

Portugal

UNCOVERED



Breakfast in the sky, exploring deserted islands and taking up residence in a stunning villa. This is where travel writers go for a well-earned holiday and it doesn't get much better than this writes *Norah Casey*.

The islands of the Ria Formosa are Portugal's best kept secret. I've been visiting the Algarve for some years now and it's taken this long to finally get to explore them. Even some of the Portuguese have yet to venture into the ocean to visit these stunning little outposts. I can promise, the Atlantic ocean has never looked less like the version we get crashing onto our beaches and cliffs in Ireland.

My love affair with Portugal began only a few years ago when some good friends invited my son Dara and I to join them for a few days. Being intrepid wanderlust travellers, my late husband Richard and I had always ventured to more remote and exotic locations given the chance so, apart from a conference speech in Lisbon, I had never explored Portugal. With only a few days to spare from work and the advantage of a short flight, sunshine and great company, Dara and I headed off to our first visit to the Algarve. And we have been back two or three times since for easy downtime.

Quinta do Lago and the surrounding area ranks among my top stress-free destinations. Everything is so effortless. The beaches are great, the sun is almost always shining, driving is easy and the restaurants range from hipster-casual to gourmet. It's hard to beat when all you want to do is spend lazy days lying by the pool buried in a book and on fun nights with great people.

The Irish have been colonising Quinta and the surrounding area for some time and although I am pretty averse to

spending time with people I live with year round there is quite a difference between the acquaintances I nod to in the supermarket on a dull, drizzly day in Dublin and the bronzed, carefree fellow countrymen I encounter on the Algarve. We travel well, perhaps.

I spend a lot of time on adventure holidays, they're exhilarating and magical. But when I want to chill I love familiarity and I have always returned from this corner of Portugal relaxed and transformed. This time, however we were spending ten days and I wanted to explore what else the Algarve has to offer.

We headed out one morning with Paulo Gonçalves, owner of Algarve WOW, and our skipper for a day's exploration of the Ria Formosa. Top of my list was a visit to the remote islands in this protected wildlife park. Over the years I had heard about Deserta (the Deserted Island also called Ilha da Barreta) and remote settled islands such as Culatra and Armona rarely visited by tourists or even locals.

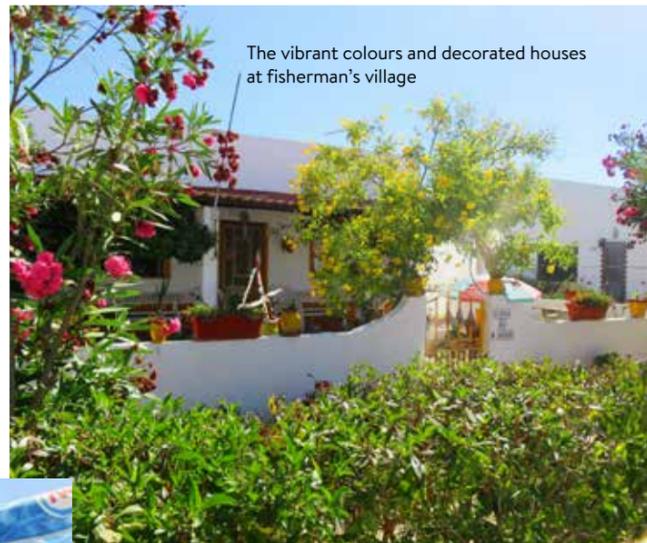
The Ria Formosa is one of the great wonders of Portugal, a 60 kilometre stretch from Quinta do Lago round through Faro and Olhão to Vila Real de Santo António. It is one of the most important preserved wetlands for wildlife particularly birds, marine life and fauna. The islands and "ilhas" (sandspits) dotted along the Ria Formosa are mostly deserted but closer to the mainland local fishermen have made islands such as Culatra home. The



Oysters, straight from the sea



The Ria Formosa is one of Portugal's true gems and a preserved wetland for wildlife



The vibrant colours and decorated houses at fisherman's village



surrounding waters are rich in oysters, muscles, clams and octopus. Farming and traditional fishing methods ensure the fragile ecosystem is preserved and respected.

