

Portugal O Meeting (POM) 2018

By Clive and Sally Wilkinson

What could be better than a few days of winter sun doing the sport we love? It didn't take us long to decide to give POM 2018 a go. It worked well with February half term and various EAOA members were already going or could recommend the event from previous years.

Looking at the website dispelled any issues on understanding orienteering in a different country. It seems that the lingua franca of the sport is English. The efficient organisers had made entering simple on the Portuguese system by undertaking to do it themselves if we e-mailed them the information. They had also block booked various hotels and car hire which made it very easy to sort it all out. The venues were within forty minutes of each other which was excellent and the city of Évora provided plentiful cafés and bars for rest and recuperation.

Day 1

The first day was a middle distance urban race around Évora. This city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site which it thoroughly deserves. It is a medieval walled city with an intricate network of narrow alleys and roads leading up to a central square and above that a cathedral, Roman ruins and amazing views. Clive's course was 5.9km with 75m climb and 19 controls.



The course start was outside the city walls and everyone turned uphill into the city from the start. That made it easier to get going up the hill and then start planning. Most of the course involved relatively simple decisions of which alley to go down. The main decision on route choice was whether to go over or round the hill. Clive's courses had two controls at the top of the hill so two climbs were inevitable. Both our courses had legs across the shoulders of the hill. This made the decision harder on whether to go over or round and created some good discussions in the debrief. We both had a control in the main square which was the main area where locals were watching this strange event unfolding around them.

The last parts of both courses were through a park with intricate paths and small woodland areas, after which we went down some steps through the city walls and across the road to our last control. The run in was into the centre of a multipurpose covered arena, the old bullring. This was a unique way to complete an Orienteering race. Both our times seemed fast, but it became clear that all timings were quick as unlike most urban races the distance quoted was the minimum possible distance rather than the straight line distance quoted in UK urban races. Overall it was a great run around a beautiful city although the orienteering was straightforward.



The roman temple in the centre of Évora

Days 2 – 4

All the next three days were in various parts of the same cork forest about a 40 minute drive south of Évora. The assembly area remained the same for all the days and on days 2 and 3 we finished (uphill of course) in the arena.

Day 2

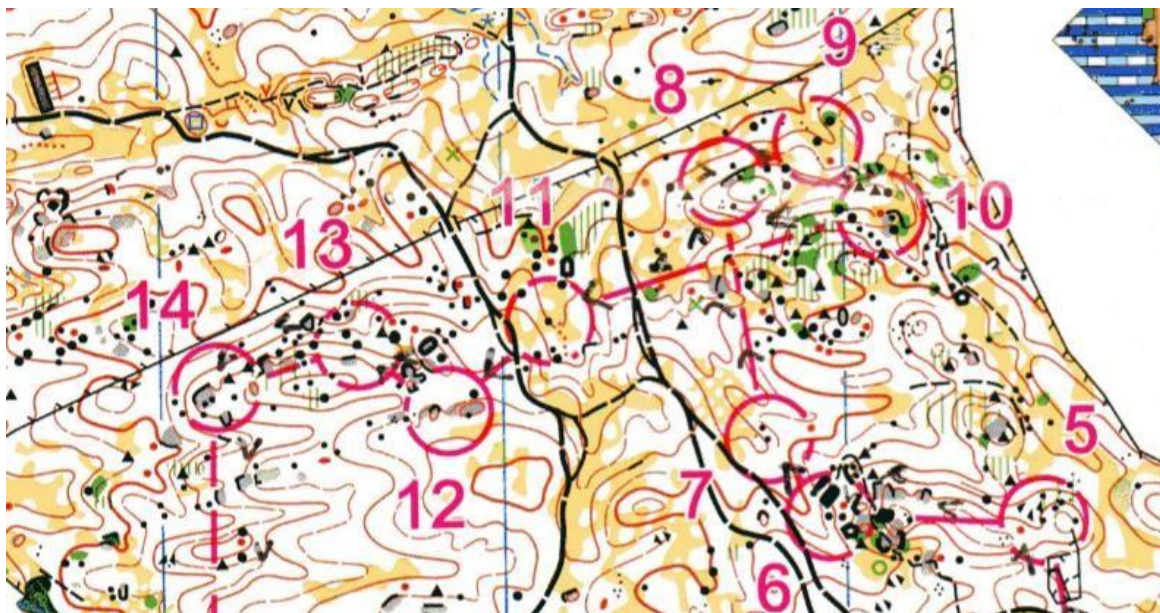
Our first look at a cork forest. Judging from the old map that had been available on the website, there was no pattern to the planting and the trees could be grouped in small copses or cover a large expanse. This had the effect of making the map look complicated, but in fact for 90% of the time you just forgot the trees were there! This was because the undulating landscape created some very useful contour detail which along with boulder clumps and the occasional path or fence gave you useful information to go on. In fact, many of the points were on boulders – often in the middle of them so you needed to be sure you were in the right clump if you didn't want to lose time.

