

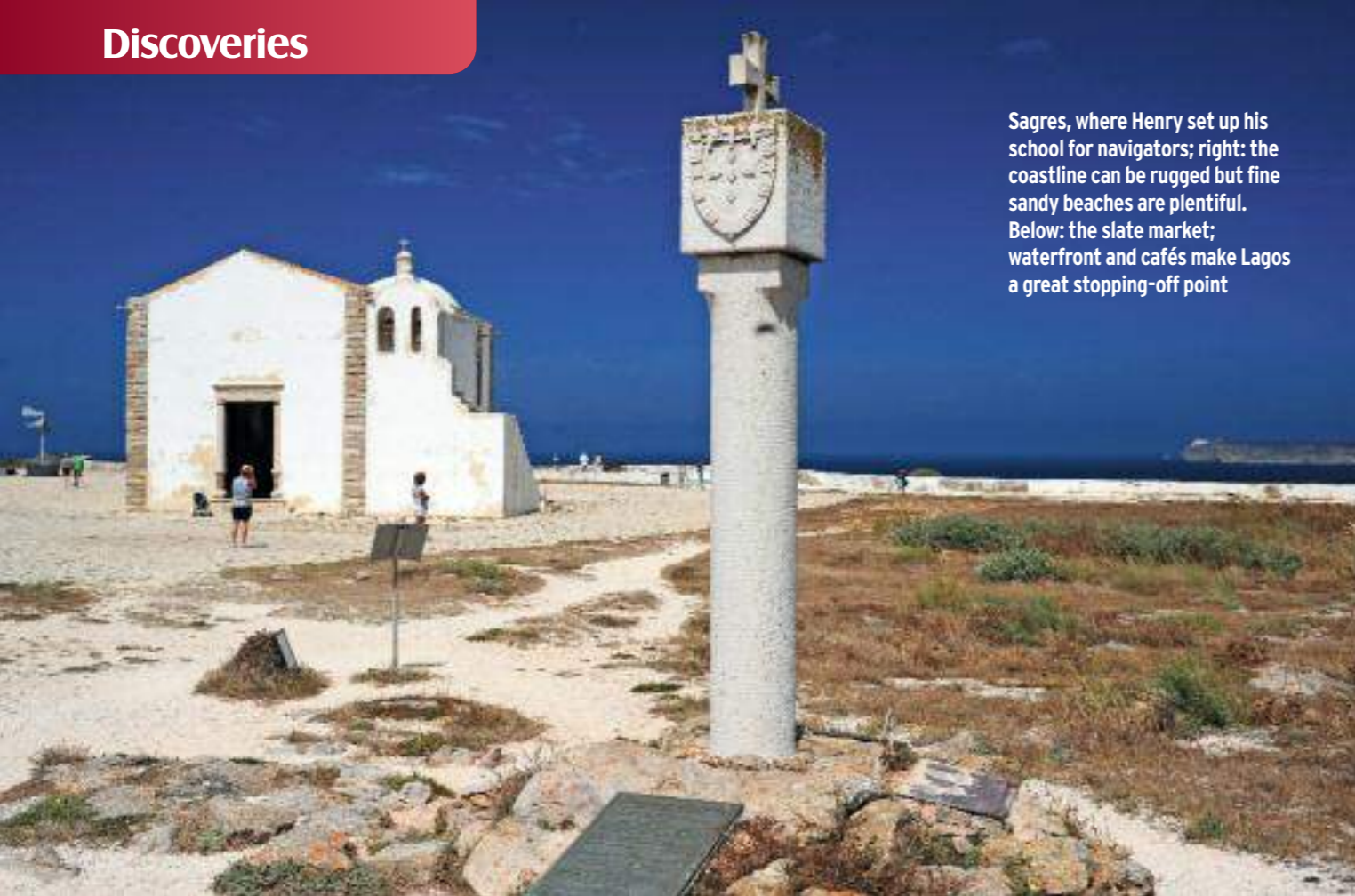
# All along the *Algarve*

An air-conditioned coach tour transports **Clive Nicholls** to the dramatic seascapes and bustling, historic towns of the Western Algarve in Portugal

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

“Dramatic cliffs, 200ft high, jut out into the Atlantic, stopping the sea in its tracks in spectacular style”

Cape St Vincent, where the southwestern tip of Portugal meets the wild Atlantic



Sagres, where Henry set up his school for navigators; right: the coastline can be rugged but fine sandy beaches are plentiful. Below: the slate market; waterfront and cafés make Lagos a great stopping-off point



As I board the air-conditioned coach in Portimao for a tour of the Western Algarve, I'm thinking that it's a smart idea. The forecast for today is hot, very hot – temperatures hovering around 40°C. It's too hot to be out in the sun all day and the coach will offer some respite between stopping-off points.

