

Sheer excitement:
perilously placed
fishermen's houses
in Azenhas do Mar

LIFE ON THE EDGE

Portugal's savage, seductive Estoril Coast was once known as the End of the Earth. For **Guyan Mitra**, it's the start of something beautiful

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **PETER MALLET**



Cross purpose: a crucifix marks the End of the Earth. Opposite, clockwise from top left: water fountain in Azenhas do Mar; breakfast at the Hotel Albatroz; surfing at Praia Grande; Biscoito restaurant; Cabo da Roca; one happy customer



The world ends exactly 43km northwest of Lisbon

...or at least that's what the ancients thought. Back in dim, distant, pre-Columbian days, the headland of Cabo da Roca on the fierce coastline of the Costa do Estoril was known as the End of the Earth. It was the westernmost tip of Portugal, where Eurasia – and the once-flat world – ran out of dry land. And while cartographers of old were wrong about the Earth's dimensions, they were correct in one assumption: that the longest land journey on Earth would stretch from the eastern tip of Siberia to the western pinnacle of Portugal, and end here, staring over the Atlantic to infinity.

I hadn't come from Siberia. I'd travelled on the No. 403 bus, because the far reaches of the Medieval world's imagination now happen to be the weekend beach magnet for the sun-seeking residents of Lisbon. But outside the capital's balmy suburbs,

few people are aware of the Estoril Coast and its wonders – great news if, like me, you're looking for unpopulated, untamed beaches, simple seafood shacks, and nuggets of historical intrigue. And you don't want to travel to the ends of the Earth to find it.

A frequent visitor to Portugal's capital, I'd always been drawn by the frivolities of libertine Lisbon but had yet to truly explore beyond the city walls. Still I'd heard tales of the rawest rural coastline in Europe: 'The west coast of Ireland with a Côte d'Azur climate,' I was told by a pair of globetrotting surfers while on a recent guidebook-writing trip to the city. Thankfully, getting to the End of the Earth was hardly the epic voyage the title befits – door-to-door in less than four hours from my northwest London home. Lisbon

is certainly worth a few days en route if you've never been: it's got cathedrals, monasteries and bars aplenty. This time, though, I was bound for wilder shores.

As the bus zipped along the brand-new, capital-skirting motorway towards the Atlantic, the city, then the suburbs, fell away to reveal some spectacularly wild scenery. The misty ocean air, coupled with the elevation, creates a wild microclimate. Oak, chestnut, walnut, pine, eucalyptus and sub-tropical vegetation wrestled with each other, reaching for the perma-blue sky above. Valleys were sprinkled with idyllic whitewashed stone farmhouses and crumbling fishermen's cottages.

As far back as Roman times, the deserted scrub and unbounded horizon reinforced the belief that here was where the world ran out. And so it remained until the 14th century, when a few nay-sayers, keen to prove conventional wisdom wrong, embarked on voyages from these shores that would create the first global empire.

Four days of my own discovery lay ahead, I contemplated, as the sun beamed

down. I'd chosen Cascais, a doughty little fishing town, as my base, and was soon devouring a late breakfast on the terrace of the Albatroz, a grand old holiday-home-turned-hotel. Over sugary Brazilian coffee and a rich *pastel de nata* custard tart, I settled in, watching a stream of fishermen return home in their brightly painted boats.

Cascais is no Johnny-come-lately in the holiday stakes. Its boom arrived back in 1870, when the Portuguese monarch Luis I decided to build his summer residence here. His grand citadel still stands today, overlooking the marina. Exiled royals and aristocrats escaped the World Wars to savour the sunny shores and the country's neutral status, an era during which Estoril town's Hotel Palácio and its adjoining casino were filled with international dignitaries, diplomats and spies (it was one of the inspirations for Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale*). While the rest of the world was gripped in the turmoil of the first half of the 20th century, by all accounts, Europe's elite was living it up right here.

