



## The unsung shores of Portugal

Explore the oldest hotel south of Lisbon – Grand House, Vila Real de Santo António

### Adam Jacot de Boinod discovers the lesser-known coastline of the southern west tip of the Algarve

IMAGINE SOUTHERN PORTUGAL without the high-rise holiday homes or indeed any British tourists. It's all here to discover, beyond and above the ever-popular part of the Algarve along a wilderness of coastline on the very last south-western extremity of Europe.

From Drive On Holidays I picked up a car. This medium-sized company has a personal service that was so very heartening after all the fuss a flight can bring. It has a wide range to suit all needs and, unlike some, allowed me to collect in Faro and drop off in Lisbon, to have English Sat Nav and

to register automatically the tolls I passed through.

We think of the Algarve for her year-round mild-to-hot weather, her golf courses and tourist towns of sugar-white villas, the ever-popular Portimao and Albufeira, her Arabic traits, her boats in their marinas, and her colourful ceramics.

But the extremities of the Algarve (that is a stunning coastline of miles of untrammelled white beach) are yet to be known by most travelling Brits.

#### A CROSSING POINT

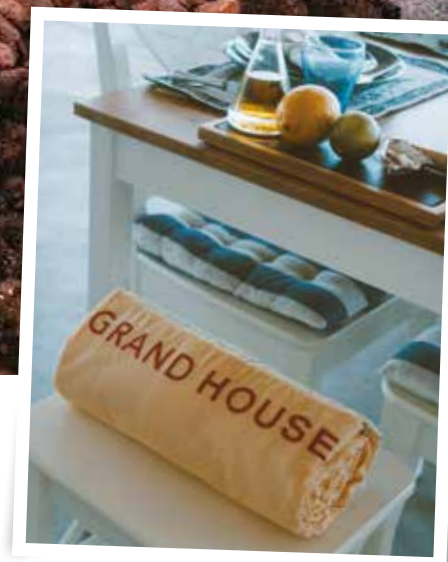
I left Faro airport to reach the very point where Portugal meets both Spain, across the Rio Guadiana and the Atlantic, for I had come to stay at the oldest hotel south of Lisbon – Grand House, Vila Real de Santo António.

With barely any motor traffic it's only yachtsmen these days who pass through this town: such is the nature of extremities and being a border town. A century ago there were rows of canneries devoted to tuna.

And it was in order to host these very merchants that this former 1910s Grand House was turned into a hotel, which stands out proudly as the only tall building along the waterfront with its glorious frontage resembling a Venetian Gothic Palazzo.

The food has locally made bread, meat from a top butcher in Manta Rota, olive oil, fruit and vegetables from Moncarapacho, organic tomatoes from Tavira and creamy curd cheese from São Brás

de Alportel. Upstairs my bedroom had dark wood and cast-iron stands, a silvery rug and taupe drapes in a calming, neutral and natural décor that had no need for pictorial decoration beyond its elegant prints. My bathroom had a free-standing bath and antiques suggesting history and luxury. »



**BEYOND THE TAGUS**

Along the motorway I drove, short-circuiting the main touristic belt of central Algarve towards the extremity that is Sagres, before moving up and clinging to the Atlantic coast.

It's the area that attracts the surfing pros along the beaches of Porto das Carretas, Areitas Brancas and Moita. And it's the start of the region called Alentejo, derived from 'Além Tejo' meaning 'beyond the Tagus', the river that flows through and past Lisbon.

It's full of flat fields with villages

typically comprising cobalt blue-trimmed houses with corked-tiled roofs and white-washed walls. It was a real find, both to discover and to enjoy, deep in the middle of nowhere, and half an hour up the coast was Herdade do Touril. Here, I found a historic building with Alentejan country architecture and rustically decorated rooms, suites and independent apartments (all handily on the ground floor and done up in a tasteful, creative manner), as well as a terrace around the pool as part of a 400-hectare cattle farm. There were

bougainvillea in the driveway and a pit fire amid the olive trees.

