

BEYOND LUXURY LIVING

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WOMEN ON TOP:
**MARGARITA
FORÉS AND
VICTORIA BELO**
ON THE PURSUIT OF
OF SUCCESS
AND HAPPINESS



/ GLOBETROTTER

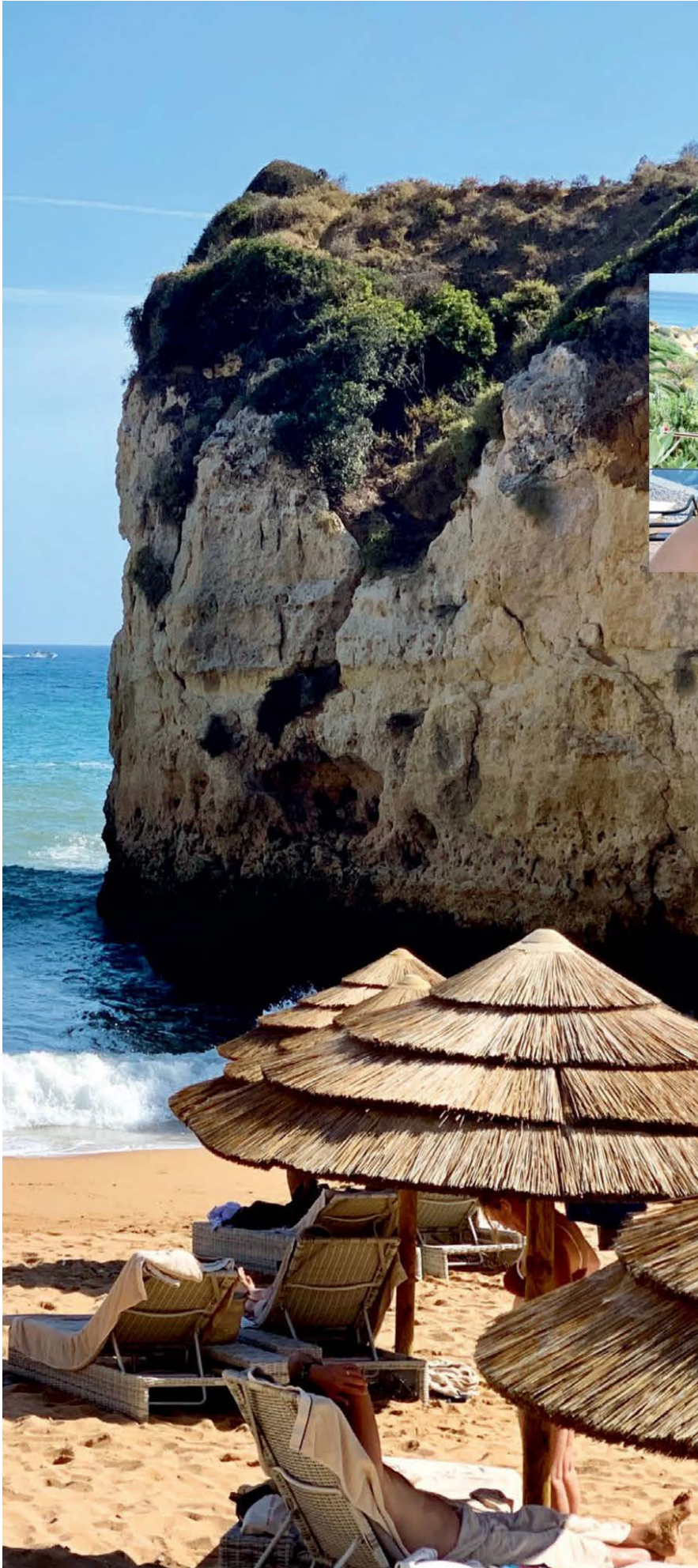
THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

INA YULO STUVE takes a West-to-East road trip through the Algarve, in the time of COVID-19

Text & Photos INA YULO STUVE



L A private access to beach lounging in VILA VITA Rare
R Brage and Ina Stuve at two-Michelin-starred Vila Joya



