into mud wrestling really wouldn't be very fair.

As suddenly as the rain started it stopped and our hurried tooth brushing slowed as the then the sun tried to squeeze through the grey wall. It wasn't just the grey that had made it feel a little odd this morning. There was also virtually no wind. It was the same confusion I felt when I woke up at home and saw the prayer flags in our back garden motionless. This rarely happens. Instead of now rushing we kicked back and had breakfast, tackled the usual backlog of washing up from last night before then tackling the still dry track out of the wilds. The sun was making an increasing effort now.

We hadn't planned anything. We'd briefly spoke of another all too soon trip to Eurasia for lunch, encouraged by the earlier chance of a grey wet day, but now the sun was making that thought feel like guilty pleasure. We drove instead to the nearest bit of coast to check the surf conditions. A couple of German surfers showed up in a blue VW van and Phil had a nice chat with them. Nobody was out along this whole section as the conditions weren't good. We moved and parked up on the Mouroudouro (viewpoint) which jutted out on high cliffs in between two beaches. When we first arrived there was a paraglider who had jumped off from here. He had obviously dropped far too quickly down to a nearby beach as his mates drove off and returned shortly after with him and his paraglider bundled up in the back of the car. Others tried it a little later with more success. The wind seemed to have picked up at a better pace now. As we watched four at once take to the air we wondered at how amazing it must be to fly and how brave they must be to run off a cliff 'lemming' style.



After a long meditation on flight coupled with journal writing and reading, a peckish twinge led us to seek a less exposed position to eat lunch. The sun was now in full flow and in the tree lined area we chose, the cicadas and birds were in harmonious agreement. We were lured in to setting out the chairs and absorbing some more of that vitamin D, hopefully not turning as pink this time. Sometimes reading, sometimes feigning wakefulness, sometimes

just sighing the sigh of someone held in solar captivity, the afternoon slipped by in the glory of relaxed laziness.

Eventually the sun fell to an angle as to alert us that perhaps it was no longer afternoon and more like early evening. A check of a watch, which vacationing away from its normal job on Phil's wrist and was in the deepest realms of his pocket, indicated it was indeed 6pm. We rallied with the idea of obtaining fresh veg, bread and tonight's wine offering and turned Miles the ten minutes down the road to Sagres.

On the way to the shop I suddenly discovered a sticky stiff patch in my hair. What the hell? I waited for Phil to pull into the car park at the supermarket to investigate. It was pine resin. It was good that it wasn't anything more ominous like bird shit or anything else I couldn't even think of, but it was bad from the point of view that pine resin is bloody sticky stuff and even a good wash in a hot steamy shower would battle to remove its stubborn attachment to all it touches. I think I am stuck with it for a while, literally. Ah well at least it smelt nice. I wondered at how I had mingled so intimately with a pine tree and then remembered my morning visit to the 'facilities' had involved a low dip under a pine. Kizzy had never warned me about these problems but being the shy dog she was about such things, I guess it never came up in our conversations.



After shopping we were back on the road and heading towards our favourite wild spot again. It was near, easy and always seemed to offer us the most seclusion and the best night's sleep. Tonight Phil had decided to spice it up and cook a satay with noodles, so along to tonight's soundtrack of a spot of Bert Jansch, he beavered away whilst I caught up with my journal. We supped on a very local organic red which we had bought at a very reasonable €4.99. I also prepared our chai soaked oats for breakfast tomorrow. This lazy life was getting to us; in a good way. I had decided that travel is about exploring yourself more than exploring new places.

**This evening's wine was Monte da Casteleja Organic Meia Praia**



## Sunday 3rd April

It rained quite a lot in the night. Every now and then a pool of water, which must have collected on Phil's surfboard bag on the roof rack, trickled down onto the metal roof above us in one constant stream. Every time we turned over or moved too something 'clanged' in the van but in the dark we weren't able to work out what it was until the morning when we discovered it to be some of our abandoned washing up. Whether it be the rain, the Chinese water torture on the roof, or thoughts of mud clogged tracks blocking our way out the next morning or just other random factors, unusually for our favourite spot we hadn't slept as well as we would normally expect here. We'd also parked Miles round the opposite way so perhaps our normal Feng Sui had been disrupted. It certainly confused me when I awoke with the sun in my face instead of behind us but it wasn't unpleasant by any means to discover the rain had contained itself to the hours of darkness. All the surrounding grasses and bushes were bejewelled with raindrops as they swayed in the gentle breeze. The sun slipped in and out behind grey clouds as we slipped in and out of sleep. Phil opened a window after a while to discover the inside and outside temperature had equalised and so we rolled up the bed and had our chai oats for breakfast. This was all done at a leisurely pace. Our wild spot here is like a cosy duvet so we were in no hurry to excavate ourselves from its comfort and peace. It was Sunday after all.

However we'd soon run out of viable excuses to be lazy. We'd already demonstrated the height of slothness yesterday so today we decided to take advantage of the dry but cooler climes and stretch our legs a little more. Today I wanted to visit the choughs.

Now anyone who lives, or in fact regularly visits Cornwall, should just bugger off back east if they don't know what a chough is. The chough is the most magnificently charismatic chatty wonder of a bird. Choughs also happen to be 'the bird of Cornwall' and until recently temporarily vacant from our shores. They returned and have been warmly welcomed and protected in their efforts to give the south west of Britain another go. Phil and I have been fortunate to have 'bumped' in to our returning choughs on many occasions on all coasts of Cornwall and better still, very close to home too. Given the amount of breeding pairs (still very low) this is nothing sort of chough magnetism so imagine our joy each time it happens in Cornwall. Then imagine our joy when last year, during our annual trip to Portugal, we heard to our astonishment the distinct shrieky shout of the chough. We weren't even aware they existed in these parts but yep, there they were with their Dalai Lama robe coloured beaks and legs, inhabiting the high rise cliffs of the south west Algarve. How wonderful.

We spent a couple of hours observing their acrobatic noisy displays back then and I resolved to return with better photographic kit. Since then, unbelievably, we once more 'bumped' in to choughs but this time their French cousins in Brittany. We weren't looking for them; had even forgotten about their existence in Brittany, but there they were flying overhead in squawky formation at the very first place we had pulled up to and taken a walk. Seriously we are chough magnets. So this year I returned with slightly better photographic kit in the hope of scoring better photos. Last year we had approached via Ingrina, walked across to Barranco and then westwards along the coast and this is where we had our unexpected chough encounter. This year we decided to bypass Ingrina and Barranco and go directly across country from the main Vila Do Bispo to Sagres road. Big mistake! It took forever.



The landscape was beautiful though, and chock full of interesting birdsong (one which sounded like a marble being dropped and rebounding several times), insect metropolis and bruised underfoot fragrant herbal vegetation. It was therefore hard to regret such beauty especially when less than a mile in to the walk a flock of over 30 (I lost count after a while) squawking and swirling choughs flew coast bound over our heads. We were on the right track then. I particularly regretted I hadn't had my camera out but sometimes life's just that much better experienced for real rather than through the lens. We continued on our way past a sea of red earth dyed sheep, before getting lost by making the mistake of following signs rather than our nose.

We discovered we had circled back to an area that was all too familiar. We broke 'rank' and headed across country instead and a while later reached exactly the spot we had seen the choughs last year. We sat for a while on the exposed cliff waiting in anticipation. Nothing. I stood, with the equivalent of 800mm's worth of lens atop a highly versatile steady monopod waiting.

Phil grew impatient and went to 'look around the next corner' whilst I remained ever alert to the chough announcement of 'I'm here now'. Nothing. In a beautiful coastal environment in relative warmth, I'm a patient woman but today I was starting to get bored now. I decided to finally pack away half of my kit reducing to a 400mm lens and have a short sit down. Despite debating this for at least 10 minutes I knew that as soon as I had made this decision the choughs would enter stage right. To the second this is what happened but luckily there was enough squawky announcement as to enable me to employ my still available and more manageable 400mm lens. I got in a few shots before they somersaulted out of view swiftly followed by Phil with a thumbs up.





Phil had walked a far way up the coast westwards and the only sight he'd seen of choughs was when he returned just in time to see the group I just had. I think he'd thought I'd been in chough heaven since the moment he'd left but sadly I hadn't. With camera still at the ready we walked eastwards along the cliffs but to no avail. Where can 30 plus noisy black mischief making birds hide themselves? But hide

they did. We packed away our kit and resolved ourselves to the long trek across country and back to Miles. We stepped over numerous dung beetles and survived a rogue bee attack on the way. By the time we arrived Miles was most definitely 'some boy' and we were very glad to see him. Today had definitely not been a lazy day.

A short hop away was again our favourite spot so we were more than happy to climb beneath the comfort of our 'wild duvet' and head there. We had stocked up on vegetables and wine yesterday so there was no need to enter the realms of 'the outside world' before we went to hide.

Lovely wine (we pushed the boat out a little and had a more expensive one at €10.99), a simple dinner, a little music and then a read before bedtime followed before dark descended. All the while distant waves roared away in the background. Just as we were cleaning our teeth before bed it started to rain again. We might be in for another night of dripping water torture after all, although the van was parked our normal way round at least.

**This evening's wine was Quinta do Infantade 2012 (€10.99)**

## Monday 4th April

It rained more in the night. The wind blew pretty hard too but seemed to pass overhead rather than directly into Miles and the surrounding trees. In fact it roared like a jet engine, the rumble of the distant waves folded into its wings and dropped like booming bombs above us. When it started to get light it was still raining so our heads dived back under the duvet despite slight concerns over the muddy outwards track. We were warm and dry and there is a certain cosy comfort in therefore listening to the rain on the metal roof. It reminds me of my days caravanning when I was a kid. Almost every weekend, come rain or shine (and sometimes snow) we were in our caravan. There were certain sounds and smells that remind me of those days; the heavy clicking of the calor gas fire and slight whiff of gas when dad turned it on first thing in the morning to take the edge off of the metallic chill, the crescendo sound of the whistling kettle on the gas stove, the smell of a hot ground sheet in the attached awning and, as mentioned earlier, the pitter patter of rain on the tinny roof above.

In a slight lull in the rainy proceedings we jumped outside but then very quickly jumped back in to brew a cup of tea. Attempts to at least open the windows to fill the van with wild moistened fresh smells from outside were thwarted by the rain which had now turned to a very Cornish mizzle.

The up side of all this however is that it was most definitely a day, this time with no guilt, for heading to Eurasia; our favourite vegetarian establishment in Albufeira. It had been almost a week since our last visit so we had done quite well in resisting the 40 mile drive until now.

I had brought the March edition of the Crantock Parish Magazine with me, as we'd had to no time to read it yet. All the way to Albufeira I was transfixed by the crossword and before I knew it we were at the restaurant. Maybe we should have worked on this crossword on our 1300 mile journey down to Portugal as it might not have seemed like such a long journey then!

The meal was as lovely as ever, despite a few less vegan dishes than normal. We still had our fill and after 2 drinks each and as much as we could eat the cost was only a wonderfully



affordable €19 total. The waitresses recognise us instantly now; even remembering our last drinks order almost a week ago. We tried to shyly practise our Portuguese and they very patiently endured and answered our questions. In the app. we use for learning Portuguese (Duolingo) it has introduced us to two words for the colour black; negro and preta. I asked today which was correct. After a slight thoughtful pause the waitress answered 'preta' was correct for things like black coffee, black cat, black scarf, and 'negro' was only really used in reference to a person who was black. So it sounded like preta was the best word to stick to in most cases. Confusingly though we did see a reference to black olives using the word 'negro' (on Spanish and Portuguese versions)!

Being the foodies that we are, and with all the other outdoor activities rendered unpleasant in the rain, I suggested we head to a supermarket chain we had never investigated before. I'd seen signs to it on the way to Albufeira last year and hadn't recognised it as one of the more familiar ones like Continente, Intermarche or Pingo Doce. To some the supermarket may seem like a strange tourist attraction but to us we were looking at an hour's entertainment at least. We love it and this particular one was really quite engrossing, offering a fine selection of wines (organic ones labelled and even one with a vegan label on it) and also more than most vegan products (cheese, burgers, ice cream, lots of milk choices, Moo Free and raw chocolate to name but a few items). We even found some Portuguese real ale which was unfiltered. We didn't even know there were any Portuguese real ales!



With our supermarket bootie we drove back westwards, continuing the crossword effort on the way. As the weather was still far from lovely we decided to go back to a wild spot behind Budens we'd been to a few nights ago; the one with the 'man toilet cave' (much to Phil's delight). At least if we were shut up inside the van we'd have a lovely view to admire and watch the weather come and go. We'd have to put up with a bit of wind buffeting though. I rang my mum and dad in the UK after their favourite early evening's TV programmes so as they didn't miss them. I normally ring them on a Monday evening and I still felt like I wanted to even though we were away. I always increase by phone buffer when we are away so I can stay in contact. We chatted for a while about our journey down, how they'd found out that

even Monday's sailings had been cancelled (so we'd been right to leave a day early) and the weather in general, as well as an update on dad's vegetable seed planting progress.

Phil and I supped on the beer we'd bought and then moved effortlessly on to a bottle of wine. That was a mistake, not because we were drunk or even hung over in the morning but just because it was unnecessary and sat heavily on top of our food. It didn't make sleep that easy either, along with the strong gusts of wind; inside and outside!

**This evening's wine was Herdade Portocarro (€9.99) plus Letra A, B, C and D (White Beer, Pilsner, Stout and Red Ale) unfiltered real ales.**



## Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> April

More chover (that's Portuguese for rain) continued overnight so another easy hide under the duvet ensued first thing. Eventually we succumbed/surrendered, had a cup of tea and did the washing up from last night. I was watching the weather closely because, despite the fact that I really wasn't feeling it, I had in mind that today I was going to stop so much lazing around and go for a run. Cool overcast weather would be nice, but not heavy rain. Fortunately/unfortunately, (I hadn't decided which of those options was best for me at this moment), it was looking good to go. I wanted to run from our spot here to the beach at

Cabanas Velhas. It looked to be a touch over 5 miles and, with the first mile or so downhill and the wind on my back it would be a gentle reintroduction to not having run for about 3 weeks. Phil was happy to 'leapfrog' me with water supply and general support in the van so I took off.

