

DIVING INTO THE ALGARVE

THE ENDURING ENCHANTMENT OF THE ALGARVE REGION OF PORTUGAL DRAWS MANY A VISITOR. GISELLE WHITEAKER EXPLORES THE BEACHES, BOUNTY AND BEAUTY OF THE COAST.

There's something special about the Algarve region in Portugal. It's not just the abundant sunshine – although as one of Europe's sunniest places, it's a contributing factor – and it's more than the scenery, although there's no denying it's a beautiful part of the country. Sprawled on a sun lounger in a patch of sand overlooking the emerald and turquoise hues of the Rio Formosa Nature Preserve, a chilled beverage in hand courtesy of the Robinson Club's well-stocked beach bar, I conclude it's the attitude. The cloudless blue skies and proximity of the ocean seem to generate happiness in residents and visitors alike.

It's not my first time to the area, but it is my first time to opt for an all-inclusive stay. Travelling with a small group of friends it has alleviated decision making. It helps that "all inclusive" at Robinson Club's Quinta da Ria is a classy affair. The guests choosing to stay in this comfortable resort are not the kind to swill beer for breakfast. Instead, there's a relaxed, friendly vibe around the expansive outdoor pool, tables are often shared on the terrace by the main restaurant, and staff and guests mingle at leisure. It's the perfect location for a multi-generational family holiday, although there are plenty of couples here too and we're not the only group of friends using the hotel as a base.

There is an array of activities on offer, ensuring all tastes are catered for. For golf aficionados, there are two fantastic 18-hole courses: the Quinta da Ria and the Quinta de Cima. With the cobalt-blue Atlantic Ocean as your backdrop, you can't help but enjoy a round here. For those with less experience or aptitude, golf pros are on hand to smooth out even the



The spectacular coast near Lagos.



most savage swing. By the end of our two-hour lesson – and we are all complete novices – we have experienced the sense of accomplishment that comes on hearing the thwack of a club hitting a ball in just the right way to launch it down the driving range. We may not yet be able to call ourselves golfers, but our enthusiasm is at an all-time high.

There are four tennis courts available for use, bicycle tours and guided beach walks, and each day the activities team challenges guests to a game of football, or a beach volleyball match. For those less athletically inclined, the WellFit area includes a full-service spa, along with a range of fitness programmes. One morning, I find myself dangling from a rope harness, contorting my body into a series of poses in an aerial yoga class. I reward that participation with a superbly relaxing massage at the WellFit spa, the therapist soothing away the last vestiges of tension from my city-living body.

The beauty of the far reaches of the Algarve can be explored on an excursion arranged by Robinson Club. From the promontory of Ponta de Piedade, a fantasy landscape of cliffs, caves, grottoes and sea arches sculpted by nature stretches along the coast, bookmarked by red-roofed lighthouses. When we stop for closer examination of the sea caves, the sea is too rough for boats to launch, but the more intrepid members of our group climb a narrow track to a birds-eye viewpoint. The remainder take the stairway down to the water line to watch the waves continue to carve their sea sculptures.



Top: The Rio Formosa.
Above left: The lighthouse of Cabo de São Vicente.
Above right: One of Robinson Club's spectacular golf courses.

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The terrace restaurant.



Robinson Club's WellFit Spa.



Grilled octopus is a treat on Tapas Night.



Golf course views.



Top: Robinson Club's rooms. Above: The pool at Robinson Club Quinta da Ria.

We make our way along the coast, pausing for lunch at a secluded beach to swim and picnic, leaping the waves that pound onto the sand. Our final stop is in the historical maritime city of Faro, where we stroll the streets and peruse the wares in the daily street market.

It's hard to pick a highlight of the Algarve, but perhaps it is the food. Each day, the chefs at Club Quinta da Ria excel, preparing a multitude of dishes. One balmy evening, we partake in a street feast around the pool, a series of stalls set up with dishes prepared on the spot, ranging from pulled lamb to curried sausages and marinated beef to stir-fried noodles. Bite-sized desserts allow for sweet sampling to complete the repast. The grilled goat cheese drizzled with honey on Tapas Night is a particular delight and the wine is crisp and fresh, as if the grapes have been crushed at a vineyard on site.

Whatever your pleasure, Quinta da Ria dishes it up in spades. The sun is warm, the pool inviting. Dive on in. ■

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INFO

For more information about Robinson Club Quinta da Ria, see www.robinson.com