

Who should you ask first about the best places to visit on holiday? The locals, of course. SARAH LEE and photographer MIKE FINN KELCEY join a group of Portuguese friends for a day at the beach to discover just where to go to enjoy...

the good life



The smells from the kitchen are irresistible. The aromas of rich tomato sauce, grilled fish and chicken piri piri are carried out of the beach restaurant and on to the

cool ocean breeze.

It's tempting to follow my nose and run off in search of tasty Portuguese food. But as I look out at the blue of the Atlantic and feel warm sand between my toes, I decide to hold out for just a little longer. I've been invited to join a group of Portuguese friends at the beach and sample all that's great about life in the Algarve.

It's been a good morning, with a feisty espresso to kick-start the day – coffee is just as important to the Portuguese as it is to the Italians. We then hit the beach just as the sun rises high enough to turn the sea into a glistening sheet of silver.

Relaxing for a moment on Praia dos Salgados, just west of Albufeira, I talk to the group about the region's attractions. Some are obvious. In August, Portuguese out-of-towners and tourists alike flock to the Algarve's resort towns, making it the most visited region in the country. But I wanted to find out more.

Pedro Duque, who moved south from Lisbon with his wife Vera before having seven-year-old daughter Bárbara, told me: "People come here from other parts of Portugal for the weather and great food.

"The weather allows us to make more

of our time – you leave work and know you can go to the beach or meet with friends for the evening. It's not as stressful as in Lisbon and we have a great quality of life."

Vera added: "We couldn't leave now. We love the lifestyle and the food here. Fish is so fresh, it's just out of the ocean."

Food is clearly an important part of life in the Algarve and, as I was to discover, it is cooked with respect for the subtleties of flavours, while mealtimes offer a great chance to chat and relax.

Drifting into the wood-panelled charm of Os Salgados we sat drinking a popular Portuguese red wine, Foral, as a seafood cataplana lunch was served.

The cataplana is as synonymous with the Algarve as paella is with Valencia. The deep metal dish, of the same name, can be filled with meat or a variety of seafood before being cooked in a tomato-based sauce to create a hearty stew.

Over lunch the conversation is lively and I get a sense of that enviably continental way of life – those long relaxing meals with friends over a good bottle of wine. Children are welcomed in this setting and these meals offer them an initiation into an appreciation of fine food and interesting debate.

Fatima Serra explained: "This beach, Praia dos Salgados, is one of my favourites in Albufeira, but when you head out of town for the west coast there are so many more to discover along with historic





Main picture: Vera and Pedro Duque enjoy the quality of life in the Algarve. Far left: Detail of azulejos tiles, in Alte. Bottom left: Os Salgados restaurant serves up traditional dishes in a beach-side setting. Remaining pictures: Having fun on Praia dos Salgados, Albufeira.



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towns in the mountains.”

With the cataplana cleared away, we sample a range of traditional desserts. There’s morgado, an almond and white pumpkin cake, alfarroba, a carob cake, amêndoa tart, made with locally-farmed almonds, and figo and alfarroba tart – made with figs, carob and almonds. We top off the meal with coffee and liqueurs – almond of course – mixed with lemon juice, and Licor Beirão, made to a secret recipe of seeds and herbs.

Then it’s back to the beach where the children make sandcastles and splash in the sea. But I take my lead from Pedro and decide post-lunch relaxation is the order of the day. I wanted to learn more about the Portuguese way of life and the places they love. I knew the following day would be a busy one.

SILVES SERVICE The next morning following Fatima’s advice, I drove from Albufeira to Silves as the sun blazed in a perfect blue sky. In direct contrast to the neon playground of Albufeira, Silves offers a more laid-back and cultural holiday experience.

Settling at a café, I had elevenses of espresso and pastéis de nata, a deliciously rich egg custard in flaky pastry topped with a sprinkle of cinnamon.

Looking around me, Silves’ history was patently clear. The Moorish architecture is stunning – from decorative archways to repetitive patterns cut into wooden panels and Hands of Fatima door knockers.

Silves was inhabited in ancient times by the Phoenicians and then the Romans. But it was the Arabs who left the greatest mark. The city was described in the 12th century as sumptuous and compared favourably to Lisbon, Seville and Córdoba. During Arab occupation it became an important economic social and cultural centre.

