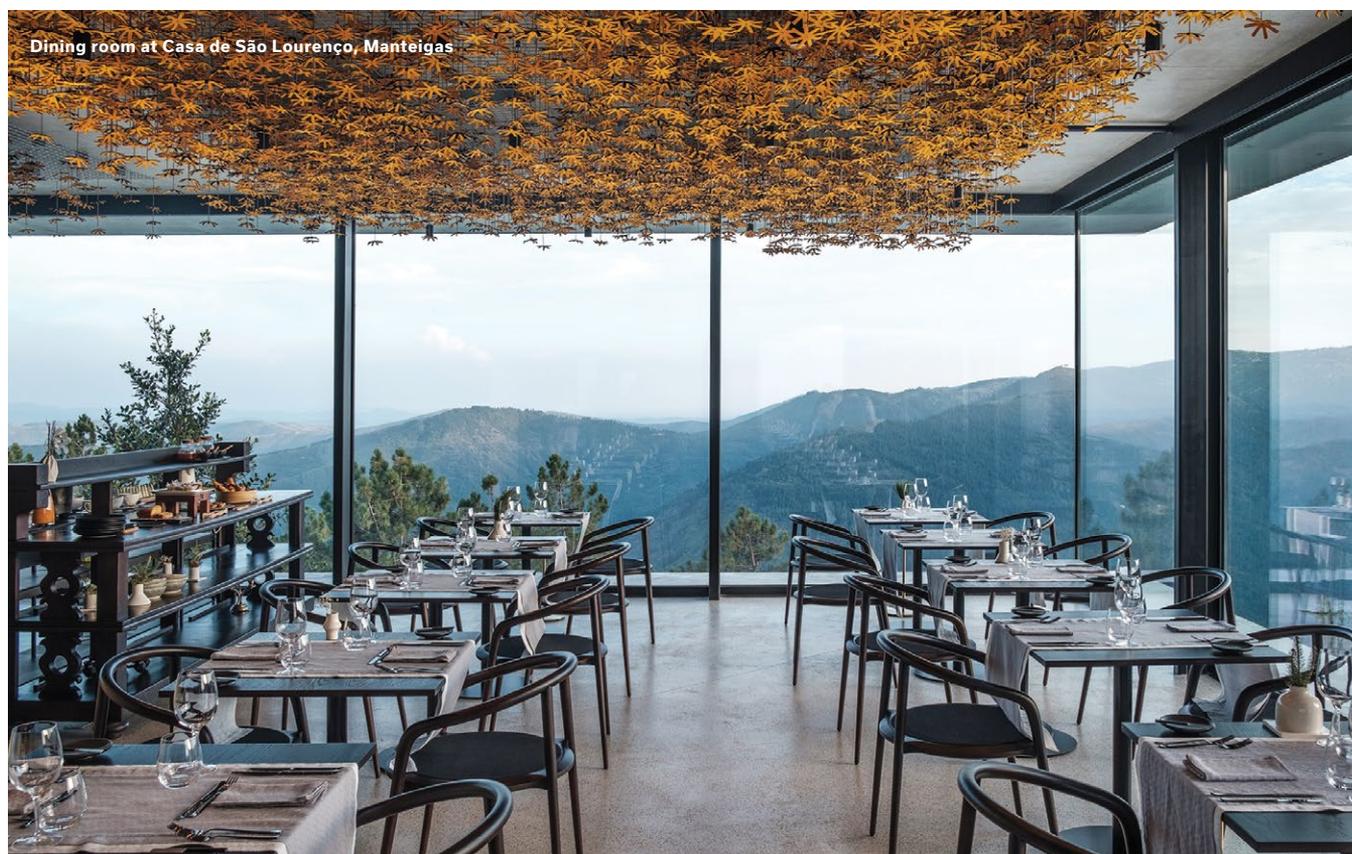


# ANDREW HARPER'S Hideaway Report<sup>®</sup>

MARCH 2021 SINCE 1979



Traveling the world in search of truly enchanting places



Dining room at Casa de São Lourenço, Manteigas

JOSE VICENTE / AGÊNCIA CALIPO

## Savoring the Pleasures of Central Portugal

Historic towns, dramatic mountain landscapes, fine Dão wines, delicious regional cuisine

