

It's one thing to read about the history and beauty of Spain and Portugal—such as the *pueblo blanco* of Arcos de la Frontera—but riding through these countries is another thing altogether, providing an intimate connection that touches your heart and lifts your soul.

Make Life

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YOU'RE RIDING FOR TWO WEEKS
IN SPAIN AND PORTUGAL, MIGHT
AS WELL MAKE IT A VACATION...



STORY AND PHOTOS BY **KEN LEE**

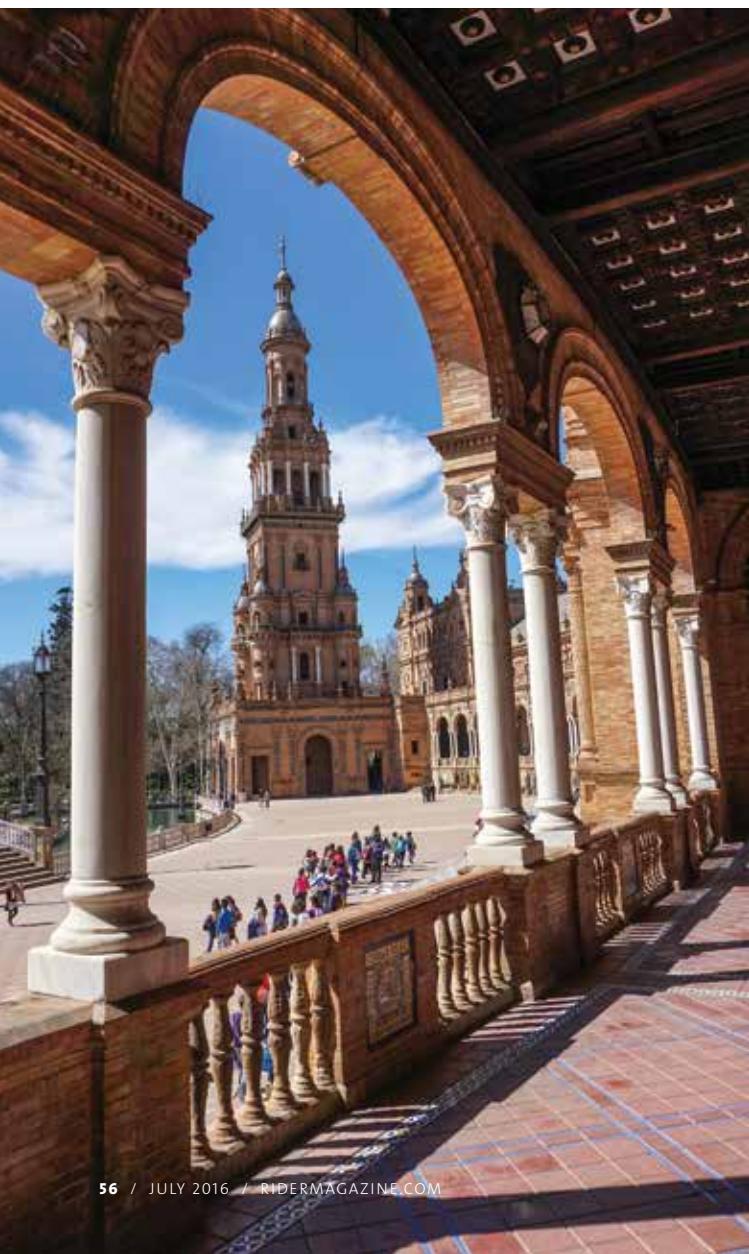
a Vacation

IMTBIKE PORTUGAL &
SOUTHERN SPAIN TOUR





Below: In major cities such as Seville, we could barely skim though the many key sites, such as the Plaza de España, where schoolchildren visit to experience their living history.



Not all motorcycle tour companies are alike. Moreover, the tours offered by a single company typically differ dramatically in many ways. So, sitting in a hotel lobby in Málaga, Spain, I listened carefully as IMTBike guides Martin Cebrián and Chano Lorenzo welcomed our group of 14 and laid out the next two weeks. We were pioneering its brand-new Portugal and Southern Spain Tour, and I wanted to capture the personality of the company and the emphasis behind this trip in particular—the intangibles that don't show up on an itinerary or website.

About 30 minutes later, they had used the word “vacation” 10 times or more while underscoring a no-stress, no-hurry and no-hassles agenda. Gotcha. Slow down and smell the roses. Not gonna be two weeks straight of veins-in-your-teeth, hammer-down pacing. They proved their intent when our welcome dinner—delicious as it was—ran very late into the evening, a common practice in that part of the world. “OK, we push back tomorrow’s start time from 9:00 to 9:30,” Martin announced, to the cheers of many, especially the droopy-eyed arrivals who had landed only that day.

Other overseas riding destinations may collect more fanfare, but motorcyclists in the know have long heralded Spain and Portugal as a best-kept secret for a great motorcycling package. Start with a wealth of fantastic roads, then add delicious, inexpensive food and wine, great hotels and a motorcycle-friendly culture spanning the entire population, and it's a win-win-win deal. Our itinerary (see imtbike.com for more details) took us from the enticing seaside town of Málaga on the Mediterranean Costa del Sol (Coast of the Sun) in a looping figure 8 through the southernmost portions of Spain, along the Mediterranean coast of Portugal and then up the Atlantic coast to Cascais, a gorgeous village perched on the ocean just outside of Lisbon, before heading back into Spain. Two more well-known cities in Spain included spectacular Granada and Seville, where we had layover days to see some of the more famous sights. And I found to my surprise (I know, I know...), it's one thing to read about Granada's Alhambra Palace that marks centuries of Moorish rule, or Seville's Gothic cathedral, the largest of its type in the world, and quite another thing to lay your eyes upon such wonders.



