

Sunrise burnishes the cliffs at Armação de Pêra. Sunset here is even more spectacular

Alluring Algarve

The attractive Algarve is an inviting option for visitors seeking recuperation from the British winter. **Norman Wright** joins the Brits in Portugal

“Stunning but uncrowded beaches are one of the real attractions of Portugal’s Algarve off-season”



Clockwise from main: Sunrise from our balcony at the Holiday inn Algarve; the Marina at Oiaho near Faro; A seafood restaurant for cats at Armação de Pêra



A FIERY sunrise turned the sky into a palette of reds and oranges burnishing the ragged cliffs and colouring the wet sand, left as each wave receded, an iridescent coral.

As the dawn show faded and the morning light took over, a single line of footprints was revealed in the sand winding around the cliff headlands. Later there would be the trails of more beach walkers, but not too many – stunning but

uncrowded beaches are one of the real attractions of Portugal’s Algarve off-season.

Our hotel’s terrace was the perfect viewing spot. Sunset from the terrace is just as spectacular. You will be joined by many more guests then, in toasting the end of a lovely day.

Of course the weather between November (when we were there) and March isn’t always perfect. When an Atlantic squall brings the waves pounding in, you can watch the white water explode

on the rocks from the comfort of the panoramic bar.

Temperatures average between 59°F and 64°F (15°C and 18°C) so when the sun is out you can bask around the sun-trap pool or take a comfortable stroll.

There are more spectacular cliff formations along the Algarve coast than the beach at Armação de Pêra but this is still beautiful, quiet and easily accessible from the hotel. A promenade above takes you along to the beach where the fishing fleet is based.

Here you can sit in the sun and watch the boats and the men working. It isn’t high-octane stuff but just the job for relaxing and you soon adjust to the pace of life. We found it fascinating watching the local cats patrolling the boats and feasting on discarded fish, competing with the gulls. No half-starved strays these. Their fish diet made them sleek, bright-eyed and in top condition.

Yes, the Holiday Inn Algarve at Armação de Pêra is ideal for winter rest

and recuperation. A relaxed buffet breakfast continues until 11am if you want a lie-in or a spot of sea air before you eat. All the meals are buffet-style, with a wide selection of dishes and culinary styles.

And if you fancy a change, the hotel has its own Indian restaurant, a very good one, too. Or down by the boats there are fish restaurants if you like an evening stroll.

Of course the Algarve has plenty to offer outside the relaxing charms of Armação de Pêra, which is about 30

miles west of the regional capital and international airport of Faro. We picked up a rental car at the airport so we could explore a bit.

The motorway just back from the coast allows access all along the Algarve if you want to head for a specific place quickly. Or you can take the coast road and see all the little towns and villages and many of the beaches as you meander along.

Turn east from Faro towards the Spanish border and you will find Tavira,



Clockwise from top left: A fishing beach at Armação de Pêra; watching the world go by at Oiaho; the Atlantic makes its presence felt at Armação de Pêra

a unique Algarve fishing town. Just 18 miles from Spain, it was the main trading port in the Algarve during the 16th to 18th centuries.

The seven-arch bridge, over the river Gilão is reputedly Roman in origin, although its present appearance was acquired in the 17th century. Since severe floods affected the bridge in 1989, it has only been open to pedestrians.

The stretch of riverfront along the Gilão is a great place to sit at one of

the cafes and enjoy the scene around the Ponte Romana which spans the river, with low arches creating gentle reflections on the water. At low tide you can see the fishermen searching for clams in the shallows.

The Algarve's name is derived from the Arabic Al Gharb, meaning The West, so we headed west to Armação de Pêra along the coast dotted with scores of beautiful golf courses and luxury resorts as well as traditional villages. One of



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Below left to right:Chocolate Forest and perfectly cooked beef at Conrad Hilton's Louro restaurant. Typical Portuguese tile street sign

those luxury resorts is Hilton's five-star Conrad Hotel at Almancil. Turning in to the hotel's drive was like approaching a Sultan's palace, as was the building itself with its huge marble atrium.

The Conrad's collection of restaurants offers a gourmet, contemporary alternative to the more rustic local Algarve cuisine available in every nook and cranny of the coast.

We were invited to the Louro restaurant and tried its taster menu. To be honest this





Passport to the Algarve

Flights and hotel

■ Independent tour operator Prestige Holidays is offering a week's stay at the Holiday Inn Algarve from £375 per person based on two people sharing a standard inland room on B&B for seven nights, with Easyjet flights from London Gatwick and private transfers. With car hire the price is £396 per person, tel: 01425 480400, website: (www.prestigeholidays.co.uk).

Climate

■ The Algarve enjoys one of the best climates on the Continent with only a short period of rainfall (it normally rains between November and March) and long hours of sunshine (the highest in Europe). It is a region endowed with beaches of fine white sand all along its extensive coastline and a calm sea with water temperatures of around 22°C in the summer. Maximum temperatures vary, throughout the year, between 15°C and 31°C. Average temperatures:

- Air temperature in summer: 24°C to 29°C
- Air temperature in winter: 15°C to 18°C
- Seawater temperature in summer: 21°C to 24°C
- Seawater temperature in winter: 15°C to 19°C.

■ (www.graystravelgroup.co.uk)

Find out more

■ Algarve Tourist Board, Avenida 5 de Outubro, 18-20, 8000-076 Faro, Portugal, tel: 00 351 289 800 400, website: (www.turismoalgarve.pt).

◀ sort of meal isn't usually our style. Being offered the choice of ten different salts to go with the olive oil and bread at the start can be a bit too much attention to detail.

As the courses arrived, however, each with a glass of matched wine explained by an enthusiastic wine waiter, the fine taste of the food overcame all our prejudices. The pasta course with Carbonara sauce inside the ravioli

instead of on the outside was sensational and the rest was pretty close.

If you enjoy this sort of super-chef contemporary cooking or you have a special celebration, you won't be disappointed. It illustrates the fact that the Algarve offers plenty of choices to suit individual tastes from beach or pool relaxation to golf, wildlife watching and walking.

Staying longer

The Algarve can be an attractive option for those who are considering escaping the British winter or moving to the region.

Algarve Senior Living offers a range of rental-based options (including fully accessible accommodation), services (such as basic medical) and cultural and sporting activities (like yoga, painting, walking, music, theatre and museum trips, and golf).

The company offers its clients a wide range of services including long-term property rental, real estate purchase, overseas retirement planning, sports and leisure activities, medical support and even a shopping service for resident expatriates.

With new rules affecting UK pensions coming into effect in April, many retirees are considering ways in which to maximise their pensions. Under legislation revised in 2013, most new resident pensioners can receive their pension tax-free in sunny Portugal for ten years.

■ For more information on long-stay and permanent stays in the Algarve, contact Algarve Senior Living, tel: 0208 144 7558, email: (info@algarveseniorliving.com), website: (www.algarveseniorliving.com).