



**BIKEPACKING EVENT IN THE LAND WITHOUT SHADOWS**

# **ADVENTURE MANUAL**

## **GRAVEL BIRDS ULTRACYCLING 2025**

**APRIL 2025 – V.1 ENGLISH**



# - GRAVEL BIRDS ULTRACYCLING -

'Gravel Birds Ultracycling' is a bikepacking and adventure-cycling challenge in the land without shadows: Alentejo, Portugal.

Gravel Birds 750 is a hilly challenge with 750 kilometers across the remote inland areas of Baixo Alentejo, including the Guadiana Valley, and the majestic Atlantic coast. L'Abetarda 330 explores the inland and central areas of Baixo Alentejo. The departure and finish of both routes will be in Castro Verde.

The fourth edition of the most south-westerly European bikepacking adventure starts on May 10<sup>th</sup> in Castro Verde.

## **ACCREDITATION**

Friday May 09<sup>th</sup> | From 14:00

## **BRIEFING**

Friday May 09<sup>th</sup> | 19:00-20:00

## **DINNER**

Friday May 09<sup>th</sup> | 20:00

## **OFFICIAL START**

Saturday May 10<sup>th</sup> | Sunrise (06:30)

## **TIME LIMIT**

Thursday May 15<sup>th</sup> | Sunset (20:30)

[www.gravelbirds.cc](http://www.gravelbirds.cc)

[ultracycling@gravelbirds.cc](mailto:ultracycling@gravelbirds.cc)

# MANIFESTO

'Gravel Birds Ultracycling' was designed to be much more than just an off-road bikepacking experience. It is a journey through a vast and remote territory, which remains genuine and resistant to the passage of time.

In addition to the set route(s) that guides you on this journey, this 'Manifesto' summarizes our values and the principles you must follow. If necessary, we will take decisions that are not foreseen in the 'Manifesto', with the aim of ensuring the common good, as well as equality of circumstances among the participants.

Gravel Birds is an inclusive event. We are committed with gender equality values. Gravel Birds is for all. Doesn't matter your pace.

## 1 | RESPECT NATURE:

Leave no trace. The territory of Alentejo is a deeply humanized landscape, but one that has evolved over time in a delicate dynamic balance with nature. Despite the human presence, the cork oak forests, the pastures, the enclosed valleys and the shoreline are ecosystems with an incredible biodiversity, but which depend a lot on us. Observe and absorb the landscape, but never leave litter or cause any disturbance around you.

## 2 | RESPECT THE LOCAL TRAFFIC RULES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES:

We are a community who wants to build a positive legacy. The way you behave will shape

how society and institutions will look to ultracycling and long-distance cyclists.

## 3 | RIDE THE ROUTE, RIDE SAFE & ENJOY:

The route was designed to tell a story across the landscape and you are the main actor. Trust the script and let yourself go. You can leave the route temporarily (for accommodation, resupplying, WC, tourism, etc.), but then return in the same exact point. The GPS live tracking shows your geographical position on the route and your tracker should always be on.

## 4 | NO THIRD-PARTY SUPPORT:

This is about your personal experience and challenging your own limits. So, make no sense to receive help from your family or friends with food, accommodation or mechanical support. Sum up, you should use the commercial services available for all riders. If you have a mechanical problem you should solve it by your own. If you can't solve it, you can use the commercial mechanical services available. The main aim of the 'self-supported' approach is to recreate the purity of the bikepacking experience and ensure a level playing field for all participants. Riders in the duo category can help each other, as well as all riders of the L'Abetarda route.

## 5 | NO DRAFTING:

You cannot follow other participants, cyclists or vehicles for aerodynamical advantages.