We boarded an eight-seater, pristine-white speedboat, The Whistler, at Faro Island – a stretch of beach and marina next to Faro airport. Paulo is a passionate advocate for the protected wetlands, a knowledgeable guide of the bird and marine life and, as his website will testify, a great photographer. This was a magical sea safari with the expanse of these magnificent and surreal wetlands stretching out on either side. Impossibly turquoise

The perfect bar at Hangares



waters and vivid blue skies more reminiscent of the Grenadines of the Caribbean than the Atlantic. The sundrenched sea and sandpits relieved occasionally by small fishing boats drifting lazily in the shallow waters or the bowed silhouettes of men with a lifetime of clam picking etched on their weathered faces. I was mesmerised by the panorama surrounding us even more so because in all the times I had visited the Algarve I'd never taken the time to visit this incredible paradise.

Further along the coast from Faro is the less frequented town of Olhão the largest fishing port in the Algarve. Paulo docked at the busy waterfront in the late morning so we could enjoy some coffee and Portuguese cake with the locals at the pavement cafes. At the marina stand two large market halls, one is home to the best locally-caught seafood and the other is packed with locally-grown fruit and vegetables. We wandered around the market with the late morning bargain hunters who took advantage of cheaper prices towards closing time. You could lose a few hours sitting at the dock sipping coffee with the beautiful vista of the islands of Culatra and Armona in the distance while the everyday hustle and bustle of this characterful place settles around you.





Traditional fishing boat at Olhão and pictured left, the market halls at the marina are packed with locally caught fish and fresh vegetables

Eventually, though, we were persuaded to get back on board and continue our journey towards Ilha da Culatra. Our first stop was the colourful village of Hangares. The impossibly picturesque village was eerily quiet as we wandered along the one street. A brightly painted bar and café with makeshift corrugated roof gave a hint of night-time banter when the locals were left to themselves. This secluded fishing village, untainted by outside influences is an amazing sight to behold. Time and technology have hardly touched Hangares and despite the searing sun there were elements that reminded me of summer days in the Ireland of my childhood.

What immediately struck me was the cacophony of colour and tradition packed into this small collection of houses. The whitewashed, low rise Moorish houses boasted brightly painted windows and doors with bold red and yellow flowers bursting out of old ceramic octopus pots adding to the colour palette. It was as though each home owner had deliberately chosen a clashing colour scheme to neighbouring dwellings so that purples, blues, reds and oranges melded into a chaotic but strangely beautiful colour palette. I loved it and wanted to hang around long enough for the inhabitants to come home from a long day's fishing to

enjoy a cold beer in the no longer deserted tin shack bar.

So far we had passed Deserta and Armona, stopped off at Hangares, one of three settlements on the Culatra Islands, and for lunch we were headed to the traditional fisherman's village of the same name. As we docked at the harbour a local oyster farmer and his son were cleaning the day's catch and right there on the spot we enjoyed the freshest oysters ever. Paulo opened a bottle of vinho verde (green wine) and we washed down the freshly shucked shellfish in the midday sun at our makeshift oyster bar on the wooden deck between the fishing boats. It was an unmissable experience.

After our impromptu aperitif we headed inland to Culatra village for a traditional lunch at Zarica, one of the local cafes. The menu is mostly the day's catch displayed in a variety of fridges. We dined on huge portions of fresh tuna, shrimp, grilled sea bream and cataplana (steamed clams). The bill for five of us including drinks was just €64. Wandering the streets of Culatra afterwards was like stepping back in time – you won't find cars, supermarkets or wifi here. Local boys were kicking a ball around while old men smoked peacefully under a makeshift sun shelter, women took a break from the heat



and sat gossiping in doorways and children in swimsuits raced around playing their own imaginary game. I remember summers like that. Culatra has its own pace and way of life and I hope it doesn't change any time soon.

