1 Family Highlights of the Algarve
I first visited Portugal in 1972 as a long-haired teenager, on the way home to my first year at university after a summer spent hitchhiking around France, Spain and Morocco. Crossing the border from Spain into the quiet hinterland of the Algarve and the Alentejo, I remember being struck by how peaceful, even backward, the country seemed. Farmers rode mules or carried their produce to market in donkey carts, fishermen hauled nets by hand, barefoot children herded fat sheep and skinny goats in pastures shaded by cork oak groves. That apparent rural idyll, of course, concealed a great deal of rural poverty.

It’s not surprising that, when Portugal's backward-looking dictatorship collapsed three years after my first visit, the people whose lives at first sight looked so idyllic took to tourism with a will.
Few places in Europe have beaches that can match the Algarve’s great sweeps of white and gold sand, stretching from the mouth of the River Guadiana – which forms the border with Spain – all the way to Cape St Vincent and Henry the Navigator’s fortress at Sagres, where Portuguese navigators like Vasco da Gama and the wonderfully named Fernando Poo set off into the unknown.

And nowhere has a climate that makes such beaches accessible all year round. While researching part of this book in February 2007 hardy toddlers were splashing in the low-tide shallows of the huge, empty beach at Carrapateira, while wet-suited surfers rode the waves at Sagres’s Praia de Beliche and teenage dinghy sailors raced across the waters off Ilha de Tavira. The temperature reached 21°C one afternoon. On most British beaches, that’s something we dream about even in mid-summer. Equally family-friendly are summer temperatures that average around 26°C and rarely soar above 30°C – hot, but not too hot, and tempered by cooling Atlantic breezes.

A mixture like that makes a tourism boom inevitable, and the Algarve has boomed indeed since the first time I went there. Thousands of British families visit every year, and enterprising locals have built an array of purpose-made, family-friendly visitor attractions to complement the Algarve’s natural advantages – from tennis academies and riding schools to karting tracks, zoos, and a plethora of water parks, boat rides and other intriguing choices for families.

Let’s not forget the region’s history. There’s a limit to how many Manueline churches you can drag the children round before the whingeing starts (about one, in my experience) but even boring old cathedrals can throw up surprise treats – like a spooky chapel full of skulls and bones, or a bell-tower occupied by a family of fledgling storks. And almost every hilltop, harbour and headland has a castle or fortress with a story to tell of knights and princesses, from the wars against the Moors and the Spaniards to the battles of Wellington’s red-coats and their Portuguese allies against the French.

Getting back to basics, the Algarve’s tourism has been driven mainly by British families, so resorts are user friendly – it’s rare to find a restaurant without an English version of the menu, there are zillions of child-friendly ice-cream parlours (enough for a different flavour for every day of the week), and if you can’t persuade the family to sample easy-to-like Portuguese dishes such as grilled sardines it’s easy enough to find comfort-food standbys such as fish fingers, burgers and beans on toast.

Most town centres have a pedestrian zone covering the main shopping and strolling areas, and many hotels are right on the beach. That said, the less you pay for your accommodation, the less family friendly it is likely to be and the more likely you are to have roads to cross to get to the sand. On top of this, many of the resorts in the west – such as Portimão – are perched on cliffs above the beach, making for fantastic views but meaning that the beach is less accessible to families with
toddlers, who may have to be carried up long flights of steps when tired. When planning your day remember many shops and businesses, along with museums and heritage attractions, close down for a couple of hours in the middle of the day.

For any family – whether with tots and toddlers, pre-teens or active teenagers – the Algarve is a great holiday destination, offering almost year-round sunshine, superb beaches, and just enough purpose-built visitor attractions and heritage sites to keep the family entertained and engaged. So, what are you waiting for?

ALGARVE FAMILY HIGHLIGHTS

Best Family Events The Algarve has a full calendar of events, ranging from deeply traditional religious festivals that have been held for more than 1,000 years to an array of world-class cultural and sporting fixtures including major tennis, golf and motor sports events. The less important religious events – such as local saints’ days – are beyond the comprehension of most non-Portuguese families, and the big-ticket sporting dates are aimed more at an adult audience, but there are a handful of events that are perfect for families with children of all ages.

