

I live in the Algarve. Here's why it's still lovely in winter

Traditional markets, architectural tours and historic castles are just some of the reasons to visit this region of Portugal when it's still sunny but crowd-free



The famous old lifeboat station on the beach at Fuseta

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This morning I was the only person on the beach near my home on the tiny island of Armona in the eastern Algarve. There had been heavy rain for days but just as it blew in on the back of what seemed like a mini-tornado, it had gone again. The Algarve in winter can be blessed with glorious weather: the temperature as I write is 20C. This is when the region shines, the crowds have gone and there's a seeming stillness that enfolds until the season begins again in May. You can still swim, park yourself in a sand dune to read a book or walk for miles at low tide. Here are my other top tips for this time of year.

Shopping in pretty Loulé

The inland town of Loulé has a red-domed Moorish-style covered market with fresh produce, fish, regional handicrafts and a food court. On Saturdays the surrounding streets come alive with a farmers' market and a gypsy market. Potter along the *calçadas* (Portuguese mosaic pavements) of the Cidade Velha (old town) following a route mapped out by Loulé Criativo, a project that promotes the traditional arts and crafts of the town (loulecriativo.pt). The sound of hammers on copper can be heard on the street before you enter the workshop of Analide Carmo, where you can watch this master craftsman make copper cataplanas, the clam-shaped cooking vessels synonymous with the Algarve. Watch women weaving palm leaves

at Casa da Empreita, then stop by the pottery studio Oficina do Barro.

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Loulé is a creative market town

ALAMY

Castro Marim's medieval castle

This lovely little village between two hilltops has one of the most important medieval castles in the country. It's a bit of a climb but once you get up there you are met with views across the Guadiana River to the province of Huelva in Spain. Before that, you see the fort of Sao Sebastiao, the salt marshes and the bridge connecting Portugal with its Iberian neighbour. Construction of the fort began in 1641 when the two countries were at war. It is closed to the public except during the annual medieval festival in the last week of August, when Castro Marim turns into a medieval village with games, battle re-enactments and a handicraft fair. Try some *petiscos* (small snacks) and an artisan beer

or a glass of mead at Taberna Velho Cavalinho (plates from £4; facebook.com/tabernamedievalvelhocavalinho2014).

Follow an architectural tour on your phone

The old lifeboat station is a red-and-yellow structure lying dilapidated on the beach at Fuseta. You can see it from miles away.

Download a pocket guide by the retired architect Will Köhlen, who has produced guides to the architecture of the Algarve (free; pocketsights.com, see more at architouralgarve.com). On his tour of this wonderful little town (which skirts the Ria Formosa and has a town beach as well as its own island), highlights include the art nouveau-style Vila do Carmo and the Bairro Casas para Pescadores: social housing built for fishermen in about 1945. Fuseta has fabulous, and cheap, waterfront restaurants for grilled fish, as well as a sweet little town square lined with cafés. It has a great flea market next to the campsite on the second Sunday of the month.

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In the last week of August Castro Marim turns into a medieval village with its festival

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Where to stay

Viceroy at Ombria Algarve

Just north of Loulé is the newly opened Viceroy at Ombria Algarve, a hillside retreat with 141 rooms, including suites with private pools and hot tubs, small kitchens, pantries and dressing rooms. It's modelled on a Portuguese village, and heart of the resort is the cobblestoned *praça* (main square), with restaurants, cafés and bars. There's even a clock tower and historic castle. There are four swimming pools; a pool bar serving cured fish, finger foods, oysters and champagne; a kids' club with a playroom and nursery; a spa; and an 18-hole golf course. The main road and paths feature outdoor art, water features, benches and bicycles for guests.

Details B&B doubles from £450 (ombria.com)

- [Why now is the time to visit the Algarve's secret green corner](#)



The spa at the Viceroy Ombria

SANDA VUCKOVIC

Hospederia, Cacelha Velha

Once a roadside tavern, post office and shop, this little cluster of buildings around a crossroads has been reimagined as a five-room guest house a stones' throw from the breathtaking coastal village of Cacelha Velha. There's a small pool with an honesty bar and breakfasts are served on the terrace and feature fruit and eggs from neighbouring farms and bread and pastries from a nearby bakery. On cooler days there's a fire and indoor dining area. A tuk-tuk will rattle you along country roads to nearby beaches and meals are available at big sister guest house Pensão Agrícola, a 1km stroll through a meadow away.

Details B&B doubles from £203
(hospedaria.com.pt)

- [16 of the best family hotels in the Algarve](#)

Quinta do Pinheiro, Ria Formosa Natural Park

Quinta do Pinheiro (farm of the pines) features a collection of five sweet guesthouses on a family estate dating from 1870 near the small town of Luz de Tavira. The houses, which have either two or three bedrooms, are charming, with red-painted windows and door frames and stylish interiors with natural materials. They share a pool and have their own kitchens and terraces. The hotel is in an avocado orchard and vineyard. It is a quiet, luxurious place to slow down. Retreats are available, including golf combined with Pilates.

Details One night's room-only for four from £264 (quintapinheiro.com)

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The houses at Quinta do Pinheiro have either two or three rooms

Where to eat

Treebuto Vinoteca, Olhao

This new vinoteca in what was an old hardware shop is upmarket for the salty dog fishing town of Olhao. It's a wine shop and restaurant with a menu that features fine Iberico ham and the best cheeses as well as savoury snacks such as duck croquettes with orange mayonnaise and the traditional Portuguese prego (steak sandwich) with homemade chips. Bigger appetites (and wallets) will wander down the menu to carabineiro (giant red prawns) served with champagne sauce, and sea bass fillet on a bed of xerem (similar to polenta) with a coriander foam. You can taste wines from Portuguese makers by the glass or buy a bottle to drink at the table or take home (mains from £16; treebuto.pt).

Treebuto is a wine shop and restaurant

Cha com Agua Salgada, Manta Rota

On the edge of sand dunes overlooking the expansive beach at Manta Rota, to the east of Tavira, Cha com Agua Salgada (tea with saltwater) has a more expansive menu than the typical grilled fish restaurants of the region.

Mains this year include small-spotted catshark cataplana with sweet potatoes, deep-fried bread, seaweed, samphire and coriander, and venison fillet with leek, shallot and red-fruit sauce.

There's a children's menu too (mains from £16; chacomaguasalgada.com).

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