

Sun-kissed Algarve, even in January

Surf crashed against the beautiful, sandy beach for as far as the eye could see under a cloudless, blue sky as we lunched in shorts and T-shirts in temperatures well over 20C.

A lone windsurfer cut through the azure blue sea and locals indicated that this beach was popular with surfers. It is easy to see why.

Dog walkers paraded along the boardwalk. Others played on the beach which was blissfully clear of litter. This was in late January, not mid-summer, but the weather patterns in Portugal and Spain made getting out and about at that time a real pleasure.

We had cycled down from a timeshare resort, a comfortable trip of around 40 minutes, on smooth, almost traffic-free roads, alongside pines and via a coastal path.

This was January, not mid-summer. After the winter we have experienced with Scotland buffeted by high winds and soaking rain, this was heaven.

We then sat in the shaded, canvas-covered upstairs decking and it was no surprise that the beach side restaurant Sal'Mare with stunning views soon became packed. The food was good too. Our carrot soup with olive oil-flavoured croutons was excellent, the sweetness of the local carrots coming

through.

As we cycled back alongside a local river, flamingos waded nearby. A stork appeared in view. We were informed that we were in the Ria Formosa Nature Reserve and cameramen were evident, recording the wildlife.

A British Airways plane and two Ryanair jets flew overhead. Yes, we were close to the end of the runway at busy Faro Airport, but we felt chilled and privileged to be in such a place with the heat of the sun on our backs.

The journey back to the immaculate Four Seasons Fairways resort at well-appointed Qunita do Lago, tagged as "a unique experience for leisure vacations", was trouble free, apart from a short hill, a tad taxing as we had not been on our bike for some weeks due to the weather back home.

A dip in the outdoor pool was called for. The initial chill was soon gone and it was a joy to swim outdoors in such a well-managed facility. The nearby jacuzzi helped ease any small aches, particularly in the kees, from the cycle run.

Our accommodation was only a few steps away and we chilled further overlooking manicured gardens where there was not a blade of grass out of place. We were shaded by palm trees and enjoyed what we believed to be a small and well-earned refreshment.

Our accommodation was in a three-bed villa (all en-suite) with pool (depth 2m), but there are other variations and the well-policed resort is surrounded by some of the best golf courses in the sun-kissed Algarve. We were only a short transfer by taxi from the airport.

The resort has a mix of luxury accommodation, safe surroundings, a first-class clubhouse with quality restaurant and service, plus well-stocked shop, and is proving a home-from-home for many from the United Kingdom and further afield.

No wonder. The Algarve boasts 3,000 hours of sunshine a year with over 30 golf courses to test your ability. Nearby is one where former Ryder Cup captain Paul McGinley has his name attached.

The courses we noted are, generally, beautifully maintained. They can be busy even if golf can be expensive. Clubs can be hired.

Getting around the local area requires a car and there is plenty of choice. Ours was picked up at Faro Airport and delivery back was easy. Arrive at the car hire barrier, a quick inspection and a one-minute walk to the departure lounge for the 2hr 55min flight back to Edinburgh.

We used the car to make short journeys to local towns. The highlight was Loule, described as a cultural gem. It has a Moorish heritage and the historic centre has well-preserved monuments like Loule Castle and the newly-discovered Islamic baths.

We popped into the Arabian-inspired covered market. Local handicraft, honey from local producers, superb vegetables from farmers in the surrounding area and fish. Yes, you could smell the fish from a distance, but it was super quality and there was a huge variety, squid, octopus, John Dory and red snapper, to name a few. Oh, almost forgot, sandines.

We exited the market and walked along atmospheric streets and alleys to a Brazilian cafe, lovingly recreated in recent years. Eye-catching cakes were so inviting so we indulged. It was not service with a smile, but we enjoyed the experience.

Leather goods – coats, jackets and shoes of great quality – are among the products on offer in local shops along with cork shoes, hats and other accessories. This is a bustling town where, according to the guide book, alleys have barely altered since the medieval period. Bit of advice, grab a parking place when you see one.

We made the short trip back towards the villa via Almancil, around 20 minutes from Faro Airport. It is situated in an area called "the golden triangle region" of the Algarve and it is a busy place and home to three Michelin star restaurants.

We popped into the Apolonia supermarket. Great choice, decent prices and, once again, wonderful quality in vegetables plus quality meat and fish counters. The adjacent cafe provides superior sandwiches.

Across the road is a curious lifestyle and design shop called Casavostra featuring furniture and clothes with an big pizza restaurant on a terrace at the back. It is famed for its thin crust pizza, claimed to be the best in the Algarve, and it is well worth a visit. It is busy, not just with tourists.

Almancil is minutes from Quinta do Lago and Vale do Lobo, another exclusive resort nearby. British golfing great, Henry Cotton, designed one of the courses, and clusters of almond and olive trees are among the eye-catching features of golf in this area, along with stunning views of the Atlantic.