Carnival is celebrated all over Portugal in mid-February, and the Loulé Carnival is far and away toddlers, who may have to be carried up long flights of steps when tired.

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It’s very easy to travel on from the Algarve into western Andalusia – and if you have a taste for sightseeing, a trip across the border is highly recommended. No formalities are required. If the Algarve has one small drawback, it is the lack of city sights with a high ‘wow factor’ and a real sense of history. If this is the kind of thing you want from a holiday, you’ll find it in Seville, Huelva, Jerez de la Frontera and Cádiz, just across the now transparent Spanish frontier, and along with piles of heritage you will also discover some of Spain’s finest beaches along the Costa de la Luz – the last relatively undeveloped stretch of coastline in Spain. Two fantastic regions in two countries for the price of one!
the most colourful and accessible in the Algarve. From deep religious roots, it has evolved into a three-day event with flower-covered floats and parades, street dancing and music. Anyone can join in – OK, it’s not Carnival in Rio or Mardi Gras in New Orleans, but the smaller scale means it’s a lot less overwhelming for smaller children and most children will be enthralled and enjoy the spectacularly costumed dancers (see p. 54).

From 7th June to 7th October, the International Sand Art Festival (FIESA) at Areias de Pêra has to be the Algarve’s top family fixture. Every year, ‘sand artists’ from all over the world descend on this stretch of beach near Albufeira to create a ‘city’ of gobsmacking, colossal wonders of the world, from gigantic Buddha images to Lord of the Rings style castles, cathedrals and monsters. Prepare for the children to be inspired – but prepare too to spend the rest of your holiday as a hod carrier while they construct a scale copy of Hogwarts Academy or Snow White’s Castle (see p. 83).

The unspoilt seaside village of Cacela Velha, east of Faro, goes all Arabian Nights for four evenings in July in a kitschy but fun recreation of the Algarve’s 10th–13th century Moorish past, the Moorish Nights. There’s a Moroccan-style open-air market in the square outside Cacela Velha’s miniature medieval castle, giving children the chance to blow their holiday pocket money on souvenirs brought over from Tangier (not so very far away) and you can sit cross-legged on cushions eating Moroccan dishes and sipping mint tea, while watching belly dancers and listening to Berber musicians create a reverberating wall of sound (see p. 156).

**Best Towns & Cities** On the map, the Algarve appears to have a good share of fair-sized cities. In fact, it hasn’t got a single big city in the true sense of the word. The suburban sprawls that have mushroomed around Faro, Lagos and Portimão are products of the tourism boom of the last 30 years – all geared to comprehensive resort holidays. However, if you’re looking for a slice of easily accessible heritage that even younger children can relate to – and that will provide young people aged 10 and up with plenty of fodder for the next school history project – head for the historic core of Faro or the lovely old riverside towns of Tavira and Vila Real de Santo António.

Faro’s old quarter, within the remnants of its medieval walls, is a medley of cobbled streets overlooked by the bell-tower of the cathedral (which is often occupied by a family of storks), and outside the walls is a traffic-free zone of shops, cafés and ice-cream parlours. Tavira has a pretty riverside esplanade, the remains of a medieval castle, islands to visit just offshore and – best of all – a quirky and unique attraction, the camera obscura, sited in a former water tower and offering a seemingly magical 360-degree...
Family Highlights of the Algarve

panorama of the city. It also hosts a lively array of summer markets and street entertainment that will keep children entranced for hours (see p. 157). Vila Real de Santo António has a special feel as it looks across the river to Spain – just a short drive away across a highly scenic new suspension bridge – and on its doorstep are some of the Algarve’s hugest and least crowded beaches at Monte Gordo. Inland, only a 10–15 minute drive away, is the atmospheric stronghold of Castro Marim, surrounded by the wild wetlands of a natural park (see p. 153).

But, if you must build an outstanding historic city into your trip, the thing to do is head east, across the Spanish border, to Seville – it’s doable as a day trip (by car or train) from the central and eastern Algarve, but well worth an overnight stay (see p. 180).