## 6 | USE YOUR OWN ENERGY:

E-bikes and doping aren't allowed

# Deepening the Manifesto

- The routes cross environmentally sensitive areas, which is why “respect nature” is intentionally the very first point of the MANIFESTO.
- The name of the event – Gravel Birds Ultracycling – is meant to emphasize the environmental dimension as a core aspect of our mission. We limit the number of entries precisely to ensure a balanced relationship between the number of participants and the territory.
- We will not tolerate any behavior that undermines this fundamental principle or threatens the legacy the event seeks to uphold.
- To prevent accidental littering, we strongly recommend a bikepacking setup that includes an easily accessible compartment specifically for waste disposal.
- The event takes place on open roads used by motor vehicles. Therefore, strict compliance with traffic regulations is essential, especially the prohibition of running red lights – including speed-regulating traffic lights.
- It is important that friends and family tracking a participant’s progress are also familiar with the tracker system and the Follow My Challenge online platform (more information available on the participants' page of our website).
- Trackers may occasionally experience signal loss, especially in more remote sections of the route (e.g., Vale do Guadiana, Serra do Caldeirão).
- The self-supported includes the following situations:
  - Throughout the entire route and duration of the event, participants may not receive any form of external and non-commercial assistance (from friends, family, coaches, or sports teams), including with food, mechanical support, transport of gear or luggage, and accommodation.
  - Regarding accommodation, participants may not sleep in any type of accommodation of their own, as well as their family and friends.
  - Support among participants is allowed for all riders in the L’Abetarda 330 route. For the Gravel Birds 750, pair members are allowed to support each other. Limited mutual assistance is tolerated among riders of the Gravel Birds 750, as long as they are riding recreationally.
  - Obviously, the self-supported approach does not apply in situations where the participant’s physical integrity or safety is at risk.
- Drafting is only allowed between teammates (pair category). In the above-mentioned cases where support among participants is allowed, participants are allowed to ride side by side or in small groups.

# SAFETY

## PERSONAL INSURANCE

Respecting the Portuguese law for amateur events, the organization assures personal insurance for accidents (expenses for treatment, disability and death) between May 10<sup>th</sup> and May 15<sup>th</sup>. We strongly recommend all riders to also have their own personal insurance covering civil liability and repatriation in case of severe physical injuries or death (foreign riders). We want to make clear that - from the organization perspective - 'Gravel Birds Ultracycling' is not a race or competition. It's simultaneously a personal challenge and a collective cycling adventure. An opportunity to face your own physical and emotional limits while other adventurers are doing the same. Individually, in community. We won't provide any kind of cash or prizes and we will collect and publish riders' results and times only for information and recreation purposes.

## MANDATORY ITEMS

Helmet, front and rear lights (including backup lights), a reflective vest and an emergency insulated blanket.

## ACCREDITATION/BRIEFING (MANDATORY)

Our staff will verify - during the accreditation - the mandatory items. We won't allow the participation of any rider without mandatory items (mentioned above). In the briefing session, we will check together the manifesto and share last hour information.

# SCENARIOS

## IF I HAVE A MEDICAL EMERGENCY

Call always first the medical emergency: 112.

## IF I HAVE A MECANICAL PROBLEM

Try to solve it by yourself. If you can't fix the problem, go to a bike shop (or similar commercial services) by your own or using public transportation (taxi, bus, train). Then return to the exactly same point where you left the route.

## IF I FACE A SITUATION THAT DOESN'T ALLOW ME TO FOLLOW THE ROUTE

The route was recognized several times, but it is impossible to control and predict what happens in hundreds of off-road kilometers. If you face a closed road/trail or land owners that don't allow you to follow the route, contact the "Race" Director. If the detour means just a few hundred meters of adjustment, find - by your own - the shorter way to back to the original route.

## IF I DECIDE TO ABANDON

Inform the "Race" Director and return to Castro Verde by your own. Don't forget to return the GPS tracker to our staff.

## I HAVE MORE QUESTIONS

Contact us via: [ultracycling@gravelbirds.cc](mailto:ultracycling@gravelbirds.cc)

## "RACE" DIRECTOR CONTACT

+351 91 88 78 360 (David). Available during the event period.

# LOGISTICS

## TRAVEL TO CASTRO VERDE

The closest airports are in Lisbon and Faro. From both cities you can travel by train to Funcheira - the nearest train station to Castro Verde (30 km away). You should travel in an 'IC Service' train which allows you the transportation of your bicycle without disassemble it. The number of bicycles allowed per train and carriage is very limited, so it is advisable to buy the tickets in advance online ([www.cp.pt](http://www.cp.pt)). Do not forget to add the bicycle transportation option on the ticket purchase form.

## CAMPING IN CASTRO VERDE

Thankfully to our partnership with the Municipality of Castro Verde, participants will have free access to the Castro Verde Campsite for camping/tent use and showers/bathrooms. The offer is valid for participant plus one companion (between 9th and 16th of May). Just need to register your name at the entrance.

