PORTUGAL’S ROTA VICENTINA
About the Author
Gillian Price has trekked throughout Asia and the Himalayas but now lives in Venice and is exploring the mountainous and flatter bits of Italy and the Mediterranean. Starting with the Dolomites, Gillian has written outstanding Cicerone guides to walking all over Italy as well as Corfu, Corsica and now Portugal. An adamant promoter of the use of public transport to minimise environmental impact, she is an active member of the Italian Alpine Club CAI. Check her out at www.gillianprice.eu.

Other Cicerone guides by the author
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Alpine Flowers
Gran Paradiso. Alta Via 2 and Day Walks
Italy’s Sibillini National Park
Shorter Walks in the Dolomites
The Tour of the Bernina
Through the Italian Alps – the GTA
Trekking in the Alps (contributor)
Trekking in the Apennines – the GEA
Trekking in the Dolomites
Walking and Trekking on Corfu
Walking in Corsica
Walking in Italy’s Stelvio National Park
Walking in Sicily
Walking in the Central Italian Alps
Walking in the Dolomites
Walking in Tuscany
Walking in Umbria
Walking in Italy’s Cinque Terre
Walking on the Amalﬁ Coast
Walking Lake Como and Maggiore
Walking Lake Garda and Iseo
Walks and Treks in the Maritime Alps

PORTUGAL’S ROTA VICENTINA
THE HISTORICAL WAY AND FISHERMEN’S TRAIL
by Gillian Price
Acknowledgements

Obrigada to Fabrizio for first mentioning the delights of Portugal. Laura joined Nick and I on the trail, José checked my language and definitely neither last nor least, Cicerone said yes!

Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/960/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

Register your book: to sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at www.cicerone.co.uk.

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route
inland route
alternative route
start point
finish point
route direction
woodland
urban areas
station/railway
peak/pass
accommodation
refreshment
tourist information
church/monastery/shrine/cross
castle or fortress
lookout
water feature
lighthouse
parking
footbridge
picnic area
windmill
other feature
ferry

SCALE: 1:100,000

0 kilometres 1 2
0 miles 1 2

Relief in metres
800–1000
600–800
400–600
200–400
0–200

Contour lines are drawn at 50m intervals and highlighted at 200m intervals.

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/960/GPX.
### Route Summary Table

<table>
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<th>Stage</th>
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<th>Ascent/Descent (m)</th>
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<th>Time (hrs:mins)</th>
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**Portugal’s Rota Vicentina**

**Atlantic Ocean**

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<td>Cabo de São Vicente</td>
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**Oriente**

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**Serra de Aire e Candeeiros**

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**Costa Vicentina**

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**Porto Covo**

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**Cacém**

<table>
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If you have a penchant for dramatic cliffs and awesome ocean scenery with secluded sandy bays, are fascinated by gangly storks nesting on sea stacks, are able to walk around 20km per day, appreciate fresh fish and charming guesthouses and hostels... without forgetting ancient oak forests, brilliant carpets of wildflowers, sweet oranges, mouthwatering traditional Portuguese cuisine and inimitable custard tarts, then the Rota Vicentina is definitely for you. And rest assured it will quickly become one of your favourite treks.

Following the wild southwestern Atlantic coast of Portugal, this beautiful route inaugurated in 2012 is relatively little-visited but is on the way to becoming popular with walkers.

**THE ROTA VICENTINA**

Starting well to the south of Lisbon, the long-distance Rota Vicentina links the rural town of Santiago do Cacém with Cabo de São Vicente, the southwesternmost extremity of Portugal that juts out into the vast Atlantic Ocean, the last bit of dry land Portuguese
Portugal’s Rota Vicentina

explorers saw as they sailed forth into the ‘great unknown’. The cape gave its name to the splendid rugged Costa Vicentina, and of course to the trek itself.

The route traverses two beautiful and fascinating regions of southern Portugal, the Alentejo and the Algarve. The first derives from ‘beyond the Tejo’, a reference to the river that runs through Lisbon. The Alentejo is reputedly the least developed of Portugal which for visitors translates as excellent walking country, a feature it has in common with the Algarve which owes its name to the Arabic Al-Gharb for ‘the west’. This southernmost part of Portugal was under Moorish occupation in the 8–13th centuries until it was reconquered by Christian forces.