Best Resorts In a sense, the Algarve from Faro west as far as Lagos is one big resort, with miles of hotels, apartments and villa developments spreading either side of former fishing villages such as Quarteira, Albufeira, Portimão and Lagos, and golf courses and tennis course resorts stretching inland as far as the A22 motorway – all served by Faro’s international airport. Each has its stretch of sandy beach, often merging imperceptibly with other strands to east and west offering Brits a great choice. Families looking for resorts with all the trimmings will probably want to stick to this central stretch of coast. Those with cash to flash will like the more upscale enclaves – notably Vilamoura and its surroundings and the Algarve’s ultimate big-spender’s oasis, Vale do Lobo. Quarteira and Albufeira are bucket-and-spade brigade havens.

To the west, Portimão’s beaches are among the Algarve’s postcard icons and are about as well supplied with family-friendly facilities as it is possible to imagine (though getting to them from a clifftop hotel can be a challenge for the pushchair-encumbered). Still further west, Lagos is less a resort than a fishing port on steroids – its beaches, and its satellite resort at Luz, are well out of town. Heading out into the Atlantic, the small resorts between Luz and Sagres are less than ideal for families – great beaches, but the surf can be intimidating and facilities are limited. East of Faro, the beaches are more sheltered and the resorts are smaller and much more low key – perfect for families with smaller children looking for no more than soft sand, warm sun and gentle waves, and mainly geared for those looking for a holiday in a self-catering villa or apartment complex. The only full-service resort at this end of the Algarve is the much-maligned Monte Gordo, which deserves a much better write up than it usually gets – the beach goes on for miles and miles, there are still touches of fishing village colour in the shadow of its high-rises,
and it has family-friendly facilities without the urban sprawl of the big resorts to the west.

**Best Water Parks** You might think the Algarve is already blessed with enough natural sandy beaches to satisfy the most demanding family, but get to a good water park and the temptation will always be there to return. Some parents end up going back two or three times to the same site once children are hooked on a certain attraction or show. There’s a spaghetti junction of flumes, pools and rubber-raft rides (as well as sun-loungers, bars and restaurants) across the Algarve waiting to be delved into.

The longest established of these great days out is **Aqualand**, at Alcantarilha; the best pick for families with toddlers as there is a special pool and play area for younger children. It has plenty for gung-ho older children too – the literally breathtaking 92-metre Kamikaze is the Algarve’s longest speed chute, and the 23-metre Banzai is Portugal’s highest water slide. The downside is that in high season – which is, inevitably, when British families are most likely to be there – there can be long queues for the most popular rides. This is unfortunately true, also, of the Algarve’s other top water park, **Slide and Splash**, near Estombar – which has an even bigger choice of thrills and spills. If standing in line for 20 minutes for a 30-second plunge is likely to shred your nerves avoid weekends, when local families as well as holidaymakers flock here for rides such as the terrifying Black Hole. Aqualand and Slide and Splash add new rides most summers so visit their websites (see p. 97 and p. 96) for the latest developments.

**Best Animal Parks & Aquariums** It takes a bit of finding, because it’s not in fact in Lagos but tucked away in the countryside about 20 minutes from the city centre, but **Lagos Zoo** is bound to please children, with its friendly macaws and cockatoos, hooting gibbon...
family, and island-dwelling troops of lemurs and marmosets (see p. 132). Zoomarine, just outside Guia off the A22 motorway, claims green credentials, but with its dolphin show, trained seals and sea-lions, sharks, sea turtles and coral reef fish, it has more than a touch of the circus. Some eco-conscious parents may have qualms about this (I know I do), but there is no doubt that it delights children (see p. 97).

**Best Islands** Separated from the quintessentially pretty town of Tavira by a narrow channel, Ilha de Tavira is the perfect castaway island for families. It’s easy to get to, has a choice of places to eat, is completely traffic free, and best of all has a beach of white sand peppered with seashells where young beachcombers can paddle, swim and explore for hours. If you’re prepared to camp, you can even stay here (see p. 154).

Ilha da Armona, a 15-minute ferry ride from Olhão, has sheltered lagoon beaches and even more bars and restaurants, but because it’s so close to Faro it does get crowded, especially on summer weekends (see p. 67).

