



Sunny Disposition

Boasting more than 3,000 hours of sunshine a year, Portugal's southern coast is a year-round vacation destination. BY LISA MATTE

The Algarve is a renowned golf destination, but I didn't come to golf. I came for the beaches, the cafés, the castles, the history and the pottery. And I found them all in abundance.

Blessed with more than 3,000 hours of sunshine each year, Portugal's southernmost region has long been a favorite vacation destination for European travelers. More recently, it's gaining a foothold among North Americans seeking fun in the sun.

Stretching from Vila Real de Santo Antonio in the east, on the banks of the Guadiana River separating Portugal from Spain, to Cape St. Vincent in the west, on the Atlantic Ocean, the Algarve comprises 2,090 square miles. It's a

long, thin, horizontal region with almost 100 miles of east-west coastline, less than 25 miles across at its widest point north to south.

The Algarve's mild Mediterranean climate — warm, dry summers and moderate winters — serves to enhance its reputation as a mecca for year-round relaxation. And while the warm summer weather draws vacationers in droves (the population swells from an estimated 400,000 permanent residents to well over a million during the height of the tourist season), the sunny days and just-cool-enough evenings of spring and fall may be a better fit for travelers who'd rather avoid long lines and boisterous crowds.

My visit in early May offered the perfect climate for



HEIGHT OF BEAUTY: *Cliff path (left), and traditional Algarve architecture (above)*

PHOTOS: LISA MATTE; REGIAO DE TURISMO DO ALGARVE.

soaking up rays on the beach (and on dramatic cliffs overlooking the sea), exploring historic villages and sipping delightful Portuguese wine while toasting the sunset over the Atlantic.

I arrived in Faro after a pleasant overnight flight followed by a lengthy layover in Lisbon. Having never been to Portugal, I wasn't familiar with Lisbon Portela Airport, but I'm not usually stymied by airport traffic patterns. This time, though, the airport threw me for a loop. Signage was almost non-existent as I circled the lobby after clearing customs and immigration. Few shops or kiosks were open for the day at the early-morning hour of my arrival, but I eventually found a merchant who, after clearly trying to avoid my approach, softened when I asked, using my few words of Portuguese, where to find the connecting flight to

Faro. She pointed upstairs and out. I followed her directions and found myself on the curb without a clue until I spotted a tiny sign designating the bus stop for transportation to the domestic terminal.

True: I'm a travel professional and a bit of pre-trip research would have helped me avoid my temporary confusion. I mention my experience now only because I later discovered I was not alone in my puzzlement. João Máximo, a native of Portugal and the director of sales and marketing at Vila Vita Parc in Porches, commiserated when I confessed my tale of woe, then unabashedly admitted he, too, had fallen victim to the confusing airport system.

Upon returning home from a Las Vegas trade show a few weeks prior, he and an associate relaxed contentedly while waiting for their connection to Faro only to discover, much too late, that they had missed their flight because they failed to realize the domestic terminal was in a different building. The "new" domestic terminal was built in 2007, but confusion still reigns supreme. Forewarned is forearmed.

But I digress.

Faro International Airport is a traveler-friendly facility with easy-access rental car locations. Within minutes of

INFO TO GO

Located about four miles west of Faro, at about the mid-point of this southernmost region of Portugal, Faro International Airport (FAO) is the gateway to Algarve. At press time, eight major car rental agencies operate at the airport, which is easily accessible to Motorway A22, the major east-west thoroughfare through Algarve. Travelers arriving in Lisbon (LIS) may choose to rent a car at the airport and drive two hours south along Motorway A2 to the region. Highways are clearly marked and easily navigable. Visit www.visitportugal.com.



PHOTO: JULIET SWIFT

CLAY NATION

Roadside shops selling pottery abound throughout the Algarve, but **Olaria Algarve Pottery** (EN125, Porches, tel 351 282 352858, www.porchespottery.com) is among the best. Established almost 50 years ago, the shop employs local artisans who handcraft each piece according to traditions passed through generations. Designs reflect the historic influence of the civilizations that inhabited the Algarve throughout the ages — animals, flowers and foliage hand-painted in the free-flowing style that defines Porches pottery.

Armação de Pêra took a more direct route, in effect bulldozing the old to embrace the new.

This is a tale of two cities.

I arrived in Porches to set up shop at Vila Vita Parc, a 5-star resort property set on cliffs high above the Atlantic Ocean. The approach to the hotel was mainly residential, so I assumed I was in a fairly quiet area. The following day, I woke to a glorious sunrise and decided to take a stroll along the cliff walk. I was enjoying the oceanfront solitude when a turn in the path revealed a city of high-rises I couldn't quite connect to my location: a mirage of sorts. That afternoon I asked José Vila-Nova, head butler at Vila Vita Parc, about my vision.

He shrugged sheepishly. "A mistake of the '80s."

Maybe. Maybe not. The high-rise metropolis, deserted in early May, was once a sleepy fishing village. At some point in the not-too-distant past, the powers that be decided the fishing village could become a profitable vacation destination. For three months each year, Armação de Pêra overflows with tourists who flock to its pristine beaches. While the high-rises preside over the landscape, a bit of the old Pêra remains readily accessible for visitors who are willing to stroll a wee bit off the beaten path to discover winding streets still lined with open-air cafés.