That is where we came in, but we can't finish without a mention of Maria's Restaurant, situated on Praia do Garrao Beach, between Quinta do Lago and Vale do Lobo.

It has enjoyed a loyal following for over three decades and welcomes families. Our visit brought back fond memories of our last trip to this stunning part of the world, only this time the sun blazed down.

The restaurant atmosphere is lively, it has panoramic views of the sea and the food is divine. It is an experience definitely worth having and Maria's is open daily, all day, from lunch to dinner, during warmer months.

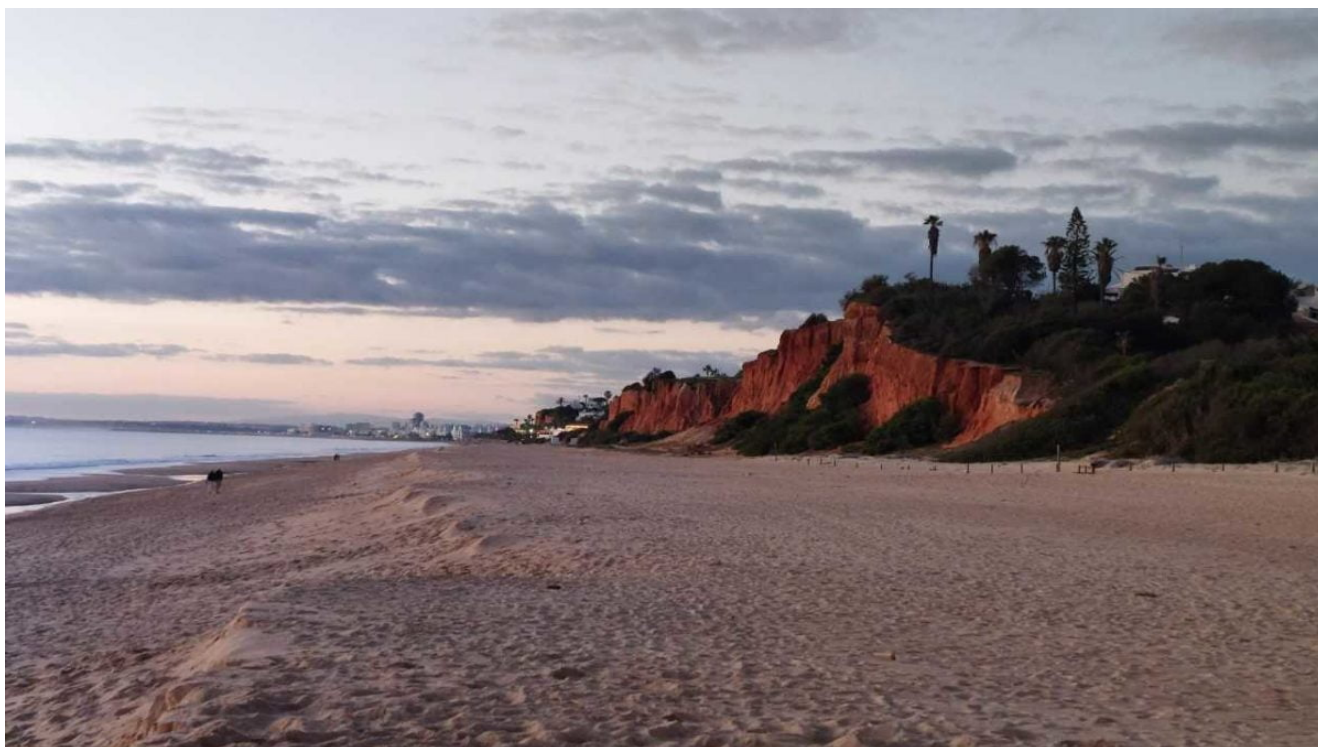
The owners says they have a passion for food and that is evident. Yes, they are busy, but our food was quality. For

example, Prawns Al Guillo – fish sauteed in olive oil and garlic, flambeed with brandy and white wine – was divine.

Grilled grouper – an odd-looking fish but packed known to be of great nutritional value for human consumption, with a high biological value and essential amino acids – was served with sauteed potatoes, cherry tomatoes and spinach, accompanied by a Mediterranean sauce, also lived up to its billing, the mild yet distinctive flavour merging well with the sauce which was packed with herbs and olive oil.

Burgers were well received and the blurb indicated that most of the produce is sourced locally. Cakes and desserts are made daily. We were indeed fortunate to have enjoyed such glorious weather, and there is no doubting the attraction of this part of the Algarve for Scottish people and their families, hence, its continued popularity.

PICTURE: Sundown from the terrace at Maria's in the Algarve.
Picture by ***Nigel Duncan***



Portugal: beach at sunset by ***Nigel Duncan***



PORTUGAL: eating out in January on the Algarve, yes, it was that warm. Picture by **Nigel Duncan**



PRAWN DELIGHT: the prawn starter in Maria's which was sensational.



LUXURY: A view from one of the villas at the superb Four Seasons Fairways resort at Quinta do Lago. Picture by ***Nigel Duncan***