For a bit more peace and quiet, try neighbouring Ilha da Culatra, a 45-minute boat ride from Olhão, or Ilha da Barreta, a 30-minute ferry ride from Faro.

**Best Natural Attractions** Your first view of the Parque Natural da Ria Formosa will be from the air, as your holiday jet banks in to land at Faro airport – from a window seat, you should have a good view of the Natural Park’s tidal labyrinth of sandbanks, islands and narrow channels, and the white, v-shaped wakes of fishing boats. The gliding storks, flamingos and wading spoonbills make this a special place for anyone with an interest in the natural world, and the web-footed Portuguese water dogs make it even more special (see p. 158).

**Best Boat Trips** With more energetic older children, you can explore the Ria Formosa (see above) on foot or by bike, but it’s a huge area and with smaller children the way to see it is from a boat (especially if dad is, like the
author, a fan of Francis Ford Coppola’s quintessential going-up-a-muddy-river-in-a-boat movie, *Apocalypse Now*. Key quote: ‘Never get off the boat’). (See p. 159.)

Other great boat trips include the schooner sunset cruise from Vilamoura Marina, which has mass appeal; while from Sagres you can take a deep-sea fishing trip that’s probably better as a father-and-son bonding experience than as fun for all the family (see p. 126).

**Best Outdoor Activities** The Algarve opens a cornucopia of outdoor activities for older children, ranging from surfing on the beaches of Sagres and Carrapateira on the west coast (see p. 126 and p. 129), where there are several surf schools that welcome young teenagers, to tutored dinghy sailing in the more sheltered waters around Ilha de Tavira or on the estuary of the Rio Arade, near Portimão (see p. 151 and p. 100). Across the border into Spain, east of Cádiz, some of Europe’s best surf, kiteboarding and windsurfing beaches can be found.

On land, upscale sports resorts such as Vale do Lobo and Quinta do Lago offer tennis academies and golf coaching for youngsters – though at a price that is well beyond the reach of most parents (see p. 67). Several companies also offer four-wheel-drive trips into the wilder hinterland of the Algarve, which can be a good laugh for older children but not for anyone under 10.

Luckily the Algarve is set up for less structured activities from running down the beach, the simple family pleasures of beachcombing on the mile-long sands between Faro and Tavira or burying dad’s car keys!

**Best Markets** Local tourist boards and many tour operators and hotels make much of the region's so-called ‘gypsy markets’, but their claims need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Some Portuguese attitudes to its ‘gypsy’ community are deeply tainted by what can sometimes be interpreted as racism, so that promoting markets that were once picturesque is cynical at best. Political correctness aside, ‘gypsy markets’ in Faro and elsewhere now have little claim to colourful authenticity, and their stock in trade tends to be the cheapest of cheap tat. Most children will find them disappointing and even a little scary.

Mértola Market
A lot more authentic, and much more interesting, are the region’s fish and produce markets. For an education in edible marine life, take them to the morning fish markets at Quarteira or Olhão, and for an eye-opening change from your local supermarket, seek out the main municipal market in any of the region’s major towns – especially Faro, Tavira, Portimão and Lagos – where the sight of local housewives sorting through heaps of fresh fruit and vegetables and butcher’s stalls where recently slaughtered calves, chickens and piglets hang is guaranteed to give the entire family a Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall style reality check.

Tavira’s indoor market, which is housed in a vast new building at the east end of town (at the end of Rua João Anas, opposite the Hotel Vila Galé) is one of the most user friendly and good for a visit in all weathers.

Best Castles Dotted at strategic points around the Algarve are castles built by crusading Portuguese kings (and their Moorish, Roman and even Carthaginian predecessors). One or two, like the little fortress overlooking the sea at Cacela Velha, are still in use by the Portuguese armed forces. On the waterfront at Lagos, the fairy-tale miniature fortress now houses a museum and art gallery.

Much more imposing (and free) is Castro Marim, with its battlements commanding a hilltop with a view across the river to Portugal’s old enemy, Spain. All that remains of Tavira’s castle is a pretty walled garden and a square tower with great views across the old town, but like Castro Marim, entrance is free. The daddy of them all, however, has to be Henry the Navigator’s Fortaleza at Sagres, where a line of ramparts defends the neck of one of the world’s great natural defensive sites, a peninsula ringed by unscaleable cliffs hundreds of feet high.