The history here is tangible. It’s as

though you can consume it and that is what makes Silves so appealing. History is everywhere from the imposing red stronghold of the castle to the beautiful 16th-century church Igreja da Misericórdia, and cobbled residential streets packed with houses whose brightly-coloured features lie stark against whitewashed walls.

From Silves it’s a 30-minute drive into the mountains to Monchique and the Roman spa town of Caldas de Monchique. The spa baths still operate today and the town’s pretty squares offer a great stopping off point for lunch.

Up a winding mountain road from Monchique is Fóia – at 902 metres above sea level it’s the highest point in the Algarve and on a clear day the sea is visible in Portimão 15 miles away. Breathing in the fresh mountain air I consider pushing west to the coast – the obvious route to take from here – but I decide to head south.

I make a quick stop at the lively military harbour town of Lagos. Its bars and restaurants throng with locals despite it being a Sunday night.

Still, I have other things on my mind and take the five-minute drive down the road to Ponta da Piedade in search of the perfect sunset. It doesn’t disappoint.

The sandstone cliffs here are heavily eroded and centuries of tides have cut huge spy holes through them into the deep blue waters, while many chunks of rock have broken off from the mainland to stand like solitary outposts in the sea. A continuous flow of small boats snake their way around the craggy rocks into numerous grottoes.

Fire-red, orange and blue dragonflies flit across the paths as I watch gulls settle on precipitous perches high above the crashing waves. Praia da Dona Ana on the next bay is renowned for its stunning cliff-backed beach, but Ponta da Piedade beats it for sheer drama.





Main picture: Fatima Serra and Vera Duque enjoy their sunshine setting. **Left:** Serving up the seafood cataplana in Os Salgados. **Remaining pictures:** Mealtimes are a sociable affair in the Algarve, where families enjoy good food and lively debate.

“The real attraction of Arrifana is the great Atlantic breakers that **crash** to shore”

The following day I decide to go west in search of the much-loved beaches my new Portuguese friends had suggested.

Just an hour from Albufeira, the west coast beaches are plentiful in number, beautiful and fall within the preservation area of Parque Natural do Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina. This area, stretching for 75 miles north to the region of Alentejo, is home to otters, foxes, wild cats, 200 species of birds and 48 plant species found only in Portugal.

THE WILD ATLANTIC Arriving at Arrifana I pause to watch fishing boats bobbing in the dramatic bay. The sandy beach is a lure for those who like to bask in the sun, but the real attraction of Arrifana is the great Atlantic breakers that crash to shore. As this unsheltered area is open to the wild Atlantic it is a favoured beach with surfers.

Another quiet seaside village that attracts the surf crowd is Monte Clérigo. Here moody mists roll in off the surf and, as the tide goes out, it reveals rocks shaped into Aztec-like patterns by the sea.

As more mist creeps in from the sea the golden sun toys with it, creating burning embers of light against the trees and shrubs in the surrounding hillsides. As another day descends into night, my foray into the Portuguese way of life also comes to an end. And I can't help but think... this really is the good life. ■



ARTY ALTE

Taking the winding roads north-east of Albufeira I came across Alte, considered the most traditional village in the Algarve.

I decided to explore its quiet backstreets where traditional Algarvian influences abound. Whitewashed houses with heavy wooden doors are topped off with Algarve chimneys resembling Moorish minarets peaking into the clearest sky. There are also beautiful azulejos ceramic tiles adorning fountains that flow into the river.

In mid-summer, families head to the riverside for barbeques, parties and cultural events. If you time it right you can swim in the dammed river as sunlight dapples through the trees and catch a folk festival full of artists in traditional dress.

One of the main organisers of the village's folk shows was José Cavaco Vieira, a keen artist and Alte's favourite son. His love of art was passed on to his son Daniel who started an art workshop, Horta das Artes (Art's Garden), in the village. It was there that I met Nelson Martins, a ceramics artist.



He said: "Ceramics are a fine art in Portugal. It's one of our main expressions and you can find it in churches, on houses and everywhere.

"At the moment I'm creating some Neolithic pieces using traditional materials such as clay worked with iron oxide, ochre and the blue used in azulejos tiles – the kind of thing found in Portuguese architecture. For example iron oxide is found in the rich soil around the Algarve and is used to build our houses."

