

Surf's up!



Caroline White heads for Portugal's wild west coast to hone her surfing skills

Picture courtesy of Joao Barreiros, Registo de Turismo do Algarve

The windswept shores, rugged cliffs and dirt-tracks of the west coast of the Algarve are a far cry from the lively resorts and white painted villas of its southern coast. In fact, the western edge of Portugal's most popular holiday region has remained remarkably unspoilt.

The beaches are breathtakingly beautiful, but the ocean is colder and rougher here than on the south coast. With the Atlantic generating some of the most powerful swells in the world, this area is perfect for one particular beach pursuit – surfing.

Being a passionate board rider, I couldn't wait to pack my wetsuit and book a budget flight to Faro. I was heading for a surf camp, one of the most popular ways to learn – or simply practise – the art of riding waves.

My destination was a villa just outside the ancient walled fishing town of Lagos. Though situated on the south coast, the town is also only a 20-minute drive from the west coast and some of the best surfing beaches in Europe.

The Surf Experience was set up by a German couple, Conni and Dago Lipke, ten years ago. They bought Villa Katarina, in Funchal – an area known as the 'Beverly Hills of Lagos' – during the Portuguese property crash of the early 1990s and have since converted it into a fabulously eclectic holiday centre with a guesthouse, six self-catering apartments and Swiss-style chalets for those who want privacy and independence. The apartments are like small houses, with two bedrooms, high wooden-vaulted

ceilings and their own pool. The chalets have a 'beach bungalow' feel, and though only one room, they have their own showers nearby, decorated in the same mosaic style as the living room of the main house.

Dago has two large *4x4s*, essential for ferrying groups down the dirt tracks that provide the only access to many of the surfing beaches.

'The feeling of exhilaration when the wave catches your board and you fly across the surface of the water is incomparable'

He employs several instructors to ensure that everybody gets the level of tuition they need. The amount of surfing you do is entirely up to you. Some people spend most of the day in the sea, others prefer to stay on the beach and enjoy the sun. And if you don't fancy going to the beach every day, you can hang out by one of the pools back at the villa.

It's hard to describe the thrill of surfing to somebody who's never tried it. The feeling of exhilaration when the wave catches your board and you fly across the surface of the water is incomparable. Even snowboarding – a similar sport in

terms of board control – lacks the incredible sensation of being at one with the ocean, harnessing its power and following the line of a wave.

Unfortunately, the very thing that makes surfing so uniquely fun is also the thing that makes it so difficult to master. The hardest part is learning how to negotiate the ocean itself – snowboarding is a walk in the park by comparison.

Any surfer will tell you that standing up and riding the board is the easy bit. Getting out through the waves to the point at which they break 'out back' is by far the most difficult aspect of surfing and takes up most of your time, whether you are experienced or a beginner. It also gives you biceps of steel.

If you've ever sat by the ocean and watched surfers for a while, you'll notice that they spend most of their time lying face down on their boards, paddling out to sea. The art of getting a board either over or under the waves that come crashing towards you takes years to learn.



Eating out in the Algarve

Picture courtesy of Joao Barreiros, Registo de Turismo do Algarve



Picture courtesy of Registo de Turismo do Algarve

Riding the waves



Architectural detail in Lagos

Most beginners at The Surf Experience spend their first few days simply learning how difficult it is to handle a large board – the larger the surfboard the more buoyant it is and easier to stand up on – on even the smallest of waves. They will be taught the basics of safety, how to paddle, catch waves at the right point and then get to their feet in the correct position, standing up as quickly as possible. They will also spend each night nursing aches in muscles they did not even know they had.

Evenings are spent back at the villa or in the friendly bars and restaurants of Lagos. Most people find that after a day in the surf, a large evening meal and a few glasses of wine, they are ready for bed well before the clock strikes midnight. The Surf Experience is, however, a sociable one, attracting



Lagos beach

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as it does people of all ages from all over Europe. Some come with friends or partners, many come alone.

Lagos itself is a pleasant place to spend an evening. Its ancient walled town centre has a wide range of bars, cafés and restaurants, as well as the obligatory Portuguese tile shops. For daytime visitors, it sports a fashionable new marina development and a long, sandy beach. Many of The Surf Experience's guests take a day off to explore the town.

For walkers and wildlife fans, the Western Algarve has spectacular scenery and several nature reserves. Hilly grasslands, eucalyptus forests, yellow and red rocky outcrops and valleys roll back from the coast to the mountain ranges inland. Here you'll find otters, foxes and the endangered Iberian lynx. The hills of the Serra de Monchique, just 15 miles north of the coast have stunning forests and views. A large stretch of the rugged western coastline, from Sagres to Sines, is now a national park.

Even at the height of the summer season, the roads and beaches on the west coast are relatively empty. Whether you're interested in surfing or not, the Western Algarve has much to offer. Superb beaches, ancient Moorish architecture, beautiful walking country and cheap restaurants are all the essential ingredients of a great holiday.

Transport and travel

Low cost airlines fly daily all year round to Faro. They include easyJet and First Choice (from Gatwick, Stansted, Luton or Manchester) and Monarch (from Gatwick and Manchester). Prices range from £30 to £60 return if booked well in advance.

From Faro take the A22 motorway (approximately an hour's drive) all the way to Lagos, the last town on the south coast before you hit Cape St Vincent, Europe's most south-westerly point.

All the major car hire firms have offices at Faro airport, where you can get a small, three-door vehicle for under £100 a week if you book in advance.

Trains are regular, clean and cheap, and run from Faro all the way along the coast in either direction.



Villa Katarina