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# TREKKING PORTUGAL'S ROTA VICENTINA

The Historical Way and Fishermen's Trail



Gillian Price

# **PORTUGAL'S ROTA VICENTINA**

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THE HISTORICAL WAY AND FISHERMEN'S TRAIL

by Gillian Price

**CICERONE**

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### 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/1143/updates](http://www.cicerone.co.uk/1143/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](mailto:updates@cicerone.co.uk) or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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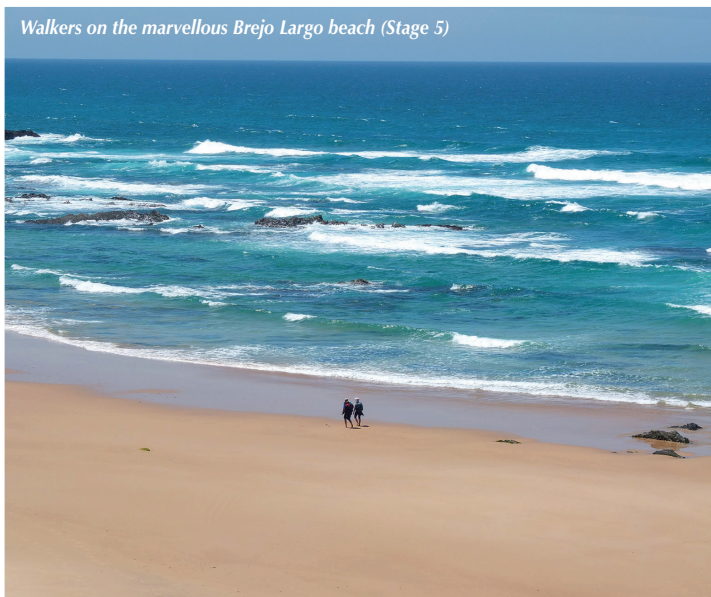
Front cover: Looking back over beautiful Praia do Malhão (Stage 4)



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*Walkers on the marvellous Brejo Largo beach (Stage 5)*



*A boardwalk leads out to the sea at Carrapateira (Stage 10), a lovely spot for a day off*



### The Rota Vicentina Association

What makes the Rota Vicentina much more than sun and walking with stunning views over the ocean?

The Rota Vicentina is the result of the work of the private non-profit Rota Vicentina Association, that started close to 10 years ago. It's unusual to see a group of local family-run companies organising such a public-use project, but they started it from scratch, choosing the trails, marking them, organising information and promotion. Sustainability of such a special coastal area is a principal aim of the project, which is based on working cooperation between the local community and visitors.

The Rota Vicentina Association would like to share these recommendations with readers:

- Choose the shoulder and low seasons; in this way you'll help spread the tourist impact and will have a better holiday with fewer people and cooler temperatures
- Distribute your stay between the coast and the inland route options; this will ensure you enjoy a more diverse experience and less crowded conditions
- Check the options for complementing your self guided walk with some local services such as guided tours and cultural events or a group experience through the options available for booking on the Rota Vicentina website; you'll be supporting local identity and be enriched with a more authentic experience
- Choose local providers who are partners of Rota Vicentina and are aligned with the project, investing in the quality of your walking experience. In this way you'll be supporting the Rota Vicentina Association and will enjoy a more personalised service.
- Search out products that are local and sustainably produced, ask your providers before ordering or buying; you'll be supporting the beautiful rural landscape maintained by the local community and you'll be surprised by the quality
- Send the Rota Vicentina Association your feedback with comments and suggestions for improvement

The Rota Vicentina Association invites everyone to commit to a better world and way of travelling under the guidance of a local organisation that is focused on improving the relationship between hosts and guests, and supporting awareness while providing high quality products, services and facilities based on the local people, identity, resources and strategy.

