



*Views of the Cliffs of Sagres*

# Portugal

## *Birds and Culture*

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Tour Leader: Whitney Lanfranco

February 8-21, 2025

## *February 8 – Arrival in Lisbon, Portugal*

Everyone arrived and checked into the comfortable Hotel Lisboa Plaza in the heart of downtown. After settling into our rooms, we met in the lobby and took a short walk to dinner at a local restaurant, where we had our first taste of traditional Portuguese wine and food.

## *February 9 – Tagus Estuary Natural Reserve*

The next morning, we were picked up at the hotel by our driver and guide, Pedro and Helder. Our first stop of the day was the Tagus Estuary Natural Reserve, the largest wetland in Portugal. The tide was out, so the mudflat was teeming with birds, including Pied Avocets, Black-tailed Godwits, Common Redshanks, and Curlew Sandpipers. We spent the next few hours giving everyone good scope views of all the species and birding the marshland habitat that surrounds the estuary. Blue-throats and European Stonechats were perched right in front of us, offering everyone great photo opportunities. We walked less than a mile from the bus into the cork forest to add to our list, including Iberian Magpie, European Serin, and Eurasian Linnet.



*Squacco Heron by Helder Cardoso*

After a delicious lunch at a local restaurant in Alcochete, we continued birding on a private farm. The owners of Quinta da Atalaya generously allow bird tours to enjoy their property, including their ponds full of Greater Flamingos. While walking around the central pond, our group was delighted by a Squacco Heron feeding in the reeds. While common in most of Africa, they only breed in small areas in Portugal. On the way back to our hotel, we stopped to scan some flooded fields full of

Glossy Ibis and Eurasian Spoonbills. We made it back to our beachfront hotel in Alcochete in time to watch the beautiful sunset before dinner.

## *February 10 – Tagus Estuary and Wine Tasting at Companhia das Lezírias*

We loaded into the bus at 8:30 am (our leave time each day) and set out to explore the Tagus Estuary. Our morning started near a local mall where large trees provide good habitat and easy viewing. A Black Redstart was hunting insects in front of us, while European Robins perched up on poles, and White Wagtails bobbed in the short grass. We then drove a short distance to a nearby road where we parked and walked with farm fields on one side and cork forests on the other. European Goldfinches, European Serins, and Cirl Buntings were abundant along the fence line, and we enjoyed close views of Long-tailed Tit. After breaking for lunch in town, we went to a nearby estuary where we added more birds to the list, including one Red-knobbed Coot. Our final birding stop of the day was the salt pans directly behind our hotel, teeming with shorebirds and gulls, including Black-headed Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Little Stint, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, and Kentish Plover.

After a full day of birding, we headed to our wine and olive oil tasting at Companhia das Lezírias, a nearby sustainable vineyard. We all enjoyed learning more about winemaking and sampling their products. We then returned to the hotel for another delicious dinner.



*Wine Tasting at Companhia das Lezírias*

## *February 11 – Sado Estuary*

Our final day in the Tagus Estuary (one of the ten most important wetlands in Europe) was spent at

EVOA, a birdwatching and conservation area complete with blinds and a visitor center that allows birders to enjoy the wetlands. Unfortunately, the weather was cold and rainy, a sharp contrast to the warm sunny days we had been enjoying. We decided to spend the morning inside the visitor center, where we learned more about the estuary and birded the lagoon from the floor-to-ceiling windows in the restaurant. Our guide, Helder, is one of the leading experts on moths in Portugal. As a special treat during this downtime, he showed us a few specimens he had collected on his hotel room balcony the night before. Just as we finished our wonderful lunch, the sun broke through the clouds and the skies cleared. This allowed us to spend the afternoon walking to the different blinds and enjoying looks at various ducks, shorebirds, and grebes. We also noted both Western Marsh Harrier and Hen Harrier over the fields and several Eurasian Kestrels. We said goodbye to the estuary and went to town for one final dinner before packing to leave for Mertola in the morning.