"You know our beaches are wild, right?" asked Lara, the manager of the rustic boutique hotel Casa Fajara. We had just arrived at the first stop of our West-East road trip through the Algarve, a region in southern Portugal that goes from the southwestern-most tip of the European continent to the Guadiana River which borders Spain. Hidden amidst the mountains of the Carrapateira village, Casa Fajara is a short distance from several beaches that feature the untamed waters that Lara talks about, making it a haven for surfers. The only other guests at the time of our visit are a German couple and their two children who went out surfing every day. They told us how they had celebrated their wedding at the hotel six years ago and loved how after a day out on the waves, they could come back and relax in the serene surroundings. With its white walls, wooden furniture, and brass décor, staying at Casa Fajara felt like being in a modernized ranch house, complete with a close-knit staff who take the time to ask us about ourselves and tell us how they came to Carrapateira and why they love it. Though every day started with a spectacular breakfast of fruits, pancakes, charcuterie, cheese, and the most delicious yogurt, Casa Fajara does not serve lunch or dinner; instead, they encourage guests to support the neighborhood businesses that specialize in fresh seafood.



- 1 Casa Fajara—view from the balcony
- 2 breakfast spread
- 3 Casa Fajara—rustic decor



THE WILD WEST

Aside from the surf crowd, Casa Fajara attracts many people who are completing the Rota Vicentina, a series of trails similar to the Camino de Compostela that snakes through southern Portugal's cliffs, mountains, and forests. We made our way to Praia da Bordeira, which is just a few minutes away by car and situated within the Costa Vicentina Natural Park. There's a laidback, hippie-like atmosphere all around and the parking lot is filled with camper vans with plate numbers from Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands. Long-haired children peek out of car windows as their parents stand outside waxing their boards. We walked across dunes, our feet digging into the ground until we arrived at a beach full of families under pitched-up umbrellas and wetsuit-clad surfers charging into the ocean. We dipped our toes into the water and got an instant shock as the cold Atlantic temperature made its way into our bones. Looking towards the end of the beach, we climbed up some rocks to get access to a long

wooden bridge that led to a viewpoint where we got a bird's eye view of the surfers in the line-up waiting patiently for the perfect wave.

The western part of the Algarve is known for being rougher—both in terms of its waters and also due to not being as developed compared to ritzy Vilamoura or nightclub-heavy Albufeira. We spend our time getting our first taste of Algarvian fare—from the deep-fried moray eel at restaurant-with-a-view A Tasca, local delicacy gooseneck barnacles at beachside joint O Sítio do Rio, and octopus with tuna bonito flakes at Restaurante O Sargo—relaxing by the pool at Casa Fajara, and driving out to Cabo São Vicente in Sagres, the edge of continental Europe. Legend has it the area is named after Saint Vicente whose bones were supposedly found in the cliffs. As we looked out onto the Atlantic, it was only natural to imagine Portugal's many famous explorers who may have sparked their curiosity for what the rest of the world could hold as they looked out onto this same view.