My knee and ankle did their usual little twang immediately but then I settled in. Phil passed me a little while later and I felt a little like a dog running after a car nipping at the tyres. Quicker than expected I was at the bottom and was able to pass Phil the gillet that, at the top in overcast wind had been deemed necessary but now ironically the sun had come out and had practically burned it off my back. The sun's appearance now set the song 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen Go Out in the Midday Sun' in my head, but I carried on regardless after a quick slug of water. Phil had commented on how quick I had reached this point but I assured him that the downhill and wind had more to do with it than my athleticism and to now expect things very much to slow down.

It felt burning hot as I set off across the main road and down the relatively flat valley road seawards. There were tall tracts of bamboo on the sides of the road but with the sun now directly overhead they afforded no shade. The wind, so cooling and helpful before, also temporarily abandoned me. I reached a corner of high trees and expecting to perhaps see Phil here, removed another layer. He however had this time over estimated my progress and was waiting further on. I still had the exposed cobbled long straight cross valley road to ploddingly negotiate first. And plod I did as the sun pushed down harder on the top of my head, despite the hat. Phil sat waiting at the end of this road and before the one and only monster hill I had to endure. I passed over the remaining clothing I could appropriately shed and glugged more water. I had to admit I was tempted to quit in the face of the heat and the hill but I just knew that quitting would feel worse. In a weird kind of way I wanted to tell myself off for over indulging last night by completing my planned run. So with heavy hot feet I continued.

The hill was as I remembered it when I'd done it a couple of years ago as part of another route. It was a bad, gravity resisting upwards thump of a hill but it was also over with quicker than you think it might be, especially when you employ the 'not looking up' tactic. If I look up on big hills it is almost like it is a big wave swelling up and getting ready to crash over me. So normally I dig in, the peak of my cap like blinkers on a horse. I passed Phil about two thirds of the way up as he was checking the surf from a little lay-by, and soon I was up and over. A little adjustment was needed to reset my legs to downhill mode and now I had the last stretch ahead. As I turned onto the dusty track leading to the beach I had to readjust again so my wobbly legs wouldn't get too cocky and roll over the small marble like stones all over this section. As I rounded into the car park and to where Phil had parked, trying to look as athletically glamorous as I could but totally falling, Phil gave me a round of genuine applause. I stopped my watch and my mileage counter before slumping in the shade of the van. I'd run 5.36 miles in a very hot 55 minutes and 21 seconds. I'd take that as it was a miracle I'd kept at it. In fact it was a miracle I'd started it in the first place. The night before from inland I stared down at the merest distant line of the road on the coast going up the monster hill and wondered at it. It is always a buzz to be able to review the distance you've covered on your own two feet. I was knackered though. Phil poured me into the van and drove us to Baptista supermarket in Luz, an easy 5 miles by car.

We knew we could get really nice baguettes at Baptista for lunch. We also found some chickpea and ginger pate we'd had before and we had tomatoes and rocket to accompany. We ate this whilst watching the buzz of windblown tourists on the beach. A while later Phil contemplated a surf here but decided he'd rather check a little further west. We stopped off



for a water top up at Raposeira before climbing up and then descending down to Ingrina. There were waves here, some of them quite sizeable but the tide was too high. The waves were closing out, held up too long before crashing down in the face of the strong off shore wind. We sat in the van watching for a while, both us made soporific by the sunshine pouring in, before it was time to head to our favourite wild spot where we hoped there was a little more shelter than last night's spot from the wind. It was still blowy but a little less and more importantly it was all ours again.

A good old post run wash and brush up was in order before we repeated the delights of the simple meal we had cooked a few nights ago; vegan sausage, herbed potatoes and lovely Portuguese cabbage. Tonight however there would be no wine and that is despite having a lovely vinho tinto on board. That made our decision even more angelic. We even did the washing up before bed.

**This evening's wine was Angel Water (€0.00)!**

## Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> April

The wind, having bounced against the outside of Miles a bit in the night, had now subsided and we woke up to bright sunshine and blue aeroplane streaked sky and as I watched another plane silently cut through the perfect blue. In the warm laziness of half sleep I had a flashback to the hot summers of the 1970's. It was the anticipation of the quiet building up of heat outside and sheer childlike joy of at that moment having nothing to do or worry about for the rest of the day at least. The fact that we were enrobed in a 'hot wheels car track' orange colour duvet in the surrounds of a dark '1970's blue' van also recalled a vague memory of a jumper I had back then; a garishly dark blue and orange striped number no doubt knitted by my grandmother. Unless that was just a weird confused memory I had. I'd have to ask my mum next time we spoke. Either way it was a wonderful moment of regression and



digression. We read for a while with the windows open to allow the gentle breeze to circulate the warming air.

Today was shaping up to be another lazy day. The sunshine made that easy and the fact that my legs were displaying quite painful amounts of lack of amusement after yesterday's run made it even easier again. After breakfast we drove to Lagos. Phil had a desire to check out a particular surf spot there but half way along I realised there was a secondary reason we were Lagos bound. There is a health food store there that sells these amazing vegan potato tortillas. Phil had remembered about them and figured them into today's plan.

We sat for a while overlooking the busy car park and beach, as the car chasing swirls of dust covered the sun lotion smothered lardy exteriors of newly arrived tourists. I had to admit the sea did look enticing here, striped bluey green beyond the fine strip of white sand. It's a great place for families with a lust for the heat of slightly more exotic landscape but a lack of creative adventure. I preferred the wilder reaches of Portugal's Atlantic coast where the smell of sun roasted vegetation endured over the smell of a British pub offering a 'traditional English roast'. There is however a certain charm in the fortress surrounding cobbled streets of Lagos; even if the cobbles are very slippery when you're wearing flip flops. It was into these very streets that we wandered after the unsuccessful search for surf but now in the search of the very important and tasty potato tortillas. They were successfully secured along with a few other provisions and treats under the watchful eyes of the white coated shop assistants. The birth of the 'hippydom ideal' health food store of the 1960's which still endures wonderfully today in some towns and cities in the UK has completely passed by Portugal it seems.





There's no muddy piles of organic vegetables or darkened corners of crystals and Nag Champa incense here. No, it's all very medicinal and bright but admittedly with quite a few desirable vegan treats on offer; mainly thanks to the German influence.

We also visited a little book shop that we knew was tucked away in the backstreets; The Owl Story Book shop. It is run by ex-pats and so English language books predominate here, offering a certain refund on return of books bought there for those more local. The man running it today was a very chatty man who told us stories of surfing in Barritz in the 60's, about how his son and daughter were both once world championship sailors, and travelling from the Lake District to Portsmouth an almost weekly event for training and how this also saw the whole family travelling all over the world for competitions. Sadly his daughter, the owner of the shop, had recently had a very serious stroke hence her father was now looking after the shop. I purchased two books, both stories of British people who had chosen to live and work in Portugal, before we said our goodbyes and wished his daughter a speedy recovery.

We lunched overlooking the lighthouse point. It was rather busy, with coachloads turning up to join the throngs of tourists visiting the lighthouse or taking the sea cave grotto tours. We did this tour a few years ago. Phil hadn't been keen at first and generally we don't go in for touristy things but I can tell you it was a blast. I was quite brave suggesting it as I'm not mad keen on things involving boats but the sea had looked so calm and greeny blue it seduced me into persuading Phil into a rare touristy moment. It was just us two and an old fisherman who couldn't speak a word of English, nor we any Portuguese back then. Actually I lie, he would point up at rock formations and announce to us what the rock was meant to resemble, such as gorilla or crocodile. The resemblances were vague along with the English translations he gave us but the sign language helped and was equally hilarious to boot. All of us, including the old man, seemed to be having fun and the rippling giggles matched the gently rippling water. Drifting in and out of sparking water lit sea caves aloft the blue green crystal clear sea was a wonderful experience too. Even if with a mischievous yell, the old man frequently had to tell us to duck to avoid the low entrances to the grottos. Afterwards Phil had to admit not all tourist 'attractions' are bad. So now we sat watching tourists, anticipating for them the delight they would no doubt feel as the old man pointed and shout GORRRRRRIIIIIILLLA with a cheeky grin.

We took our time with lunch, sucking in the heat now Mile's side door faced away from the cooling breeze that also had a habit of sending dust devils swirling inside. Phil started reading one of books I bought earlier 'A Year in Monchique' and peels of surprised and knowing laughter were punctuating my sunshine absorbing sighs as well as my sighs when I finally got another crossword solution. After much of this type of behaviour we returned to the surf spot to review its potential again. It was however still not performing so we ambled to the supermarket for fruit and veg supplies. There were a couple of dogs just on the mat inside the supermarket doors. They were pretty funny sitting there and then checking in people's shopping bags as they passed by like a couple of furry security guards. Whether their owner was inside shopping or they were just local dogs hanging out I am not sure but they were certainly not being chased off but very much tolerated.

On the way back west we debated about our higher viewpoint spot but the wind was picking up so we returned to our old favourite and more sheltered wild spot. Again it was all ours and perfectly filled with early evening sunshine to encourage us to open last night's saved bottle of wine and just sit for a while. The longer into a holiday you go, the less lazy doing nothing feels. Ask yourself how often you take the time to just sit and think? At home those moments for me are rare and almost like the punctuations to the long spells of busyness in between and often they can feel rushed or make me feel guilty about not doing all those things I seem to be able to find to do. Here it is the opposite, although at first it takes some practice to reverse it. Long spells of reading, writing, thinking, staring; are punctuated with the things that need doing like shopping, cooking, washing up. I don't have to snatch a quick read before bedtime. I can read all day if I want. What a joy!



Back to things that need doing though now as we jolted ourselves out of waking slumber to cook dinner. The sun was after all starting to dip behind the pines. We cooked up the potato tortillas we bought earlier and Phil cooked up, at my specific earlier request, a tomatoey bean dish. With this we had more cabbage, which is a strange thing to be developing an addiction to but it indeed seems we were. We hurriedly washed up before bedtime as both of us were eager to snuggle up and tuck into our books.



**This evening's wine was Herdade Dos Lagos Reserva 2012 (€?)**

## Thursday 7th April

Another blue sky day welcomed us; the pine tree tops bathed in an orange glow. We slowly greeted the day and pondered further on the crossword whilst we ate chai oats and had a cuppa before then contemplating leaving. In the last few minutes before we left we had been suddenly immersed into cloud a little. We bumped along the track and out of the wild. The ruts and bumps were now packed hard again after two days of sun but somehow they seemed deeper each day. As we approached the main road we could clearly see a bank of grey cloud clinging to this corner of the coast. Luckily we drove out of it and it hadn't reached where we were heading.

We arrived in Ingrina a short while later and Phil potted off to observe the surf. I sat staring into the place you stare when your body is immersed in heat; the same place you stare at just after you've sunk into a hot bath on a cold winter's evening. Phil returned and, to my surprise, announced that he would go in for a surf. The conditions he said weren't perfect but it was worth a go. A few minutes after he'd gone in I glanced up and saw him ripping down and across the face of a sizeable breaker. It sure didn't look too bad from where I was standing! Whilst Phil was out 'making the best of bad waves', I took the opportunity to give Miles a sweep out. We always go to such lengths to clean Miles inside and out before we leave for our trip. You have to wonder at the value of this as barely two days in and the outside is covered in a fine film of dust and pollen and the wheel arches and surrounds in splashes of now baked on pale mud. Meanwhile the inside accumulates a fine film of dust, with sand and bits of vegetation thrown in for good measure. Luckily we can shake out the rug easily and the floor brushes out well too. Van housework done, I set up a chair outside on the sun trapped wind sheltered side of the van to do some journal writing. It wasn't too long however before Phil returned. I was surprised as I imagined he'd be out there a far while yet. He said the tide was now too high but he'd enjoyed a short but sweet session. As he said this he looked back around at the surf and cursed as a good set rolled in. He watched for a while, still holding his board and bedecked in his dripping wetsuit, and I wondered whether he was going to change his mind, but as others got out too, I think he knew he was right to quit whilst he was ahead.

Onwards to Baptista supermarket in Luz for some of their lovely baguettes for lunch and veg for later. We also dropped into the health food store nearby to have a brief look around. I managed to find an interesting recipe book for 'energy balls' that I'd never seen before but beyond that we bought very little beyond a couple of treats as the prices here are relatively high.

We took our baguettes a few miles westwards to the fort at Almedena. From here you can see for miles both ways up the coast and only a smattering of visitors means it is a relatively quiet spot. When we arrived there was only one van there; a hippy mobile appropriately decorated with colourful graphics and lyrics from a Pink Floyd song. The guy had art work on sale which he had displayed in the front window. He had a leggy black and white mongrel for company who languidly flopped from shade to sun; unable to work out which was more desirable or merely wishing for somewhere in between. It wandered over in slow motion at one point and discovering us at our open door, poked its dusty nose in for a wag resulting stroke and scratch before wandering off for a good munch on some nearby sheep's poo. We remained here for some time watching tourists come and go, photos snapped of the fort ruins with the dazzling whiteness of the sea behind. My photographic experience tells me most of the resulting photos would no doubt just be silhouettes but the memories will remain regardless I'm sure.

We couldn't remain in this lazy mode forever. We had after all our favourite wild spot to drive to and laze around in further. What a drag! We did have to, and after a much shorter duration than normal, fill up with water again. We are either washing too much or cooking too much cabbage and potatoes. It was busy at the water tap so, in the effort to not hold up someone else, Phil totally forgot to wash out his wet suit after the earlier surf. If you don't do this in fresh water it can sometimes get a big whiffy. However, it would have to wait until tomorrow now but maybe before then he will get back into the surf again anyway.

As we drove towards our wild spot it now almost felt like we were driving down our own driveway it was so familiar. It's a good job nobody was in our space as we might have felt

inclined to have called the police on them for 'breaking and entering'! We still had ample time before cooking would begin to continue our quiet reading and writing whilst supping on this evening's wine offering.