**LAID BACK GLAMOUR**

The whole coastline south of Lisbon, an ancestral landscape of cliffs and beaches, is preserved thanks to a strict government policy enforcing the hotels to be located inland. Up past Sines, the birthplace of Portugal's greatest explorer Vasco da Gama in her 'golden age of discovery' that was the early 15th century, I reached a glamping boutique Eco Suites Resort. Set between Costa Vicentina and Comporta this state-of-the-art enterprise, begun in 2019, and with ambitious and expansive plans ahead, is certainly 21st century in character.

Resident at the resort is the tasteful and uber-cool Foggo, where I ate a selection from choice local producers and markets that included

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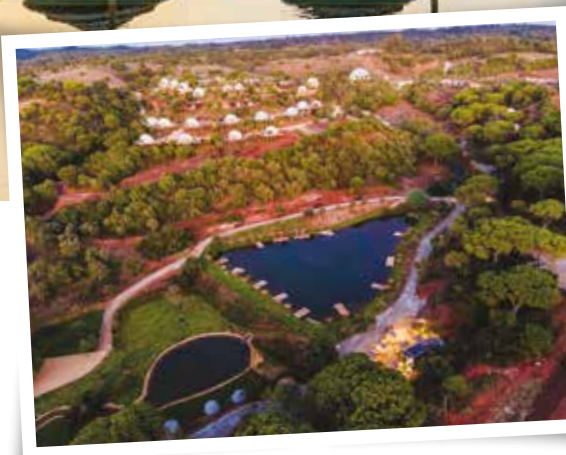


Quinta da Comporta: eat, drink and be pampered



Quinta da Comporta is a stylish collection of pool villas and town houses

FREDERIC DUCOUT PHOTOGRAPHY



**CHIC AND STYLISH**

I came to my last resting place Quinta da Comporta. A 'quinta' is a country villa or estate, and here I found pool villas and town

My spa treatment was inspirational as I experienced a defoliating scrub made from rice granules and the massage that followed.

My room had a super-confident natural colour palette with little need for pictorial adornment such as the visual feast from the woven baskets on the walls, the honey wood and wicker and the sisal rug, stitchwork textiles and funky banana leaf chairs.

I ate one night a mere 10-minute drive away at Sem Porta Restaurant. Set without in pine woods and within in luxurious surroundings of brick, wood and leather, with frayed rattan lanterns resembling jellyfish and a roaring fire, it's lit up amongst olive trees outside with two smaller ones within this mammoth former barn.

I reached Lisbon with ease beyond the other side of the river Tagus determined now to share with the British this wilderness of coastline already popular with Germans and French. I must go back, whenever but soon! **GW**

**Glamping doesn't come much more 'glam' than that offered at Eco Suites Resort**

pork steak, a platter of Alentejo bread with goat cheese, jam, olives and seasoned lupine beans followed by some delicious ice cream.

This 'slow-food' concept is in keeping with Alentejo's reputation for being slow and laid-back. It was a real eating experience and fully engaging for my sense of smell and taste and visually and aesthetically uber-cool: so creative the food and supreme in its presentation.

Having lodged in my treetop pod and viewed the stunning sunset it was time to go further north to where, at dawn and dusk, storks also rest and nest famously on every available telegraph pole and church steeple.

houses all designed for an authentic wellbeing experience.

Opened in 2019, it has two super-sized ancient rice warehouses. It reminded me of Soho Farmhouse in Oxfordshire appealing to chic and trendy guests seeking urban comforts in a rural setting.

Of the two larger-than-life barns one was to eat in and the other to exercise and be pampered beneath its vertiginous ceiling.

The serene setting of the Oryza Spa and Hammam provided a fitting focus for its diet of wellness on offer. Lit up at night it resembled a Tuscan church one end with its curvaceous façade and a monastic ruin the other with its lack of roof allowing me to savour the breeze and spot the stars snug within the warmth of the outdoor pool.