

ESTORIL & CASCAIS

Welcome to the Sunset of Europe

Text & Photography: Jonathan Ramael

Cabo da Roca: westernmost point of Continental Europe



The Estoril Coast is a destination with more history than you'd think at first. Just 20 km from Lisbon, it served as a summer retreat for the rich and famous since the 18th century. During the last world war its hotels were home to exiled royalty, high society members and officials, but also to countless spies documenting their every move. Years later it is still one of the country's main leisure resorts. MICE is on the rise though, with several modern venues popping up in recent years. Most of all, the area offers lots of fun and interesting things to do. We joined an international press trip for four days of teambuilding activities, surprising discoveries and a quick visit to the capital.



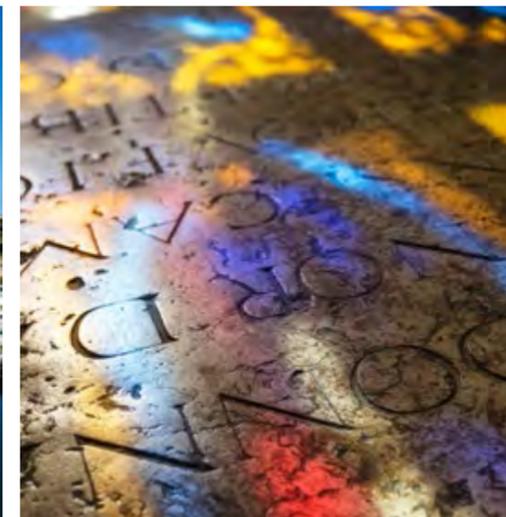


Our happy bartender making some dry martinis at the Palácio Hotel.

While the wind messes up what's left of my hair, I look out over the Atlantic Ocean violently breaching its waves on the steep cliffs below. I'm at Cabo da Roca – its red and white lighthouse a beacon on Europe's westernmost point. Between me and the Americas on the other side lie only the Azores and a couple of thousand miles of empty ocean. In earlier days this was believed to be the actual end of the world – a place where krakens and sirens lurked. 'Here be monsters!' would it say on the maps, and I can understand why. The deep fall and the vast blue emptiness beyond make for a seemingly impassable boundary and an all-out impressive sight. Today Cabo da Roca is a popular spot, attracting tourists from far and wide taking selfies with the ocean at their backs. This August a couple's desire to make the perfect holiday picture proved fatal in the

most tragic of ways. They took a step too many and fell into the abyss posing for their kids. Maybe some of the sirens never left.

Cabo da Roca is just one of many natural attractions in the area. It's just a couple of minutes from Cascais – a fishing village turned holiday paradise dating back to Roman times. We'll be staying here for the trip, not in neighbouring Estoril. In reality both towns are practically one, but the region as a whole is called the Estoril Coast. It became famous as a leisure destination in the 18th century, when doctors started advocating the health benefits of sea baths and the royal family transformed it into their summer residence. It attracted the rich and famous ever since, and many of them still have holiday homes here. The centre of Cascais doesn't



Clockwise from the top left: Hotel Grande Real Vila Itália, Winetasting in the Sintra Mountains, A fisherman checking his nets in Cascais, Sunshine through a stain glass window on the floor of the Pena Palace and the Cascais Marina.

feel too posh. It's full of little restaurants and bars, and generally boasts a lively feel. The road from our hotel to the centre – and actually all the way to Lisbon – flanks the ocean and creates a welcome track for joggers and bikers. The little bay in the centre is still filled with fishermen in tiny boats selling their catch of the day at the local market. All in all a cosy and charming place to be. Touristy, but not overly populated, and with more than enough local residents to keep it feeling alive during low season.

Shaken, not stirred

As a nice alternative to the usual press programme, journalists were divided into four groups completing challenges for points. That's why, on my first full day in Estoril, I found myself partnered up with another

Belgian, an Irish gentleman, a German and a young French girl, for a GPS-based treasure hunt along the beaches and the city centre. It led us all over the place making pictures and answering questions. Ultimately, we were the first team to arrive at the Palácio Estoril Hotel – end of the activity and a place steeped in history. Because of Portugal's neutral status during WWII, lots of royals and officials travelled here to flee the war. Hotel Palácio was one of their main hubs, and looking at the amount of royal portraits on the wall, they never stopped coming. All these kings and queens caused the arrival of some other, less wanted guests: Estoril was riddled with spies. They hung around the hotel bar, ordering drinks, making friends, eavesdropping on every conversation they deemed interesting. It was in this hotel that Ian Fleming – a spy himself – started writing



Impressions of our sailing adventure, Vasco being in middle pic.

his first James Bond story. Casino Royale was based on the actual casino next door. Bond eventually returned to the hotel, as it became a location for several scenes in 'On her Majesty's Secret Service'. We concluded a Bond-themed afternoon in the best way possible: with a dry martini in the bar he was born. Shaken, not stirred.