**This evening's wine was Douro 100 Hectares Touriga Nacional (€?)**



Dinner once again somehow involved cabbage and potatoes. What was it about that at the moment? Tonight's potatoes would however finally be traditionally cooked with rosemary as Phil had found and picked some at Ingrina earlier. So once more we settled in to another quiet but wind whispered evening. It was just a shame that the sun was teased with encroaching clouds now from the west. Hopefully we would still get the lovely warm glow of sunset whilst eating our dinner.

## Friday 8<sup>th</sup> April

The wind wasn't even pausing for breath this morning. Everything outside, apart from the ground, was dancing in its wake. The sun also had a thick blanket of cloud thrown over its head and had been taken hostage. It felt dull and chilly. We went back to sleep and the next time we woke the wind was still up for a fight but the sun had at least now been released. The now scant clouds were being stretched across the blue sky like flimsy pizza dough at the hands of the wind. The bees, sent off on windy diversions, valiantly battled on trying to shop for their honey making ingredients but looked more like sailors trying to dock ship in a turbulent sea.

We breakfasted and then I had a little battle with pig-tailing my hair. There is a technique to this, namely brush your hair into the wind and pig-tail against the wind. That technique went a bit out the window this morning though as the wind seemed to be against me on all accounts. I don't have a mirror in which to judge my attempts but the side of the van, dusty or not, helps a little although it does have a tendency to throw back a 'fairground mirror' type



of effect which you just have to ignore (I really haven't been eating that much have I?). Regardless I wrestled my greying locks into some semblance of tidiness. Let's face it if it was too prim, in the environment we are currently living in, it would just be way too weird. In fact at any time it would look way too weird for this scruffy outdoors girl anyway! The last part to my 'how to pig-tail outdoors' guide is to put a headscarf on. It doesn't matter then how tidy or untidy you've done it as you cover it all up anyway! So why pig-tails if it's so much trouble? Well you may remember (or you may still be trying to forget) my rather detailed earlier guide to ablutions and how I get by without the need to wash my hair once during our trip. Well one of the secrets to this is pig-tails and headscarves. Freshly washed hair just before the beginning of our trip is then neatly packaged up in pig-tails and wrapped in a headscarf. Each day I redo my pig-tails it smells as fresh as the day it was washed. As long as I kept it up and out of the way of my sweaty neck and back when running, all is well.

We headed to Ingrina in the hope of surf but the howling off-shore wind messed up the otherwise good size surf. It wasn't a day for sitting around in the sun either due to the aforementioned wind so we decided to take a drive up to Monchique in the mountains. We briefly stopped off at Baptista for some more lovely baguettes which we lunched on at the Caldas da Monchique. This is a favourite place of ours as it is centred on the springs there. The village itself is pretty too, set deep in a wooded valley with cobblestone streets and a centre square. It was a kind of spa back in the day; a place that people came 'to take the waters' and aid recovery from sickness, so many of the houses are quite grand, having catered for the fairly well off who could afford such luxuries as a visit to a health spa. We went to collect some of the water from the spring and returned to the van just as a guy in the rental van next to ours opened his door on to the side of Miles. I wondered what was going on as Phil exploded into a very uncharacteristic rant which led me to believe he was just about to knock the guy out. The guy said he had 'fallen out' of his van and hadn't done it purposefully but Phil wasn't convinced and told the guy he was lying. His apologies did seem on the insincere side. The damage was a small dent and a scratch in the paintwork. It was one of those situations where it is 50/50 whether you do anything about it and here, in another country, with idiots from yet another country (Germany we think), the complexity outweighed taking it any further. Whether the guy meant it or not I think that him and his family had been so frightened by an enraged Phil that they returned within about a minute, got in and drove off; Phil glaring intensely at them during their hurried retreat. Understandably Phil remained disgruntled and enraged for a long time after. After all Miles is our 'baby' and we really take care of him, but his kind of thing could happen anywhere without us catching anyone in the act, even in our own car park at home. It wasn't worth spoiling our holiday, as I had pointed out when Phil had been ready to stove the guys van doors and windows in.

We remained to eat our lunch and then decided to take a little road across country we've never taken before; from the Caldas da Monchique to a place called Alferce. The road was small, more like a relatively well made track, but a beautiful windy one at that. It afforded amazing views, beyond the pine and eucalyptus clad hillsides and valleys and all the way to the coast. Admittedly the white high rises of Portimao predominated the distant view but it was still the kind of view that made you feel like you were flying. There were tucked away houses, springs, newly dug over terraces, wheel chasing dogs, little fern filled valleys and plenty of enticing woodland trails along the way. We continued, making mental notes of possibly sleeping spots as we went. As we hit the more major road at Alferce, we turned back towards Monchique. We'd been here on many occasions and it's familiarity was somewhere between comforting and normal for us so after a quick drive through town, more out of tradition, we headed up to the Foia (mountain top) for an either higher viewpoint. It's a funny place. It kind of draws you up there but leaves you wondering what you are doing up there about 5 minutes later. It's kind of flat, desolate, full of tourist coaches and bland looking



restaurants, and surrounded by telephone and other such important looking masts. So five minutes later we dropped down to a spot we had parked up overnight a couple of time last year. It wasn't the most glamorous, being on a kind of patch of wasteland, but the view was vast and come night time it was bejewelled with twinkling stars above and at ground level below. Unfortunately the wind was rather distracting on this side of the mountain and could have led to another bumpy night so we decided to drop down further and investigate spots we had earmarked earlier on the quiet track road out of the Caldas da Monchique. A couple of miles in Phil pulled in to a likely candidate; an off the road track with an overgrown trail in full sun and shelter from the wind. It was unlikely hardly any cars could be driving along the actual road track (one in the hour we have been here so far), let alone the little track we are tucked in to. Time to celebrate our successful escape from the wind so tonight's wine offering was uncorked as Phil worked his magic on the stovetop to make us a coconut tofu curry with batata doce (sweet potatoes), cebola velmelho (red onion), pimento velmelho (red pepper) and broccoli (I'll have to look that up!).

### **This evening's wine was Monte da Casteleja Organic Meia Praia (2<sup>nd</sup> time)**

Before dinner we had taken a little stroll along the trails that extended beyond our chosen spot. There were some interesting tracks in the hard baked mud along the way like extremely large dog tracks with big claws. We both wondered at the amazing experience of seeing a Portuguese lobo trot past this evening but I think our imagination was enhanced by sunshine and wine and our experience of seeing the fox the other night. I'm pretty sure that the Portuguese wolves have confined themselves to the more northern wild mountain regions around Guarda but you never know. Meanwhile the only wildlife I managed to encounter on our brief hike was a large tick on my boot that was hastily rehomed in the bushes. We did see some funky looking wild mushrooms growing in what looked like sheep's shit.

Even as the sun dropped westwards and behind the hillside to our right, we were still treated to the sight of very gently swaying eucalyptus to our left. The silence was so amazing it would have been sacrilege to have put on music as we ate our dinner. We hoped we were in for an extremely silent night (unless the lobos started howling).

## **Saturday 9th April**

It wasn't the lobos who started howling last night, but the wind.....big time! Pretty much as soon as we started to turn in for the night it began to shake our world. We were surrounded by thin high eucalyptus trees which, not unlike palm trees, do make a bit of a fuss in the wind. Regardless, I think they had a night of it too as they were being bent at an alarming angle. Somehow we managed to get in some sleep early on but at 2.30am, when a big sounding lump of something landed on the roof of Miles, we both woke up with a start. The wind had increased even more and from my 'ring side seat' side of the van I could see the tops of the trees bending at an angle that surely soon would have them snapping like breadsticks at a particularly lively dinner party. The bright stars behind were sent flashing in their wake. I was nervous particularly so when more debris loudly announced its sudden presence on the roof. So much for thinking we were in for a quiet night and it suddenly didn't seem such a bright idea being under, or within the reach of swirling bending trees. I was seriously putting in some thought about asking Phil if we should move but I figured he would have suggested that already if he felt the need. So instead we tossed and turned and remained transfixed with whirling dervish performance taking place outside. We must have somehow managed to drift off, me after having convinced myself it might be relenting a little, as sunrise came thankfully quicker than it felt it would have done at the earlier 2.30am wake up call.

Weirdly, almost creepily, as the sun caught the upper edges of the pale eucalyptus leaves, it was pretty still and silent. It was almost as if the eucalyptus trees, having been at a really wild rave all night, had angelically slipped in the back door at sunrise without their parents even knowing. Basically 'butter wouldn't melt'. We weren't complaining; quite the contrary, but it was just weird how calm it was now.

Despite the lack of sleep and despite the fact my legs were still a little sore from the run earlier in the week, I really fancied running the two or so miles from here and back to the Caldas da Monchique. It might wake me and my legs up. As usual Phil offered to 'leapfrog' me in Miles and I was off. The road had been a delight to drive yesterday but it was even more so running it. It was beautiful. The going was relatively flat at first and with amazing sweeping views to my left and coastward. Phil gave me the thumbs up at one point when I ran past and as he sat in a particularly good viewpoint. There were a few hills that popped up unexpectedly; I must not have noticed them on yesterday's drive, but all in all it felt like a joy. I shouted "Bom dia" as I passed a couple of men tending their terraced veg patches and also when I passed a group of shepherds with their herd of goats. One of the big sheepdogs spotted me as I ran towards him on the road and lolloped towards me. He was beautiful and good tempered and, with his head at my waist level, I stroked it as he ran alongside me for a few seconds. I continued passing more terraces, big mountain boulder areas, quiet white washed houses and then met a couple more dogs, who'd come out to patrol their section of road on hearing me advance. These two were chatty and in friendly Portuguese dog language kindly asked me to 'move on through please'. As I descended the steepest section and cruised into Caldas da Monchique, Phil was waiting patiently. It had actually turned out to be 3.1 miles and I plodded it out in 26 minutes and 19 seconds. I'm no sprinter, it is more important I work my legs and enjoy the run so I was more than happy with that.

As we were now back again at Caldas we thought we would refill with the beautiful spring water again so ambled along with our containers into the atmospheric little valley. It was quieter here than yesterday which was strange given it was a Saturday. After, we continued through the village and parked in the shade of some tall sturdy pines, as the heat was now building. We noticed yesterday the sign for a section of the Algarvian walking path (a long distance walking route through the Algarve) which looked like it delved deeper into and along the river valley Caldas was sat within. We fancied a shady walk alongside the sparkling river so took off, following the signs. It did indeed take us downwards into the valley but the river was still set deeper in the narrow valley, so although we could hear its tinkling charms, we couldn't much see it until we reached a bridge to cross over to the other side. There was a house set beside the bridge and as we passed and now unexpectedly turned upwards and back along the opposite side of the river, the three resident hounds wagged, shouted and followed our progressed, even passing through the house and out the other side to shadow us.

We continued to climb up and away from the river. The vegetation, greener and lusher below, now turned more dusty and spikey. We even encountered prickly pear and barrel cacti as we passed a higher small residence. Shade had now abandoned us as we followed sandy fire road type tracks. Lizards skittered and scarpered, often unseen, into the dry rattling vegetation on either side. Despite the drier environment the landscape was still lit up by the bright pinks, yellows, reds, purples and oranges of wild flowers and herbs scratching out their existence in the loose earth. This also meant that the bees had more than enough shops to visit and the air was filled with the sound of their rush hour traffic. A pick-up truck had actually passed us on the track up, it's back filled with bee hives so business was brisk it seemed.

At a relatively high point and after quite a few minutes ambling along, we reviewed all the multiple track possibilities above, below and beyond. We could have gone on forever but being this had turned into a different, hotter walk than expected and we had no water supplies on us, or sunscreen, hats and sunglasses, the ever building heat decided we should really turn back. The whole act was played out again at the house with the three dogs and as we dropped back down to the shade and the cooling sounds of the river below. It had been a different walk to what we had anticipated but an enjoyable one regardless.

Our small breakfast from earlier was now long forgotten by our bellies so, with already being a ways toward Albufeira we now made the excuse to hop the remaining distance and visit Eurasia for lunch. We got there at 1.30pm and luxuriated in the foody offerings until closing time at 3pm.

We weren't going to risk the mountain again tonight so now we travelled back westwards to the hopefully calmer and comfort of our wild spot. At least there were no tall trees to attack Miles' roof. First however, and with ample time to hand before the need to settle in for the evening, we drove up to the fort at Almedena for some high view watching along the coast. We sat reading, writing and glancing out to sea as now gathering clouds constantly changed the colour of its surface. It was looking increasingly sure we wouldn't be experiencing a glowing sunset tonight but we'd take anything else rather than the wind drama of last night.

On the way to our wild spot and after stopping off at the public loos at Raposeira, I had a wicked thought. There was a pizza place there that was recommended by a guy called Thor we met here a couple of years ago, who unfortunately since has departed this world. It was about time we got around to checking it out. We went in to order and were told it would take about 25 minutes, such was the busyness of this tiny place inside. We decided to have a couple of beers whilst we waited and free bar snacks of peanuts, roasted corn and lupin seeds (which actually unbeknown to us are better eaten by taking their skins off first we were told here) served alongside. As the sky turned dark outside we both shared the fact that we couldn't help thinking of Thor and how we wished we had spent more time talking to him or had any inclination that he would chose the sad pathway he did of taking his own life. Thor was a talented and much published Swedish surf photographer. We often bumped into him in the same places on our trip a couple of years ago and got chatting. He was a deep character, still trying to get over a split from his fiancé and perhaps we should have seen the signs in his sharing of his deep emotions without having really known us that long. I remember him being buoyed when we shared how Phil and I had met all those years ago and how our relationship easily survived any social pressures for marriage or having kids. It obviously wasn't enough and obviously there was a cloud of pressures on Thor's shoulders somewhere along the line that we didn't know about. We both still feel guilty for 'not knowing or preventing' Thor from taking the pathway he chose but that is what everyone feels, his close friends and family no doubt more so, if someone takes their own life. We learnt about it some months after meeting him via the surfing press and we are obviously still feeling the effects now as we sat waiting for the pizza from the place he was always visiting and highly recommended. Thanks Thor, it was nice pizza.