Nowadays it is well known as a retreat for sun-starved northern Europeans as it boasts 300 clear days a year! Both of these regions offer walkers a remarkable range of landscapes and habitats, from rolling hills to splendid wooded river valleys then olive groves and cultivated fields which back the exciting Atlantic coast, where marvellous breakers roll in and white-blue painted fishing villages cluster at the mouth of navigable rivers.

Myriad extra interest comes along the Rota Vicentina in the shape of local Portuguese traditions – such as feasting on goose barnacles – and history – in the shape of Arab-era castles and the Age of Discovery sites from the 1400s. Prince Henry the Navigator founded a navigation school near Cabo de São Vicente and famous Portuguese explorers the ilk of Vasco da Gama were in attendance.

The Rota Vicentina consists of two marked routes: the Caminho Histórico or the Historical Way and the Trilho dos Pescadores or the Fishermen’s Trail. The former links Santiago do Cacém on an inland route over rolling hills to Odeceixe before moving closer to the coast the rest of the way south to Cabo de São Vicente. The shorter Fishermen’s Trail mostly sticks to breathtaking clifftops from Porto Covo down as far as Odeceixe. This guidebook uses a savvy combination with the best of both. The route described here, totalling 224km, begins at Santiago do Cacém, but not far along it veers out to the wonderful Atlantic coast before turning south to go the rest of the way to Cabo de São Vicente in a total of 12 splendid day stages.

In addition, a four-stage inland route is described from Odeceixe running inland north back up to Santiago do Cacém to make an excellent 215km, 11-stage circuit for those seeking a loop rather than a linear walk. While these inland stages are less dramatic in terms of scenery, they give walkers an insight into life in rural Portugal. Many old houses constructed with clay, stones and stucco are still standing and used by farmers and herders, and small-scale agriculture continues to be a way of life. Alongside are eucalypt plantations and wide-scale logging.

Covering level ground for the most part, the Rota Vicentina is suitable for all fit walkers and has no technical difficulties. The walking follows a string of clear paths, lanes and country dirt roads with abundant waymarks and signposting. The odd
steep section is included but overall it’s easy to average walking. The sun is one factor to take into account as shade is at a premium and the wind should not be underestimated as this is the Atlantic coast and spending a day being battered can be tiring albeit exhilarating.

Thanks to the mild climate in this corner of Europe, the Rota Vicentina is feasible any time, year-round, with the sole exception of the midsummer months when it’s just too hot. Each stage concludes in a hospitable village with excellent facilities and thanks to local transport, days can be varied and walkers can easily put together their own itineraries to suit individual holiday schedules.

A huge chunk of this trek is in the realms of the Parque Natural do Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina where plant and bird life are protected. This encompasses the most extensive consolidated sand dunes in the whole of Portugal along with stunningly rugged headlands, eroded cliffs of coloured rock and wild beaches for swimmers and surfers alike. What’s more, the park area guarantees that this beautiful coastline remains pristine. One of its great beauties is that it feels remote and you can walk for hours on end without meeting anyone. Even the villages and resort towns are low key and pretty quiet in low season – which is walking season. Naturally as summer approaches temperatures and price rise as visitors pour in, but in any case it’s too hot for walking then.

The Rota Vicentina is a very well thought-out sustainable walking route that is bringing visitors and income to coastal and rural areas of southwest Portugal. Over the last few years new accommodation and refreshment options have been springing up, to the advantage of all, walkers and residents alike. Go and do your bit.

HIGHLIGHTS AND SHORTER WALKS

The Atlantic coast sections of the Rota Vicentina are undeniably the most spectacular stretches of the trek, however an alternation of peaceful rural countryside contrasting with cliffs and beaches makes for an excellent combination. The complete trek means 12 stages but walkers with time limits can mix and match at will. A recommended nine-day loop visiting both coast and the interior is possible by starting out from Cercal do Alentejo and heading for Porto Covo then down the coast to Odeceixe (Stages 3–7). There you pick up the inland route (Stages 1IR–4IR) and follow it back to Cercal do Alentejo.

