

## Portugal Kayaking (2008/9)

From Mark Rainsley, UKRGB [www.ukriversguidebook.com](http://www.ukriversguidebook.com)

Just got back from Portugal - interesting paddling destination. We paddled all week but levels were generally low. There was regular rain, but never quite enough to properly kick the rivers into gear.

Some visitors have raved about the paddling and it's been called some interesting things, namely 'the California of Europe' and 'the Appalachians of Europe'. As most of the group had paddled extensively in these regions, we were certainly intrigued to see what we'd find. Frankly, it's neither of these things in any sense, and these descriptions aren't very helpful at all. If you're looking for a realistic comparison, it's the *UK* of Europe(!). Rainfed boulder-garden/bedrock rivers with good bits and bad bits and the odd crappy portage, okay quality if levels are low and of course really great quality if the rain kicks in. Various trip reports have also talked of having great paddling even weeks after rain; we weren't convinced about this, either; some trips are still possible but you absolutely need heavy rain - then and there - to get the best out of the paddling. Where Portuguese paddling differs from the UK is that the trips are usually pretty committing, in deep valleys or gorges, and they're often surprisingly hard to locate or accessed by sketchy roads; in practice these logistics mean even a motivated and organised group will occasionally find themselves rather short of daylight for these serious trips ...

The thing we do agree with previous reports on is the country itself; wonderful. The scenery and landscape is regularly utterly gobsmacking. Craggy granite mountains, sleepy rural villages, crumbling villas, steep terraces, old ladies in black prodding livestock, catholic kitsch statues and churches. I could barely believe we were in western Europe sometimes. In upland areas up to 75% of the population is over 60 and an ancient and visually attractive - but undoubtedly tough - way of life was disappearing literally as we watched. Local paddlers were amazingly welcoming and friendly, and indeed we received nothing but friendliness and welcomes from all folk we met; try getting that in certain upland areas of the UK. Food and drink was rather good also (steak and Vinho Verde!) and we're ashamed to admit that most of the week went by before we realised that we were each actually ordering meals *for two* every night. I really strongly recommend northern Portugal as a trip in its own right, regardless of paddling - go MTB, walk, drink wine. My wife and I will be returning, and not necessarily with kayaks. Flights are cheap and the country is fairly cheap for UK folk, although much less so now that the pound is worthless.

Okay, the rivers ... a very mixed bag indeed!

Saturday - Rio Paiva. Heather and I were there a day earlier than everyone else. After a night in some hotel somewhere, we turned up at the Rio Paiva (on the advice of a luggage handler at the airport who was a paddler!). We checked out the river but weren't going to paddle as we had no shuttle. Amazingly a local paddler then located our unmarked van and invited us to join their group for a paddle - they'd been searching for us! I did the Paiva Garganta (Gorge) with them, a long Grade 4(5) trip in splendid surroundings - this is basically their fairly reliable fallback low water trip, an equivalent of the Orchy or Upper Dart. We slept in bunks at their clubhouse and the other four joined us late that night.

Sunday - Paiva gorge again - it was a bit higher after rain, all six of us enjoyed a run on it. Claire aced the trickiest rapid - but then headbutted a rock and gave herself a black eye, oops. I somehow broke my thumb on a rock somewhere, the first of a remarkable series of self-inflicted injuries I gave myself last week. We stayed at the clubhouse again, and dined with the Portuguese paddlers - our thanks to them.

Monday - Rio Tamega. Oh dear. This major river was supposed to be a rollicking Grade 4(5) trip. It

was actually a flatwater paddle through a craggy gorge, with two one-off Grade 4 rapids, both notable for nasty sieves. Even with loads of water chucked down it, it would be primarily flat. Odd. We headed up into the mountains and rented a flat for a couple of nights on the Spanish border.

Tuesday - Rio Castro Laboreiro. This is one of the locals' favourites. The scenery in this upland valley is wonderful, and we were excited to catch section 1 at a little above the optimum level. We all paddled boney flatwater a few kilometres down to the gorge. This was rather deep and impressive, and several of the group correctly took one look and walked out. Two of us continued and enjoyed about 200 metres of Grade 5 slides and falls. Then a huge portage followed (I've left a sling and krab attached to a chockstone if anyone wants it) across slippery wet rock, and we finally rejoined the river. Only to find that all that was left was a few kilometres of low water bouldery choss that would need much more water to be worthwhile, at which point the gorge would be a no-go. We finished the trip exhausted and confused. Sorry, I know this is heresy but we don't see the point of this section. The guidebook calls it a 'fun waterpark' (or similar) but it involves massively much more effort than, say, Allt a'Chaorainn, for possibly less reward. Section 2 was also running for most of the week (with the famous triple waterfall), but as this was supposed to be much more arduous, we gave it a miss. Tim Burne (Poke) was in the country and was much braver/fitter than us, he paddled it yesterday and has a story or two to tell ... !

Wednesday - Rio Mouro. Good good good. We checked out the Rio Vez after rain, there was enough for the gnarly top sections but not quite enough for the two lower sections. We liked the look of it as it was it was a nice continuous boulder garden. We moved on and found a good level on the nearby Rio Mouro (continuous steepish Grade 4) and this was perhaps the best paddle of our week. A cross between the Erme and Tavy, it had enough horizon lines and went on long enough to challenge most. Claire somehow blacked her other eye and ended the trip looking like Rocky Balboa. We stayed at nearby Melgaco and checked out the nightlife for New Years' Eve.

Thursday - Rio Arnoia. An ordeal! Given that we'd spent most of the week on the border, it seemed rude not to knock off one river in Galicia (Spain). We went to the Arnoia, which proved to have an okay flow. Three of us ventured into a deep remote valley for a ten mile trip. The scenery was fantastic, I was entranced by this wild valley which was reminiscent of a hugely scaled up Dart loop valley! The river seemed rather good indeed, as we found long sections of Grade 4 among big boulders and bedrock constrictions. Clearly we'd lucked out, what could go wrong? At the halfway point, everything did. We came across a massive dam, built in the 12 years since my Galician guidebook was published. This was a hefty portage (down the dam face!), only to find that most of the water had been extracted. We bashed down and portaged the next mile until the water was returned, at which point there was a second dam ... and the whole farce was repeated again. A beautiful valley and classic paddling river has been destroyed. We met some Czechs at the takeout who said they'd found dams all over Galician rivers. I also managed to stab myself in the ribs with a sharpened tree trunk on one of the boney bits, leaving me out of breath and in pain ever since.

Friday - Rio Minho. This major river forms the border with Spain and is described as 'playland'. Over ten miles, we discovered about 10 Grade 2 or 3 rapids and masses of stagnant flat water. Not to our taste.

Saturday - Rio Vez. Heavy rain brought us back to the Vez. There wasn't quite enough rain however, and we bashed down section 3 at a fairly crappy level. No doubt about it, this would be a lovely continuous Grade 4 run in fantastic scenery (my favourite valley) if it rained hard enough. We then did tourism in Porto (nice waterfront, UNESCO-protected) before flying home.