The first stop, however, comes a bit earlier than expected. It isn't at a recognised tourist attraction; it isn't even a quaint town or village. No, it's a

roundabout on the Portimao ring road and our coach has been encouraged to make an unscheduled stop by a Portuguese policeman standing in the road and directing our driver to a disused bit of tarmac.

How interesting. Is it a check on one of the passengers? The coach is almost new and not a clapped-out rust-bucket so it can't be that. No, it's our driver, or rather his tachograph, that is the focus of their attention. I never realised just how much paper these things hold, but in a jiffy the

police soon have yards of this stuff unspooled and are going through the data with a fine-tooth comb.

The coach driver looks to be losing his sense of humour as the police start highlighting figures on the printout and, sure enough, that is soon followed by a ticket for some infringement. It can't be serious for they are more than happy for our driver to continue on his way and, with a swift 'adeus' – goodbye – it's back to the roundabout for the coppers as we head west to Cape St Vincent, the south-western

point of Portugal and our second stop of the day. Dramatic cliffs, 200ft high, jut out into the Atlantic Ocean, stopping the sea in its tracks in spectacular style.

On a calm day the sea appears rough but when the wind picks up it is dazzlingly beautiful; waves collide with the cliffs with sound and spray to tingle your senses.

Yet just round the corner there are fine, sandy beaches, the sand polished to perfection by thousands of years of pounding from the Atlantic breakers.

The Cape is a place you want to see, but perhaps you only need an hour or so – the coach tour is perfect: back on board, air-conditioning on and next stop Sagres just a short hop away. It was here that Henry the Navigator had his base in the early 1400s. Building a fortress, setting up a school of navigation, he was an early shipping entrepreneur. He pioneered trade routes and died a wealthy man in 1460. It was here, in the school set up by Henry, that Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama studied before going on to greater things.

The fortress you can see today is later than that built by Henry. It dates from the 17th century, but over the years took a battering from earthquakes and pirates. You can still see the layout, and the chapel on the site is quaint.

Now for a town with a little more hustle and bustle – Lagos. I really like this place: there's masses of history, a smashing waterfront and a town centre that's welcoming with street cafés and bars – it really is a gem.

In its history Lagos has seen many



Portimao is a bit more hustle and bustle but the beaches are fine and the shopping is good; the statue of Henry the Navigator in Lagos makes a magnificent perch for visiting seagulls



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changes. Its harbour made it a desirable acquisition for any invaders looking for a foothold in the region. Carthaginians, Celts and Romans feature in its early history but after the fall of Rome, Visigoths, Byzantines and, importantly, the Moors from North Africa all left their mark. In later times it became so important for the Portuguese explorers. Henry the Navigator spent a lot of his time here building his shipping empire.

It didn’t take long for the explorers to turn their spirit of adventure into a lucrative business – slavery. The first slave market in Europe was opened here in 1444. There is plenty of evidence of this evil trade still visible today; the market

building is still there but thankfully no longer open for business and Henry has his statue in the market square.

Nowadays fishing is important to the region but, once again, the harbour has benefits, being the first safe port of call for boats arriving from the Atlantic. Take some time here. The mixture of historical buildings coupled with near-perfect beaches, restaurants and bars takes some beating.

Just three miles west of Lagos is Praia da Luz – for our generation it will be forever linked with the disappearance of Madeleine McCann. There is a large expat community here and it’s very easy to feel at home. It’s mainly a beach resort but

there are shops, cafés and market stalls, though for me it doesn’t have the variety of nearby Lagos.

The coach tour is winding its way back to Portimao, a town of 55,000 inhabitants, boasting an historic port which attracts cruise ships, sailors and fishermen alike, a large shipping centre and plenty of waterside restaurants serving fresh seafood.

Like many of the built-up areas in this region, the earthquake of 1755 took its toll but there are still remains from earlier periods. Although tourism is important, Portimao is a thriving town in its own right and the shopping in particular is not just aimed at visitors but gives you a bit more of a taste of the real Algarve.

I like Portugal, I like the Algarve. Coach tours are one way of taking in the tourist hotspots fairly quickly but if you have more time, hire a car and go at your own pace. The Algarve is great for spending a few hours here, a day there. Fresh seafood in a waterfront restaurant is just brilliant, and, if it all gets a bit too hectic, you are never far from a beach to relax and soak up the sun.



**Find out more**

- Visit Portugal, website: ([www.visitportugal.com](http://www.visitportugal.com))
- Visit Algarve, website: ([www.visitalgarve.pt](http://www.visitalgarve.pt))