The joy of sailing

The second day took us to the beautiful Cascais Marina, where four sailboats and their captains awaited us for the next competition. Since we could pick our own captain, we decided to play safe and go for the one called Vasco – never a bad idea in Portugal. The guy turned out to be very friendly but healthily competitive. He'd been a pro-sailor in earlier days and really wanted us to win. It would take work though. There was practically no wind and we had to manoeuvre the boat and its sails by ourselves. Unfamiliar terms like tacking and jibing and about 10 others I already forgot flew about, but we soon somewhat got the hang of it – with a lot

of help of course. It's surprising how scientific a sport sailing actually is. Vasco was constantly checking the wind and the other ships, making silent calculations in his head to then change directions ever so slightly. Even more surprising was how competitive we became ourselves. We won the first race, and were gaining speed in the second, when a rivaling ship decided to stray off course in a turn, forcing us to ram it and lose momentum. Violent curses that have no place here were uttered and the race was lost, but I never expected sailing to be this much fun.

A short trip to Lisbon

The second day we left Estoril for the Portuguese capital. It was my first visit to Lisbon and I knew practically nothing about it. I must say it looks like one of the most underrated cities in Europe. It's beautiful. There are so many sights to enjoy, both on the waterfront and in the buzzing centre. The facades covering the hills of central Lisbon are coloured and tiled, making for a very lively view. It's full of little alleys hiding an insane



The impressive Padrão dos Descobrimentos monument in Lisbon, celebrating the Portuguese Age of Exploration.



Clockwise from the top left: Statue of King José I at Praça do Comércio in Lisbon, the Arco da Rua Augusta on the same square, a young girl enjoying the view at Pena Palace and two of my teammates in our jeep.

amount of bars and restaurants. The capital is filled with museums and cultural venues and served as the first 'modern' city in Europe after it was almost completely rebuilt following a horrible earthquake in the 18th century. We had dinner on the marvellous Praça do Comércio – a gigantic square giving out on the river where more important stuff happened throughout the ages than in several countries as a whole. Our venue of choice was quite special: Can the Can is a gourmet restaurant offering only canned food. It doesn't sound very appealing but trust us, it was. <http://candethecanlisboa.com>.

Through the mountains by jeep

Our final day led us on an adventure in old Land Rovers, through the nearby Sintra Mountains. The Sintra region is scarcely populated but harbours some real treasures. The village with the same name is an architectural gem

full of weirdly shaped but magnificent mansions. There are beautifully well-kept historic gardens all around and the Lego-coloured Pena Palace on top of an impressive peak nearby is one of the most visited sites of the country and offers fantastic views all the way to the ocean. Most of the surrounding area is covered in eucalyptus forests and the occasional cork tree – you'll barely see anyone. It was here that – after a fierce battle involving tree climbing, marksmanship and gas powered buggies, our team finally won the day. We returned to Estoril as victors, and we returned to our respective countries with a suitcase full of memories of a fantastic destination. We'll be back.

MICE in Estoril: facts and figures

Tourism might be king in the region, but there are plenty of options for meetings and events. Several factors make it a prized location for mixing business with



Driving our Land Rovers through Sintra.

pleasure. It's close to Lisbon, offers a varied choice of top tier hotels and activities, is built on a human scale, is a living community and has nine golf courses and a famous race track. Estoril and Cascais are home to eleven 5-star and six 4-star hotels. Here are some of the top tier hotels offering event space for more than 400 people:

- Hotel Cascais Miragem: www.cascaismirage.com
- Palácio Estoril Hotel: www.palacioestorilhotel.com
- Quinta da Marinha: www.quintadamarinha.com
- Hotel Grande Real Vila Itália: www.granderealvillaitalia.realhotelsgroup.com
- The Estoril Casino can house events for up to 800 guests: www.casino-estoril.pt

The Pousada de Cascais Cidadela Historic Hotel & Art District won the World Tourism Award for best con-

ference hotel. Its biggest event space has a capacity of 350 pax. Several rooms are used by local artists to work and exhibit their art. Private workshops with the artists can be booked. www.pestana.com/en/fortress-cascais-hotel/pages/home.aspx

The award winning Estoril Congress Centre is very likely the greenest meeting venue in the country and can take up to 1.200 guests in both halls combined. www.estorilcc.com

For more info on the MICE possibilities of the Estoril Region, visit: www.estoril-portugal.com.

BBT Online stayed at the Hotel Grande Real Vila Itália mentioned above.