## UNNECESSARY BELONGINGS

It will be possible to store - at the Castro Verde Campsite - a bag or a cycling bag with unnecessary belongings for your journey. We will receive it during the accreditation (before the briefing session). If you are staying overnight at the Campsite, we are available to receive your belongings at 6:00. We won't take items of value (e.g. car/house keys, computers, cell phones, cash, etc.). We won't be responsible for the loss of valuable items.

# RECOMMENDATION

## ACCOMMODATION ALONG THE ROUTE

We don't recommend prior reservation of accommodation located along the route. Unpredictability is ultracycling middle name. Along the route, there are several villages with old public wash houses that, with the help of a bivouac bag and tiredness, it brings the experience closer to a nice hotel room. However, be prepared for cold nights. Temperatures can easily reach 10°C during the night or colder. The probability of rain is low, but you should be prepared for all scenarios.

## WATER FOUNTAINS

The probability of high temperatures is significant. However, we don't recommend you to drink water from fountains, namely with the info: 'Not Controlled Water' ('Água Não Controlada'). You will pass by several villages with 'cafés' and bathrooms. Carry large bottles is a good solution. It's safe to drink tap water.

## TYRES AND BIKE

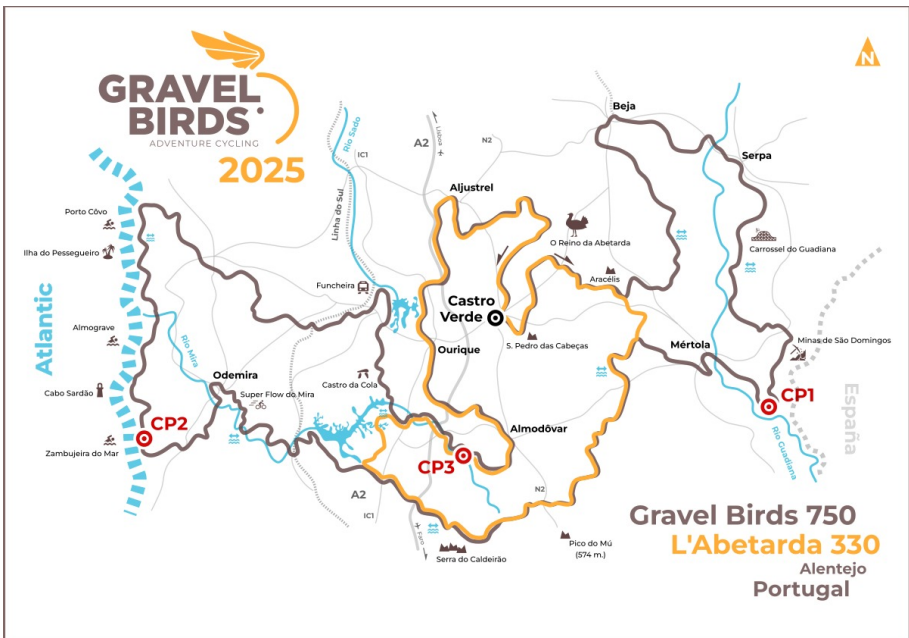
Above 40 mm will be our recommendation, but it also depends of the profile/preferences of each rider. The route was designed especially for gravel bikes, but mtb are also welcomed.

## DECISION TO ABANDON

During a long-distance journey you will have highs and lows. Don't take important decisions during bad moments. Wait for the morning. A beautiful sunrise in Alentejo will always help.

# THE ROUTE

The Gravel Birds route was originally designed as a single circular route of 750 km, but since 2023 we presented a version with a shorter distance and a lower degree of difficulty, consisting of an inner loop and sharing a large part of its course with the original route. Both routes start and end in Castro Verde. The original Gravel Birds route is called 'Gravel Birds 750' and the short loop 'L'Abetarda 330', named in honor of the most emblematic bird of the Alentejo steppes, the majestic Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*). The introduction of this shorter loop, more plural and inclusive, is also an invitation to all those who are starting out in adventure cycling or who simply (yet) don't feel prepared for an overly extreme challenge.



## GRAVEL BIRDS 750

Gravel Birds 750 starts and ends in Castro Verde, covering a good part of Baixo Alentejo region. It's a physical demanding adventure route that crosses some of the most remote and isolated territories in Portugal. In the open plains of the inland Alentejo, gravel roads are generally quite fluid and allow for a fast pace, contrasting with the more rugged terrain of the Guadiana Valley and Serra do Caldeirão.

