

Europe Special

Cycling in Portugal

Don't assume the grass is always greener, says **Gary White**



As keen cyclists in the UK, we feel somewhat beleaguered, and poorly treated by our country and countrymen (and women sometimes). But perhaps it is wrong to believe that the grass is always greener on the other side...

First, some context. My wife is Portuguese and we often visit her family in the charming town of Idanha-a-Nova in the Beira Baixa (Lower Baixa) region in the country's north-eastern interior. The Beira Baixa is landlocked, north of the Alentejo, about 200km from Lisbon on the Spanish border. The region is thinly populated and agricultural. Most people work in farming or related industries (e.g. food processing, cheese production) or else in services provided by the country's large public sector.

Idanha is moderately well-known for its bi-annual Boom Fest and the occasional drive through by the Paris to Dakar Rally. Distances between settlements are considerable (30 to 40km is common) and Idanha and the regional city of Castelo Branco, are surrounded by numerous small farms, villages and the occasional town. Though family life and quality of life are good by western European standards, personal incomes are often modest, save for the growing number of rich urbanites visiting their second homes in their Volvos and Mercedes. Public transport is better than might be expected, partly thanks to the policies of the socialist Camara (municipal council). Buses run quite frequently between main settlements (at peak times certainly) and there is even a free bus service for over-65's.

However, cycling by adults is almost unknown, save for the small leisure cycling club in Castelo Branco and the occasional peleton of professional Spanish cyclists doing a border raid whilst training for a major race. Children ride bicycles, and like children anywhere there is great excitement at the arrival of the first bicycle at Christmas. This brings real freedom, but the excitement does not last into adulthood - bicycles are not seen as a practical means of transport, or even for leisure, just fun for children. The local



supermarket does sell bikes - 'mountain bikes' for 70 euro (about £40) that look as though they would fall to bits bumping down a kerb, and are only available in children's sizes anyway.

There is not a single cycle lane - or indeed any concessions to cycling at all - in the whole of the Beira Baixa (a region more than twice the size of Lincolnshire), and I know of only one bike shop (actually a hardware shop that fixes bikes on the side!). This is particularly tragic, because it is fantastic cycling country. I have an old bike which I use when I am there, but I have to keep my own stock of spare parts and tools brought over from the UK, as I would not be confident of getting the bike fixed by a third party. The topography is generally flat, except for some granitic inselbergs (like big Dartmoor tors), making for excellent cycling terrain, with very quiet rural roads, save for the odd fruit truck bound for Spain. Even the climate is equable, with high pressure far more common than in the British Isles (even in January, days are often sunny and 15°C is common). The locals do tend to drive fast but they are thankfully relatively courteous, and cars are rare! I have cycled all day, doing a spot of photography or bird watching (another of the region's assets) and enjoyed quite idyllic times, with 50km in a day as an easy cycle, eating a packed lunch, and stopping to talk to the locals.

There is massive potential for the development of appropriate and sustainable tourism here, especially as one



The first bike (or trike) is as important as anywhere else, but in Portugal the cycling habit is soon forgotten

of Europe's twelve designated Geoparks is in the region. Lack of local employment opportunities is a perennial problem for the Camara. From a cyclist's point of view - and one who is interested in sustainable, low-impact development - it seems that the region could make more of its heritage, culture and landscape and give cycling a boost too.

“...there is also a glimmer of hope. Lisbon has its share of traffic congestion...”

My father-in-law happens to be the Presidente (mayor) of the Camara. I have asked him why he doesn't do more to promote cycling. 'And who would use the cycle lanes?' he says. Not an unreasonable response in the circumstances, perhaps, but I pointed out that pro-cycling policies don't necessarily involve cycling lanes. No doubt there are cultural barriers to the acceptance of 'children's transport' for serious use by adults. Certainly, the Portuguese, like the British, are in love with the motor car and also like us, have a commensurate national problem with obesity and other health



issues related to a lack of exercise. However, Britain's cycling policies and attitudes which we all bemoan, are positively vanguardist compared to Portugal. And Portugal doesn't have the density of traffic in the UK, save for a few obvious cases of large cities. So, there is potential for change.

