

# The Algarve



Love it or loathe it, it's easy to see the allure of the Algarve: breathtaking cliffs, golden sands, scalloped bays and long sandy islands. And let's not forget (as too many do) the stunning inland area, which boasts beautiful countryside and pretty castle towns.

Coastal Algarve, Portugal's premier holiday destination, sold its soul to tourism in the sixties and, it seems, it's still for sale... Just behind the beachscape, especially along the south coast, loom some monstrosities: huge conglomerations of bland, modern holiday villas and brash resorts. For some it's paradise, for others it's an abhorrence.

Whatever your view, there's no doubting the Algarve's personality. Underrated Faro boasts beautiful assets, especially the Parque Natural da Ria Formosa; Lagos is the Algarve's carnival queen; and elegant Tavira boasts a beautiful island beach. The rugged west coast is more relaxed; this enchanting place is more about nature and less about construction (for now, anyway). The laid-back villages of Sagres and Carrapateira attract surf- and sun-loving visitors.

But it's the inner Algarve that really shines. To bypass this area is to miss the Algarve proper: cork tree- and flower-covered hillsides, historic villages (many with restaurants serving intoxicating cuisine), walking tracks and birdlife. Highlights include stunning Silves above the banks of the Rio Arade, sleepy Alcoutim on the picture-perfect Rio Guadiana, and quaint Monchique. The region has some excellent walking opportunities and the Via Algarviana passes through the area.

If you're not keen on crowds or high-season prices, avoid hitting the coastal region in the European holiday season (July to mid-September). Spring and autumn are wonderful alternatives, especially for inland adventures.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Winding your way up the stunning – and secluded – west coast, after peering over the cliffs of **Cabo de São Vicente** (p226)
- Lounging in waters off untouched sand islands in the **Parque Natural da Ria Formosa** (p192)
- Strolling the historic streets and exploring the castle of **Silves** (p209)
- Finding your inner hedonist at the beaches and nightclubs of **Lagos** (p216)
- Unwinding in the spas of **Monchique** (p231) after hiking in the surrounding hills



■ POPULATION: 396,000

■ AREA: 4995 SQ KM

## History

British residents in Portugal are following a long tradition of settlement. Phoenicians came first and established trading posts some 3000 years ago, followed by the Carthaginians. Next came the industrious Romans, who, during their 400-year stay, grew wheat, barley and grapes and built roads and palaces. Check out the remains of Milreu (p189), near Faro.

Then came the Visigoths and, in 711, the North African Moors. They stayed 500 years, but later Christians obliterated what they could, leaving little trace of the era. Many place names come from this time, easily spotted by the article 'al' (eg Albufeira, Aljezur, Alcoutim). The Syrian Moors called the region in which they settled (east of Faro to Seville, Spain) 'al-Gharb al-Andalus' (western Andalucía), later known as 'Algarve'. Another Arabic legacy is the flat-roofed house, originally used to dry almonds, figs and corn, and to escape the night heat.

Trade, particularly in nuts and dried fruit, boomed, and Silves was the mighty Moorish capital, quite independent of the large Muslim emirate to the east.

The Reconquista (Christian reconquest) began in the early 12th century, with the wealthy Algarve as the ultimate goal. Though Dom Sancho I captured Silves and territories to the west in 1189, the Moors returned. Only in the first half of the 13th century did the Portuguese claw their way back for good.

Two centuries later the Algarve had its heyday. Prince Henry the Navigator chose the appropriately end-of-the-earth Sagres as the base for his school navigation, and had ships built and staffed in Lagos for the 15th-century exploration of Africa and Asia – seafaring triumphs that turned Portugal into a major imperial power.

The Algarve coastline is 155km long, with five regions: the leeward coast (Sotavento), from Vila Real de Santo António to Faro, largely fronted by a chain of sandy offshore *ilhas* (islands); the central coast, from Faro to Portimão, featuring the heaviest resort development; the increasingly rocky windward coast (or Barlavento), from Lagos to Sagres, culminating in the wind-scoured grandeur of the Cabo de São Vicente, Europe's southwesternmost corner; and the hilly, thickly green interior, which rises to two high mountain ranges, the Serra de Monchique and less-visited Serra do Caldeirão. The Costa do Ouro (Golden Coast) borders the Costa de Sagres (Bay of Sagres), while the Costa

Vicentina stretches north of here on the windy, wild rim of a national park.

## Climate

Blessed with good weather, the Algarve has a mild winter and sunshine almost year-round, with 12/six hours' sunshine on a typical summer/winter day. Summertime temperatures average between 25°C and 30°C, sometimes reaching as high as 40°C. In January and February almond blossoms cover the countryside, while March is orange blossom time; April is the best month to visit to see wildflowers.

## Dangers & Annoyances

This is Portugal's most touristed area, and petty theft is prevalent. Never leave valuables unattended in the car or on the beach.

Swimmers should beware of the temperamental coast conditions, especially on the west coast. This means dangerous ocean currents, strong winds and sometimes fog. Check the coloured flags: chequered means the beach is unattended, red means don't even dip your toe in, yellow means wade but don't swim, and green means go: wade, swim. Blue is an international symbol that means the beach is smashing – safe, clean and with good facilities.

## Orientation

One of the clearest Algarve maps, including six town maps, is published by Freytag & Berndt (1:150,000).

## Information

There are several Algarve-specific newspapers and magazines, including *Algarve Resident* ([www.portugalresident.com](http://www.portugalresident.com)) and the trilingual classified newspaper *Algarve 123* ([www.algarve123.pt](http://www.algarve123.pt)), which has informative features. *Essential Algarve* ([www.essential-algarve.com](http://www.essential-algarve.com)) and *The Good Life* ([www.vistaiberica.com](http://www.vistaiberica.com)) are leisure and lifestyle magazines.

*Turismos* (tourist offices) dole out information, maps and free leaflets, including the monthly *Algarve Guide*, which covers what's on, and the quarterly *Welcome to the Algarve*. Major towns have a monthly *Agenda Cultural* magazine. *Algarve Tourist Yellow Pages* is another freebie, with town maps and local information. Useful for up-to-date tips on local spots are privately produced *Free Maps*, often available at resorts, bars and shops.