



The Algarve

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Why Go?

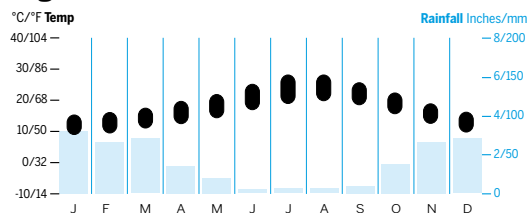
The Algarve is alluring. Coastal Algarve receives much exposure for its breathtaking cliffs, golden beaches, scalloped bays and sandy islands. But the letter 'S' (for sun, surf and sand) is only one letter in the Algarvian alphabet: activities, beach bars (and discos), castles (both sandy and real), diving, entertainment, fun...

Let's be frank: Portugal's premier holiday destination sold its soul to tourism in the '60s and never really looked back. Behind sections of the south coast's beachscape loom massive conglomerations of bland holiday villas and brash resorts. However the west coast is another story – it's more about nature and less about development.

And yet coastal Algarve is a 'drop in the ocean' for any visitor. The enchanting inner Algarve boasts pretty castle towns and historic villages, cork tree- and flower-covered hillsides, and birdlife. And the wonderful Via Algarviana walking track crosses its breadth.

When to Go

Lagos



Anytime It's blessed with good weather; a mild winter and sun almost year-round.

Feb & Mar See and smell the abundance of almond and orange blossoms.

Apr & May Hike inland amid the wildflowers and leafy hillsides or get in pre-season swims.

History

The Algarve has 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, 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 recognised 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 Moorish 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 Islamic 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 of 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.

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 beware of temperamental coast conditions, especially on the west coast, including dangerous ocean currents, strong winds and sometimes fog. Check the coloured flags: chequered means the beach is unsupervised, red means don't even dip your toe in as it's currently unsafe to do so, yellow means paddle but don't swim, and green means it's safe to swim. Blue is an international symbol that means the beach is smashing – safe, clean, good facilities.

Cliff instability is a problem, especially heading westwards from Lagos. Erosion is ongoing and serious rock falls and smaller landslides do occur. Heed the signs at the beaches and along the cliffs.

Getting Around

BUS

A good bus network runs along the Algarve coast and to Loulé. From here, you can access inland Algarve, although services become more limited. Two big bus companies, **Eva Transportes** ( 289 899 700; www.eva-bus.com) and **Rede Expressos** ( 707 223 344; www.rede-expressos.pt) zip frequently between the Algarve and elsewhere in Portugal. Smaller lines include **Renex** (www.renex.pt) and **Frota Azul** (www.frotaazul-algarve.pt).

Consider buying Eva's **Passe Turístico**, available from major bus stations and good for three days (€28.80) or seven days (€35.90) of unlimited bus travel on most main routes in one direction with Eva Transportes, and on Frota Azul between Lagos and Loulé. Bus service slows down considerably on weekends – particularly on Sunday.

CAR

Most main towns have reliable car-hire outlets.

TRAIN

Trains run along the coast between Faro and Vila Real de Santo António, and Faro and Lagos, and from the main towns to Lisbon.

Faro

POP 50,000

The Algarve's capital has a more distinctly Portuguese feel than most resort towns. Many visitors only pass through this under-rated town – it makes an enjoyable stopover. It has an attractive marina, well-maintained parks and plazas, and a historic old town full of pedestrian lanes and outdoor cafes. Its student population of 8000 ensures a happening nightlife, and its theatre scene is strong. Marvellously preserved medieval quarters harbour curious museums, churches and a bone chapel. The lagoons of the Parque Natural da Ria Formosa and nearby beaches, including the islands of Ilha de Faro to the southwest and Ilha da Barreta (aka Ilha Deserta) to the south, add to Faro's allure.

History

After the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, Faro boomed as the Roman port Osssonoba. During the Moorish occupation it became the cultured capital of an 11th-century principality.