

FRUITS OF LAND *and sea*

Portugal's Algarve is holiday heaven for foodies, with a smorgasbord of fresh seafood and drop after drop of excellent wine. **Renate Ruge** savours the flavours

A secluded cove along the Algarve's Seven Hanging Valleys trail



Cloud parts through the plane window revealing a bird's-eye glimpse of the Algarve below: emerald hills blanketed with vines stretching to azure blue. I spy salt pans and a swirl of turquoise and white; the point where the Ria Formosa lagoon meets the Atlantic looks like it's been stirred by a giant spoon. Fishing boats steam home followed by clouds of seagulls chasing their fresh catches of mackerel or sardines.

Our flight lands and there's only one thing on our minds... *pastel de nata*, Portugal's famous custard tarts. Local guide Catia takes us through Faro's historic streets, which are shaded by white sails, to *pasteleria* Gardy. The warm pastry tarts are sprinkled with cinnamon, a reminder of Portugal's historic explorers bringing spice back from the East Indies.

A CLASS ACT

I lure my foodie friends away from the cake counter's fruit-shaped marzipan to nearby Tertúlia Algarvia for a cooking class on how to make *cataplana*, a traditional seafood stew named after the copper clam-shaped pot it's cooked in. Onion, pepper and garlic sizzle in olive oil, fired up with fresh paprika. We ladle fish stock into the bubbling pot, add hunks of cod and scatter just-caught clams, razor clams and herbs on top, before closing the lid. While it simmers, we nibble *tiborna* – carob bread topped with paper-thin slices of smoked tuna, known as 'ham of the sea'.

After lunch, we check into The Vines – cube-like villas at chic winery Quinta dos Vales. Owner Karl Heinz Stock is also a modern artist; his flamboyant sculptures pop up everywhere around the estate, and his son Michael takes us on a tour, tracing the vintner's process from fruit to bottle. In the chandelied cellar he tells us how wannabe winemakers can now buy a slice of vineyard to make their own vintages.

As it's harvest time, we pick bunches of plump, ripened grapes from the vines in the fading sun and jump at the chance to blend our own. After much experimentation (and some giggling) pouring perfect amounts of Aragonês, Touriga Nacional and Cabernet Sauvignon varieties into bottles, 'Renate's Reserve 2021' will be cracked open in two years... ►

Next morning, as the sun appears over the vines, I wake in my cool villa-suite. After a refreshing dip in the infinity pool, breakfast of croissants with fig jam and fruit is on the terrace.

Later, we walk the Seven Hanging Valleys trail at Armação de Pêra, a coastal path that winds around sheer cliffs. People are paddle-boarding and kayaking in the sea below, while a man on the beach cooks fish over coals, its scent signalling lunchtime.

Eating with water views is joyous at O Patio in Carvoeiro Beach, where tureens of colourful *arroz con mariscos* (seafood rice) arrives studded with giant prawns and comfortingly soupy. 'It's best eaten with vinho verde (white wine),' says Catia. We agree. The Moors brought citrus fruit and almonds to Portugal, so an almond tart with orange-flavoured sponge and a nutty topping is a fitting finish.

A VERY FOODIE TOUR

Later, larger-than-life tour guide Nuno takes us 'off the beaten track' on a safari, and our first stop is Vila Sodrê Silves. Owner André welcomes us into his candlelit cellar, where oak barrels are covered with platters of cheese, olives, and *presunto* cured meat. His passion for wine shines. We taste a blushing local rosé, Al-Mudd, which is made of native Negra Mole grapes, and a riot of rare reds. For the finale, he dusts off a special, sultry fortified vintage, Porto Messias Colheita (Single Harvest) 1966.

Back aboard the jeep, Nuno drives past Monchique village's whitewashed houses before accelerating through rivers into the mountains. We pit stop at beekeeper Antonio's place to sample sweet golden honey and a shot of Aguardente de Medronhos fire water – a schnapps-style liquor made of medronho fruit.

The sun's setting as we reach Fóia, 902 metres up; the air is fresh and the scenic views of the Serra de Monchique mountains are breathtaking, the ocean on the horizon splashed by the last rays of sunlight. Friend Toni, reminded of family holidays, sings that famous Carpenters song and we really do feel 'on top of the world'.



We wind our way down to the luxe Monchique Resort & Spa for tapas-like *petiscos*. Tempura organic beans or 'fish from a garden' is a highlight, followed by roasted octopus in silky red bell pepper coulis, soft baked sweet potatoes, and grilled beef with turnip greens. There's just room for creamy rice pudding and figs marinated in medronho liqueur.