#### Useful Links:

- The Rota Vicentina website [rotavicentina.com](http://rotavicentina.com)
- The Rota Vicentina Blog, [Blog.rotavicentina.com](http://Blog.rotavicentina.com)
- Semana ID, a special week in early spring with dozens of events and activities [id.rotavicentina.com](http://id.rotavicentina.com)

## ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Title	Distance	Ascent/ Descent	Grade	Time	Page
Stage 1	Santiago do Cacém to Moinhos do Paneiro	21km	280m/315m	1-2	5hr 10min	34
Stage 2	Moinhos do Paneiro to Cercal do Alentejo	20km	160m/215m	1	4hr 30min	38
Stage 3	Cercal do Alentejo to Porto Covo	16.5km	185m/290m	1	4hr 15min	41
Stage 4	Porto Covo to Vila Nova de Milfontes	20km	160m/160m	1	5hr 15min	45
Stage 5	Vila Nova de Milfontes to Almogrove	15km	130m/150m	1-2	4hr 30min	51
Stage 6	Almogrove to Zambujeira do Mar	22km	110m/100m	1-2	6hr	55
Stage 7	Zambujeira do Mar to Odeceixe	18km	280m/310m	2	5hr	59
Stage 8	Odeceixe to Aljezur	19km	100m/100m	1-2	5hr 15min	63
Stage 9	Aljezur to Arrifana	12km	170m/160m	1	3hr	67
Stage 10	Arrifana to Carrapateira	24km	390m/480m	2	6hr	71
Stage 11	Carrapateira to Vila do Bispo	22km	290m/220m	2	5hr 10min	75
Stage 12	Vila do Bispo to Cabo de São Vicente	14km	80m/90m	1-2	3hr 30min	80
<b>Total</b>		<b>223.5km</b>			<b>57hr 35min</b>	
<b>Inland route</b>						
Stage 1IR	Odeceixe to São Teotónio	17km	350m/200m	2	4hr 30min	86
Stage 2IR	São Teotónio to Odemira	19km	150m/300m	1	5hr	90
Stage 3IR	Odemira to São Luis	25km	410m/250m	2	6hr 30min	94
Stage 4IR	São Luis to Cercal do Alentejo	20km	410m/400m	2	5hr	98





*The marvellous rugged Vicentina coast (Stage 4)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Looking back over beautiful Praia do Malhão (Stage 4)*



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 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



A stunning beach awaits at Carrapateira (Stage 10)



Old adobe farmhouses in the interior testify to rural life

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. There are dozens of variants. This guidebook uses a savvy combination with the best of both. The route described here, totalling 223.5km, 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.

#### PORTUGAL'S CLEAN ENERGY



*The giant propellers of the Parque Eólico de Fonte dos Monteiros wind farm dwarf walkers (Stage 11)*

The trek also touches on another small park located south, in the Algarve: the Parque Eólico de Fonte dos Monteiros is one of the country's many wind farms. Wind turbines currently cover 23% of domestic consumption, contributing to the country's clean energy campaign that makes use of hydro and solar power among others. In 2016 a whopping 58% of the power Portugal generated came from renewable sources, then amazingly in March 2018 the country produced even more than it needed and by 2040 it expects to be able to cover home demand completely with clean energy. Portugal is undeniably a world leader in this field.

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 prices 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 south-west 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 11R–41R) 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



## STAGE 1

*Santiago do Cacém to Moinhos do Paneiro*

<b>Start</b>	Santiago do Cacém bus station
<b>Distance</b>	21km
<b>Ascent</b>	280m
<b>Descent</b>	315m
<b>Grade</b>	1–2
<b>Walking time</b>	5hr 10min
<b>Refreshments</b>	Vale Seco
<b>Accommodation</b>	Vale Seco, Moinhos do Paneiro