In Pomarão the route almost touches the border with Spain and between Zambujeira do Mar and Porto Covo it follows along the shoreline. Along the 750 km, Gravel Birds passes through dozens of villages and

small towns, but in some more remote sections there will be many kilometers to ride far from civilization. The Gravel Birds 750 has an elevation gain of approximately 8,000 m, being approximately 75% gravel.

Gravel Birds 750	distance (km)	
	from start	to the end
Beja	103	647
Serpa	135	615
CP1 Pomarão	203	547
Mértola	220	530
Odemira	399	351
CP2 Zambujeira do Mar	433	317
CP3 Santa Clara a Nova	610	140
Almodôvar	627	123
Ourique	656	94
Aljustrel	697	53
(arrival) Castro Verde	750	0

L'ABETARDA 330

L'Abetarda 330 is a smaller and more accessible version of the Gravel Birds route, forming a central loop and sharing almost all of its course with the larger route. The first 40 km are common for both routes, separating from the Gravel Birds 750 to rejoin a bit later. On this shortcut, L'Abetarda 330 avoids the harshness of the Guadiana Valley. L'Abetarda 330 also reaches Serra do Caldeirão. However, and comparing with Gravel Birds 750, this route avoids the longest crossing of this mountains. It doesn't cover also the beauty of the Alentejo shoreline. L'Abetarda has an elevation gain of approximately 4,000 m, with 65% of gravel.

L'Abetarda 330	distance (km)	
	from start	to the end
CP Santa Clara a Nova	194	139
Almodôvar	210	123
Ourique	240	93
Aljustrel	281	52
(arrival) Castro Verde	333	0



## **SURFACE TYPE**

The vast majority of the route runs along unpaved rural roads. It's surface is mostly hard packed dirt and smooth gravel (Grade 2 and 3) allowing for a very fast pace. However, there are also some large sections with a more irregular surface (Grade 4 and 5), being recommended to use more versatile tires (above 40 mm will be our recommendation). Asphalt sections are mainly on secondary roads and with reduced traffic, with only one or two crossings on roads with significant car traffic. At one point or another, you will need to hike-a-bike. Along the coastline, between Malhão beach and Pessegueiro island, the path is on loose sand and for sure you'll need to push your bike.

## **VILLAGES AND LOCAL SERVICES**

The routes cross many villages/small towns, but many of them have so few people that there aren't any commercial services for supplies. In larger towns you can find all your basic needs, so it's really important that each person does its own planning, as there are some remote areas without any support. There are only a few specialized bike shops along the way, so be prepared to solve most situations on your own.

## **REMOTE AREAS**

The routes do not cross deserts or inhospitable mountains, but on several occasions, you will wonder if you are still riding in Portugal, especially on Gravel Birds 750 where you will have long hours riding far from civilization. At several points along the route, but in these more remote areas in particular, the mobile communications network is scarce or non-existent. You should previously study the route. The KMZ and GPX files of the routes, the 'Ride With GPS' routes pages and the routes map file provide you important information about the location of the main resupply spots along the routes.

## **FENCES, GATES AND PRIVATE PROPERTY**

All paths were previously validated and were considered of free passage, but often these paths run on private property. Along the route there will be gates or fence doors that may be closed. Whenever a door is closed, you must open it, pass through and close it again. These doors are used for cattle management and should always be left as they were.

## **RISK MANAGEMENT**

In the design of the routes, we tried to reduce hazardous situations, but risk is also a part of the adventure. Riders should always evaluate any situation in order to reduce the risk. In Alentejo many small rivers are often dry for most of the year, but with a highly variable flow during the rainy season. All water

line crossings are crossing points used by local populations throughout the year, even when there is some flow, but the safety conditions for the crossing must be evaluated on site by each rider. Guard dogs, which protect livestock and farms, are quite territorial and should not be provoked. If it is not possible to keep the distance to keep on route, it is best to remain calm, not show aggression and go slowly or even dismount from the bicycle.

## **ACCOMMODATION AND BIVOUAC**

Along the routes, accommodation availability will be quite variable. In larger towns or along the coastline it is relatively easy to find accommodation, but on the inland Alentejo it may not be easy to find a place. If your option is to bivouac, know that in many small villages you can find old public laundry washrooms (mostly deactivated) that offer perfect conditions to sleep for a few hours: clean floor, a roof and (with luck) a faucet still with running water. In the route files (gpx and kml) you can check the exact location of a few dozen spots of these wonderful "5-star hotel rooms" along the route.