A suggested one-week stint is Porto Covo (Stage 4) as far as Carrapateira (Stage 10), otherwise in six days from Zambujeira do Mar (Stage 7) all the way to the trek end at Cabo de São Vicente (Stage 12). A short and sweet trip of just four days could start from Porto Covo (Stage 4) and head south to Odeceixe (Stage 7). These are just a couple of suggestions.

Walkers who are more comfortable with day walks will find plenty to get their teeth into on the Rota Vicentina. Nearly all of the villages visited during the trek can be reached by public bus, although a rental car gives more flexibility. You can always park at one of the stage starts, walk the route then catch a taxi back to where you began. Taxi services and other useful contacts can be found in Appendix B.

Lastly, the Rota Vicentina is continually being supplemented with interesting side trips. A handful are described in this guide as variants to the main route and lend themselves to circular day walks, namely at Arrifana and between Vila do Bispo and Cabo de São Vicente. See the Rota Vicentina
Portugal’s Rota Vicentina

STAGE 1
Santiago do Cacém to Moinhos do Paneiro

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<tr>
<td>Walking time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refreshments</td>
<td>Vale Seco</td>
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<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Vale Seco, Moinhos do Paneiro</td>
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</table>

The Rota Vicentina strikes out as the red/white-marked Historical Way leaving Santiago do Cacém to head due south on a series of clear lanes and paths. Walkers are led across rolling rural landscapes dotted with farms and through vast cork oak woods typical of the Alentejo region, with occasional promising glimpses of the coast and the sparkling Atlantic Ocean (three days off). After dropping in at a peaceful farming village, this opening stage concludes at fascinating old windmills with comfortable accommodation, although there is another overnight option 20min before the end.

Seeing as this is the opening stage you’ll undoubtedly be very excited, however as it is the very first day on the trail with a rucksack, in all likelihood it will feel long and tiring. Do take your time.

SANTIAGO DO CACÉM

Santiago do Cacém, where the Rota Vicentina adventure begins, is a typical township in the rural Alentejo region. Its old centre features steep cobbled streets leading up to a fortified castle atop a prominent hill. The town became part of Portugal in 1217 and the king handed it over to the custodianship of the Santiago order of warrior monks, hence the first part of the name. Cacém on the other hand derives from Kassen, as the settlement was previously known under the Moors.

The town has plenty of facilities including restaurants and shops. Places to stay include centrally located Residencial Covas (tel 269 822675) and Hotel Dom Nuno (tel 269 823325 http://hoteldomnuno.com).
From the bus station at Santiago do Cacém walk SW up to cross the main road then keep R up a street at the foot of a park. At the corner go L and up to where cobbled way Rua Dr Francesco Beja Costa branches R. Following signs for the Centro Histórico it's uphill to a T-junction then L past the tourist office. Not far along is the main church Igreja Matriz (15min) alongside the castelo, home to screeching swifts and zooming swallows. It occupies a marvellous position dominating the plains.

You're pointed down a flight of steps to traverse a park with a swimming pool and WC. Paths lead through woodland and up to join a series of lanes leading mostly S. Tiny smallholdings are passed, as are grazing sheep and the first of the many cork oaks.

At a modest farm you change direction and take a path W past the ruins of a 15th-century convent (1hr 30min) before lanes resume through land planted with eucalypts. There are vast views towards the coast and over the port of Sines and its power station in the distance. The way drops into a lovely valley thick with rock roses, before gradually bearing S again mostly on a level in the company of cork oaks and the odd farm.

At a surfaced road and a fork (for Paiol) you veer sharp L and down into a shady flowered valley, heading mostly SE. Up on a rise at a lane is a wide ridge with pylons and cultivated fields. A surfaced road is joined R for 5min before you’re pointed off L through to a cluster of rural houses that go by the name of Vale Seco (2hr 40min). A welcome café-cum-grocery shop completes the laidback picture.

By turning R you quickly reach the main road. Cross straight over onto a lane past houses and farms. Not far along is the fork L for Terra Verde accommodation (tel 96 5765233). Otherwise continue on essentially S to join a road briefly. You soon leave it for a lane L and go over a rise to Moinhos do Paneiro (45min).

Here are marvellous twin windmills dating back to the mid 1800s; the adjoining buildings provide accommodation (tel 269 909047 www.moinhosdopaneiro.com, meals available if requested in advance).