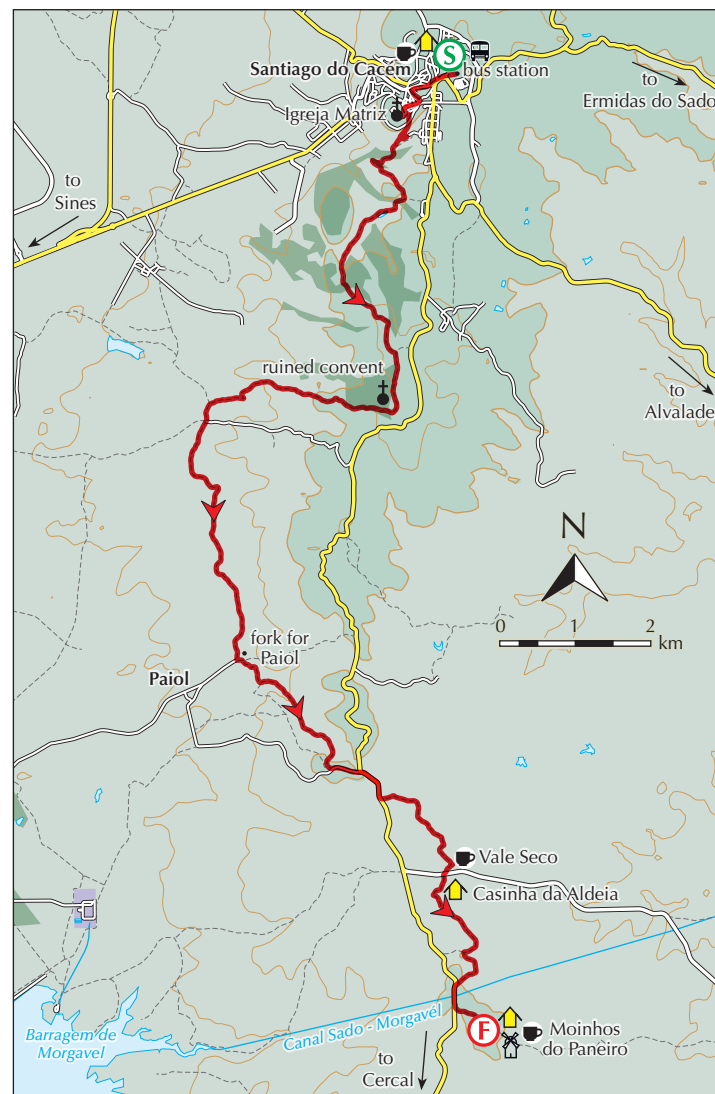
The Rota Vicentina strikes out as the red/white-marked Historical Way leaving Santiago do Cacém to head due south on a series of clear lanes and paths. Walkers are led across rolling rural landscapes dotted with farms and through vast cork oak woods typical of the Alentejo region, with occasional promising 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>).



This is the official start of the Rota Vicentina and clear red/white markings appear here to guide you on your way.

Remember to look back to Santiago and its castle.

Cork trees on the way to Vale Seco

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 path 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



An old windmill at Moinhos do Paneiro, stage end



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 where the route veers R are cypress trees and the entrance to Casinhas da Aldeia accommodation (<https://casinhas-da-aldeia.negocio.site/>, tel 926 135594/962 284363, fatima.krus@gmail.com, meals available if requested in advance). Continue on essentially S to join the 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 909047/937 184176 [www.moinhosdopaneiro.com](http://www.moinhosdopaneiro.com), meals available if requested in advance).

En route are a number of stock gates that need to be closed after you.



- 224km from Santiago do Cacém to Cabo de São Vicente
- dramatic cliff scenery, vast sandy beaches, welcoming fishing villages • traditional regional food



hostels; if you love ancient oak forests and carpets of wildflowers ... then the Rota Vicentina in southwest Portugal is definitely for you.

- 12 day stages of around 20km
- level walking suitable for most walkers
- best walked in spring (March to May) or in autumn (September to November)
- detailed information on accommodation, transport, language and cuisine
- includes shorter variants as well as a four-stage inland route from Odeceixe running north to Santiago do Cacém

If you have a penchant for dramatic cliffs and superb ocean scenery with secluded sandy bays; if you appreciate fresh fish, mouth-watering Portuguese cuisine, and charming guesthouses and

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