

## April 2018 Faro-Mertola 4 day SUP camping trip + Guadiana Challenge

We had been to the Guadiana Challenge in Portugal a few times and had always hired a car to get from the airport to the event. When we took off on our way home last time we saw just how close the airport was to the sea..... and hatched a plan

### Day 1 Apr 16, 2018

Day 1 arrived and after a filling breakfast we pumped up & loaded up the boards setting off under beautiful cloudless skies from Faro marina.



The plan was to paddle east for as far as we could before the tide turned - a longer than planned lunch stop (sangria & nibbles) we reached the end of the island just off Tavira. Researching the trip we had seen that there were a few cafe's & restaurants on the island however in reality they were all boarded up & closed so early in the season so we set up our tarp, got into our sleeping bags & resorted to plan B for dinner - a bottle of rose & a packet of Tuc biscuits as the sun went down.



As the sun set we checked in online and our phones started to ping as message after message arrived from folk telling us "what a shame it was" - "what are you going to do now" - "are you going to carry on or come back" ..... digging a little deeper we found out that the 2018 Guadiana Challenge had been cancelled on safety grounds due to the forecast of severe storms in the area

Turning back never really occurred to us - life is an adventure and we only ever go forwards plus not having our cake fix from that little cafe in Mertola wasn't an option

[Faro to Tavira map & stats](#)

## Day 2 Apr 17, 2018

SUP camping rocks!!!!!!

After a night sleeping to the sounds of the waves on the shore & the fishing boats heading back in with their catches we were woken by the sun rising out of the sea - a perfect day for a paddle with no sign of the promised bad weather. A quick look at the charts, tides & weather we decided that due to the large open water crossing the best option would be to have a day exploring before packing the boards up and catching a train, bus, passing donkey or whatever we could find to get us along the coast to Vila Real de Santo Antonio (VRdSA) and the entrance to the Guadiana river - however after the previous night meagre dinner caffeine & pastries were a priority.

We decamped, packed everything back onto the boards and headed the 5km up the channel to the nearest town (Cabanas) against a fierce outgoing tide - hard work but rewarded by coffee & the obligatory pastel de nata's



As there was a chance of having to carry kit overland we decided not to stock up on any supplies - we had 2l each in our hydration packs and an emergency stash of gels hidden away should we need them - time to go explore

Paddling up the lagoon as far as we could for a couple of hours we pulled up onto a sandy beach backed by a cactus grove (if that's what you call it) for a sit down only to be met by thousands of one clawed crabs scurrying out of holes in the sand and off into the undergrowth



Quick drink, relax in the sun and then time to head back to civilization to try and find our way overland to the river using public transport

Before heading back to Cabanas it was time for a quick photo opportunity & we climbed the sand dunes that separated the lagoon from the sea..... the dead flat, calm sea with just a gentle swell & not a breath of wind..... not the weather that had been forecast



We looked at each other, looked back out to sea, unable to make out our destination on the Portugal Spain border 17km away but both knew that we had come to paddle the route not get the train.

It took a couple of trips to cart loaded boards & kit the 500m over the dunes to the shore - final check of weather & tides showed that it would be tight but doable so off we set on a course of 85 degrees towards Spain

En-route we bumped into Nick Robinson from Algarve Sup, had a quick chat then pressed on with a cheery wave & a promise to "see you in Mertola"



There was a wind line to the right of us, maybe 1km further out to sea and for the first hour there is stayed before creeping closer, and closer. We then transitioned from glassy clam swell conditions to messy tide generated chop and my heart sank.... had i got my sums wrong? Had the tide already turned? Quick assess of the situation there was the town of Monte Gordo ahead & Altura behind but i knew that if we went ashore there would be no way of launching the loaded boards through the visible shore break - especially once the forecast weather came in.

Deciding to press on as long as we could before heading for land conversation turned to scenarios of how to get ashore without trashing ourselves or our kit then slowly conditions improved and the entrance to the river started to get closer

Eventually we rounded the breakwater that sticks 1.5km out to sea much to the bemusement of the local maggot drowners but it was no time to relax - the tide was turning and not for the first time that day we had a 5km slog against the current to make it to the town.



We were by this time out of hydration but the promise of a large glass of wine & something to eat got us up the river & into VRdSA

Spotting some young fit types in K1's & canoes on a slipway we asked if it would be okay to store our boards there overnight - it was & we did, tucked away out of sight behind some boats before finding a hose to rinse ourselves down & rehydrate.

One thing was for sure - this night we would eat & sleep well!!!

[Tavira to Vila Real de Santo Antonio map & stats](#)

### Day 3 Apr 18, 2018

Woke feeling fresh with a good night sleep behind us and after the regulation strong coffee & pastries we grabbed a few provisions and made our way down to the boards.



As we were looking to have the tide push us up the river the plan was to leave on the mornings low tide.... Only issue was that with another hour of outgoing tide there was already a 5ft drop off the muddy slipway to the water – time to sweet talk the port police and they kindly let us down their pontoon to launch in comfort.

Heading out onto the river the first hour or so was slow going as we plugged the last of the current against us but we were making progress so all was good.

Surprisingly for such a large river there was very little traffic, the odd fishing boat & a car ferry shuttling from bank to bank.



It seemed to take an eternity to reach the huge bridge crossing the river joining Portugal to Spain and the shade under it gave us a few seconds relief from the already scorching sun from here on it was back to rural paddling with the river moving from wide meanders through the agricultural coastal plains to the more rugged deserted hills.

With a bit of flow helping us along we rafted our boards together and made ourselves a delicious lunch of cheeses, salami, bread & olives as we drifted along at a leisurely 1.5km/hr

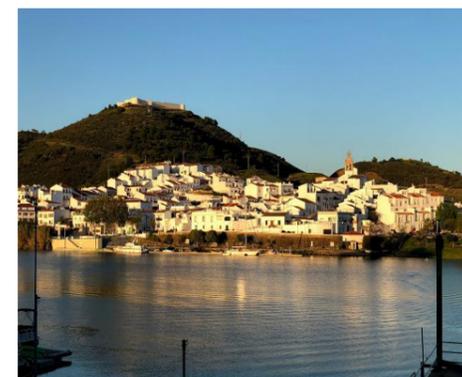
After several more hours alone on the river it was apparent that civilisation was approaching as there were occasional yachts & cruisers moored up in the river then rounding the final bend Alcoutim & its Spanish neighbour Sanlucar came into view.

The last kilometre was spent paddling & chatting to a young couple in a rowing boat off to pick their kids up from the village..... they spend the winter & spring in a Spanish school & the rest of the year cruising the Mediterranean on their yacht.

As we were a day ahead schedule we decided to stop 2 nights in Alcoutim and spent the next day exploring the town, its castle, café's & sampling the regions fine cuisine/ wines (rude not to at only 1 Euro a glass)



[Vila Real de Santo Antonio to Alcoutim map & stats](#)



## Day 4 Apr 20, 2018

Today was our final push up the river to Mertola and we were looking to arrive there late afternoon/early evening so there was no rush to get away. A leisurely breakfast was followed by a short paddle over the border for lunch in Sanlucar.

This was a familiar stretch of river as we had paddled it in both directions in the previous runnings of the Guadiana Challenge but without the pressure of a race we were able to lift our heads more & enjoy the views.



Talk turned to the next few days.... How many would still turn up for the cancelled event as they had flights & accommodation booked..... would the stormy weather arrive & how bad would it be...? Which of Mertola's fine eateries would we head to first!!

About 5km out from Mertola we saw a lone figure in the distance heading our way – the unmistakable John McFadzean had arrived at the venue a few hours earlier and having followed us via the SPOT tracker we carried decided to come meet us.

We swapped boards for a while so that John could have a try of the fully loaded up RedPaddleCo 13'2" Explorer+ and see that though it handles differently under all the weight it is still a lovely board to paddle & perfectly suited to such trips. Just before the last corner you can see Mertola's hilltop castle dominating the skyline and its then that we knew that we had made it.



There were a few folk on the quayside but not the 100's that would've been there had the forecast been kinder.

Watches were stopped, tracker switched off & arrival photo taken before the boards were hauled ashore, stashed in a corner and we headed up to the Beira Rio hotel for a hot shower & change into non paddling clothes (in reality a clean pair of shorts & less salty t-shirt!) ready for dinner



[Alcoutim to Mertola map & Stats](#)

## Day 6 Apr 21, 2018

The weekend was spent being tourists around Mertola, seeing parts of the village we had not visited before, wandering the castle walls & discovering Lancelot's nightclub.

Those who had made it to the event venue got together on the Saturday afternoon and went for a 20km ish paddle down the river - not quite the race we had hoped for but a great chance to meet & make friends with paddlers from all corners of Europe.

In total over the week we paddled 156km in 23.5 hours and approx. 40000 paddle strokes

Did the storm arrive? It did - we had a couple of hours of very heavy rain, thunder & lightning.

This trip re-affirmed our love of SUP touring & SUP camping and we plan to get back to do the same trip again with friends if anyone is interested