The Portuguese often compare their country to California, and in some ways that isn't far-fetched. Both comprise long and relatively thin coastal strips that lie at the western edge of a much larger landmass; both have a cool, rainy northern region and a sunbaked southern one; and both have areas devoted to fine gastronomy and wine production. Of

course, California is twice as long and has a population four times as large. But why quibble? For a small country, Portugal is an exceptionally rewarding destination: Its people are welcoming, its landscapes are varied, and it is surprisingly inexpensive.

The charms of Lisbon — its great museums, fine restaurants and setting on the estuary of the Tagus River —

are well-known. What is surprising, however, is that so much of the country remains under the radar. On a recent trip, I decided to explore central Portugal, a lush green swath lying between Lisbon and Porto and stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the mountains along the border with Spain. The region combines unspoiled landscapes, historic towns like Coimbra

**Hideaway Report editors travel anonymously and pay full rate for all lodging, meals and related expenses.**

Since the launch of the Hideaway Report in 1979, featured hotels and restaurants have been selected on a completely independent basis.

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Hotel Faro & Beach Club (bottom left), overlooking the Faro Marina and the barrier islands running along the coastline to the Spanish border

## Taking a Fresh Look at the Algarve

The city of Faro, the Parque Natural da Ria Formosa and the unexpectedly charming border town of Vila Real de Santo António

**T**he Algarve, Portugal's wave-sculpted southern coast, has long been one of the most popular holiday destinations in Europe. This means you need a carefully crafted itinerary to enjoy the region beyond the crowds.

On a recent trip to Portugal, I decided to do something almost no one ever does: Explore Faro, the region's largest city and the location of its busiest airport. I've rushed through the arrivals hall numerous times on my way elsewhere, but this time I took a cab into town and discovered that it is an unexpectedly charming place.

Though not a luxury hotel, the **Hotel Faro & Beach Club** was a pleasant, well-located base in which to spend the night, with an excellent rooftop restaurant — try the sautéed baby clams and the Portuguese beef fillet in Madeira sauce — and a dramatic rooftop plunge pool. My comfortable suite was filled with light and provided lovely views over Faro's port.

My primary ambition in Faro, however, was to experience the barrier islands and lagoons that run east from the city along the coast to the Spanish

border. I'd caught a glimpse of this ecosystem during a previous trip, but I'd never visited the Parque Natural da Ria Formosa, the national park that protects these waterways. I didn't want a sightseeing expedition, but rather a spell on the water with local people who would allow me to see and understand the place through their eyes.

Which is exactly what I found in guide Cristina Nugas the following morning when I boarded her grandfather's traditional wooden fishing boat. Aside from Nugas and the boat's captain, the only other passenger aboard was her Portuguese water dog, a breed native to the Algarve that was used by fishermen for centuries to drive fish into nets, retrieve gear from the water and swim with messages from one boat to another.

"A fisherman's dog was his partner and best friend," said Nugas as we headed out across the still, dark-green waters of the creek. On gray sand banks on either side of the channel, people were digging for cockles and razor shell clams. Eventually, we stopped and joined them, sinking spades into the thick mud. We worked

for a while in the briny air and ended up with a great harvest of shellfish. Reboarding the boat, we headed to the oyster farms where the bivalves are grown on seaweed-tasseled wire racks. Our captain disembarked to make a purchase. Nugas then popped a cork on a bottle of white wine from the Alentejo, and we indulged in an oyster feast.