Due to its location on the world map, the Algarve has long been a center of dispute. Through the ages, Phoenicians, Romans and Moors have ruled the territory, all vying to own its rights to the sea. It's the base from which Henry the Navigator initiated his 15th-century exploration of the New World. Among all of its influences, the Moorish character remains most evident in its architecture — tiled roofs, whitewashed houses and minaret-like chimneys.

Silves, a short drive north of Porches and Armação de Pêra, is a perfect example. (It's also interesting to note that Armação de Pêra is part of the Silves district, so there exists a balance between the old and the new.) Evidence suggests

MIGHTY FORTRESS: *Silves Castle* arrival, I was on the road, heading west toward Porches. In the interest of time, and with jetlag settling in, I opted for the quickest route. Motorway A22, completed in 2003, replaced the scenic EN125 as the primary east-west route through the Algarve, reducing travel time significantly. Today, it's possible to travel from Vila Real de Santo Antonio to Lagos (just a bit shy of the region's westernmost point) in under an hour.

There's a time for efficiency, and there's a time for wandering. I was in a get-there-fast frame of mind, so I decided EN125 could wait until the next day.

Porches is a small town often overlooked on maps. A short drive south of the historic town of Silves, it is, in some ways, a suburb of Armação de Pêra. Both began as villages focused on seafaring ventures, but while Porches remained true to its heritage as it embraced the benefits of tourism,

ENDLESS SUMMER: *Algarve beaches offer year-round fun in the sun.*

PHOTO: JOHN COPLAND





STEP RIGHT UP: Shopping along the streets of Monchique

PHOTO: LISA MATTE

the hillside village dates to 1000 B.C., but its heyday is traced to the early 11th century when, during a Moorish occupation, it became an important center of commerce.

Visitors today wander the narrow cobblestone streets, usually heading up, up, up until they reach the ruins of the town's Moorish castle. Reopened to the public following a \$1.5 million restoration that includes signage, a café and a guest information area, the castle ruins are now one of the town's major historic points. Others include a 13th-century cathedral, located just a short walk from the castle; an archaeological museum housing items dating back to the Stone Age; and Ponte Romana, a Roman-era bridge rebuilt from the original in the 15th century. Take in the sights, then stroll through the town, stopping along the way to check out shops or grab a cold drink at one of the many outdoor cafés.

For a different point of view, head inland to the town of Monchique. Located in the Serra de Monchique between two peaks — Foia and Picota — Monchique is about as far away from the Algarve's beach culture as you can get. The relatively quiet village centers on a small town square with narrow hillside streets radiating from the hub like spokes on a wheel, lined with shops and cafés. The drive to Monchique reveals panoramic vistas of the landscape and ocean at every twist and turn. For an even more dramatic view once you arrive, climb to the now-unoccupied 17th-century Franciscan monastery high above the town.

On a clear day — and it's almost always sunny in the Algarve — you'll be able to see all the way to the coast. ■■■

LODGING

HILTON VILAMOURA AS CASCATAS GOLF RESORT & SPA

Just a 20-minute drive from Faro International Airport, hotel highlights include expansive swimming pools with cascading waterfalls and its proximity to the Pinhal Golf Course. *Rua da Torre d'Agua Lote 4.11.1B, Vilamoura, tel 351 289 304000, www1.hilton.com \$\$\$\$*

SHERATON ALGARVE HOTEL

With Moorish architecture spread across 72 cliff-top acres, the hotel resembles an Algarve village, with breathtaking ocean views, nine restaurants, three swimming pools and five tennis courts. *Praia da Falesia, Albufeira 8200-909, tel 351 289 500100, www.sheratonalgarve.com \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$*

VILA VITA PARC

This exquisite 5-star seaside oasis of well-placed guestrooms, suites and villas features fine dining, a spa, several swimming pools and a secluded beach grotto. *P-8400-450 Porches, tel 351 282 310100, www.vilavitaparc.com \$\$\$\$*

DINING

ARTE NÁUTICA

The beach-shack ambience of this oceanfront eatery belies its reputation for succulent seafood and authentic Portuguese specialties. In warm weather, request outside deck seating. *Armação de Pêra Beach, Armação de Pêra, tel 351 282 314875 \$\$-\$\$\$\$*

CANIÇO

Talk about a dramatic entrance! An elevator transports guests from the clifftops above a scenic cove to the beachfront venue serving Portuguese-influenced Mediterranean cuisine March to November. *Praia dos Três Irmãos, Alvor 8500-072, tel 351 282 458503, www.canicorestaurante.com \$\$-\$\$\$*

PORCHES VELHO

Housed in a 200-year-old wine cellar, Porches Velho remains true to its Portuguese heritage with traditional cuisine and fado performances every Friday night. *Rua da Praça 8400-477, Porches-Lagoa, tel 351 282 381692, www.porches-velho-restaurant.com \$\$-\$\$\$*