Tonight, we're staying at modern resort São Rafael Atlântico, with its peaceful palm-fringed pools, perched above Albufeira's golden beaches. Breakfast the following morning is al fresco. A saxophonist plays, and seagulls survey my carob pancakes drizzled with velvety chocolate sauce.

Later, we speed across electric-blue waves aboard a speedboat with AlgarExperience. Jetting along the craggy coast is exhilarating, dipping in and out of inlets and spectacular caverns.

EATING LOCAL

Back on dry land, we make a pilgrimage to Guia, which is famous for its barbecue and where farmer José Ramires set up a grilled chicken stall in the 60s. Restaurant Ramires' piri-piri chicken is now legendary, and the fiery flame-grilled chicken is delicious alongside crispy fries dusted with local sea salt and extra chilli (for the brave). Queues form outside as we leave.

Morgado do Quintão is a real gem of a boutique winery, producing wine only from Portuguese varieties, and we spend an afternoon wine-tasting under the shade of a 2,000-year-old olive tree. The wine flows: Palhete '19, a salmon-hued rosé that has hints of strawberry and peach, is tasty with tuna, beans and feather-light goat's cheese, while a refreshing pineapple-y white, Branco '20, pairs perfectly with fluffy fish cakes. For afters, a citrusy orange *torta de laranja* pudding jives with a chilled red, Tinto '18, which has hints of blueberries.

At swish resort Vila Vita Parc (home of the two-Michelin-starred Ocean restaurant), sommelier Artur wows us with his encyclopaedic wine knowledge. He opens a special vintage bottle of port Terras do Grifo, removing the cork by slicing the bottleneck with hot tongs. It's a perfect aperitif for delightful dishes from the '*pica-pica*' (share and play) menu at restaurant Adega. Roasted chorizo sausages are flambéed with medronho liqueur at the table, while huge grilled tiger prawns come with a saffron-and-garlic Mozambique sauce.

PURE PORTUGAL

I'm officially hooked on clams, so we venture to lively fishing village Olhão and follow guide Christine on a walking tour. Weaving through blue and green-tiled streets, we admire outdoor street art mapping the lives of fishermen and marvel at huge tuna and piles of prawns at the fish market.

Culatra Island is reached by ferry from Olhão, but today we take a water taxi. A walkway snakes



'Weaving through tiled streets, we admire street art ... and marvel at huge tuna and piles of prawns at the fish market'



through old houses and sand dunes to a quiet beach where people dig for clams as the tide goes out. Tasting clams and plump oysters straight from the seabed is wonderful, and they're shucked for us by community leader Silvia Padinha, who's passionate about preserving the local clam-digging heritage. At Café Janoca, a blue-and-white shack on the jetty, we savour sea bass and juicy sardines, blackened by the chargrill. The smell is pure Portugal.

Further east at Vila Real de Santo António, where the Guadiana River meets the sea and dolphins play, we check into the luxurious Grand House hotel and pretty canaries in golden cages sing us a welcome. Lunch at the stylish Grand Beach Club with its cool infinity pool is sublime, and we feast on meaty dorado sprinkled with *flor de sal* from nearby salt pans while watching boats sail by.

Chef Jan Stechmesser also oversees Grand Salon, a colonial-style dining room where next-level dishes like slow-poached egg in asparagus purée and decadent salted caramel chocolate mousse feature. Bartender Filipe's bespoke cocktails are made to 'suit your mood'. Mine's a Green Witch.

We're back in Faro's old town for our last night at sleek hotel 3HB Faro, handily just 15 minutes from the airport, where chef Adérito de Almeida's Hábito restaurant celebrates Algarve flavours like oyster ceviche, seared tuna, and pink lamb with a glossy jus. Dessert of rosemary ice cream and carob churros is a perfect end to the day on the rooftop bar overlooking the fabulous infinity pool, and we toast our foodie odyssey with one last zesty caipirinha. As they say in the Portuguese foodie mecca of the Algarve... *Saude!* ■



THE DETAILS

Renate travelled as a guest of Algarve Tourism Authority, staying at The Vines, Quinta dos Vales winery (quintadosvales.pt); modern Albufeira family friendly resort São Rafael Atlântico (nauhotels.com); the luxurious Grand House hotel (grandhousealgarve.com) and stylish boutique hotel 3HB Faro (3hb.com). Visit visitalgarve.pt for more information. Return flights to Faro start from £90 with Jet2 from Manchester, and from £200 with British Airways from London Heathrow.



Clockwise from top: Sao Rafael Atlantico's pool; *petiscos* at Adega; a boat on Culatra Island; food and friends at Morgado Winery; hotel 3HB Faro's *pastel de nata*; Renate cooks a *cataplana* stew