The dusk came pretty swiftly in the face of the darkening clouds as we ate our takeaway pizza in our favourite wild spot. Hey, perhaps they would be able to deliver now the wild spot seemed to be our permanent address? We climbed into bed to read as the first spots of rain started and soon increased but at least there was no raging wind swept eucalyptus to cause drama overnight.

**This evening's wine was just a couple of beers!**

## Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> April

A grey wet un-sunrise greeted our bleary eyes. No surprise then that, despite our thankfully good night's sleep, we still dove back under the covers. At waking again it was much the same so we spent some time engrossed in our books happy to feel cosy in our dry and warm tinny cave. Eventually the sun came out and pulled the duvet off from over us. It was surprisingly hot given its earlier efforts but sadly it was relatively short lived. We brunched intermittently opening and closing the door between strong sunshine and sudden showers. Each time it rained we briefly discussed 'rainy day' plans but then the sun butted in. We read more, finally finished the crossword, chatted and before long it was getting on for 6pm and the sun blasted in gloriously. It appeared that our day had shaped itself in a wonderfully quiet, gentle and unrushed way. How is it possible in such a tiny space to have such a lovely day? Phil, lowering the wonder slightly, mused that perhaps it was because we were such cheap dates!

We uncorked the unfiltered port we had wisely bought a couple of days ago and bathed in the early evening sunshine. My evening was complete in the knowledge that we didn't have to leave to go to some fancy restaurant. Not with a gourmet stovetop vegan chef on board. It appears that not only had Phil been sitting silently reading his highly engrossing book, interspersed with joint crossword efforts, but had indeed been consulting his extensive culinary skills balanced against our Miles Kitchen stocks. He had a plan and soon Satay Tempeh noodles was on its way.

What a wonderful lazy Sunday we've had and how lovely it was to finish it with more lovely company, good food and now very warm bright evening sunshine. We have not seen or heard anyone all day beyond flying planes. Today this wild spot in Portugal had been the centre of our universe.

**This evening's wine was Porto Quinta Do Infantado LBV Unfiltered Port 2008**

## Monday 11<sup>th</sup> April

As darkness had fallen last night, so had the rain, hard. In between the rain showers was hail and sometimes periods of quiet when you could very easily hear the roaring surf in the distance. Both of us were woken by a particularly heavy shower at 2.30am, the loud pummelling and tinkling on the roof indicating it was either hail or particularly heavy and big raindrops. I think both of us were wondering how the track out was shaping up after two days of rain showers and now the deluge overnight. There was nothing we could do about it now though so best stop worrying but neither of us could settle for a fair while after but did eventually.

The rain greeted us at dawn and continued stop-starting. We had planned ahead last night and got all our tea making stuff out before we'd put the bed down (the bed restricts access into some of the cupboards when down) but when we attempted to turn the stove on it wouldn't ignite for some reason. The lighter of course could have helped out the ignition switch, but this was trapped in the cupboard under the bed as we don't normally need it. There goes our cup of tea in bed idea. Of course as soon as we had put the bed up and could

easily access the lighter, the stove lit normally all by itself. If there was a Portuguese translation of 'Sod's Law', now would be the appropriate moment to use it.

We dived in and out of the van between showers to do various things like using the facilities or brush my hair. After a quick breakfast we decided to tackle the track out. It was pretty sodden and the whipped up mud caused Miles to have a little 'double take' on a couple of sections as well as cover his wheels and undercarriage with a thick gloop. We had however made it out and once we hit the main road we left a muddy trail in our wake until it had all flung itself off. Mysteriously though, the upper bodywork of Miles, despite all the overnight heavy washing, still remained dusty. Once more we headed for a water top up at Raposeira (what were we doing with it all this year?), a toilet break and a quick check of surf. Big slabs of grey and white wave were slinging themselves onto Ingrina beach this morning and so understandably no one was out trying their luck with them.

It was difficult to decide what to do today. One minute you thought it was shaping up for a luxuriate in the sun moment, the next a hide in the van or rainy day activity. We decided that because at least we needed a few food supplies, we would go visit a supermarket in Lagos; a different one to our normal, to see what different things they may offer. In Continente I managed to find the pine sweets that my mum and dad had taken a fancy to when I'd brought them home last year so I bought a few packets for them. I also managed to find a vegetarian macrobiotic Portuguese cook book (all recipes except one seem to be vegan). The recipes looked very interesting and it would help me learn Portuguese too. Beyond that there wasn't as good a range of things available as Intermarche.

It had rained before we entered the supermarket and looked like it had more since we'd been inside and continued to shower here and there as we ate some lunch overlooking one of the western Lagos beaches. There were quite a few people out surfing but mostly surf schools trying to catch the messy small offerings that crashed on to the beach. A quick trip to the health food store to check on potato tortilla stocks was fitted in after lunch. Unfortunately they'd not restocked after we'd cleared them out last week. However Phil was thrilled to see some seitan slices there he'd taken to last year so they were purchased to accompany our now regular cabbage and potatoes for tonight's dinner.

That was enough of a city fix for us today (not that it's really a huge city) so we made a run for wild, quiet solitude again. As the rain had continued we decided to avoid our favourite wild spot and the muddy assault on its approach but instead climbed up on the better made Budens to Pedralva track to a spot we had stayed in a couple of times so far. The flat plateau was reasonably windless when we arrived, the sun hot between showers and the extensive view below highlighted at varied points as the clouds moved the spotlight around constantly. We listened to Portuguese radio for a while desperately trying to pick out words we recognised from the rolling rrrrrr's, the back of the throat snorts and the constant shhhhh'ing. There was the odd word here and there we both shouted out at the same time. We both started to wonder that one programme we were listening to was about sexual health as the odd word here and there, although I might add not part of the learning we had covered whilst using our Portuguese learning app, had us raising eyebrows. Perhaps it was just coincidence and for all we know could have been about knitting or flower arranging. I guess we'll never know.

Just after 6.30pm I rang my mum and dad in the UK for our regular Monday chat. Weather conditions were exchanged and the week's news and activities caught up on. Sadly they told me that their planned trip to see my sister in Alaska was more than probably off now due to them not being able to find adequate travel insurance. Their age and current and previous



illnesses were proving huge obstacles, with one company quoting a ridiculous £20,000. It made me feel pretty sad and I could feel their disappointment hugely. It also made me feel all the more appreciative of the travel Phil and I were able to do now, of all the places over the world we have been to and of all the places we still hope to visit in the future. You never know what's around the corner so you should love and appreciate every moment as it arrives. Thankfully my mum and dad, although obviously disappointed, were still reasonably buoyant and had both managed to do work in the garden at the weekend. I think there is something very therapeutic about working in and with nature. My mum is also very good at weeding and during their summer visits I can almost see the weeds between the paving slabs in our back garden visibly recoil as my mum announces she might 'have a little go at clearing them for you'. Talking to my mum and dad about the garden and being surrounded by newly furrowed or planted terraces out here got Phil and I discussing our garden plans. I've normally long since scoured the gardening catalogues and set about the plan whilst perched in front of the fire in winter, but this year unusually I hadn't found the time. There had always been more pressing distractions like learning Portuguese. I'd even brought the gardening catalogues with me to take advantage of more time but as yet hadn't picked them up, until this evening. Whilst drinking tonight's wine offering I started to now peruse them.

**This evening's wine was Meio Seculo Alentejano 2013 (which had a hint of sun cream in its palate!)**

The wine wasn't really the best we've had though. My tasting notes would include the words 'sun cream lotion' whilst Phil's wouldn't as such be words but more just a screwing up of the face. Perhaps it was an omen when the cork split in two when Phil was trying to open it. Credit to him, he did with a bit of patience manage to extract the remainder without residue becoming an ingredient. Somehow though, I'm not sure we will be trying that one again.

We finished our dinner in near darkness and as more showers swept in so, for the first time in a few days we decided to save the washing up till tomorrow and concentrate on both our newly started books in bed.

## **Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> April**

I've just noticed I seem to start all my day's journal entries with a report of the weather overnight and as we wake up. I think there are varied reasons for that. Firstly weather is really interesting to me and I guess it's not just me. Maybe it's a British thing but it is often the first thing my dad enquires about on the phone, whether we are home or abroad. Even the other day during a Facebook communication with my sister in Alaska she happened to mention she'd been checking up on the weather in Portugal and seemed to take some glee in saying that she'd noticed on one day it was warmer in Anchorage than it had been in Portugal. Maybe she was comparing her midday temperature to our night temperature but I don't recall being particularly chilly so it must have been unseasonably warm over there. Either way, the other reasons I guess I mention the weather so much is that when you first wake up it, being surrounded by windows with no curtains in the van, it is the first thing you notice and it pretty much shapes the day.

Last night it had continued to rain on and off but nothing more than a soothing sprinkling on Miles' roof. It had been forecast (when we last updated with Wi-Fi on Saturday) as being another wet day so we were pretty delighted when we woke up to a bright sunrise and ever increasing blue gaps between the clouds. We sat on our hillside sentry post with the door open, in vest tops and shorts whilst we breakfasted earlier than normal today. A good night's

sleep for both of us, along with the promising weather, meant we had woken up not so bleary eyed at 7am. The bees buzzed around in the wild flowers and herbs, which twinkled from the raindrops that still clung to them. There were the frequent calls of cuckoo around along with that of a bird we'd named, in the absence of a formal identification, the 'bouncing ball bird' due to its call resembling the ever decreasing bounce of a marble or a large ball bearing on a tiled floor. Phil made a comment that nearly made me spit my coffee out as we sat in the soporific heat; "I bet your sister's not sat out sunning herself on a terrace now is she?" Notwithstanding the fact it was probably unlikely at that moment given it was about midnight in Alaska, I had to agree she probably wasn't.

We glanced at the washing up a while longer whilst we now got tucked more into the seed and plant catalogues and chatted more about garden plans. These reached the heady heights of replacing our disintegrating shed with a greenhouse or even building a conservatory on the back of the house. Back to earth literally and we for now vaguely settled on at least sweet potatoes and Kale de Nero, carefully netted against the yearly plague of cabbage white butterflies. Eventually we managed the washing up and climbed down from our sentry duty to check surf.

A couple of usual spots were checked to no avail but Burgau offered enough of a temptation for Phil to give it a go. He squeezed Miles into a 'ringside seat' for me along the edge of the beach car park, which was partially obstructed by building works. After a careful dismount of his board from the roof and an emptying of all the rainwater that had collected inside the bag (hence the careful overhead removal from the roof), he was off. Just after he left a bird shat in through the open door. I took it as a sign that perhaps Phil would have good luck and fun on his surf but the five minutes of cleaning up that ensued didn't feel very lucky. After I settled in for some journal writing with frequent glances to stare out to sea and catch Phil having some fun rides.

Phil's return confirmed he'd had fun. He hadn't had any time to change out of his wetsuit when a guy approached him. He'd recognised Phil from surfing in Crantock. Small world! The guy had flown over for a week's holiday and was staying at Sagres. They chatted about surf spots and the like for a while before saying their goodbyes. I think Phil had timed his return perfectly as the warm sunshine had now been crowded out by gathering black clouds. Shortly after it started raining. It didn't last long thankfully before the sun lit the sea westwards in an approaching sparkling line. It looked like it was two different seas layered one on top of the other, light on dark. About ten minutes later and on the way to the supermarket for our daily supplies it belted down with rain again and we had to make a dash from the van to the entrance. When we were at the checkout and looking out of the window about ten minutes later it was innocent blue sky sunshine again.

We headed for last night's wild spot again but dammit, someone had the audacity to beat us to it. It bet it was 'zee Germans'! How dare! We continued on the track and then took a right in search of an alternative now we were up here. We bumped from corner to corner heading eastwards. I turned on the tablet to see if I could get us anymore lost than we were already. Now Phil is normally the one who wants to always push on and see what's around the next corner but tonight it was me who wanted to keep on going. I was a bit unusually high maintenance about finding the right spot. The upshot was we explored about five miles of tracks with a few possibilities but nothing that met my sudden and unexpectedly high standards before we found ourselves back on the tarmac of the main road. Phil, tired and jarred from the rutted, pot holed track driving, suggested we turn westwards towards our favourite wild spot just beyond Vila do Bispo. We hoped the track had dried out sufficiently during the hot sunny spells today, including the current prolonged one we were in. It was

much better than yesterday morning and now our only concern was that the Germans hadn't got to this one first too! Fear not, as usual it was all ours and I celebrated by taking my trousers off and then my top and generally parading around bits of me in the hot sun that other suns had yet failed to reach! It was okay as there would be no witnesses to my 'white bits' here. Hardly anyone passed by; only a couple of horse riders and one car in total for every time we'd been here this year. The world was therefore spared the trauma.

We opened tonight's wine offering which had cost us a mere €2.89. Despite last night's unusual Portuguese wine failure, we had been lured in by the 'cheap as chips' price by the fact that this one had won an International Challenge Silver wine award. What that meant we didn't quite know but it sounded impressive. And impressive it was. It was a smooth 14% Ribena over toned wonder. No wonder the shelves had been almost cleared of it. A mental note was made to return to clear the remainder at that price!

**This evening's wine was Sociedade Agricola As Pias 2014 (£2.89). An International Challenge Silver Winner**

Tonight's meal was a one pot wonder of potato gnocchi with feijao manteigo (Portuguese butter beans – a breed away from the UK pale efforts) in a smoky tomato sauce with onions, yellow pepper and mushrooms. Avocado with a sprinkling of nutritional yeast on top finished off this gourmet vegan camper van meal as we still sat in bright sunshine. Simply put I could do this forever. The only slight worry of the evening was Phil sticking a lit incense stick (to deter any mozzly visitations) in the folding outer flap of the top cover of the fuel compartment of Miles. There was no way it was going to burn anywhere near to the actual fuel tank but somehow I couldn't get the Darwin Awards out of my head. All that was left to think about was whether we were going to do the washing up tonight, whether a sudden and further rain torrent would trap us here tomorrow and how much of our books would we read tonight.