THE BEST ACCOMMODATION

The Algarve has a well-deserved reputation for luxury villas and golf resorts at one end of the budget scale – and for cheap and cheerful apartment complexes at the other. But look beyond these to find a much wider and imaginative choice of places to stay.

For those with deep pockets, there are lavish five-star hotels and villa complexes that are self-contained resorts in their own right.

Windmill
These are perfect for a stay-put holiday, with everything you could want right on your doorstep, and enough facilities and activities to keep the whole family busy for a week or even a fortnight without ever leaving the resort. Less gleamingly new, but perhaps with more genuine Portuguese character, are the (surprisingly affordable) pousadas. Most of these are historic buildings – convents, monasteries and even palaces – that have been converted into comfortable and individual hotels, with pools, courtyards and gardens that are safe places for children to play in, some excellent restaurants, and secure off-street parking, and most are located slap in the historic centre of some of the region’s most attractive towns. That said, they’re perhaps better for a shorter stay, or as part of a multi-stop touring holiday, than for a long holiday.

At the other end of the price scale, well-managed campsites are strategically located along the coast, and for those who can’t be bothered lugging a tent all the way to Portugal they offer tent rentals and even simple beach chalets with en-suite shower and WC. Away from the beach, the Algarve and the Alentejo also have a growing number of guest-house-style places to stay in former farms or country estates – some of which still have chickens, pigs, sheep and horses, children will be happy to know.

Best Self-Contained Resorts
Covering 400 hectares of groomed grounds and set on a 2-km stretch of beach, Vale do Lobo is the swankiest address in the Algarve, with gorgeous villas and apartments, facilities including baby-sitters and nannies on request, a large children’s village with animators, child-minders and its own pool and mini-golf course, and a tennis academy where your budding Wimbledon stars can be coached by world-class tennis aces. It also has its own supermarket and designer boutiques, 15 very good restaurants, tennis courts, golf courses, and other activities ranging from lawn bowls to volleyball, yoga, aerobics and wooden-top spinning (see p. 56).

Le Méridien Penina scores equally highly – and a smidge more affordably – with its Penguin Village for children, offering everything from an adventure playground to a children’s pool and slide, crèche, paints and craft materials, bikes, movies and a bouncy castle, along with five-star rooms and suites, cots (in both Penguin Village and in parents’ rooms), and babysitting (see p. 112).

Best Inland Accommodation
Almost all the Algarve’s accommodation is on the beaches, but if you prefer to seek out something away from the resorts, Quinta dos Amigos is a former farm (it has pools for grown-ups and children) on three acres of gardens and farmland, with accommodation in two-person studios and one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments (the
largest sleep up to seven people) in converted farm buildings. It has its own riding stables (for riding lessons, beach rides and guided trail riding) and babysitting is available on request. Breakfast and dinner are not included in the price, but can also be arranged. It’s an excellent compromise between self-catering and hotel-style accommodation (see p. 71).

**Best Grand Hotels** Set among gardens and palm trees, just a minute’s walk from Tavira’s ruined castle, the Hotel Convento da Graça is outstandingly dignified and grand without being intimidating. There’s a large inner courtyard, and behind the hotel are grassy lawns in which you’ll find a toddlers’ pool as well as a full-sized pool with umbrellas and sun-loungers. With fewer than 40 rooms and suites, it’s not too crowded even when full. If your budget will stretch to it, go for the best of the five suites, which has its own terrace and garden. Breakfast is buffet-style, which is handy for picky and impatient children, and parents in need of a discreet hair of the dog can start the day by helping themselves to a complimentary glass of sparkling wine. It also has off-street parking (see p. 167).

**Best Stay Near an Unspoilt Beach** On a verdant hilltop within sight of the rolling surf of the west coast at Carrapateira, where there’s not a sign of a high-rise hotel or apartment block, the Monte Velho Nature Resort is run by the friendly Balsemão family, who have young children themselves and so understand family needs. Accommodation is in single-storey, ranch-house style abodes opening onto a pretty garden (with a toddlers’ pool); this is definitely for people looking for a self-sufficient, quiet holiday as there is very little to Carrapateira apart from sand, surf and scenery. Peace at last! See p. 141.