## *February 12 – Castro Verde Plains*

Our morning was a cultural experience spent exploring Évora, a UNESCO World Heritage site. This municipality has evidence of human settlement dating back to the 2nd century BC. Medieval walls still surround the well-preserved old town, which features the ruins of a Roman temple at its center. Our cultural guide walked us to these sites, as well as a historical monastery and a chapel of bones. After lunch, we enjoyed some free time to walk the downtown area and shop for local pottery and other souvenirs.

We then continued to Mértola, but not before stopping at some fields to enjoy our first view of Great Bustards. We arrived at our Hotel Museu in Mértola, which is built over a 12th-century house and Roman bath, the ruins of which are visible in the lobby.



*Our group at Castro Verde*

## *February 13 – Guadiana Valley Natural Park*

After breakfast at the hotel, we loaded into the bus to begin our journey around the rolling hills of the Guadina Valley Natural Park. Our morning was spent walking some nearby roads where Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew low over our heads and more Great Bustards strutted across the plains. Our next stop was “Nossa Senhora de Aracelis,” a chapel perched on a rocky hill that was once used as a lookout by Romans and Moors. The large porch and 360-degree view of the park are perfect for scanning the skies. We searched for birds of prey and found both Black-winged and Red Kite.

After lunch in a nearby village, we were heading to our next birding destination when Pedro slammed on the brakes for a perched Spanish Eagle right out our bus windows! We then birded a local wetland and had wonderful views of Little Owl and Eurasian Hoopoe. Our final stop of the day was a conservation area dedicated to the Iberian Lynx. Although we had no luck when scanning the hills, it was still nice to learn more about this important effort.

## *February 14 – Castro Verde*

Before we loaded onto the bus in the morning, we stopped to scope a Common Kingfisher on the bank of the river near our hotel. The older buildings are also home to hundreds of Western House-Martian and Eurasian Craig-Martins. We then headed to the steppe to add to our bird list for this area. After stopping in a village for lunch (and searching for Long-eared Owls roosting in the trees), we arrived at Guadiana Valley Natural Park. We walked the well-maintained path by the river and had two Spanish Eagles soaring above us, as well as Bonelli’s Eagle, and Golden Eagles. We also enjoyed the great looks of Iberian Green Woodpecker, Dartford Warbler, and Spanish Sparrow. We returned to Mertola and enjoyed another dinner at a local restaurant overlooking the river and castle.

## *February 15 – Mértola*

The history of Mertola dates back to the Neolithic period, when it served as an important trading post for the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, and later for the Romans. In the 10th century, the Moors built a castle which still watches over the small village. Our last morning was spent with a cultural guide exploring the castle, church, and ruins of this unique village. Before we began our tour, we paused to scope the Lesser Kestrels newly arrived in the church bell tower near our hotel. We birded during our tour of the castle grounds and evacuation site, including Iberian Magpie, Blue Rock-Thrush, and Eurasian Blackcap.

In the afternoon, we returned to the Guadiana Valley because we still needed Little Bustard for our trip. After searching multiple fields and finding many European Golden Plovers, Red-legged Par-

tridges, and Iberian Gray Shrikes, we were treated to a flock of Little Bustards feeding in the grass. We returned to our hotel for one final dinner in beautiful Mértola.



*Mértola at Night*

### ***February 16 – Castro Marim Natural Reserve***

It was time to head to Tavira and the coast! After a short morning drive, we stopped to bird an area along the Rio Vascao. The area was once a watermill and an orchard, which still features many fruiting trees that birds love. There were several Eurasian Blue Tits, Common Chaffinch, Sardinian Warblers, and a Hawfinch perched for us for some time.

We then traveled on towards our destination, but first we stopped at the oldest nature preserve in Portugal, where we added Mediterranean Short-toed Lark to the trip list. It was a three lark morning with additional views of Thekla's Lark and Crested Lark. It was also a three Tringa morning with views of Common Redshank, Spotted Redshank, and Common Greenshank.