Just before bed we brushed our teeth under the stars. There is no light pollution here so they were bright and numerous. As a child I'd stare up at them and ask the question that you never grow out of asking; "What's it all about then?" Again tonight I wondered this with the thought that whoever made all this up had both an eye for beauty and a sense of humour. Sounded like my kind of bloke. Shame I don't believe in God then.

## Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> April

Apart from a short, sharp rain/hail shower in the night, which surprisingly Phil didn't hear, it remained dry and really very warm. I had to throw the covers off several times in the night. From my bedside view I could see the tops of the small surrounding pine trees, one minute a glossy bold glow of orange green against blue sky, the next a subdued grey matt green against the clouded sky. We read for a while and then packed up the bed and had a cuppa. We had chai oats ready for breakfast but I had my sights set on a little run beforehand on the trails from where we were to the beach. Phil was originally going to drive the road way round but then, from memory of driving the track before, he remembered it wasn't too rutted or bumpy so he did his usual 'leap-frogging' of me as I ran. If he had gone the road way I am pretty sure I would have beaten him and I wasn't that far behind going this way either. It was much more downhill than I remembered and shorter too so about 17 minutes and 1.75 miles later we met up in the beach car park. Oh well, it had at least stretched my legs a little and it was a very scenic run as well.

We then ate our breakfast whilst watching the onshore messed up waves and the steady flow of people arriving and departing to walk on the windswept beach. After washing up we debated what to do today. Surf wasn't an option and the clouds weren't promising the opportunity to soak up some sun. Yesterday, and after seeing some interesting vegetable seeds in the supermarket, I had wondered about whether there were any garden centres around. It would be kind of interesting to see what they offered in this environment. When we were in California a few years back we visited a garden centre in Santa Cruz. It was really interesting and we left with a clutch of vegetable seed packets which we grew quite successfully in the following years. The only things we had vaguely seen that resembled garden centres over here were one place on the main Lagos road, and one on the Aljezur road but both, when we'd passed quickly before had looked to not be open. We decided to take a closer look at the one on the way to Aljezur. After all we could then visit the spring on the way as well as the health food store at Aljezur. Well we looked for this previously seen garden centre like place all the way along to no avail. It must have either completely closed or we were both being particularly unobservant today. Thankfully the spring and the health food store hadn't vanished!

We also stopped off to investigate for the first time the 'Mercado Municipal de Aljezur'. I was curious about what wonders this market had been hiding over the years. The sun was really bright outside when we first entered the covered market so it immediately felt much darker than I had imagined. Much smaller too. To the left was a rather stinky fish stall which was just packing away by the looks of it, but to the right was the more colourful, more fragrant and welcome sight of a massive fruit and vegetable stall. For me this kind of sight is more enticing than a sweet shop. I instantly spotted some good looking fava beans (broad beans but big juicy ones) and our meal plan for this evening changed. We normally have a meal of fava beans, mushrooms and leeks in a creamy vegan sauce a few times during our trip as the favas are so lovely (still in their pods when you buy them). However, we'd to date on this trip been unable to find them until now, hence the sudden and simple excitement. We picked out some more vegetables and whilst Phil was bagging up I caught the sweet juicy aroma of some impressive looking strawberries. I adore strawberries; an adoration that might have started barely days after I was born. In the summer of 1970 whilst soothing sounds of tennis ball against racket was followed by the gentle ripple of the very British applause of a Wimbledon audience from our square Technicolour television, mum sat and ate juicy summer strawberries. Come Baby Scooby feeding time her boobs became strawberry milkshake makers and I consequently came out in a rash. The doctor, being perhaps a little more insightful than the pharmaceutically obsessed ones of today, apparently asked 'has mother been eating too many strawberries?', and mum was forced to ration her intake a little more. I think by then I was already hooked, along with my love of Wimbledon. Even the sound of a match in the background with its gentle commentary and punctuated applause, will send me into a soppy summer mode. Anyway back to strawberries. Now not all strawberries are equal. Supermarket ones are generally pathetically dry, pale and tasteless. The ones we bought today were big, juicy, and aromatic and like a mouthful of 1970's summer. Luckily the ones my dad grows are like this too and even luckier I often get a really good share of them. Even the excess glut, carefully prepared and frozen, tastes wonderful and has the wondrous effect of moving a little taste of the summer to even the midst of the winter. I missed out last year due to the airline Flybe. A carefully planned strawberry exchange at Gatwick airport was put in place for my return leg back to Cornwall after a business meeting in London. My dad had been saving the best for me and timed the harvest perfectly. Meanwhile the date, time and precise location where I was going to meet my parents within the terminal was discussed at length. Then Flybe really screwed up my flight so much I had to cancel my meeting and remain in Cornwall. Thanks Flybe, you screwed up my family's tradition, important harvest and also that year's summer childhood fix. I should have sued!

Anyway, back to present day. We lunched in the little car park near the bridge in the centre of Aljezur. It is just opposite the market and sits sandwiched between the river and farmland. From here you can observe all manner of things. You can watch the ducks under the bridge ride the little river eddies, you can watch and listen to the ever chatty sparrows in the now greening trees or storks gliding effortlessly above the newly ploughed strips of inner village farmland and then on and up over the castle ruins above. You can also watch the busy parade of cars, tourist coaches, tractors, juggernauts, vans and OAP-mobiles jostle for space over the white painted bridge. I took to watching a tiger striped cat for a while. It was stalking the perimeter of the farmland; its radar ears in full operational mode for enemy birds, rodent or lizard. It bade no attention to our squeaks of attention but slunk off to sit on a raised piece of concrete in the sun. It gave the impression it was fully employed and on the 'pest control' payroll but I knew its game. Really it was just observing for observing's sake whilst absorbing nothing but the warm sunshine. Basically it was doing nothing. I knew this because I recognised this behaviour in us now and from many of our days on our trip. I was becoming an expert in it and therefore recognising the same in the cat. There is much to learn from cats it seems. Equally interesting was the gesticulated gossip of the groups of old men who sit and gather in designated places, much like our British youth in bus shelters. Judging by the intense hand signals this particular group were just getting going with putting the world to rights.

We arose from our observational slumber and drove the short distance to the supermarket to check out the veg seed options there and acquire this evening's wine offering. The seed choices were less so than the supermarket in Budens which was disappointing for such a farmland surrounded area but then again I imagine most of the 'old boys' that work their land around here save their seeds from one year to the next with no need to purchase new ones.

We returned southwards aiming again for our favourite wild spot. We'd actually been lucky with the weather. The whole time we'd been in Aljezur it had been hot and sunny and the dark clouds we could see seemed to just skirt around us. As we drove southwards however it really did look like we were heading straight into them and we wondered as to the merit of our decision. However, on arriving it was still bright sunshine and better still, our spot was all ours as usual. Time to sit back, uncork and contemplate cat type thoughts before dinner.

**This evening's wine was [Jose Maria Da Fonseca Montado 2014 Vinho Tinto \(Alentejano region\)](#)**

We did encounter a short sharp shower that sent Phil scurrying outside to move the surfboard that normally resides inside the van (but is moved outside to give us more space at times) to under the van. It would save having to dry it off to bring it back inside later. It returned to warm sunshine soon. As darkness fell, we had our lovely fava bean dish which was particularly good tonight with sliced avocado sprinkled with a touch of cider vinegar and nutritional yeast on top. We did however do the washing up despite the dark and then we decided to go for a little stroll under the stars; just towards the coast a little. I wondered whether we might catch a sneak of a fox trotting around under the cover of darkness. We reached a crossroads from our trail and I excitedly thought I'd heard something in the bushes so went to investigate whatever it was. It must have been something relatively small though and had scarpered quickly. We continued over the crossroads and towards the sea. This is the narrow track (although you can still get a vehicle down it) which continues to a thin bit of headland. In places there is relatively thick vegetation either side. It was from this vegetation to our right that we suddenly heard a porcine grunt and the sound of vegetation parting swiftly away from us. We had most definitely disturbed and frightened something big and



from the noise there was no doubt it was a wild boar. We stood for a few seconds looking between each other and from where the noise had come. Our silence was suddenly interrupted by a low menacing growl and the sound of bushes parting again, but this time towards us. That was it, I was out of there. Phil inexplicably remained on the spot and I did a 180 degree turnabout and said “are you kidding?” I had become my dad; ever sane, safe and full of self-preservation. I’d heard about wild boars; even just read about them in the book I was currently reading. It would be like being hit by a car with a bite and good sized tusks, which is why I couldn’t believe Phil’s sudden Darwin Award (for the second night running) type behaviour and curiosity in the face of such a ‘fuck off’ growl. I think he was brought to some sense of urgency by my sudden retreat. After we had retreated to what felt like a safe distance we then started to giggle about it. What would have happened if it had charged us? Phil had longer legs but the disadvantage of flip flops. I had the advantage of walking boots and sheer porky fear. Phil then said it was a shame we didn’t see it though and I wondered at his sanity again and exactly how much closer he would have liked to have got. Its growl had vibrated the contents of my dinner in my stomach. That was close enough for me. As we approached the darkened but safe shape of Miles I was still listening intently for any vegetative rustling or porcine grunting. We brushed our teeth before climbing into bed. Somehow this favourite wild spot of ours had just got a whole lot wilder.

## Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> April

A breezy/sunny/overcast day greeted us; the kind of day that leaves an air of what to do. The wind direction didn’t bode well for surf and over a small breakfast we mused the idea of a sneak off to Eurasia for lunch. Then the sun would come out again and it just didn’t seem right to waste it on being indoors. Then the sun would go in, dark clouds appear and the wind pick up and we were back to the Eurasia idea again. I turned on my phone and reviewed the weather report we had updated on Wi-Fi 5 days ago (the last time we were at Eurasia in fact). It said that the next few days would be rain and sunny intervals but today at least it would be dry. Right then we really shouldn’t be wasting that on going to Eurasia as Eurasia was even tastier in the rain! The weather might be outdated by now but in the absence of Wi-Fi we had to go with that. I had a plan then. We go to Ingrina and walk from there along the coast to visit the choughs again. We hadn’t done this walk yet this year, having attempted a much more prolonged inland walk earlier in this trip.

When we arrived at Ingrina, a prime overnight parking spot was free so Phil grabbed it. We imagined we wouldn’t stay here but it was a nice spot regardless. We packed water and snacks this time in my rucksack that also contained the all-important camera kit, including long lens. Then we were off up and over the herb scented dusty trails, and towards the hippy centric beach of Barranco. There were a little less hippy wagons parked up today than last time we passed.

As we walked across the blanched white sands I regretted not bringing my sunglasses to reduce the glare. It increased the already building heat too; much warmer than we had earlier imagined. Despite the overgrown uphill climb that followed, being away from the sandy glare felt cooler. There was a slight cooling breeze too up top and, as we followed the coast westwards. About five minutes later we heard a shriek and then saw a flock of about a dozen black shapes in the distance climb into the sky. It was time to get the long lens out of my rucksack and on to the camera. We reached the cliff face and sat in anticipation for some time, camera at the ready. We saw nothing but squawky groups of jackdaws.

It was becoming increasingly possible that the earlier flock had, from a distance, lured us into wrongly installing a sense of false excitement. Perhaps they had been the jackdaws that now surrounded us. We decided to move a little westwards to the next rocky inlet along these high cliffs.



Not long after we moved we hit chough beak coloured gold. A pair arrived in their acrobatic chatty style, plonked themselves down on a nearby rocky outcrop for a bit of a chough feeding session. Magical; and I caught it too. Admittedly the chough traffic wasn't as frequent today but it had more than been worth the additional visit. It was great to stretch our legs over the four miles or so too and the hot sunshine was definitely topping up our vitamin D3 and adding some summer colour.







After a couple of hours or so and having not seen the choughs for a while, we turned back, collecting rosemary for tonight's dinner on the way. On arriving back and opening the doors of the van it was like an oven and the backs of our t-shirts damp with sweat. We removed our boots from our hot tired feet and went for a paddle in the sea. The temperature of the water was in stark contrast to the sunshine. In fact it hurt my feet it was so cold if I went out too far, so I stuck to the shoreline where the ankle height cold water washing in and out was warmed slightly by sun exposed sand. We then sat for quite a while on a rock on the shoreline and

gazed out to sea watching a couple of young boys being coaxed and coached into surfing the little waves by their mum and dad. The mum was just in her swimming costume which made me shudder but she really didn't seem bothered by the cold. An old man was over on the other side of the beach collecting some kind of shell fish from the rocks. We discussed whether we should now stay in the spot we had, that we could for a couple of beers at the café and also that we had enough ingredients to cook for dinner so we had no need to leave to go to the shops. We agreed we'd give it a go and then returned to the van where we had a good wash after our earlier sweaty walk.

Clean and refreshed we ambled to the café, got a beachside table and ordered two beers. There were a couple of slim ginger tom cats cruising the tables and it only took one squeak from me for one of them to come and rub itself around my feet and cruise on to the next table. The other identical looking one was on the rocks by the beach flirting with a very macho looking black guy. The guy seemed to delight in the mischievous flirtations of the cat as he squatted down to pet it with a broad white smile filling his face. We ordered two more beers.

There had been a couple stood on the beach talking to each other for a far while. We couldn't hear them as they were too far away and the waves and laughing remonstrations of a group of Portuguese old men behind too loud. Phil said he was sure the guy was giving a verbal lesson to the woman on surfing. I can't say I'd noticed but Phil, heavily tuned into surf gesticulation, was fairly sure. We ordered two more beers when the owner came up to clear the table next door. He disappeared inside to fetch them but didn't reappear immediately, instead seemed to be staring at his mobile phone before making a call. After he'd finished, about five minutes later, I went inside to re-order. He seemed to indicate that he knew he had forgotten and apologise. I returned with the beers. The couple on the beach had returned with wetsuits on and boards under their arms. So Phil had been right and the actual lesson was about to start. Phil watched with interest as the guy ordered the woman in and out of the water whilst constantly talking and gesticulating. His method was unconventional it seemed and not one that Phil would have taken given his little quiet giggles every now and then.