On our return journey we watched local men tend to the clam farms and, as the tide ebbed, we saw more and more of the shorebirds that rely on this protected park. As well as the gulls, sandpipers and oystercatchers there are over 200 species that visit the Ria Formosa every year including herons, egrets, gulls, spoonbills and flamingos. I know I will return again to the barrier islands of the Ria Formosa. Our day with our expert guide Paulo was a fantastic introduction to this unique wetland park but there is so much more to be discovered.

To follow in my footsteps you can book Paulo Gonçalves via his company Algarvewow.com; Tel: (+351) 289 397 268; info@algarvewow.com



Richard and I often debated whether it was worth investing in a home abroad as so many of our friends had done. There is, of course, the great advantage of returning to your own place with all the familiarity and local knowledge to ease you straight into holiday mode. But then we saw that some of our friends began to feel guilty if they didn't use their home-from-home as much as they should. Then they stopped exploring new destinations. They complained about the management and bureaucracy of trying to rent out the place and the difficulty of family and friends asking to use it for free. So the wonderful home-from-home dream often turned into a burden. I'm glad now that we never bought a place abroad because it's so much nicer to borrow someone else's beautiful home.

And on this trip we borrowed a palatial one. A villa with a beautiful pool in a gorgeous manicured resort right in the heart of the great restaurants and beaches at Quinta do Lago and just half an hour from Faro airport. But I already knew what standards to expect because I had

experienced the owner's original flagship resort, Martinhal Beach Resort & Hotel in Sagres (see Norahcasey.com for review).

The brainchild of global entrepreneurs Roman and Chitra Stern the Martinhal brand has expanded significantly over the past year. Chitra is an amazing woman, mother to four children, former engineer and chartered accountant at PWC and a visionary in this new world of travel where family-friendly goes hand in hand with luxury. She predicted that families were becoming more and more global (that is certainly true in Ireland) and that inter-generational travel would become increasingly important. The resort at Sagres was the first five-star family-friendly resort in the world. Last year Martinhal Quinta Family Golf Resort became the second and now a further two in Lisbon have been added.

The Martinhal stamp was evident throughout our beautiful villa which blends contemporary décor, traditional features and statement pieces while splashes of art add personality and flair. The main doors of the living room led out onto the tiled patio, garden and pool where we lazed away for hours every day. The daily cleaning service, the offer of in-room massage and ready supply of clean towels added to the 'pampered house guest' experience.

Some of the features we enjoyed at Martinhal's resort at Sagres have also been installed at Quinta. The handy on-site Mercado Deli & Bakery where you can stock up on vegetables, fruit, fresh bread and all the provisions for a holiday kitchen. At the pool area the O Terraço restaurant is now serving an excellent buffet breakfast and light dinner in the



The villa's elegant and airy grand hallway

early evening, with a takeaway option for those who want to dine at home.

Of course, the Martinhal brand is synonymous with luxurious, family-friendly resorts and Quinta is no different. The large Pool Hangout is a kiddie paradise with fountains, slides and water features. And wherever for Martinhal is there is a VW camper van for kids and adults to enjoy, a witty touch that adds to the personality of the place. Children from six months to eight are well taken care of at the Kids' Club and the Blue Room in the Clubhouse has lots to keep the older kids and young adults entertained including PS4s, Xboxes, air hockey and table tennis with an outdoor trampoline.

But the people make the place special. Chitra had told me before how important the Martinhal family were and the staff are exceptionally pleasant and helpful. I have a feeling that the Martinhal brand will continue to grow and push boundaries in the travel world. For me, I have just discovered a new home from home.