There is also a glimmer of hope. Lisbon has its developed world share of traffic congestion - and even smog, sometimes - and is a not particularly cycling-friendly place. Porto, however, is a more encouraging environment for the cyclist. It is by far the most northern-European looking city in Portugal - for better and worse. There are strong trade and tourist links and there is a burgeoning IT and media industry, in part sustained by graduates from several large universities. There is quite a health-conscious and work-out culture, perhaps more so than in any other part of the country. And there is even a cycle

lane or two. Near Porto along the coast, such as in Foz where the Douro estuary joins the Atlantic, there is a seaside cycle lane (shared with skaters, it seems) that runs for several kilometres. It is very popular indeed, especially on weekends and holidays. However, this is far from typical for Portugal.

“...if you wanted a pannier or trailer you’d probably need to look overseas...”

Lessons

So what lessons can be drawn? Portugal is far from being the only developed country where cycling is ignored, misunderstood and under-invested. The following points are often cited as reasons not to invest or indeed to show any interest at all in cycling. Some of these might be familiar:

- *The locals believe the roads are ‘dangerous’ - even in remote rural areas - and this is a reason not to cycle. There is no cycling infrastructure (e.g. designated routes).*
- *Lack of fitness or laziness*
- *Worried about getting wet or hot*
- *Nowhere to change or park the bike*
- *Lack of load-carrying capability (e.g. for shopping). Aside from Porto, there are few specialist bike shops around. For example, if you wanted to buy panniers or a trailer you’d probably need to look overseas.*



What can we do about this? Current car usage, as in all of Europe, is completely unsustainable. Relative to incomes, gasoline and diesel prices in Portugal are already a significant burden on families. The main challenges are:

- To prevent the haemorrhaging away of children - who have an initial enthusiasm for cycling - and to get them to graduate to an adult cycling culture
- Nurturing recognition that cycling is an alternative means of transport, not just for 'nutters' or fitness fanatics!
- Provide cycling infrastructure to make short and medium journeys attractive by bicycle.
- Develop a culture where fitness is enjoyable and almost a goal in itself (the most difficult).
- Integrate cycling with public transport (not even on the agenda in Portugal, yet).
- Incentives for employers to provide facilities for cyclists and bolster take-up.

In my region of rural Portugal, I see such an opportunity for pro-cycling development. In Idanha, many students of the two high schools and the higher education college travel some 5 - 15km from surrounding settlements. Cycling would be ideal. Furthermore, the region has a lovely climate which is conducive to cycling (save perhaps in the high heat of the summer), many quiet, rural, open spaces and roads, and a relatively sedate pace of life.

There is also the potential for sustainable employment. The Camara wishes to develop tourism, and I can think of no better way to stimulate employment in a low-impact way: guided cycle tours, accommodation, maintenance, cafés and shops, etc.

My ambition when I leave my job teaching geography in the UK is to move to the Beira Baixa - maybe there will be a job for me as sustainable development or cycling officer in twenty years time! Fingers crossed... watch this space.

Fancy That!

Bicycle Bandit arrested by Roswell police

“...last year’s rash of bicycle bank robberies may have drawn to a close. Roswell police announced Jan. 3 they had Carlos H. Arango-Mejia, 47, in custody at the Roswell Detention Center...Arango-Mejia currently stands accused of two counts of bank robbery, both at the Bank of America on Alpharetta Highway in Roswell March 8 and July 25. More charges are likely against the suspect accused of using costumes and bicycles to rob various banks from March until Dec. 26. Lt. James McGee, a spokesman for the Roswell Police Department, said it wasn’t one piece of information that led police to Arango-Mejia. Rather, it was a task force of investigators each bringing small bits to the table. "It was like piecing together a puzzle," he said...

McGee said his department is not releasing a mug shot of Arango-Mejia for fear it could taint line-ups currently being conducted by the departments investigating bank robberies on their home turf. He also would not comment on whether a bicycle... spotted in most of the crimes or any cash was found at the home in Avondale...”

Appen Newspapers, 3rd January 2008 Spotted by Jason Patient