From where we were sitting we could see the parking area that Miles was parked adjacent to. It seemed that the previously quiet car park was filling up with camper vans and we started to wonder at how peaceful and private our night would be. I went in to pay for our beers saying six in Portuguese. The guy at the bar said "6 or 8" with a quizzical look. I said six again and he gave me a look that said he didn't believe me. I went out to check with Phil in case I'd lost my mind and yes we'd only have 3 small bottles each so I went in and told the guy again but then said that if he wanted to charge me for 8 then so be it. He backed down, said that he valued my truth and then charged me for six which came to €10.20. I gave him 15 but he handed me €5 back so ended up knocking off the 20 cents anyway before continuing to talk to some locals. It all felt a bit weird to be honest. I think he had counted the two beers that we ordered but he had forgotten to bring and I did try and explain that but I couldn't help thinking he didn't believe me and I really didn't like that. We've drunk at this bar in previous years and he has always been very nice but this kind of put me off. We left and as we got to the entrance of the car park where Miles was parked a couple more hippy wagons had showed up. They seemed to know others that were there and fearing a sudden party atmosphere destroying the peace we so enjoy, we decided to leave and retreat to our favourite wild spot. It would only take about ten minutes.

Thankfully, after the usual bump down the track, we arrived to find it all ours. Just us and the wild boar tonight. As darkness was now pretty much upon us we had a quick post beer

naughty meal of rosemary potatoes with fried onions and vegan smoked sausages. It was lovely. It was too dark for washing up so we brushed our teeth (shame really as the taste from all the dinner was still salivating our mouths) before retiring to bed to read.

**This evening's wine was 3 bottles of Sagres beer each (although the bartender thought 4 each!)**

## Friday 15<sup>th</sup> April

An overcast sky greeted us this morning and did nothing to discourage us from reading in bed. Eventually we surfaced, had a cuppa and did the washing up. With the clouds still of a dark and foreboding nature we decided that today was definitely shaping up for our final visit of the trip to Eurasia. With a quick stop off to use the facilities at Raposeira we headed east and arrived at around 12.30pm.

It was already buzzing with a mixture of Portuguese and internationals. We started off with our usual Caldo Verde soup (potato and greens soup – a Portuguese national dish). Whilst Phil had his usual cha de jasmine (jasmine tea), I had cha do limao (lemon tea but made traditionally with the zest of the huge local lemons). As soon as the soup was finished we went in for the main event. Today's spread was even more exciting than our previous visits on this trip as we noted there was a lovely fava bean dish, soya meatballs and the traditional bread dish that we had enjoyed in previous years but for the first time this trip today. According to Milla, the chef and owner, this is a traditional peasant dish of the Alentjano region. It is kind of mushed up bread with orange juice and herbs and then remoulded and baked. It's lovely. Two plates of food later and I was sadly stuffed but Phil courageously managed a third whilst I attempted to upload our one and only blog post from this trip on our trusty but extremely old and slow netbook. Eventually I managed over additional drinks; a cha do limao this time for Phil and um batonado (black coffee) for me. We had also checked out what garden centres there might be around whilst we had free access to Wi-Fi.

As we settled the bill (€23.50 for all you can buffet for two and four drinks and that included a €3 tip), we got talking to Milla again. We told her this was probably our last trip to Eurasia this time. She surprisingly mentioned our blog and how our posts about Eurasia had really increased the international customers over the last couple of years. She thanked us for writing about Eurasia for that reason. We were really surprised she had remembered and said about this. It left us with a very nice feeling as we said goodbye for this year.

The rain that had threatened since first thing had finally arrived; first with a very Cornish drizzle whilst we were on our second plate at Eurasia and then a more heavy persistence since we left. We dropped into the large Continente supermarket nearby to see if we could start picking up our supplies for taking home like olive oil and olives. However it was so busy we couldn't find anywhere to park so gave up and headed back west. Our next plan was to drop in on the garden centres we had hunted down on-line. There were three all next to each other between Lagos and Oxiadere. We went first to the one with five star reviews. The plants were excellent, with things that would cost a bomb in the UK a fraction of the cost here. However there were no vegetable seeds to be seen. It was the same at the second place. The third place had some seeds but the selection was small with nothing unusual and different to the UK. The people at this place however seemed to be German or Dutch and spoke good English so we were able to ask whether the lupin seeds they had were the ones that produced the edible Tremocoe seeds. They weren't as they were purely ornamental. We



asked whether it was possible to find such seeds and if so where and the lady said that you could in rural agricultural shops and directed us to one in nearby Oxiadere. Her directions had sounded complicated but it was actually very easy to find in the end. The difficulty came in working out which bucket of loose seeds was what and how, in this very local store, things worked. For a start we weren't sure who was in charge. A couple of guys said *boa tarde* (good afternoon) when we entered but then seemed to just hang around. The one guy we had seen behind the counter disappeared shortly after we arrived and didn't reappear. More customers appeared and just stood at the counter waiting so we decided this was all getting too complicated and left.

We now had our heads set on the Continente supermarket in Lagos; Phil now requiring his daily ration of chocolate. He could get his favourite type there; a dark chocolate loaded with almonds. Just before we got to Lagos Phil suddenly saw a place on the opposite side of the road called Bio Sabor (translates as organic taste). It seemed to be advertising plants and vegetables. It was worth a look so we turned around. By now Phil was a bit bored and tired on the garden centre/seed hunt so remained in Miles whilst I went in to investigate. It had loads of vegetable plants (as well as others) and a selection of veg seed packets but nothing that was really unusual. It also had a really good looking selection of fruit and veg. Then I turned the corner and saw sacks of loose bean seeds. I braved asking for tremocoe seeds and the ladies there came out with a bag about the size of a bag of sugar; a little too much for my experimental needs. The main lady also told me it was too late to plant them as December/January was the right time here in Portugal. I explained that I wanted to try them in the UK and she shrugged her shoulders and said that they are so cheap it was worth trying. She then dished me out enough to last me years and charged me €0.50. I was on a roll. I saw some feijao mantiego (butter beans) seeds and decided at these kinds of prices they were worth a go too. I also ordered a large serving of olives and then veg (leek, mushrooms and fresh fava beans) for the next meal. It all came to €3.76 – an absolute bargain!

I returned to the van; arms full of cheap vegetable bounty and we pushed on to Continente. After picking up a couple of bottles of good olive oil to take home and Phil's chocolate we decided to drop in to Intermarche briefly for other supplies before heading to our overnight spot. We had originally planned to do a 'take home' shop but as our attention wasn't there and it was meant to be a 'wash out' weather wise tomorrow, it would be best to reconvene that plan then.

We drove to our wild spot behind Budens only to find that once again somebody had beat us to it; in fact two hippy wagons at once! We drove past; up and then left on the trails in the hope of finding an alternative. After some searching and both of us leaving the van to investigate tracks in different directions, Phil returned asking whether I was feeling adventurous! He had found a good high spot which was relatively flat and with space to turn around at the end of a sandy and slightly overgrown track. I trusted his judgement, although still slightly nervous after his previous desire to 'play wild boar', and very soon we were in an amazing new sentry spot next to an old ruin. We had to use the levellers to straighten us up a bit but the adventure had been worth it. We arrived in good enough light to enjoy the view as we uncorked the wine and enjoyed a simple supper of olives, bread and pate. With no wind or rain now (although forecast to come in overnight) and no nearby hippies, we hoped we would be in for a peaceful night. The distant wind turbines became flashing red as darkness fell.

**This evening's wine was Porta da Calada 2013**



## Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> April

We both hadn't slept very well last night for some reason so when the first blackbird started singing in the grey windy dawn, we tried to grab a few extra minutes or in fact hours as it turned out to be, as we finally woke up fully at just before 9am. We both stared out of the side windows and up to the grey. There seemed to be about three different layers of cloud; a high bulbous white layer with a slightly thinner light grey one moving a little faster than the one below. Then under that was a fast moving wispy dark grey layer. All three were taking turns in hiding and revealing the sun, glimpses of blue winking in between.

Whilst we were having breakfast, which we took our time over, there was a hard rain shower so we got the idea that the clouds weren't just threatening rain but had every intention of keeping their promises. Heavy rain had been forecast today and had meant to start in the night but I had only heard a few mild rainy taps lasting seconds during the night; until now that is. With the forecast looking pretty right we planned today to gather up the majority of our supplies that we like to bring home from Portugal; olive oil (lots of), olives, dried oregano, some wine and port, tremocoes, feigao manteigo (we actually found some dried this year too!). It's stuff that is not only better quality than in the UK but a lot cheaper too. Our olive oil, dried oregano and dried butter beans can almost last out until the next visit. The wine and port doesn't fare as well then then we don't go nuts with that.

After breakfast we headed out along the tracks. We were almost on tarmac down an unfamiliar track when we came upon a big puddle straddling the entire track. It would have been dodgy to have reversed back as it was narrow, uphill and rutted so I volunteered to investigate the depth. With trousers rolled up and over my knees and flip flops abandoned at the edge of the puddle, I tentatively paddled in. Moving from one side to the other with Phil watching and mapping the route, I was pleased to report that I felt mostly stony ground beneath with very little wet mud and it was only just up to my ankles at most so it looked

more than do-able for Miles. Phil helped me wash and dry my feet before we drove through. As we did Miles had an air about him that said, 'really you should have trusted me and not made such a fuss'.

We drove towards Lagos via a surf spot for Phil to check but it remained no good still so we pushed on. It hadn't rained since the shower at breakfast and, although mostly cloudy, it was really warm which made concentrating on the shopping quite difficult but we picked up all that we needed here before a quick stop at the Lagos health store and to Baptista supermarket in Luz. There were particular olives here that we wanted to buy; favourites of ours over the years, and some of their lovely baguettes wouldn't go a miss too for today's supplies. We then headed west via Burgau. Stopping off to do a recycle I noticed one of my flip flops was missing from the doorway where they normally sit in the van. I must have accidentally dropped one out of the door when getting back in the van at Luz; at least I hoped it was there and not all the way back in Lagos. We turned around and drove back the 5-10 minutes or so to Luz and thankfully there it sat in the car park all forlorn. If a flip flop can make you feel guilty, the sight of this one sat all alone as we arrived certainly did.

Returning to Burgau Phil was going to check the surf but there were so many cars around he changed his mind and we thought we'd prefer to go and bag our favourite wild spot and relax for the rest of the late afternoon and evening and also to cook, eat and wash up whilst it was still light. It is my mum's birthday today so I also planned to make an additional call to my parents too. Before all that though, I had our home supplies to pack away securely in the van, flip flops to clean as they were still a bit muddy from earlier, and a quick bit of floor cleaning in Miles.

We uncorked as only the second rain shower of the day started. It really hadn't been the heavy rain shower day predicted but the all day threat of it from the clouds was enough to not embark on forays too far from cover. The next two days were meant to be dry so we hoped that forecast was correct and our last two days in the Algarve would involve some proper sunshine and cloudless days. We would have to wake up tomorrow and see.

After dinner we grabbed our toothbrushes and brushed as we ambled a little way along the track in the dark. Although a little nervous of another wild boar encounter, I was also curious. We didn't go far and I managed to throw a rock into the bushes without Phil seeing and then acted all spooked. Phil fell for it and seemed a little less willing to play boar tonight so we returned to the van as I came clean it was me. Teeth brushed and the evening's air taken in we climbed into bed for a read.

**This evening's wine was Quinta Vale D'Aldeia SA Foral de Meda Douro Tinto 2012**

## **Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> April**

It was wonderfully quiet all night; no rain and no wind, and this continued after first light so a gentle dawn greeted us. Sun started to fill Miles, our orange duvet glowing and the heat building, so Phil opened the door. There was still a cool edge to the air outside but from the gentle buzzing excitement of insects you could tell there was an anticipated warmth to come. We sat and ate our chai oats and had a cuppa in near silence. Then we got chairs out to sit and finish our drinks. I was thinking how wonderfully quiet it was, nothing to interrupt our sun soaked thoughts. Then I suddenly realised it wasn't quiet at all. The bushes were alive with birdsong and the bees and insects motoring around, some sounding like they had blown

exhausts or at least turbo injection. I'd thought it was silent as these are the very noises that get ignored mostly in everyday life; crowded out by every day modern living. Take those everyday noises away and you are left with what you think is silence but are the true noises of life. I made a mental note to seek out more places where 'silence' existed. It truly is a wake-up call to all those little but extremely important 'people' out there who are working hard to make a living and keep nature in its correct balance (e.g. the bees)!

I had my heart set on another run today; one that I had done last year – Raposeira to Ingrina. So after a quick toilet break at Raposeira I set off. It is a bit of a climb out of the village and towards the coast but I set off at a sensible pace. Phil passed me quickly but then I passed him as he had pulled up at the 'watering hole' to fill up our water supplies. I trudged on and actually sooner than I anticipated had reached the brow. I seemed to remember it being a longer drag last time so perhaps that was a good sign. From here it heads downhill but has various undulating sections of slightly uphill, flat and downhill. I'd got further than I imagined by the time Phil passed me. The final section is definitely downhill so a chance to pick up the pace and run to maintain a cooling breeze. I completed the 2.65 miles in 26 minutes and 15 seconds which was 28 seconds better than last year. As I spent a few moments cooling down at the van, I could see the surf was non-existent here sadly. Phil said he wouldn't mind taking a drive to the west coast to see if anything was different there.

We arrived at the Mirodouro (viewpoint) about 15 minutes later to view the situation. It was a little better but still not enough for Phil to bother tackling the Sunday crowd that was out there. We decided to lunch; again a very simple bread, pate, tomatoes and olives affair, a little further up the road in a quiet car park with a viewpoint. Whilst we were sat there we saw a couple of storks glide up the valley below from the coast. We don't see as many storks on this section of the coast so it was lovely to watch their gawky elegance as they soared past. Phil also had a huge bee land on his forehead, just between his eyes. He sat very calmly, almost going cross-eyed in his effort to see it, before it flew off and out of the van of its own accord.

Phil suggested we go for a walk. There is a marked trail from here that we had only just ambled along a little way barefooted last year. We'd seen quite a few people do it and it was only a couple of miles so, even in the heat, it was still a fine idea. The car park we were in was slightly more private than other areas which, although great for a quiet lunch, was not so comforting for leaving Miles unattended so we moved to the busier parking area nearer to the road.