At the time of writing, Martinhal Quinta was offering a special package for a two-bedroomed townhouse with private pool for seven nights including breakfast, use of the indoor/outdoor pool and complimentary kids club until March 2017 for €128.50 per night. martinhal.com; res@martinhal.com





DINING IN THE SKY

I'm not one for heights as most of my friends know. I have in recent times tried to confront my fear by doing some crazy things. Despite various vertiginous challenges including flying a plane I still have a fair degree of height fright. So I am not sure why I thought it was a good idea to have breakfast strapped to a chair on a platform suspended 50 metres above the lake at Quinta do Lago. There is a bit of a daredevil in me that doesn't stop to consider the reality of actually doing it, rather than bragging about it. I was the first to get strapped into the chair so had plenty of time for the stress to reach peak levels as I constantly checked and pulled on the strap, asked the staff for the umpteenth time how often they had flown (alarmingly it was the first time for most of them) and inspected the hinges and pulleys of the wires. In front of me was an enticing pre-packed breakfast from the restaurant, Pure, which I suspected wasn't going to go down too easily. Finally, everyone was strapped in, the staff were harnessed and the platform began to rise slowly. I noticed that I was leaning back further in my chair than my companion and one of the staff said there was a handle



at the side that would bring it upright, but I was so afraid I would pull the wrong handle and find myself unbuckled (or worse) I didn't dare touch it. The more I tried not to look down the more my eyes betrayed me. "Better to look out over the lake," said one of the staff. She was right and unbelievably I started to relax a bit, enough to leave just one hand clenching the table while I shakily toasted my fellow passengers with orange juice. "You can let go and swing the chair around if you like," they told me. Bad and all as it was to face inwards imagine facing outwards with your legs dangling over nothingness, at least with the platform in front of me I felt I could grab onto it if the chair broke. In between my heart fluttering and the tummy flips I could appreciate how beautiful the view was. It was a glorious sunny day, the lake was sparkling below us. I have never dined in such spectacular settings and my companions were having a ball. When we eventually started to descend I found my inner smile and joined them in taking lots of photos and selfies just to prove I had been there and done that. Not a bad way to start the day. **Check quintadolago.com for regular updates on events.**

TOP 3 FOR CASUAL DINING

1 We had breakfast at Pure regularly which has great smoothies and tasty superfood salads. You can also buy takeaways which is handy for lunch or BBQs. quintadolago.com

2 Casavostra Pizzeria is buzzy and has great pizza, book in advance and ask for an outside table on warm nights. For great burgers try its more casual sister restaurant. pizzeriacasavostra.com; hamburgueriacasavostra.com

3 The Shack at Quinta do Lago lake was a firm early evening favourite. Rock up in beach wear and enjoy a cold beer. theshack@quintadolago.com



THE BEST ALGARVE DINING



1 Bovino Steakhouse opened last year and we enjoyed a fantastic night there with great steak, wonderful service and the best cocktails of the holiday. It takes the number one spot for scoring high in all areas. The décor and mood is New York steakhouse with brick, wood, butchery and a great cocktail bar with studded red leather high chairs adding to the retro vibe. The staff, dressed in bow ties, braces and jeans look like they sprang from the same era. We had magical sunset cocktails in an eclectic mix of bottles and jars at the pool side. My dining companions consider themselves to be steak aficionados and we had tried various options at other restaurants – the verdict by a long shot was that Bovino beat the others hands down. bovino@quintadolago.com

2 2 Passos takes the top spot for fabulous seafood, great sunset but above all the best service on the Algarve (by a mile or more). The front of house team here might have every reason to rest on their laurels as many others do at the height of the season but instead they are the epitome of efficiency and friendliness. 2 Passos has it all. restaurante2passos.com



3 Casa do Lago, which is also at the lake has been a favourite of mine since I started to holiday at the Algarve. The seafood is great, I love the décor but above all the front of house team are superb. I always see this as a special treat during our stay. Book in advance and arrive early to make the most of the view. quintadolago.com

4 Restaurante Alambique at Almancil is consistently good. I love the ambiance and the outside space. The service is charmingly old style and the menu features traditional portuguese dishes as well as great lamb and fish. **Tel: +351 289 394 579**



5 Maria's at Dunas Douradas takes a spot because the location is great and I always book it for the first night we arrive. Arrive early for sunset with a cocktail on the roof overlooking the beach and let the sea breeze ease you into holiday mode. Book early. mari-asbeachalgarve.com