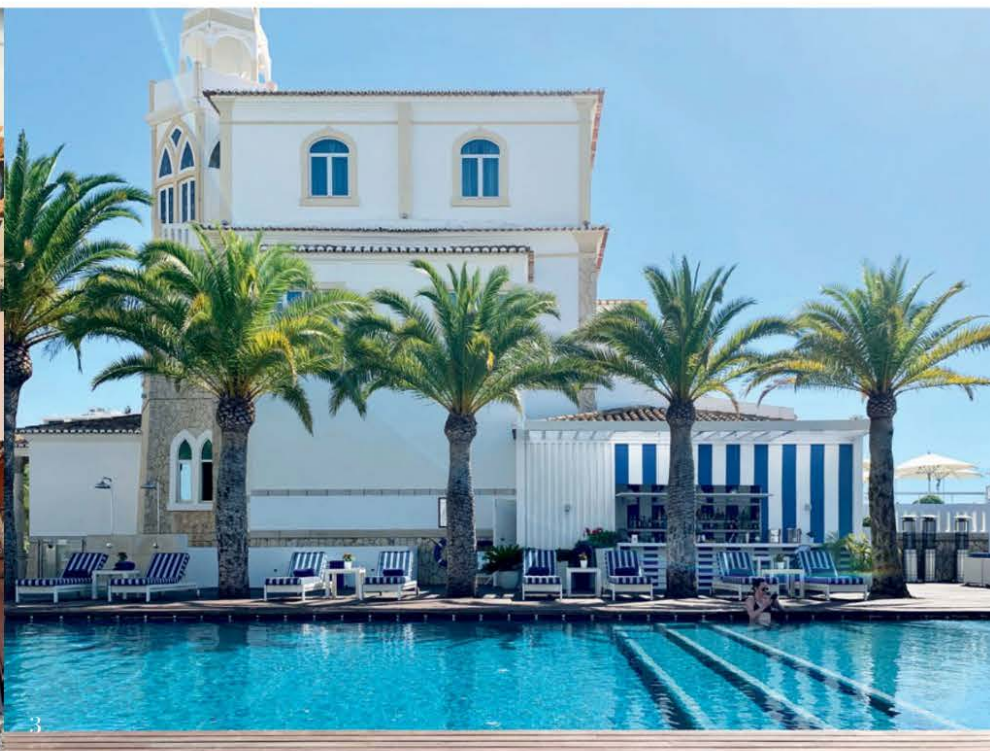


A STORIED BUILDING AND A DESERT ISLAND DAY TRIP

Portimao is a busy port city near the center of the Algarve. The town is filled with apartment blocks and the lively Avenida Tomas Cabreira is packed with street performers and tourists making their way to the popular Praia da Rocha beach. We saw people posing in front of an imposing set of gates that bore the Relais & Châteaux logo. Tucked quietly behind was the Bela Vista Hotel & Spa, our second stop. Perched on a cliff overlooking Praia da Rocha, Bela Vista has a storied past and has welcomed many notable guests—presidents, war heroes, and royalty—through its doors. “We opened as a private villa in 1918 and when we evolved into a hotel, we became one of the first hotels in the Algarve”, said Gonçalo Narciso Dos Santos, the hotel’s general manager. We were given a tour of the hotel and learned about the story of the Portuguese explorers landing in Brazil depicted in the beautiful original

T Bela Vista Hotel Spa azulejos
B Bridge view at Praia da Bordeira





azulejos (Portuguese ceramic tiles) that adorned the walls. Throughout the hotel, we saw reminders of its glamorous past—the chita-covered piano, the stained glass ceiling, a coconut husk wall feature in the bar—and the subtle but attentive service is also reminiscent of a bygone era. Our room reflected the colorful design scheme with a nautical twist and delivered excellent sunset views out on the balcony. Gonçalves told me about how after their Vista restaurant gained a Michelin star, the number of repeat guests increased drastically. We were able to sample some of the kitchen's specialties during dinner at the Bistro restaurant, including clams in lemon and garlic and the famous seafood cataplana, an Algarvian stew cooked in a copper dish thought to have been brought over by the Moors.

On one of the days of our trip, we took a speedboat out to the Ria Formosa Natural Park. A favorite of birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts, the Ria Formosa is a protected area with lagoons, marshlands, and islands. One of these islands is Ilha Deserta, an uninhabited strip that forms one of the five barrier islands spread out across the Algarve. We enjoyed a quiet afternoon on the uncrowded beach, noticing how much warmer the sea as compared to our time out west. As the only restaurant on the island, Estaminé is a destination in itself. Guests reach the crab-shaped restaurant via a wooden boardwalk flanked by the solar panels that are responsible for almost all of the kitchen's power requirements. It's of no surprise that seafood features heavily on Estaminé's menu and we eagerly tuck into a lunch of Ria Formosa oysters, breaded prawns in the Deserta special spice mix, and squid ink pasta.

- 1 Deserta prawns at Estaminé restaurant
- 2 Staircase of Bela Vista Hotel Spa
- 3 View from the pool
- 4 Monkfish at two-Michelin-starred Vila Joya
- 5 Whale restaurant
- 6 VILA VITA
- 7 Parc's lobby
- 8 VILA VITA
- 9 Parc's view from walking trail
- 10 Snacks with a view at two-Michelin-starred Vila Joya





RESORT LIFE AND MICHELIN-STARRED DINING

The next part of our trip took us to VILA VITA Parc, a family-friendly luxury resort near the town of Porches. With ten restaurants, six bars, an 11,000-bottle wine cellar, a kid's club, multiple pools, lakes, and private access to two beaches, there's something for all members of the family. Our room opened up to a private terrace where we could relax while looking out at the incredibly lush surroundings. The gardens are a big focus for the resort with flowers, tropical plants, and 5,000 palm trees greeting us as we took leisurely walks from one spot to another. The sprawling grounds cover 54 acres and the hotel staff kindly offered to take us on a golf cart tour to see it all. With tennis courts, a clifftop driving range, and secret trails, VILA VITA Parc is more like an exclusive village than a hotel. Some of our favorite memories included eating grilled prawns with a delicious Mozambique sauce at the Adega restaurant, listening to live music with a freshly-made cocktail at the Oasis Bar, and looking down on beaches and lagoons from one of the nearby walking trails.