There were also tall trees here to offer a shadier and therefore more cooling result on our return. With boots on this time we set off following the clear signs. The dusty crunchy trail at first headed over flat ground surrounded by spikey gorse, lavender and the wonderfully scented sticky white rose plants. We then dived in between sturdy pines and eucalyptus before turning right and downwards past a little pond, full to brimming with tadpoles and jumping croaking frogs; their heads sparkling in green iridescent flashes as they leapt. For a while, whilst heading downwards we were shaded in a pine valley and on to another larger darker lake, equally full of aquatic rush hour traffic.

We then started to turn uphill again and, bursting out from the shade, on to an exposed trail that skirted the edge of the hill with deep views into the wooded valley and the sea beyond. We sat for a while in full sun on a bench that overlooked this scene. Bird song and sweet herbal and floral aromas surrounded us and I said I wished we could bottle the sounds and the smells around us. I tried for a while to record the sounds on my mobile phone but the quality wasn't good enough and one recording was interrupted by a gargantuan Phil sneeze. It's



funny as I'd been sneezy too for the last couple of days and especially on this walk. I've never had hay fever but perhaps there was something here that set me off a little. We set off again for the last section talking about how we could try and recreate the smell of the wilds of Portugal with essential oils. It would definitely have to include pine and also eucalyptus, lavender and rosemary. We vowed to try it on our return.



On arriving back at Miles and opening the doors it was still hot inside so we were thankful we had parked in shade! We sat on the step of Miles for a while, having changed out of our sweaty boots, taking in the relaxing cool breeze. A group of young Portuguese surfers were sat nearby eating and drinking and the sound of laughter and the gentle strumming of a guitar



floated over. For a while we were transfixed by the cool breeze and non-invasive noises. We only stirred at the thought of tonight's veg and wine supplies and how we could continue our warm, quiet relaxing at our favourite wild spot soon.

As we set off, our way was suddenly halted by a trail of ducks crossing the road in front of us. It was a cute interruption to our unhurried journey. Before the supermarket we made a quick stop off at a large pottery place at Raposeira. At this place they sold a huge selection of handmade pottery; some garish, some very beautiful and some very practical. The prices here were very reasonable and over the years I had purchased the odd thing here and there, including large lasagne type dishes to try and cater for my family who were visiting from overseas in the summer. They also had a little book selection from where we had found some interesting reads over the years. Unfortunately the selection didn't change much from year to year so Phil and I had pretty much exhausted it within minutes. Our cupboards were also already bursting with various salad bowls and baking dishes from here so we left only with the two small decorative olive dishes I had intended to buy, along with a jar each of organic olives, for our neighbours who had kept an eye on our house whilst we'd abandoned it for a month.

We continued on to the supermarket. Here we bought some veg seeds we had seen the other day and had failed to match at any of the garden centres or bigger supermarkets we had looked in. These included padron peppers, sprouted turnip tops and an herb we didn't recognise. All were only €0.85 so well worth a go. We also bought potato gnocchi to have with leek and red pepper in a tomato sauce with the seitan cutlets we got yesterday and cabbage on the side. I was already looking forward to dinner. I also found a suitable wine for €1.69 but didn't tell Phil how much it cost. I wanted him to try and guess later.

With shopping done we headed to our favourite spot and with the sun still in full swing, got the chairs out. It was beautiful and the birds and bees were still busy with sunny chatter. It was so warm that soon we shed more clothes than is normally acceptable in everyday society. We read and wrote in naked privacy, enjoying this evening's wine offering.

Phil was really shocked at how cheap the wine was as it was indeed very palatable; just as good as some of the €6 or €7 ones we've had which goes to show really that it's not all about how much you pay. After a while the bees became quieter and we thought to look at the time. It was indeed time to start cooking; as the bees too had finished work and gone home for dinner. After dinner we stood outside for a while listening to music and starrng up at the moon and the stars. We got the binoculars out to look closely at the moon too; amazing as there seemed to be a bulge on the left hand side that interrupted the otherwise silvery smooth curve. It was still warm with only the faintest hint of a breeze. It was beautiful and we were going to take it in as much as we could as this would be our last night here. We were planning on heading northwards tomorrow to split up the normally long journey north to Santander.



**This evening's wine was Seleccao de Enofilos Douro 2013 Vinho Tinto (€1.69!)**



## Monday 18<sup>th</sup> April

As soon as it got light the wind started to pick up. It was a cooling breeze that robbed the sun of its warmth early on. We enjoyed a robust breakfast of seitan burgers with our morning cuppa before washing up, including the stuff from last night. Then we reluctantly packed up and drove the bumpy track out for the last time this year. It did however feel right to take the opportunity to explore northwards a little as well as take the 'sting out of' the long journey we would have completed in one go tomorrow.



First we were on a mission. It was my dad's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday this year and it is always a struggle to know what to get a man who pretty much has everything he needs. He does however love tools and, as Phil says, you can never have enough tools. There is a particular gardening tool that all the old boys over here use to get those neatly planted furrows you see on all the little strips of red earthed plots scattered all through the countryside. Now we could be wrong but we are pretty sure dad doesn't have one of those. I came up with the idea yesterday but of course being a Sunday, any shop that might sell them was closed. We hoped we could find one today and our first point of call was the little hardware shop I'd spotted in nearby Villa do Bispo. At first we didn't think they had any but then we spotted the head of the tool was sold separately to the wooden handle; an obvious thought really. The head was roughly but sturdily made and at €7.50 it was a bargain. Phil chose a



handle, again a bargain at €2.80. Judging by Phil's sudden excitement I could tell he was having a spot of tool shopping fever so we left with two sets in the end; one for dad and one for us! We did wonder what border customs would think of our unconventional but actually extremely traditional gifts from Portugal if they pulled us in!

We had a quick and final look at Ingrina to see what the surf was doing but, being it was pretty much as flat as a pancake, we moved on. We had final supplies to collect before we set off northwards. Firstly we wanted to get two days' worth of bread and veg, so we didn't have to search our supplies later and in areas we were less familiar with. This was also the last day we could pick up a big supply of fresh oranges and some lemons to take home. We were under strict instructions to 'not forget the oranges', from dad during a previous phone call. The guy at the quiet roadside stall we had earmarked was a character. We'd already said we wanted to buy oranges but he had us tasting them and trying all manner of other fruit and nuts. He was Brazilian but had moved to Portugal for 'political' reasons. We're not sure what that meant but his sunny disposition led us to believe he was doing okay over here. We bought two 5kg bags of oranges, half a dozen large lemons and a nut and corn mixture Phil had found. It all came to just over €12. We think his calculations were a bit wrong but given that we were getting a lot for our money anyway and we liked the guy we gave him €13 and said our goodbyes.

Our last stop was at the large supermarket at Lagos. Being that we were this far east on the N125 road we would now take the Lagos to Aljezur road rather than the coastal road from Vila do Bispo so we had to pass right by the Lagos supermarket where last time they had some amazing freshly squeezed orange juice. It had to be done except unfortunately they didn't have any today! We left however with a couple of hand tools (like you do) similar to the full sized ones we'd bought earlier; again one for dad and one for us. Mum might quite like using it too to terrorise the weeds!

Finally we were off, climbing up through the wooded gently curving Aljezur road. It's actually a lovely road and one that we don't take that much as our northwards explorations normally begin from further west where it is quicker to take the coastal road. Before we knew it we were on the outskirts of Aljezur where we quickly resupplied with water for the final time. We hoped it would be enough for the last three days as it would be a tragedy to have to buy water.

We didn't have any need to stop at the health food store or anywhere else in Aljezur as we were now fully stocked, so we drove on through. Phil wanted to check the surf at Amoreira beach just north of Aljezur so we drove the tarmacked but still slightly bumpy four miles or so to the beach from the main road. We arrived to see little waves forming and a long boarder already in residence on them. Phil ummed and aahed briefly but I think sensing he was running out of surf opportunities on our trip, he decided to go for it. Not long after he got in, the other surfer left and he had the waist to chest high clean off shore waves to himself for a while until a surf school and about a dozen surfers joined him. I still saw him getting his fair share though. Even from a distance I can still recognise his seagull like swooping and gliding over the surface of a wave. Upon his return he told me he had indeed enjoyed his surf and particularly so as it had upped the wave count of his meagre tally of surfs on this trip. He'd also got chatting with a guy that was in charge of the surf school out there. He was coaching mainly British people on the waves. He was a chatty and encouraging guy who told Phil that even he last week had struggled to find any waves for his clients.

It was by now heading towards 4pm; a bit late for lunch so we snacked on some tasty crisps and decided to push on northwards for a couple of hours. It is a different landscape slightly as



you move northwards. The dark red soil turns a little paler, and totally sandy looking in some places. Pine and eucalyptus still rule but the land seems to open out with little pockets of deep valleys and twisty hilly climbs. The main road turned quite 'pot holey' at one point which slowed our progress a little. We reached some places that we'd been vaguely aiming for quite a bit quicker than we had originally anticipated so pushed on. There was a balance to be struck between gaining time on tomorrow's journey, finding a nice place to stop and having enough time to relax and cook dinner. We settled on a little bit up the coast from Sines where we could easily re-direct back towards the main motorway north. If we'd gone much further north it would have to have been inland and complicated by the urban creature that is Lisbon. I chose a beach area near a sand dune reserve in the hope that there would be a quiet spot to park up in with relatively nice views. I wondered as we were driving past Sines, with its industrial power stations and multiple roundabouts, as to the value of my choice especially as the turning onto the track leading to the beach was close to quite an urban area. However we drove 1.7 miles along a relatively well tarmacked track with only the odd jogger along the way. Extensive sandy trails into pines and eucalyptus extended off from the road, all fenced off. I started to worry. However, at the end was a higher quiet car park (only a couple of cars parked) and a lower beachside one. Phil went for a quick look over the built up sand dune and out to sea. He said the beach went for miles northwards. We thought the higher car park looked a little quieter in terms of traffic and also afforded better views so opted for that.

We parked up, uncorked and started food preparation. The two occupants of the parked cars soon returned and left us to our own devices, and with just a few beach going cars passing, it was a relatively quiet spot. Dinner was cooked and ready with still light in the surrounding hills, sandy pines and out to sea evident. It was a nice view but a little disappointing to see a collection of toilet roll and condoms in one area of the car park. We hoped that the traffic that had created it wouldn't be evident this evening.

After dinner we made the effort in partial light to wash up as it would help us get off to an early start tomorrow morning. Then to bed for a quick read and some (hopefully) essential sleep to steel ourselves for tomorrow's continued drive north.

**This evening's wine was Seleccao de Enofilos Douro 2013 Vinho Tinto (€1.69!) Again!**



## Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> April

It had been a wild night and sleep didn't come easily at all. It wasn't anything to do with boy racers or amorous pursuits in the car park. In fact it turned out thankfully to be totally peaceful from that perspective. It was the weather. We had the worse rain of the trip overnight, with accompanying wind gusts battering us from behind too. Rain was even driven in through a couple of Miles' windows making a small wet patch on our duvet. We both didn't sleep very well and wondered whether we should just start driving at several points in the night when sleep didn't seem possible. However that didn't seem a very pleasant idea either so we stuck it out managing a bit of sleep here and there. Come morning it was bright sunshine with only the large surrounding puddles in the car park, the large collection of water in Phil's board bag on the roof and the small damp patch on the duvet the only evidence of the havoc the rain had reeked on our peaceful night. Phil emptied the board bag of its contents.

We quickly packed up and skipped breakfast, preferring to get some miles under our belt and then look forward to an early lunch instead. We decided to map out a route that joined the main roads north but avoided the toll motorway as much as we could. These roads can be equally as fast and a lot more interesting at times. The IC-1 road is probably one of the more major non-motorway roads. It runs north-south and its single carriageway can be quite busy due to lots of traffic wanting to avoid the toll roads. However we'd taken a section of it further south on our way down to the Algarve and it had been wonderful so we figured it was worth a go. It was a mistake. The constant parade of lorries with cars twitching to get past should have been a sign and the potholed surface with verge side sudden tree root undulations the other bad sign! However it was the frequent large notices at the side of the road announcing that the IC-1 was 'the road of death' that had us looking for the next available opportunity to rejoin the toll motorway. We gritted our teeth for the eight or so miles it took to reach the junction.

The toll motorway was a dream after that. We pushed on, thankfully avoiding a wrong turn that a few years ago had us going on the much longer motorway through Lisbon. We were on familiar ground now, passing over high bridges across river valleys, past pine plantations and olive trees and loads of circling and nesting storks, one of which was nested on an overhead road sign. Dark clouds started collecting and threatening the whole time.

Around 12.30pm we felt sufficiently hungry and satisfied enough with the progress we'd made that we stopped at a services to have lunch in the van; padron peppers, bread, olives and tomatoes with a cuppa to follow. It was lovely and a welcome break from the moving road. The only distraction was a man in a car next to us who kept staring, then getting out of his car, going for a little walk and returning to stare more. He eventually moved his car to a different position to briefly stare at others before finally leaving.

After lunch Phil wanted to remove his longboard from the roof to reduce the resistance a little and get more of a speed on. I had noted the lovely blue patch and sun we had very warmly been sat in seemed to be dissolving fast as the darkening clouds finally started to catch up with us. Just as Phil had managed to get the board off the roof and into the van the heavens opened. Our lunch and the removal of the board had been timed to the second. Thankfully we didn't have a wet board bag to now put inside the van.

Progress was slowed and made a lot less pleasant by the heavy rain. We were approaching the mountains around Guarda now and as we climbed we met the clouds. Sudden patches of



collected water would appear on the road and overtaking lorries increased the amount of water twofold that forced its way onto the windscreen. The landscape on this stretch of the road is quite beautiful but today you really couldn't see much beyond the odd raving waterfall or patch of flooded pasture where the river had burst its banks.