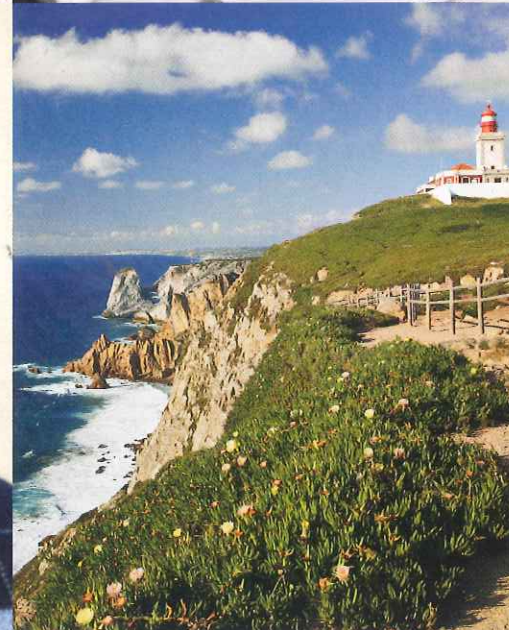
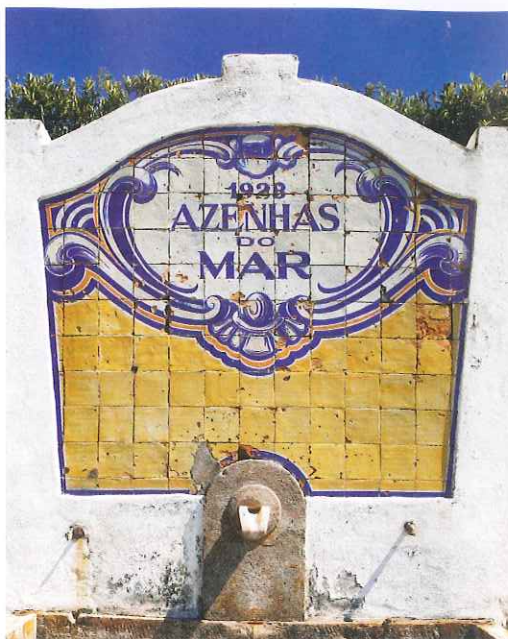
The spires, domes and turrets of faux-Gothic mansions poke up along the skyline, each a marker of a long-gone aristocrat. Sadly, most are empty now, their owners locked in bitter inheritance feuds. The buildings remain spookily abandoned, their pastel paint peeling like fraying lace. Meanwhile, in their shadows, multi-tasking waiters toss fishing lines out to sea from restaurant pavements.

As I wandered the town, I happened upon another relic of chic times past. A queue of excited children was milling outside the doorway of tiny ice-cream parlour Santini, which arrived in Cascais as part of the exiled Austrian royal entourage in 1949 – and has remained, marooned, near the beach ever since. Safely back home, former royal exiles – such as Spain's King Juan Carlos – still get the famous pistachio flavour shipped around Europe to their kitchens. But I was content to take my cone and wander beneath the shadows of the faux-Gothic castles along the sleepy seafront promenade, eastwards towards Estoril.

In the sandy shallows below, children reconstructed the grand shore-front edifices with buckets and spades.

Eventually, the peachy sun dropped beyond the horizon towards the Americas. I returned west to Cascais and to sleep – my head filled with tales of imperial pomp and grand seafaring expeditions. And woke with an explorer's hunger.

I hopped on one of the free bikes available outside the train station and pedalled out of town along the coastal cycle route. Today I was heading northwest, on a path that snaked through ocean spray at the edge of a choppy sea. An easy 15-minute ride led to Praia do Guincho: a couple of kilometres or so of ochre beach guarded by two grassy headlands. Large waves made for a looming orange structure that resembled a Moorish fortress. The cliffs this far along the coast from Lisbon are scattered with ancient lookout points, once protectorates for the estuary-situated capital. This one now has a happier purpose, as grand hotel Fortaleza do Guincho. >



A rock and a soft place:
Praia da Adraga,
arguably the most
beautiful beach
of the Estoril Coast

Guincho is certainly a dramatic place to stay: the infamous swell attracts Lisbon's after-work surfers in their hundreds. Swarms of them were paddling to the horizon, preparing to be carried home by the strong Atlantic winds. The waves were terrifying, but machismo dictated that I should at least try some body-surfing in the frothy shallows. It turned out to be ill-advised. The water was brain-freeze-cold as it swept, swirled and crashed around me. Even the beach looked crazy as I bobbed around desperately beyond the break of the waves: thick dune grass and ribbons of sand rose angrily in battle against the roaring wind.

