

A step back in time in the Algarve

Portugal will be a perfect place to unwind after a challenging year, says Katie Monk

Last year, we took a trip to the eastern Algarve, in southern Portugal. After hiring a car at Faro Airport, we headed north east to Moncarapacho. Winding our way past olive groves, rocky outcrops and men in flat caps tilling fields, we pulled up outside a huge white finca surrounded by bougainvillea and citrus trees and flanked by mountains – we'd arrived at Vila Monte Farm House.

An open fire and bottle of Murganheira, the local sparkling wine, greeted us as we settled into our room, which had sea views. Old black-and-white films played on a screen in reception as we enjoyed an aperitif before dinner at A Terra, the hotel's cosy restaurant, which serves wood-fired pizzas, local seafood and homegrown vegetables. The award-winning Monterosa olive farm is just down the road and you can take a tasting tour or just enjoy the oil on tap at the hotel. And, of course, the restaurant does full justice to Portugal's famous wines.

Vila Monte has a Capetonian beach house aesthetic, with whitewashed walls, brightly coloured cushions, driftwood furniture and crisp white linen. It's the sort of place you could spend a week just unwinding after what has been, for most, an exceptionally challenging year. In warmer months, there are two outdoor pools to lounge around, plus a beach bar and the Laranjal Restaurant. In winter, you can sit in front of the open fire. But we were determined to make the most of our trip and set out to explore the area.

The full Algarve experience

The eastern Algarve, especially around the Ria Formosa Natural Park, is blessed with swathes of dazzling white sand and turquoise sea, salt flats and sea birds. It's much calmer and more laid-back than its more popular counterparts along the coast. We took a drive to the small fishing town of Fuseta for a long, lazy lunch of freshly grilled catch of the day from one of the rustic barbecues by the river, washed down



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“This is where the well-heeled came when Algarve tourism first took off”

with a carafe of ice-cold Vinho Verde. A ferry then took us across to Fuseta Island where we enjoyed a walk and a snooze before making our way back to Vila Monte.

The next day we drove to Tavira, a pretty riverside town with yet more excellent restaurants and riverside cafes. And our last day was spent in Olhao at the famous Saturday food market. From both Tavira and Olhao you can take ferries over to a variety of islands for a *bona fide* step-back-in-time Algarve experience. For keen cyclists, there's a dedicated cycle path that runs through the national park and all the way to the other end of the Algarve along the 214km Ecovia do Litoral. If you don't have bikes or a car, all these places are easily accessible by train, or Vila Monte can arrange a beach shuttle, as well as a private beach picnic at Barra Nova. You can also book activities, from local market tours with a chef and guided hikes and horseback

rides, to fishing trips and watersports. Vila Monte feels luxurious without being pretentious, relaxing without being sleepy.

A mean Negroni at the Grand House

Our next stop was at the very tip of the eastern Algarve: the border town of Vila Real de Santo António. Famous for its grid-like streets inspired by Lisbon's Baixa, and views of Spain, this is where the well-heeled used to come when Algarve tourism was in its nascent phase, and it's experiencing something of a renaissance. Our hotel, The Grand House, is right on the riverfront – a beautiful, tastefully renovated 1920s townhouse. It's the oldest hotel in the south of Portugal, and the first five-star hotel in Vila Real de Santo António. Inside, it's all polished wood, coastal stripes, antiques and crystal chandeliers. Huge windows open out to the glistening Guadiana River below, and from here you can gaze over at Spain. As the Grand House is in town, you'll need to avail yourself of the hotel shuttle to visit its private beach club, ten minutes down the road. If you want the beach proper, it's just a bit further, and the hotel has a private section set up with sunbeds and umbrellas.

Whatever you do, visit the hotel's main restaurant, The Grand Salon, and be sure to try a signature cocktail beforehand. The bartender does a mean version of the Negroni, made with ruby port and orange liqueur, and a Vesper Martini dedicated to James Bond. Follow this with the tasting menu of local delicacies such as ocean ravioli and homemade seaweed bread.

This summer, all being well, the hotel will open its roof terrace, The Grand Secret Garden, as well as a pavement cafe. We'll be back to sample both as soon as we can and can't wait to sip on port tonics by the river, the scent of grilled fish on the breeze.

Katie was a guest of Vila Monte Farm House (from around €180, vilamonte.com) and the Grand House (from €229, grandhousealgarve.com).



The Grand House – a tastefully renovated 1920s townhouse