Nelson is currently creating lamps, decorative items for gardens and Neolithic-styled pots.

"I'm painting symbolic lines on this pot," he said, eyeing the creation in front of him. "They symbolise water and eggs which are linked to fertility symbols. I'm also using simple firing techniques as I'm trying to find ways to create pottery without polluting the environment."

As I leave Nelson I think of the many homes I've seen using azulejos blues on their walls or red and yellow ochre around window frames.

It seems the people of Alte are really living their art.

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Main picture: Monte Clérigo on the Algarve's wild west coast. Clockwise from top left: Making a splash at Praia dos Salgados; the craggy rocks at Ponta da Piedade; time for a stroll along the beach; ceramics artist Nelson Martins.

We'd like to thank Avis, Os Salgados restaurant, and Holiday magazine's friends in Portugal for their help with this feature.



Pictured from top: Os Salgados' owner Michel Catuna eyes the catch of the day at Albufeira's market; back at the restaurant, chef João Sacramento tops off the seafood cataplana with tasty red prawns; the cataplana, mouth-watering and ready to eat.

■ **Os Salgados, Praia dos Salgados, near Albufeira. Tel: +351 289 592179.**

What a catch

Famously fresh fish, tasty local produce and a broad domed cooking pan! Just the ingredients for a classic Algarvian dish – the delicious seafood cataplana. SARAH LEE tucks in. Pictures by MIKE FINN KELCEY.

Michel Catuna is a man who knows what he's looking for. Every morning he heads to Albufeira's market to buy fish for his restaurant, Os Salgados, at Praia dos Salgados to the west of the city.

After working in the family-run restaurant for 18 years he strolls through the stalls with an air of self-assurance, pointing out the best looking produce.

"Most of the fish you get here comes from Sagres, in the south-west of the Algarve, where the water is cooler and the quality is better," Michel explains eyeing some red king prawns.

"The most popular fish here are grilled sardines, of course, but Portuguese people also like horse mackerel, sea bass, golden bream and shellfish, and we love a seafood cataplana."

Back at the restaurant, chef João Sacramento introduces us to the cataplana as Michel loads the catch of the day into the glass chiller cabinet.

Cataplana is the word given to both the recipe and the pot it is cooked in. This broad domed dish was introduced to southern Portugal by the Moors and is traditionally made of copper though modern ones are stainless steel.

Seafood or meat is placed in the bottom half of the dish with potatoes and a tomato-based sauce. The hinged lid is then closed so the ingredients simmer together and the flavours develop. It can be used in the oven but is often cooked on the hob.

Either way, the result is simply delicious. ■

Os Salgados' seafood cataplana
(serves four to five)

Ingredients

- 4-5 chopped medium white onions
- 8 peeled and chopped tomatoes
- 7 medium sized potatoes
- 10 cloves of garlic, chopped
- 2-3 tablespoons of olive oil
- 100g Creme de Marisco (available at Continental grocers), alternatively 250ml of fish stock
- 500g of clams with shells on
- 400g white fish (halibut or golden bream are best) cut into two-inch pieces
- Handful of squid rings
- Handful of king prawns with shells on
- Handful of chopped flat leaf parsley

Directions

- 1** Add the olive oil to a large saucepan and fry the onions, tomatoes and garlic for two minutes. Then mix the Creme de Marisco with 250ml of water and add this, or the fish stock, to the pan.
- 2** Bring to the boil then simmer for five minutes.
- 3** Meanwhile par-boil the potatoes for four minutes, before cutting them into medium-sized slices.
- 4** Place the clams (leaving a handful over for decoration) into the base of the cataplana or alternatively, a wok. The shells will stop the food from sticking and generate heat within the pan.
- 5** Spoon over some of the tomato and stock mixture to cover the clams, then add a layer of potato and cover with a little more stock.
- 6** Add a layer of fish, followed by more of the mixture, then a layer of potato. Continuing the layers until the pan is full.
- 7** The cataplana should be topped off with the king prawns, squid rings, the remaining clams and a sprinkle of flat leaf parsley.
- 8** Clamp down the lid of the cataplana or cover your wok and cook on the hob over a medium heat for 15 minutes.
- 9** Serve with a good Portuguese red wine.