Returning to Faro, I wandered the cobbled streets of the city's old town on my way to a cooking lesson at Tertúlia Algarvia, a restaurant famous for its cataplana. This is a typical Algarvean dish of shellfish prepared with tomatoes, chile peppers, coriander, onions, garlic, paprika, bay leaves, olive oil, lemon juice and white wine, and cooked in a copper dish with a lid. The 45-minute lesson ended with lunch, at which I got to enjoy the fruits of my labor. Feeling inspired, I bought a cataplana dish in a shop just across the street from Tertúlia.

I then set off for Vila Real de Santo António, an hour's drive from Faro on the old coast road. I've always loved frontier towns, because of their live-and-let-live atmosphere and rogue

charm. Just across the Rio Guadiana from Spain, Vila Real de Santo António was constructed in the late 1700s by the Marquês de Pombal, the Portuguese aristocrat who rebuilt Lisbon on a grid pattern after it had been destroyed in the catastrophic earthquake of 1755. Originally intended as a bulwark against Spanish expansionism, the town boomed during the mid-19th century as the center of a thriving fish and shellfish canning industry.

That history puts the handsome and unexpectedly glamorous 30-room **Grand House** hotel in context. When it originally opened in 1926 as the Hotel Guadiana, it was the first luxury hotel in Portugal south of Lisbon. As well as business clientele, it attracted travelers who loved the endless sunshine, temperate climate and beautiful beaches. When the dictator António de Oliveira Salazar became the Portuguese prime minister in 1932, the border between Spain and Portugal was effectively sealed. Then the Depression and declining fish stocks sideswiped the local canning industry, and the Grand House eventually closed.

It reopened in 2018 after a \$2.5 million renovation. The fanciful façade, a mix of art nouveau, baroque and Orientalism, was restored, and chic new interiors were created to reflect the hotel's 1920s heyday.

The property offers a variety of room sizes, but I'd booked a first-floor Grand Suite, which had a parquet floor and high ceiling. A wrought-iron chandelier with crystal pendants hung overhead, framed etchings of Portuguese notables covered white walls with wainscoting, and the king-size bed was made up with good-quality white cotton sheets and a duvet. The small sitting room was furnished with a linen-upholstered sofa and several armchairs. A wraparound balcony afforded beautiful views over the Guadiana River. On the same floor, I discovered a charming library, the

hotel restaurant and a bar with ceiling fans and rattan chairs.

As I had arrived just before lunch, I used one of the hotel's bicycles to head to its beach club a half-mile away. Overlooking the river, it has a restaurant serving grilled fish and shellfish, plus a swimming pool and a short beach with loungers. Slightly farther afield, the Praia de Santo António is a beautiful stretch of white sand with low Atlantic breakers.

Enjoying a cocktail at the bar before a delicious dinner — grilled razor shell clams and red mullet — I fell into conversation with a Dutch couple who

were also staying at the hotel. They told me that they had been coming to the Algarve for years, staying at resorts. But now that the Grand House had reopened, they have transferred their affections “because it's so charming and comfortable, and it's much more interesting to be in a small, lively town, especially when there's a beach club and great golf courses nearby.” For my part, the Grand House is exactly the kind of place where I could happily have settled in for a much longer stay, and I very much look forward to returning to this stylish, intimate and sophisticated hotel. **HR**

Suite and entrance at the Grand House, and the town of Vila Real de Santo António (Grand House, second building from the right facing the harbor)



## GRAND HOUSE 93

**LIKE** The historic charm; excellent service; chic décor; elegant and comfortable accommodations; proximity to the beach club. **DISLIKE** The arched doorway to the lounge in my suite lacked curtains or sliding doors to close it off from the bedroom. **GOOD TO KNOW** There's no on-site parking, so you should drop your bags, get a hotel parking pass and then look for a spot nearby. *Medium River Room, \$550; Grand River Suite, \$740. Avenida da República 171, Vila Real de Santo António. Tel. (351) 281-530-290.*

*Prices quoted reflect average mid- to high-season rates (including taxes) and are subject to change.*