The other overnight stops along the way—Antequera, Mazagón, Lagos, Évora, Arcos de la Frontera and Ronda—might not be household names even for more experienced travelers, but IMTBike uses these spots thanks to their strategic locations in or near the National/Natural Parks and mountains that abound in both countries. The route planning took us down a fascinating variety of two-lane roads, which often roughly parallel freeways—all the better to take down the heavy commuter traffic, leaving us to enjoy our riding in virtual seclusion. We spent the majority of our time on isolated farm roads in rolling hills or absolutely awesome twisty roads, interspersed with picture-perfect *pueblos blancos*, or white villages, dotting the countryside. In one day we might joyride through the mountains above the treeline, wander through rolling hills and transition to flat, sandy coastal plains flecked with pine trees to arrive at our evening's stay overlooking the ocean. All in all, a very well planned itinerary.

THE ROADS

We are not typical travelers. Because we elect to see the world aboard two wheels, the evening destinations might be of some interest but the road's really the most important



Terrific food and chance encounters with locals highlighted the entire trip. Far left: This serene little path twisting through the heart of Arcos turned out to be our exit route the next morning.



Dawn breaks gently with a spectacular view from the converted fortress turned hotel, Pousada Pestana Cidadela, in Cascais, Portugal.

thing. This tour incorporated three rest days, which meant we covered about 1,500 miles in 10 ride days. An average of 150 miles a day may not sound like a lot of riding, but we spent the vast majority of our time on beautiful back roads, which meant slower going over small, two-lane highways coursing through open land along with plenty of challenging twisty mountain roads. And we often stopped to take in interesting sites or just wander around a mountain town during a coffee stop. By exercising the option to ride during layover days and/or striking out on your own, apart from the guides and group, the door opened up for added miles and hours in the saddle. The guides emphasized that alternative from the get-go, but no one on this tour felt like they were lacking for seat time; one rider, who was experiencing his first-ever overseas motorcycle tour, confided to me that this trip was a lot more challenging than he had anticipated.

IMTBike supplied me with a fully programmed GPS, and that tool helped me to “peek” ahead and anticipate where the twisty sections and scenic overlooks might be lurking. I thought about departing from the group more than once, and that GPS gave me the confidence to do so; I recommend taking advantage of this option when you join a tour. Three or four times I seriously thought about skipping lunch to go back and ride an especially delightful piece of road once again. One such time featured my new personal favorite road, *Puerto de las Palomas*, or Door of the Pigeons, named for an annual migration of pigeons funneling through this Spanish mountain pass inside the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park. Unblemished pavement, perfect twists and turns, zero traffic and spectacular scenic views that only got better and better as the road went upward for miles and miles.



We enjoyed plenty of isolated country roads, plus a fun ride aboard a not-too-upscale ferry that helped us dodge rush hour in Seville.





By civic standards in Évora, Portugal, this aqueduct is fairly new—built only in the 1530s. Minutes before, we departed Pousada Convento Évora, which sits between a cathedral built in 1184 and a first-century Roman temple.

LODGING, FOOD AND CULTURE

Usually, I don't pay much attention to lodging while traveling. I figure, once you close your eyes to sleep, every hotel looks pretty much the same. However, this tour featured outstanding Paradors (in Spain) and Pousadas (in Portugal), historic hotels out in the country, each unique in its own way. Pousada Pestana Cidadela in Cascais and Pousada Convento Évora stand out in particular; the first sits within a converted 16th-century seaside fortress, while the latter is a renovated convent adjacent to the Évora cathedral, which dates back to 1184, with a Roman-era temple brooding over the other side. Riding bikes into each felt like rolling straight into a museum—it seemed so wrong, but felt so cool! The other Paradors and Pousadas were equally memorable, my only regret being that we couldn't stay longer.

Naturally, most of the tour meals revolved around local specialties, including a vast and delicious array of *tapas*, small plates of cold or hot food for nibbling: olives, veggies, seafood and more. Main-dish options varied, with some very specialized treats; my favorite meal included pig's ears, marinated octopus, grilled and braised octopus, and pork tongue. I grew up eating such things so my palate is pretty adventurous; others opted for more straightforward dishes such as chicken, fish or steak, delicious in their own right.

Spaniards by birth, the pride Martin and Chano feel for their culture proved infectious. They took us to a museum where we could climb aboard replicas of the Niña,

Pinta and Santa Maria, near the original spot where in 1492 Christopher Columbus departed on his journey. These are not large ships; Columbus reportedly favored the 50-foot-long Niña, the smallest of the batch, which held only 24 men. Make that 24 very brave men. Other highlights included Cabo de Roca, the westernmost point in continental Europe, with a lighthouse that first began operating in 1772, the too-perfect hilltop village of Arcos de la Frontera, and too much to recount in Seville, Granada and Lisbon.

THE PEOPLE

Even with all these highlights, the thoughts I cherish most are memories of the people we met and saw along the way. Travel by motorcycle seems an open invitation to interact with the locals: one ancient-looking fellow in Portugal, who sported but a single tooth, going on and on, sharing tales of his small village as I smiled and nodded, catching maybe one in 10 words; the worker, standing by the side of the road, cheering, waving his hat and hopping up and down in celebration as 11 big BMWs rode past; the storybook-looking lady who opened the top half of her door to chat with us in a seaside village where we stopped for coffee; the old couple who simultaneously and spontaneously burst into applause as I made eye contact with them while riding through the cobblestone streets of their little town.

Yeah, it all added up to one heckuva vacation... 