



Algarve's Praia da Marinha has been declared by the Michelin Guide as one of the 10 most beautiful beaches in Europe and among the 100 most beautiful in the world.

## Taking it slow in the Algarve, Portugal

By Wibke Carter  
Epoch Times Contributor

The Algarve's natural and cultural diversity is undoubtedly one of its greatest riches. Visitors to this southern region of Portugal can easily pass through different environments within the same landscape. From coastal regions to the Algarvian Mountains, from fishing villages to resort towns, there is a whole world of diversity to be explored and just as many different ways to do so.

It was hard to choose where to base myself initially, but the aspect of experiencing life in a working, bustling fishing centre made my heart set for Olhão, a coastal town with a population of 45,000 in Faro, about 20 minutes' drive east from the main airport of the Algarve region.

Since the Middle Ages, life in Olhão has centered around fishing, and there is no better way to experience it than by visiting the local fish market which is housed right next to the waterfront and comprises some 80 stalls. The abundance from the Atlantic was impressive: dorada (sea bream), robalo (sea bass), tuna, salmon, octopus, squid, and clams. I was getting rather hungry looking at all the fish, and just before the lunch rush hour I scooped one of the last

free tables at the family-run, unpretentious Vai E Volta.

Hidden in a back street, Vai E Volta served grilled fish only—but at its best. The fresh produce, potatoes, bread, home-made salad, and sauces left nothing to be desired (only a bigger tummy volume!). For 9 Euros. (\$11.90) I was invited to eat as much fish as possible and the owner look almost disappointed after I declined a fourth plate.

Culture and history lovers should rent a car and head to the city of Silves, home to the best-preserved castle in the Algarve region. Sitting on a hilltop above the town, the red sandstone structure and neighbouring 13th-century cathedral were immediately visible when I approached Silves.

The castle once sheltered the old Moorish "alcáçova," the residence of the lord of the city. Four of the eleven towers, modified at the time of reconstruction work in the 14/15th centuries, have gothic doorways and the 360° views reach far, though the sea is obstructed by rolling hills.

### Most beautiful beach

After exploring the castle and Silves, I decided it was time for a beach break, because Praia da Marinha—declared by the Michelin Guide as one of the 10 most beautiful beaches in Europe—was only a 20-minute



Church of Nossa Senhora do Rosário in the historic heart of Olhão.

drive away. Located near the town of Lagoa, the beach is noted for its calm waters and rocky outcrops. Despite the rather windy weather, the gravel car park was full, though looking down the steep cliffs no brave swimmers facing the elements were in sight.

Praia da Marinha, a small patch of sand nestled between orange limestone cliffs and aquamarine water, is worth a visit at any time of the year. It's possible to see the beach and walk along the cliffs—and get the perfect photo shot—without descending the many steps to the actual beach. But in nice weather you'll be rewarded with calm waters for snorkelling, boat trips to the nearby caves, or simply a quiet time relaxing

in a beach chair and listening to the waves.

The sea is a lifelong focus for the people of the Algarve—one that is closely bound to nature.

Every morning I could see the low tide of the Ria Formosa Natural Park from my holiday apartment, sipping my first coffee of the day, while the locals were already starting their day's work, wading into the Atlantic to find cockles and barnacles. Many of these would be sold at the Olhão fish market later.

Generations of fishermen who learned the trade from their fathers and grandfathers also go out in their small boats to catch tuna, sardines, mackerel, or seafood like squid and octopus. And while a stay in Olhão gives an idea of how this

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hard-working group of people lives, the real experience is to be found on Culatra Island.

### Secluded Cultra Island

There is only a 30-minute ride between Culatra and the mainland, but stepping off the ferry felt like entering a long lost world. And the 980 residents of the two settlements, Culatra and Farol, like it that way. There are no hotels, no B&B's. If visitors want to remain longer, they have to stay in one of the locals' houses, nearly all of them fishermen or mussel farmers.

After walking down the main street—in reality a narrow concrete path from the ferry into town that soon turned into a wooden walkway—along mostly single-storeyed houses and older bushes, I reached the endless, golden beach. The waves

were crashing loudly ashore, seagulls were wheeling above my head, and in the distance I could see a couple walking into the dunes. It was tempting to just sit and enjoy the glorious day, but I opted to walk the few kilometres between Culatra and Farol, with its red and white lighthouse glaring in the distance.

I was told that only 14 people live in Farol, half of them working as lighthouse guards, and indeed, after my solitary walk along the Atlantic shore, no human soul was in sight. Only a large bulldog looked curiously at me while I started to panic on account of not finding the path to the ferry. All the houses looked the same to me, there were no road signs being that there were no roads, and I didn't want to walk through someone's garden/the dunes.

But in a town this small, all ways eventually lead to where one has to go and I caught the ferry—which only goes 2-3 times a day—just in time. As much as I enjoyed my quiet time on the island, I was ready for a lovely fresh fish dinner back in Olhão.

Wibke Carter is a world traveler who hails from Germany, has lived in New Zealand and New York, and presently enjoys life in London.

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