We went to Tavira for a lovely alfresco lunch along the river before continuing our birding at a local pond where we found Ferruginous Duck, Little Grebe, and Great Spotted Woodpecker. We then headed to our home for the next three nights, Hotel Vila Gale Albacora. As a former tuna fishing camp, this hotel feels more like a village with the original chapel and school preserved. It is also in the natural park of Rio Formosa and boasts lovely water views.

### ***February 17 – Sagres and the Cape St Vincent Regions***

We loaded up in the morning and headed for the coast! We spent the morning scanning for seabirds

from the top of the cliffs at Sagres, dominated by a 15th-century fortress. We had at least fifty Northern Gannets flying close to us, as well as three Black-legged Kittiwakes, and six Balearic Shearwaters.

After lunch, we walked around a little park near the beach that has a pond and forest. It was a warm afternoon, but we still managed a good bird list, including Song Thrush, Meadow Pipit, Zitting Cisticola, and Eurasian Linnet.

On our way to check into the hotel, we stopped by a field full of Red-billed Chough. After enjoying the views from the bus, we returned for a break before dinner at the hotel restaurant.

## *February 18 – Rio Formosa Natural Park*

There were two parks on the agenda for today. The first one, Rio Formosa, is a freshwater lake located in an upscale residential community, surrounded by walking trails and mudflats. From the blind, we enjoyed views and photo opportunities of many species, including Eurasian Wigeon, Western Swamphen, and Common Pochard. We also had a couple of Booted Eagles (new for the trip) flying over the neighborhood.

After lunch, some of our group chose to go to town for shopping, while the rest of us continued to Parque Ambiental de Vilamoura, which boasts several ponds, blinds, and nice walking trails. The retention pond was full of Ferruginous Ducks and gave us our first look at Tufted Ducks on the trip. From the blind, we enjoyed a great look at Water Rail and newly arrived European Red-rumped Swallows. The day ended on a high note when we found ourselves surrounded by a flock of busy Black-headed Weavers grabbing nesting material from the reeds.

## *February 19 – Transfer to Lisbon*

The trip had gone so quickly that it seemed strange to be returning to Lisbon already. We started the morning by birding the mudflats near our hotel, where we got looks and photos of Audouin's Gull, Red-crested Pochard, Eurasian Oystercatcher, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, and Eurasian Penduline-Tit. Just outside Lisbon, we visited one final special birding spot, where Helder knew a pair of nesting Eurasian Eagle-Owls resided. We didn't see the male, but the female was perched out on the rocks, and everyone enjoyed scope views. We returned to Lisbon and our Plaza Hotel once again. After dinner at a local restaurant near the hotel, everyone was given the option to experience traditional Portuguese Fado music. Originating in the early 19th century, this melancholic genre is described as the "music of longing." It reflects the lives and emotions of working-class people and is traditionally sung by women, as men were away at war. We visited a local Fado house as a special treat, with Helder helpfully telling us the meanings of the beautiful songs.

## *February 20 – Lisbon City Tour*

Our final day focused on the rich history of Lisbon and Portugal itself. Our cultural guide joined us on the bus and pointed out landmarks to us as we drove around the city. We visited many sites, including the Belem Tower, the Belem Monastery, and the famous Pasteis de Belem for a mid-morning culture snack. After lunch on the rooftop of a downtown restaurant, we were guided around the Lisbon Castle area and the maze of the Alfama neighborhood. There was plenty of time for souvenir shopping and to taste Ginjinha (the specialty cherry liqueur of Lisbon). We also added a few birds to the trip list from a local park, including Rose-ringed Parakeet and Common Firecrest. We concluded our journey where it began, at a lovely restaurant near our hotel, where we savored local wine and reflected on the highlights of our adventure.

## *February 21 – Departure*



*Lisbon*