

Under the Portuguese sun

"It must be there," my mother says, pointing to an indistinct spot on a map which correlates with a sharp right hand turn. I slow down and look at the steep cobbled lane, only a few inches wider than the car. Yanking on the steering wheel to compensate for the sharp angle, I try inching the rental vehicle up the steep incline. After a few yards we lose traction, the wheels spinning and sliding on the uneven surface. We roll back down the hill for another attempt. I rev the underpowered engine and get enough momentum to fly over the steep section of road. The driveway to Quinta Bonita is ahead, surrounded by greenery. The sun is shining, the sky is blue, and the Portuguese landscape stretches invitingly across the horizon.

We are in a remote corner of the Algarve somewhere past Lagos in the western corner of Portugal. We have driven across almost half of the country to get to this point

stretched out to absorb the sun's rays. We break at the Verandah Café looking out to sea before returning the way we came, never tiring of the royal blue ocean views contrasting with the tan and grey crumbling cliffs.

Back at Quinta Bonita guests mill around the lounge, socialising over pre-dinner aperitifs. Tonight the hotel is offering a three-course set meal and judging by the chatter it is much anticipated. For good reason. Every morsel is delicately seasoned and beautifully presented. Our stomachs are groaning as we push away from the table, ready to collapse into a post-meal coma until morning.

We greet the new day with freshly-squeezed orange juice straight from the orchard, fresh bread from the village bakery and freshly-laid eggs from the gardener's farm. Feeling wholesome and

Portugal lies a hop, skip and jump away from the UK, and the Algarve is its most visited region. But hidden pockets of secluded perfection can be found. Quinta Bonita is one of them.



from Faro Airport but it only took around an hour to traverse the narrow country. The views from Quinta Bonita make it worthwhile. The oldest property in the teensy village of Matos Morenos, Quinta Bonita sits perched on a hill with nothing to block the panoramic views. The crisp white villa with 10,000 square metres of spectacular gardens is a luxury hideaway, and hosts Chantelle Kortekaas and husband Fraser are on hand to ensure every need is met.

We sit on the back veranda overlooking the pool and orange orchard, making plans over coffee and cake. Chantelle gives us detailed walking notes for a coastal hike starting from the nearby town of Praia da Luz and we set off to explore this lovely corner of the world. The walk follows the cliff edge, offering beautiful views over the ocean at every turn. The path is rocky, the surrounding landscape colourful with the blooms of thousands of wildflowers despite the arid land. We lapse into a comfortable silence as we walk, stopping only to point out yet another stunning vista.

The walk to the village of Burgau is around 2.5 miles, filling our afternoon nicely. The village nestles in a cranny overlooking a beach with golden sand, bronzed bodies

reinvigorated we prepare to mount our steeds for the day – bicycles. Fraser has prepared a route map and loaded the panniers attached to the extender rack on my bicycle with a lunch-time picnic, which makes me rear up on the back wheel when I attempt a hill start. This motivation keeps me peddling furiously on every incline.

We cycle through beautiful countryside, the rolling hills stretched out before us, stopping to explore tumbled-down stone cottages and hilltop villages. The sun beats on our backs, its welcome warmth providing the perfect backdrop for the day. An obstacle comes in the form of a roadblock, which sends us into unknown territory, off the map. Our mild concern at the extra miles is offset by finding a secluded grove, dappled with sunlight and speckled with flowers. We stretch out our picnic blanket and explore the delights of our hamper. Enormous club rolls are paired with a delicious Greek-style salad, fruit, crisps and cake. We polish off the lot, noticeably affecting the centre of gravity of my bike.

After recharging by the pool, we drive to Ponta de Piedade, on the western outskirts of Lagos. The promontory is a fantasy landscape of caves, grottos



and sea arches sculpted by nature. In the fading light, the aquamarine waters shimmer against the camel-coloured cliffs, backed by a red-topped lighthouse. Just down the road is the lovely Camilo Beach, a spit of sand protected by high cliffs. O Camilo restaurant overlooks the water, fittingly specialising in seafood. The mackerel is lightly flavoured, only a liberal sprinkle of salt used on the grilled, whole fish. Washed down with a glass of locally-produced wine, the meal embodies the simple flavours of Portugal.

The wind-whipped seas have calmed for our final day, allowing us out onto the water with Kristen, our excitable kayaking guide. She gives us a few tips and pointers and we are on our way, skimming across the waves, the only sound the splash-splash of our paddles hitting the water. We kayak into caves and grottos and around spectacular stone formations, admiring the patches of glowing aqua where the water absorbs the sun. Small crabs hunch back into rocky ruts as we pass the cliff walls, and birds circle overhead. We spend several hours paddling, a short beach landing providing a brief respite, before returning to shore and rewarding ourselves with a deliciously sweet *pastel de natas*, a Portuguese egg tart pastry.

We spend the afternoon exploring the old centre of Lagos. An ancient maritime town now thronged with tourists ensures a plethora of souvenir shops, restaurants, cafes, and a busy pedestrianised centre complete with

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musical buskers and touts.

Shopping done, we retreat from the crowd at O Celeiro restaurant, on a quiet stretch of road near Quinta Bonita. The rustic décor belies the mouth watering cuisine, and the two brothers who run the eatery offer food with a sense of humour. “A small glass of wine on the house?” says one, eyes twinkling as he sits a fish-bowl sized wine glass in front of my mother, splashing a measure of wine into the bottom. Her head fits inside the glass making it a near-impossible challenge. The difficulty is determining what to eat. From rabbit to pork tenderloin, every hearty dish of home fare is a delight.

As we sit on our balcony late in the evening, sipping on a glass of local organic wine, we reflect on our Portuguese experience. From the regional cuisine to the sparkling sunshine, the soothing ocean to the luxurious comfort of Quinta Bonita, every detail has been perfect. The sun always shines in the Algarve.

For more information on Quinta Bonita see:
www.boutiquehotelalgarve.com