Apart from ignoring the plentiful cork trees, the other lovely surprise was how short the grass was – definitely the most runnable terrain we have ever orienteered in! Of course, that meant that the winning times were fast. Today, the W50 course was 5.5km with 140m climb and it was won in 35 minutes! Sally managed to come 29th with a time of 57 minutes – this included some small errors which added up to seven minutes.

Day 3

Today was a middle event. Sally's course was only 3.3km so she was determined to run as hard as possible whilst keeping in touch with the map! Having a familiarity with the terrain from Day 2 was helpful, although the start was in a different place about a kilometre from assembly, as was the finish. The terrain being so runnable was an added bonus for a middle as you are nearly always going to try and stay on the pink line in this event. Simplification was the key and also expecting the points near a boulder to not be in plain sight – reading across all the columns on the control descriptions paid dividends! The first three points were a control pick followed by a long leg. Sally drifted left and had to relocate off a helpful boulder clump losing a couple of minutes. However, the only other error was getting bogged down in a large area of 2m plus boulders losing 1.5 minutes so this was an improvement on the previous day as was the position of 22nd. The most interesting part of the course was the middle section below, as the points were close together and many more points were out there than you needed. Really good fun!

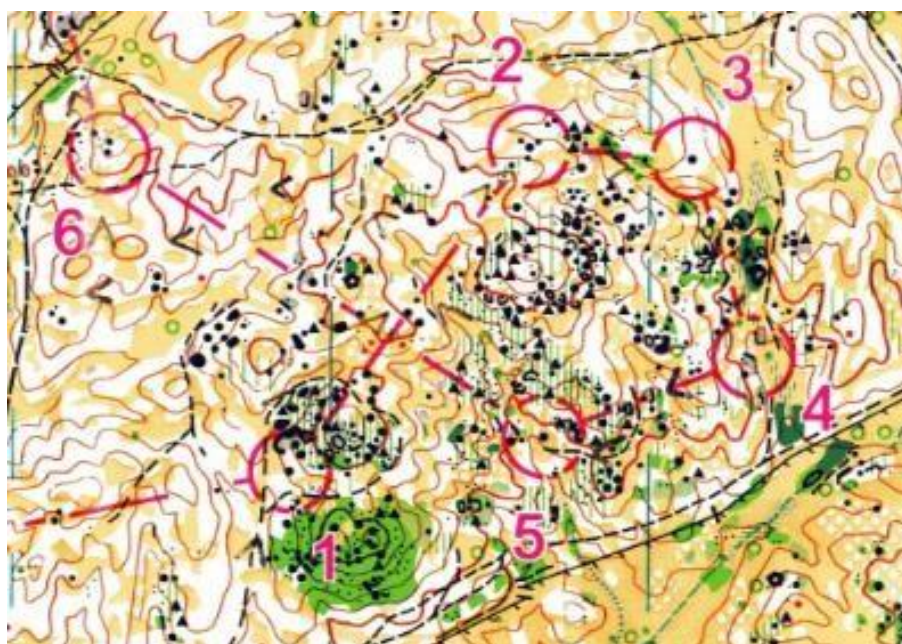
Extract from the W50 course showing the detail for controls 5-14



Day 4

The final day was a long distance race. The elite runners had a chasing start based on their first three days results. The leaders were off first. For the men this was Mathias Kyburz who had a lead of four minutes which he increased by running his 17km course with 500m climb at 4 minutes/km pace. Wow! The ladies' race was much closer with the leader being chased down by the spectator run through. It was lovely to see the camaraderie afterwards as they debriefed each other. Part of the joy of this sport is the fact that although you are competing against each other, the main foes are the map and the planner. Clive's course on the final day was 6.8km with 295m climb. It was in a similar area to the previous two days, but had more climb at the beginning onto the plateau. The planner had also gone into more detailed areas of boulders and crags. It was important, as on previous days, to carefully look and understand the contour detail.

Extract from the M55 course showing the detail for controls 1-6.



The planner had alternated areas of control pick with long legs where it was easy to lose contact with the map or wander off line. Clive wandered left on leg 5-6. He saw a boulder group on his left and stupidly ignored them as there were none on the map near where he should have been running. Considering the boulders had been mapped so well on the previous two days this was a mistake. This cost three minutes after a period of relocation. The last four controls of the course were downhill and then Clive had an impromptu race with another competitor up the hill and through the amphitheatre to the finish.

The four day event ended with both of us finishing in mid table in our respective classes. It had been an excellent event on good terrain in warm winter sunshine. We will go back!