Around 4pm we hit the border, still in heavy rain. I got the passports ready but don't know why as the chances of the border guards standing out in this weather was pretty slim. I was right and we crossed from Portugal to Spain at 30 miles an hour and without a soul noticing. Next stop was to refuel at our favourite and cheapest gas station in all of Portugal and Spain. It was over €0.25 per litre cheaper here than some places we'd seen today so we filled to the brim. We wouldn't need to fill up again now before the UK if we didn't want to but we normally did in Santander to take advantage of the cheaper price of fuel over here.

We were off again. The rain was still heavy but the motorway in Spain has a much better surface that doesn't tend to suddenly surprise you with aquaplaning opportunities. The rain remained persistent all the way across the plain and in to the mountains, where snow still lay on the upper reaches and snow poles lined the road; evidence of its lower reaches at certain times of the year. It seemed like it had been getting dark for hours. We briefly contemplated an empty layby, set back off the road, to stay overnight but Phil was keen to go further. We discussed heading to a place where Phil had surfed last year. It was a little cove backed by pine woods, a little stream, a collection of houses and a hotel. There was a quiet car park there that we remembered thinking might be okay to park up in. As we got nearer and it got later and even darker we started having doubts about whether our memories served us well and with only a few miles to go we changed our minds and decided to head to a place we had stayed at last year; Licences. It would take us about the same amount of time, be nearer to Santander and was much more of a known quantity with surf possible too. I quickly repositioned the map on the tablet which promptly, knowing that we were by now tired and vulnerable, had a spot of mischief and directed us unnecessarily off the main road and through the middle of the town of Torrelevega and then back on to the same main road. With only one other minor 'short cut' it managed to get us to our desired location about ten minutes later.

This area has extensive parking areas beside a large sandy beach backed by dunes and pine forest. You approach it down about a mile of road through the pines where it then opens out onto different spread out parking areas. There were already quite a few 'big white job' camper vans where we had tucked ourselves away last year so we opted for a different area and parked up. There were only two other vehicles in this area when we arrived but a few cars were driving down, around and out again; some circling towards us. Seeing as it was about 10pm Spanish time (they are an hour ahead of Portugal/UK time), this was a little strange to us but it would have to do. We had originally planned to cook on arrival but we weren't hungry enough to warrant the effort with our current tiredness so we just snacked, had a small glass of port and chatted. It had actually stopped raining and the sand and the waves around us now illuminated with moonlight. Finally the car traffic subsided a little and we turned in to sleep, feeling that we were moving a little still.

**This evening's wine was Porto Quinta Do Infantado LBV Unfiltered Port 2008**

## Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> April

We both slept well but that didn't stop us from sleeping more. Besides it was raining really quite hard and through our misted windows it didn't look like it was going to stop very soon. An hour or so later, and after a cosy read in bed it did stop and the sunshine and demisted windows revealed the view around us. Sandy beaches and rugged cliffs stretched in both directions. To the west in the distance, parting clouds revealed snowy mountains, made even more striking by the glint of sunshine. We'd never noticed these mountains from here before. Perhaps this was the first time the clouds had revealed them to us.

We had a cup of tea whilst Phil perused the surrounding surf. Already there were various places in the surf where little groups of surfers now gathered. Every now and again the floating group would burst into action as a line of swell approached and one of the group paddles and is picked up and pushed along in front of the gleaming white lip of the wave. Phil decided to go in and started tentatively removing his long board from the roof. We had put it back on top of the van last night to give us more room inside and now the overnight rain had refilled the board bag. He closed the side door of Miles, with me inside, as he unzipped the bag and a gush of water cascaded down the side. I kind of felt like I was going through a car wash. Phil fished out his warmer wet suit and booties for the colder water expected this further north and was soon heading out into the waves.

I read for a while, interspersed with taking a few photos of Phil surfing and watching the comings and goings of gathering surf crowds and their free roaming happy band of hounds. I also readied my bag and our supplies for our overnight ferry sailing.



Phil returned from his surf happy and hungry so he cooked up the coconut curry we had intended to eat last night if we hadn't arrived so late and tired. It was lovely and probably so much more enjoyable than it would have been in the rush of last night. The accompanying



view was good too; another thing we would have missed out on last night. We washed up and then started making moves to drive closer to Santander.

We stopped off briefly to fill up on cheap fuel where a chatty man served us. French was chosen as the common language as his English and our Spanish was pretty much non-existent. We now headed to Carrefour, a big supermarket on the edge of Santander. We found some interesting stuff there before and also wanted to get another big bottle of olive oil to take home as well as a few food supplies for the ferry journey. It's a cavernous place that, although cold in the way that large supermarkets are, was seemingly super-heated. There were digital readings of the temperature here and there and it was reading around 25 degrees C which made the going quite sluggish at times. To make things even more random, in the high metal rafters above sat tweeting sparrows who freely fly around; their particular favourite area being above the bread department unsurprisingly. Phil wondered what they got up to left alone when the store closed. I imagined a fair amount of sparrow looting occurred and good luck to them!

We left with still time to spare before we really needed to get to the ferry port so we drove along to the far end of the seafront and sat for a while. A group of men stood leaning over the railings nearby. They stared out to sea in between loud gesticulated conversation with each other or on mobile phones. The time then came to run the gauntlet of the roads to the ferry port. It isn't too bad on the earlier sections of the seafront road but towards the shopping area and near the ferry port it divides into three lanes, roundabouts with multiple exits and entrances, and drivers that don't seem to know what indicators are, with cars frequently and suddenly pulling out or parking up in the lane you are in. It feels more like a computer game and by the time you reach the port a sense of relief floods over you as you see the wide open areas and ordered check in queues.

Last year we had turned up at the check in and then were immediately waved on past the two queuing areas and straight on to the ferry. It was magic as we sailed past the bored stationary cars and were in our cabins a full hour before the ferry departed. We had no idea how this had come about but Miles had felt like a VIP. No such luck this year as we sat in amongst the

straight numbered queues. A guy in a 'hippy wagon', climbing holds fitted on the back as a way of accessing the high roof racks piled with surfboards, came to talk to us. He was a friendly chap from Wales who'd decided to buy a van and take off for three months over the winter. He was a landscape gardener by trade so work was slack during winter time. The queue suddenly moved and he had to break off the conversation to drive forward. It abruptly stopped again and he popped back out of his van to continue the conversation. It turned out he'd been staying predominantly in the areas in the Algarve we had been so talk continued around that. The queue moved again, then stopped and this time Phil got out to talk to him. They chatted more whilst I studied the apartment blocks that ran alongside the ferry port. Although the same style everybody had individualised their balcony areas; some had blocked them in with windows, others partially so. Some had the standard railings whilst others had put posh looking glass instead. There was a woman sweeping her exposed balcony whilst on another a man was on an exercise bike looking out to the distance. They had a hell of a view from up there. Not only was it above the busy and vibrant seafront road and shopping area but they had a huge ferry, not far off the height of the buildings, sitting right outside across the street. Then they had the view out across the sea channel, with its white bleached sand bars and across to the distant snowy mountains. You could also see planes landing and taking off at the airport across the water. If you liked watching the world go by, one of those apartments would be a good bet. I saw the flicker of TV screens in some of the windows and wondered at whether, like most things in life, the familiarity of all the interesting things around them had made those occupants now bored of it all and turn to that 'electronic window on life' called the TV.

Suddenly we were off again and this time picked out of our current line to join a long line of VW Transporters as we now snaked into the bowels of the ferry. Our cabin was found quickly and after a brief settle in and use of the facilities such as the wonders of a private proper toilet and running hot water, we went out on deck with our wine. This was a tradition of ours to ensure, whatever the weather that we watched as we slipped away from Spain. We didn't seem to be going anywhere fast though at the moment and with worrying hammering noises coming from somewhere above us, we wondered at the luck of the ship breaking down. Phil also joked that perhaps there was a group of Polish workers on board still refitting the ship! The engine had suddenly gone quieter. We waited on the sea side of the deck where very little people passed by, most more concerned with viewing the evening spectacle of Santander rush passed on the other side. Looking over the side of the ferry we could see shoals of large fish collecting a little distance away. They seemed to be forming a line and the more we looked the longer the line seemed. They seemed to be waiting for something and when the engine thankfully re-kicked in to action it became apparent that the resulting kicking up of sediment was what they were after. A sudden line of cloudier water appeared and this defined even more the line the fish were moving against. We wondered whether the fish set their clocks by the ferry's departure. If so they would have been tutting as we were leaving late.

As we finally drew away from the port and the fish scattered more, an announcement came over the speakers that we would be arriving in Plymouth at 8.15. It wasn't a slip of the tongue either because I understood enough French and even Spanish to know she said the same time as the UK announcement. Phil and I looked at each other confused. Were we suddenly on a superfast ferry getting in at 8.15am or had our previous arrival time of 4.15pm been delayed by four hours and it was 8.15pm? About five minutes later another announcement came out apologising for the incorrect information and then proceeded to add the correct arrival time of '4.15 in the morning'! We shrugged our shoulders and thought they must be tired or drunk or something as no way was it anything but 4.15pm, unless those Polish workers had really



zooped up the ship. We stayed outside until Santander's lights began to fade into the distance and the shelter of the large estuary gave way to stronger wind.

Back in the cabin there was a strong smell of fumes. It was horrible and seemed to be getting worse. It was coming through the air vent. There was no way this was going to be comfortable so I went along to the information desk. I asked whether anyone was aware of a problem with fumes in cabins and the lady nodded knowingly. I felt sorry for her as she explained that since the refit of the new scrubbers (something that extracts the particulates from the exhaust fumes) they have been having trouble with this depending on the wind direction. The ship had only been back in action since 1<sup>st</sup> April but I got the impression this was already something that had been a regular event from the way she explained it. I could see in her eyes that she felt this would be the bane of her life over the rest of the busy season ahead. Credit to her she was lovely, possibly because I was sympathetic to her situation more than annoyed at ours, and she promptly said she would move us to a cabin near the front where there is less chance of it happening. She then added she would make it a bigger cabin too. I went back to collect Phil to find him stood with the door propped open with a chair. The fumes had got that bad. Even with the door open it was strong. So he was extremely relieved at the news of moving and delighted to hear it was a bigger cabin too. We gathered all our stuff up and moved.

Leaving Phil to delight in the sudden increase in space to spread ourselves out in, I went back to the information desk to drop off our old door passes and say a very big thank you. It was almost as if she wasn't used to thanks, and judging by the sour faced Brits that suddenly started queuing up, I could probably see why. Poor woman. I think we might have got this sorted too in the nick of time.

We got stuck into our food supplies now with a simple supper of bread, guacamole, fresh cherry tomatoes, and aubergine imman. Then I got stuck into my book determined to finish it on this trip, whilst Phil got stuck into shaving and various other cleansing activities. I couldn't be bothered tonight. I would luxuriate tomorrow when we had plenty of time to kill. Shortly after I was snoozing, only interrupted by a heavily snoring Phil. He normally accuses me of being the monster snorer and I normally put up with his little snorting efforts, just glad generally that at least he is sleeping. However, this was the rip-snorting stuff of deep sleep and for once I was wide eyed and swearing. I was worried that an announcement would go out saying "Please would the occupants of cabin 6102 turn the snoring monster on his side"; it was that loud. I ssshhhhed him, told him to 'stop it' and nudged his arm to no affect. In fact every time I nudged him it just seemed to make it louder. I even thought about recording it on my phone knowing he wouldn't believe me but just at that moment of near action he solved the problem by waking himself up with a gargantuan snore and he thankfully turned over. I wonder what he would have thought if I'd been lent over him with my mobile phone at that point? The rest of the night was thankfully quiet and the crossing so calm it gently rocked me to sleep again.

**This evening's wine was Spanish Tempranillo Cabernet Pago Finca Elez 2013**

## **Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> April**

I awoke confused. Firstly in the night I'd heard rain gently tinkling on the roof and then I couldn't understand why it was so dark and why I felt like I was floating slightly. Then I realised I wasn't in Miles. The 'tinkling rain' was in fact the slight creaky movement of the folded up bunk bed above. The darkness was due to there being no windows, and the floating



due to the fact that, well we were floating! I looked at the digital clock; with no pattern of dawn sunshine on treetops to inform my light deprived inner clock. It was 6.30am and I felt relatively awake. This was good news in a way as it was good practice for tomorrow morning when I would have to get up at that time for work. It was bad news in the fact that my mind suddenly clicked in to work mode and all the things I'd have to do and think about when we got home. It was a world away from my initial wake up when I thought we were still in Miles.

I wanted to read to push the 'stuff' out of my head but Phil seemed to still be happily snoozing so I just laid there for a while till my thoughts got so boring I must have dozed off again. I woke again at 8.30am needing the loo and with Phil now awoken by my necessary interruption, I turned on my bedside light and read until my book was finished. What followed was then a full luxuriate in that thing called a shower including a good old hair wash. Even though my hair had fared well from its absence from washing for almost four weeks, it now felt good to wash it. I now felt slightly more presentable to the 'unreal' world although, as I pointed out to Phil, I still always feel scruffy for some reason. I didn't know the meaning of 'chic' and probably never would but Phil loved me all the same; probably more so regardless.

We had a small simple lunch from our supplies box and a cup of tea thanks to a flask that Phil went and filled with boiling water from the restaurant. Feeling like we'd yet to see the light of day we then went for a walk outside. It was sunny but we promptly got blasted by the strong wind which sent chairs scattering across the deck. It was a wonder it was such a smooth crossing but Phil mooted the idea that the wind direction (NE) is quite strong which is against the predominant swell direction which is south west. I liked that idea a lot.

We retreated indoors but found ourselves trapped for a while within earshot of the entertainment. Everywhere you went you could hear the coarse tones of the female vocalist singing to recorded background 'popular' music. It wasn't popular with us though and Phil even said it was like a 'precursor to being put in a nursing home'. We had to plunge three floors down and almost back to our cabin to escape her. That was enough of the 'unreal' world for now. We would hide in our cabin until it was time to face it properly when we docked in Plymouth and headed home to Cornwall.

**This evening's wine was nothing as it was back to reality time!**

Miles driven – 2951  
Money spent – £1436 total for whole holiday  
Bottles of wine drunk – 20  
Number of surfs – Five  
Number of runs - Four