Before heading to our final destination for the week, we decided to see the Algarve's beautiful nature and azure waters from a different angle—between a pair of ears. We met Jose, co-founder of GM Equestrian, and his horses on a dirt road in Alvor, a former fishing village by the coast. After riding through forests, past hikers, and appreciating the João de Arens beach from above, my husband surprised me with lunch at the two-Michelin-starred restaurant Vila Joya. Chef Dieter Koschina's dining destination gave us the chance to sit outdoors whilst enjoying a seasonal menu with oyster sandwiches, langoustine, monkfish, Iberian pork, and ending with his take on a banana split. It was the perfect way to experience the diverse gastronomy of the region.

VIEWS FROM THE BORDER

The final stop on our road trip brought us to the charming town of Vila Real de San Antonio, on the eastern-most part of southern Portugal. On the way there we were treated to a show of the area's attractions such as the Castro Marim castle, the white flamingos standing in the shallow water of the reserve, the salt pans to the north that is responsible for all the cured fish on restaurant menus, and the serene Guadiana river which separated us from neighboring Spain. We arrived at Grand House Algarve, another Relais & Châteaux property, and were immediately taken aback by the large chandelier looming overhead in the lobby. The interiors had a strong Art Deco theme with the hotel's blue and white scheme featuring heavily. "She's a grande dame. And yes, she's a she, but a masculine and powerful one. She likes having an old-fashioned cocktail and smoking a cigar at special events," explained general manager Marita Barth when asked about what makes Grand House Algarve so unique. She told us about the big earthquake in 1755 where a tsunami washed away almost everything in the surrounding area. Vila Real was thus built from scratch in the same Pombaline architectural style found in Lisbon's Baixa district. Marita took us on a short tour of the town center, accompanied by the hotel's mascot, a Portuguese Water Dog named Grand. The construction of the Guadiana International bridge in 1988 increased the flow of Spanish tourists to Vila Real, and during our trip, we heard almost as much Spanish as we



- 1 Roof terrace of Grand House Algarve
- 2 Grand House Beach Club
- 3 Grand House Algarve's mobile butler
- 4 Sea ravioli with caviar





did Portuguese when walking around the town. "What makes it different here is you can get two destinations in one—we're just an hour away from Spain. You can get both fado and flamenco in one trip!" exclaimed Marita.

During our stay, we spent most of our time at the Grand Beach Club, which houses the hotel's infinity pool, seaside restaurant, and bar, where hotel guests get priority access to a set of sun loungers that look out onto the waters and the Spanish beaches beyond. We got to know the hotel staff like bartender Filipe who made us perfectly-blended cocktails and paired wines to go with the tasting menu we had for dinner at the Grand Salon. Every evening, we'd enter our room to discover a new surprise left by the housekeeping staff, including a welcome spread of local delicacies, a bottle of homemade limoncello, and some post-dinner coconut pastries.

Traipsing along the cobblestone roads of Vila Real de San Antonio and floating in the warm, Mediterranean-influenced waters by the beach club made for the perfect end to our week-long sojourn. It was a great reminder that there

is a way to continue traveling and exploring new places despite difficult circumstances. Marita put it perfectly when she said: "We wanted to bring back the old charm of the 20s because back then, they had a lot of problems, but they were always ready to get the party started. We're in the 20s again now and are again having to face similar challenges. But I think we should come back to our roots and continue trying to enjoy the good things in life." Despite the troubling times, we're in and the massive blow that COVID-19 has imparted on the travel and hospitality industry, our trip to the Algarve showed us that the industry is full of people and businesses who are taking every precaution to ensure their guests can have a safe and relaxing holiday. From pouches left in our rooms with face masks and sanitizers to digital check-ins, increased cleaning schedules, and even Theodore, the social distancing stuffed bear who was strategically placed to remind guests to leave enough space between one another, the hotels and restaurants we visited during our stay all showed professionalism and genuine desire to go above and beyond the call of duty so that their guests could come back and enjoy a much-deserved holiday. ■