

Unparalleled Portugal

While the Portuguese capital Lisbon is as beautiful and busy as any European city, the rest of this mainly rural country

By Lorraine Williams

Perhaps British rock legend Sir Cliff Richard put it best when he said, “Portugal has a peaceful feel about it. I sit on the terrace overlooking the vineyard there and I feel cut off from the world. You need that sort of thing.”

I know what he means. That feeling of relaxation and contentment hugs you like a protective blanket whether it’s mainland Portugal, basking in the warmth of the Algarve, breathing in the fragrance of flower-filled Madeira or marvelling at the infinite variety of the Azorean Islands. You just sit back and enjoy the sun, the sea and a culture that’s been long in the making.

Portugal claims it discovered Canada in 1472 (with early navigators reaching the New World some 20 years before Columbus sailed)! Perhaps that’s why Canadian vacationers feel an affinity for it.

Utilizing expertise from decades of Phoenician and Moorish settlement, Portugal built its unparalleled reputation for maritime navigation. It’s recognized in the capital, Lisbon, by an impressive monument to those adventurous explorers.

Lisbon and its rival Porto are as beautiful and busy as any European city, with riverside views, cobblestone streets, marvelous museums and inspiring cathedrals.

But the rest of this mainly rural country is laidback, with old-fashioned charm, medieval castles and picture-perfect villages scattered over meandering coastlines and flower-covered hillsides. Frequent visitor Doreen Birley, a Canadian, describes it as “filled with the scent of flowers, blossoming trees and citrus orchards.”

Even at the busiest resorts in the Algarve, it only takes a short bus ride or a walk across countryside to reveal rarely visited places offering the feeling of discovery – a sentiment close to the Portuguese soul.

This Algarve region is a particular favourite for Canadians looking for longstay accommodation. On the east and south lie the Atlantic Ocean, on the west Spain. Its magnificent one hundred kilometres of beach are perfect for strolls at any time of day. An added feature is coming upon fishing boats returning with their daily catches and looking ahead to eating fresh sardines or other seafoods perfectly cooked over a barbecue.

Add to this the unforgettable sunsets filling the cliffs, beaches and white-tiled homes with a surreal golden glow and one understands why this is a repeat destination for travellers. The popular guidebook Lonely Planet, unabashedly a fan, praises its “dramatic, end-of-the-world cliffs, wild dune-covered beaches, protected coves and long, sandy islands.”

Many young British and German families flock there as well, but tend to go in the summer when the water’s warm enough for swimming, as Canadians stay at home enjoying our sweet but short summer season.

The Algarve is also popular for its relatively low lodging costs compared to anywhere else in Europe. Although not the bargain it once was, it’s still cheaper than Spain’s popular Costa del Sol and definitely not as commercialized. A comfortable four-star apartment with kitchenette can still be had for \$1169 for a two-week stay or \$1519 for four weeks in January. Prices rise modestly for each succeeding month. Not bad, especially if the cost is shared with a friend.

Markham resident Louise Stewart knows the Algarve well, enjoying long stays for many years. “I found it offered a bit of everything. We’d walk the beach early in the morning, then have coffee on our apartment balcony. Later we’d walk or take a bus into the neighbouring town and have dinner at a little cafe. Usually we’d order the fish of the day. Then there was always some sort of entertainment at our apartment resort at night. “Later, before we retired, we’d look out and see all the fishing boats out on the ocean, their lights twinkling like stars on the water. Other days we might take a bus to Sagres or other day trips. Sometimes I’d just enjoy the sounds of the birds and the beauty of the almond blossoms.”

Weather-wise, Portugal boasts 3,000 hours of sunshine a year, the highest average for Europe. There are exceptions when there’s an unseasonal cold snap or rain.

Most visitors don't run into that. But it's best to be aware in case you're one of the few unlucky ones!

The Algarve is not the only place to find winter sun. Portugal's Azores, nine islands forming an archipelago in the mid Atlantic. With moderate temperatures year round and only occasional showers, these islands, each one with distinctive features, are places of tranquility, great natural beauty and absolutely no pollution. I highly recommend them as a great sun-filled destination of discovery.

(The recent, tragic landslides in Madeira that resulted in significant loss of life, however, means that gorgeous island will be in recovery mode for some time. But once the mending is underway, the islanders will be eager to recoup their losses and will welcome visitors once again. Contact your travel agent for up to date information.)

Author Maria Luiz Scaperlanda's impressions of Portugal coincided with other friends and my own experience: "It was full of unexpected pleasures. The people were gracious, the food delicious, especially seafood dishes. And the scenery along the coast was spectacular. I'm a beach nut and what makes Portugal and its coastline stand out for me it's the incredible combination of sunshine with colourful waters. I've never seen anything like it elsewhere."

For more information go to www.visitportugal.com.

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