Keen to warm up, I pedalled for five minutes in my wet shorts – up through scrub and flower-filled fields to the village of Areia, a clutch of white-stone cottages, where the only lunch venue was Biscoito (meaning 'biscuit'), a sparse joint of squeaky tile flooring, plastic tables and crustacean-filled fish tanks. My meal was a bowl of pork and clam stew, mopped up with crusty bread and washed down with a tumbler of icy lager. A bottle of local white, Alvarinho, was opened, and the rotund owner talked me through the triumphs of the all-conquering 1960s Benfica football squad as he force-fed me pastries. A picture of the local heroes hung

above the kitchen door, crowning a portrait of the Virgin Mary. After a *ginjinha* (cherry brandy) for the road, I wobbled home on my bike like an untrained seal, and slumped into my hotel room for a *sesta* – a Portuguese siesta. A 20-minute power nap turned into a three-hour slumber-fest, and when I came round with a start, it was late and dark – too late for any exploring. The End of the Earth would have to wait.

It was my last day, and I couldn't be sidetracked by ice cream, custard tarts or cherry brandy. Otherwise I'd have to face going home overindulged and unfulfilled, without a tale to tell the folks back home of Europe's farthest point. And so, skipping breakfast, I was quickly up and venturing north in the hop-on, hop-off No. 403 bus. I guessed I was on the right track when I spotted the ominously named Boca do Inferno (Mouth of Hell). Here, the natural formation of the cliffs creates an amazing apocalyptic volcano of churning and spurting water.

The road lurched and rumbled, through craggy landscapes and one-shop villages. Not even an hour's travel away from Lisbon, the scene was like another world, or time: mile upon mile of cliff soared out over the ocean, protecting secret coves below. The coastal route followed stunning

I WOLFED DOWN THE CHARRED SARDINES FROM THE WOMAN'S BARBECUE. LOOKING BACK, I'M NOT EVEN SURE THEY WERE FOR SALE

beaches edged by grassy dunes, and the empty, gusty sand unfurled beneath me: Praia das Maças, Praia Grande and then, most beautiful of all, Praia da Adraga, which lured me away from my quest for a couple of hours of lazy beach-bumming beneath a burning sun.

Just after the village of Almoçageme, this boulder-strewn strip of sand is secreted between jagged cliffs and the swelling ocean. On the beach, which felt like it had been hacked out of the rocks with a giant axe to make a path for the >

EXPERIENCE FIJI The Essential Tropical Island Paradise

Fiji is a land where there is still room to move. Set in the tropical South Pacific, the Fiji islands are surely the essence of a tropical island paradise with white sand beaches, swaying coconut trees and pristine waters.