## ELEVATION GAIN

The Alentejo is known for its open landscapes with horizons as far as the eye can see, but you will find much more than that. The elevation gain was calculated using various digital elevation models and is approximately 8,000 meters on Gravel Birds 750 and 4,000 meters on L'Abetarda 330. The data is an average of the information provided by route planning apps. However, several participants recorded, through their cycling computers and GPS devices, climbing numbers up to 11,000 meters of elevation gain in the Gravel Birds 750 route. You must adjust your expectations to what is your perception of elevation gain might be, which is normally shaped by the data estimated by your GPS device.

## CHECKPOINTS

Rider control along the route is done through the GPS trackers, but additionally there are several Check Points (CP) along the route. To be considered a “finisher”, each participant must arrive at each CP before the respective time barrier and stamp his brevet card.

	Check Points Day and Time Limit	KM
L'A330 CP Santa Clara a Nova	20:30 Wednesday May 14th	194
L'A330 (finish) Castro Verde	20:30 Thursday May 15th	333
GB750 CP1 Pomarão	20:30 Sunday May 11th	203
GB750 CP2 Zambujeira do Mar	20:30 Tuesday May 13th	433
GB750 CP3 Santa Clara a Nova	20:30 Wednesday May 14th	610
(finish) Castro Verde	20:30 Thursday May 15th	750

## THE LANDSCAPE AS STORYTELLING AND THE BIRDS OF CASTRO VERDE

The routes in Gravel Birds weren't designed at random: the paths chosen tell a story and many other stories within. And the difficulties along the route are also a part of this narrative, recreating the hardships of the territory itself, just as its people have experienced them since immemorial times. The sequence of landscapes, the difficulties, the hard and the perfect gravel roads, the melancholy and solitude, the towns and cities, the remote and almost deserted villages, the ruins of the past, the pastures, the cork oak forests, the mountains, the beaches and sea cliffs, the touristic and fishing villages: all this tells the story of Alentejo, a territory that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Castro Verde Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO) holds the most important cereal steppe area of Portugal, which is one of the most representative of the Iberian Peninsula. This ecosystem is one of the most threatened rural landscapes of the Mediterranean region and is recognized internationally for its importance for several bird species, like the Great Bustard, the Lesser Kestrel, the Little Bustard, the Black-bellied Sandgrouse or the Montagu's Harrier. Riding the Gravel Birds routes you will likely see many of these endangered birds, so always keep your distance, enjoy the moment and avoid any disturbance.

# RIDERS' AGREEMENT

- ☐ I confirm that I have read the 'Manifesto' and I agree with the principles, namely respect the local traffic rules, ride the route, self-supported approach, no drafting and no e-bike.
- ☐ I am aware that 'GRAVEL BIRDS ULTRACYCLING' (both routes) is an extreme emotional and physical challenge and I understand the risks associated with it (as well my family, relatives and friends).
- ☐ I am aware that 'GRAVEL BIRDS ULTRACYCLING' (both routes) is a non-competitive event and that if I see it as a race/competition it is my own perspective/responsibility.
- ☐ I am informed that participation in the entire briefing session - which will take place on the eve of the day of departure - is mandatory and that my absence will result in disqualification.
- ☐ Concerning security, I will have/use all mandatory items: helmet, reflective vest (nights and poor visibility conditions), frontal and rear lights (including a backup kit), emergency blanket.
- ☐ I am aware that the organization will assure personal insurance for accidents (expenses for treatment, disability and death) during the event (10-15<sup>th</sup> May).
- ☐ I am aware that the insurance of the event doesn't cover any damage to my bicycle/equipment, as well as damages caused - by my responsibility - on third parties.
- ☐ I will cooperate with the organization and their media team to reach maximum coverage.
- ☐ If I have a personal media team covering my progression/participation I will contact previously the organization asking for authorization and I will always mention 'GRAVEL BIRDS ULTRACYCLING' and use the logotype in the video/documentary credits.
- ☐ I am responsible for the tracker and to delivery it back to the organization (tracker loss: 150€).
- ☐ I trust the organization to be able to take decisions that are not foreseen in the 'Manifesto', with the aim of ensuring the common good, as well as equality of circumstances among the participants.

## RIDER

CAP NUMBER

NAME (FULL)

SIGNATURE

## EMERGENCY / NEXT OF KIN CONTACT

NAME

PHONE

EMAIL

Castro Verde, May 09<sup>th</sup> 2025



partners:

