

Bike paths: A sojourn in Portugal

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

Last summer, my big adventure was a bicycle trip through northern Portugal, where church bells still ring the hours and homeowners value grape arbors more highly than garages. While some people I met grieve the loss of their nation's one-time dominance in the world, others admit that obscurity has its benefits. Terrorist attacks are not likely in Portugal, one nobleman explained to me, since Portugal has no power. I did not have much time to explore history or politics, however, since I spent the better part of each day bent over the handlebars of a touring bike, trying to find my way from point A to point B.

Every morning, two incredibly fit, trilingual guides briefed my seven companions and me on the directions for the day's ride. Depending on our own fitness level, we could choose 20-, 30- or 40-mile options, with the assurance that a support van would come along to rescue those of us who had overrated our abilities. After placing the directions in the plastic holders between our handlebars, we stretched our hamstrings, strapped on our yellow helmets and hit the road, where the pecking order was quickly established.

A septuagenarian named Bill led the pack each day. More accurately, he left the pack behind each day. With a resting pulse rate of 38, he became known as "The Machine," and I saw his yellow jersey only briefly every morning before he vanished into the distance. My own pace put me nearer the middle of the pack with my husband, Ed, although there were long stretches when we saw no one but each other. These are the times I wish to write about, when we pedaled unknown roads in a distant land with no language to ask for help and no security save the sheet of directions in front of us.

"Turn left at stone cross," it read. "Cobblestones end. At traffic circle, go 3/4-way around and exit to Baiona." Since I am what some therapists call a "damaged truster," I experienced huge resistance at first to doing what the directions told me to do. I felt so fragile on that bicycle, aiming my front tire at the four inches of paved shoulder on my right while trucks roared by me on my left. Laboring uphill, I moved

so slowly that I could not ride in a straight line to save my life. Racing downhill, I went rigid looking for patches of gravel that might send me flying. If I missed a turn, I doubted that I would have the strength to retrace my path.

“Cross curved stone bridge and veer left at Y intersection,” the directions read. “Easy turn to miss. At top of hill, turn right at T. Exercise caution on busy road.”

Reading Fodor’s *Portugal* was never like this. I could flip pages in that lavishly illustrated volume for hours without ever risking a skull fracture, while between my handlebars lay a very different kind of travel writing. It offered me no essays, no pictures, no vicarious pleasures. If I wanted to make the trip, then here were the directions. They offered me no guarantee of safety. All they offered were roads that really went somewhere, but only if I followed the directions.

Too proud to flag the van, I followed them, and as I did I learned how well they matched the landscape. Over and over, I saw what the directions promised me I would see. When I did what they told me to do, I ended up where I was supposed to be. Before long I gained the visceral knowledge that the guides had not only planned this route carefully but had also ridden it themselves many times. Their directions contained no abstract speculation, no secondhand information. Instead, they had charted the coordinates of their own repeated journeys in the most direct language available to them.

Eventually I learned that this remained true even when I was lost. “Veer left at Y intersection,” the directions read at the bottom of one long hill. “Small stone church on left.” But there was another road not mentioned in the directions, a hard left in addition to a gentler left that could be construed as a right depending on how I held my head. “Lumberyard on left in 1.9 km,” the directions read, which meant that I only had 1.9 km to go before I discovered whether or not I had chosen the right road. I smelled the sawdust before I saw it, but as I sailed by the shed of stacked lumber on my left I envisioned my beaming guides with their thumbs stuck in the air.

When four of us got lost a second time, the correction was easy because we had learned how our guides thought. After we passed a significant-looking church that was not on our directions, we knew that we had taken a wrong turn. Our guides would have mentioned that church, we agreed. They would have told us about the cobblestones. Turning around, I gained a fresh revelation of what faith does to fear. I

might make more wrong turns. I might even blow a tire, but I trusted that even then the guides would find me, because they had ridden all these roads themselves.

Back home, I am writing this so that I do not forget what kind of guide I want to be. Good Lord, deliver me from the temptation to offer smart lectures instead of good directions. Thump me when it is time to get out of the van and ride the route again myself. Above all, help me care less for my own safety than for a road that really goes somewhere, and give me the grace to trust those I lead to pedal their own paths toward You.