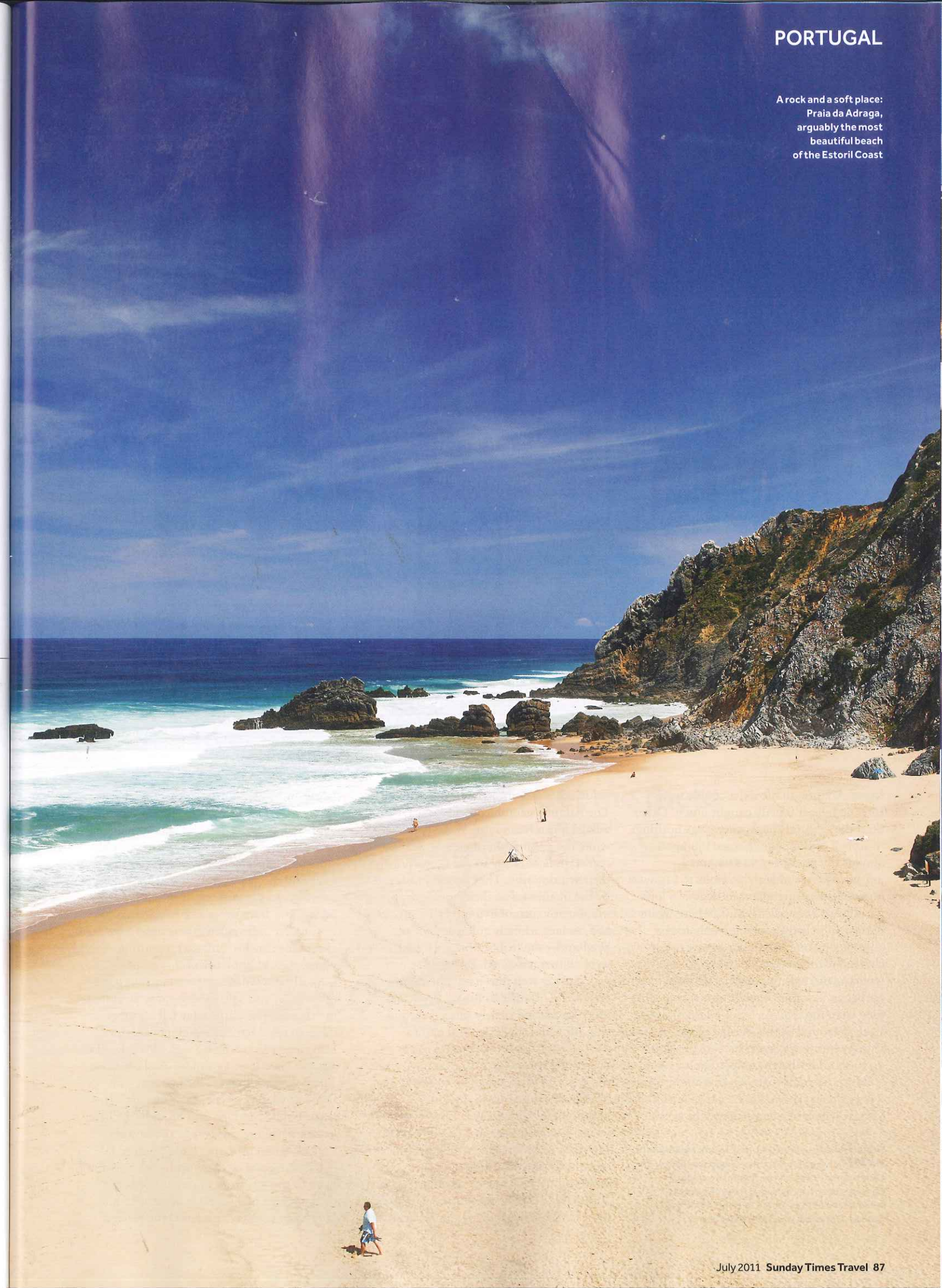
Fiji is the perfect stopover choice for a few days of rest and relaxation when travelling down to Australia and New Zealand. Plus with the Rugby World Cup 2011 in New Zealand later this year, there's never been a better time to visit this welcoming nation.

Plan your Fiji experience holiday with the Austravel experts on 0844 050 2821 or visit austravel.com

fiji me

AUSTRAVEL
We don't just go there, we know there.

5 Night Fiji Stopover from only £199pp
Including accommodation and airport transfers





frosty Atlantic shallows, a couple were tucking in to a freshly caught lunch. Other than the seafood shack, there was nothing.

To hell with hunger pangs. I jumped aboard the next passing 403 and journeyed on, suddenly anxious to know how the story might end. It began to look perilous at Azenhas do Mar, where white fishermen's cottages clung feebly to the edge of a jutting headland. I gestured at charred sardines outside the house of a woman who was fanning her dustbin barbecue. Looking back, I'm not even sure they were for sale. As I wolfed them down, I gazed around at the strange scene: the stumpy houses of Azenhas do Mar came up to shoulder-height on 6ft 7in me, and I felt like Gandalf roaming around the Shire – only this wasn't Middle Earth. With the lofty village being eaten up by the ocean

Shore to please: clockwise from top left, looking onto Praia da Conceição in Cascais; riding a free bike on the cycle path to Praia Grande; Santini ice cream; Cascais's town hall; fishing at Praia da Adraga; steamed sea bass as served by Hotel Albatroz in Cascais. Opposite, view from the Albatroz

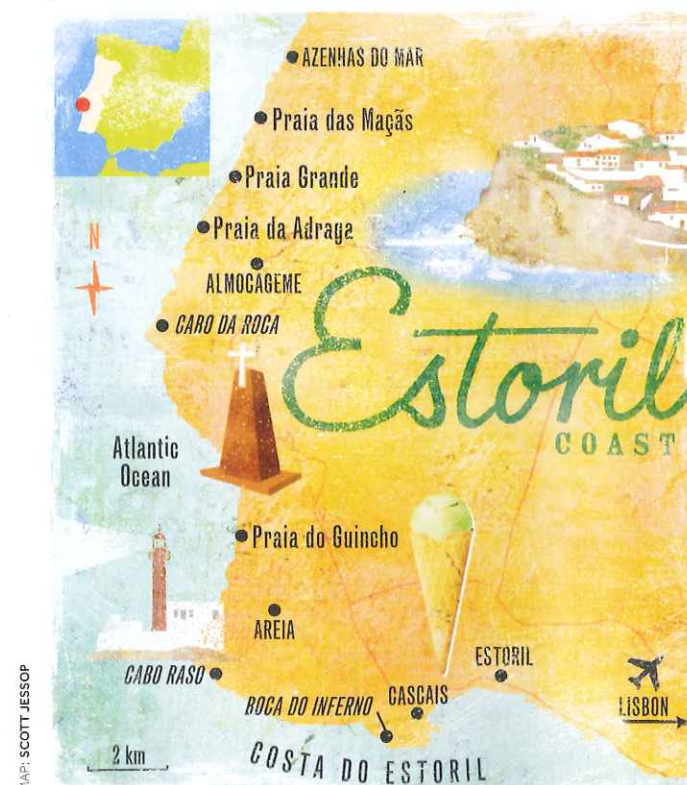
below, the End of the Earth felt nigh. The Atlantic grumbled below the cliff-top village like a lion toying with its prey, while the population of elderly women tended nonchalantly to the flowerpots on their windowsills. They seemed unfazed by the likelihood of their homes dropping imminently into oblivion. Half a property had, in fact, already collapsed off the headland – the front door and kitchen were all that remained. Perhaps the rest was already well into its maiden voyage across the Atlantic to Brazil. I, on the other hand, had clearly missed the bus stop for Cabo da Roca, and had to double-back down the coastal road.

Coming from Cascais or Lisbon, you might think you've made it to the final headland when you see the lonely lighthouse at Cabo Raso. This is the point where the coast swerves sharply north. The wild isolation leaves the impression that this ocean-surrounded corner is the westernmost extreme of the continental mainland. But, like the Romans, who first correctly mapped this region, I'd been

better informed: Europe's farthest reach is the next headland north.

I reached the End of the Earth finally at Cabo da Roca, to find an unassuming stone crucifix. 'Here is where the land ends and the sea begins,' a placard states, stoically – a typically no-nonsense perspective from the god-fearing, seafaring Portuguese. The cliff-top was deserted except for this little marker, denoting where the old known world ran out.

Swirling winds threatened to sweep me off my feet and salty ocean spray lacerated my cheeks. The cliff's edge fell 100m or more to the Atlantic, which pulsed, heaved and licked its way up the rocks like a scrum of salivating sailors on shore leave. There was nothing on the horizon – no boats or islands or encroaching cliffs. If you'd blindfolded me and brought me here before unveiling my eyes to the savage sight, I would probably have believed I'd reached the end of the world, too. I turned back to the bus stop, in pursuit of beers then a warm bed, as dusk descended and grey clouds slowly curtailed the view. ■



Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

TAP (0845 601 0932, www.flytap.com) flies from Heathrow to Lisbon from £124 return. **BA** (0844 493 0787, www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow and Gatwick from £128 return. **EasyJet** (www.easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick and Luton.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Albatroz in Cascais (00 351 21 484 7380, www.albatroz-hotels.com) has a great terrace overlooking the sea, and breezy doubles from £150, B&B. Or try the simple charm of **Hotel Baia**, also on the seafront in Cascais (00 351 21 483 1033, www.hotel-baia.com), with doubles from £65, room only.

GO PACKAGED

Sunvil Discovery (020 8758 4722,

www.sunvil.co.uk) has three nights at the Hotel Albatroz in Cascais from £689pp, B&B, including flights from Heathrow and transfers. **Classic Collection** (0800 008 7299, www.classic-collection.co.uk) has three nights at the five-star Palácio Estoril in Estoril from £653pp, B&B, including flights from Gatwick and private transfers.

GET AROUND

Find the timetables for local bus routes at www.scotturb.com. A return journey from Lisbon to Cascais costs £3.60. Or, if you want to do as the exiled royals did, take the train: they leave Lisbon every 30 minutes and cost £1.60 per journey (see www.cp.pt).

FURTHER INFORMATION

See www.visitlisboa.com.