**Best Pousadas** In the rolling hinterlands of the Alentejo, luxury pousadas are surprisingly suitable for families with younger children. Housed in a former convent, the Pousada de São Francisco in the historic centre of sleepy Beja has big, safely enclosed gardens full of palm trees, goldfish ponds, nesting swallows and swimming pools for adults and children, plus a small play area with a tree house, swings and slide. It also has off-street car parking. See p. 221.

In Alvito, a very pretty small town that is a great base for exploring the Alentejo countryside, the Pousada Castelo de
Alvito is in a medieval castle complete with turrets and battlements with views for miles around, and safe, pretty lawned gardens with a pool suitable for tots under supervision as well as parents, and a resident mob of rare and magical white peacocks that occasionally hop over the wall to roam the village streets. Wannabe princesses should book the Queen’s Room, with its four-poster bed. See p. 223.

Best Campsite  
Camping Tavira, under pine trees on Ilha de Tavira, is the perfect castaway campsite. You can only get there by boat (a five-minute hop from the jetty at Quatro Águas) and it’s just one minute’s toddle to the island’s huge sandy beach (with lifeguards, a first-aid station and half a dozen cafés and restaurants, so even if you’re in tents you needn’t live out of tins). It’s Robinson Crusoe Algarve style with all the nice extras (and company) Daniel Defoe didn’t provide. Bring your own tent or rent one for up to six people complete with mattresses, sheets and sleeping bags. Older children may enjoy sleeping in their own pup-tent next door to mum and dad. The site has security guards, and there’s a store room where you can lock up valuables (see p. 168).

THE BEST EATING OPTIONS

The Algarve is purpose-built for family tourism – 40 years ago, it hardly existed as a holiday destination, and most of the restaurants, bars and cafés that now exist have been built quite recently with holidaymakers in mind. The positive aspect of this is that virtually all are very well accustomed to the needs of British families, but the downside is a certain uniformity. In addition, the lifespan of an Algarve restaurant is often short – last year’s favourite fish restaurant may close down and reopen under new management next year as a Tex-Mex burger bar.

Families looking for familiarity will be reassured by a tourism infrastructure built on British requirements, but more independent families should look to areas offering both convenience and a range of cuisine. There are very few restaurants with special options for children, such as highchairs, outside major resort hotels or ex-pat establishments, however, the Portuguese are very welcoming of children, flexible and used to having them gambolling around. Parents won’t be fussed about child-specific amenities when the welcome is so friendly.

Even more positively in Portugal – if your children can be wheedled into sampling unfamiliar dishes – the typical Portuguese menu features an array of small snack dishes. With a range from sausages and olives to shrimps, sardines and other seafood, as well as salads, there is rarely any objection to ordering a tapas-style selection of small dishes for children to sample, rather than full-sized adult main dishes.
Restaurants on Beaches
Restaurants right on the beach are the best of all worlds for families, allowing parents to linger over coffee while children hopping up and down to do something else can head straight back to the sand after lunch. Fortunately, the Algarve has plenty, clustered along the beach boardwalks at the main holiday centres. There’s a particularly good choice of purpose-built eating places on Portimão’s spectacular Praia da Rocha, overlooked by steep cliffs, where restaurants such as Castelos and O Âncora stand on a wooden boardwalk that stretches all the way along the beach. Just outside Faro, Praia de Faro has the biggest choice of beach restaurants (often very busy on summer weekends). In the east, traffic-free Ilha de Tavira has a cluster of restaurants and cafés on a huge beach, including the value-for-money Restaurante Ilha Formosa, and the cheap-as-chips Dinoself self-service café. There are more in the very shadow of the giant apartment pyramids of Monte Gordo, and at Praia Verde, where Pézinhos n’Areia is popular with locals for its wide seafood menu and where children can play on the beach within sight while parents eat. It’s worth noting that not many of these places stay open all through the winter, though you will usually find at least one restaurant serving lunch on any of the beaches on winter weekends, if not through the week (see p. 151).

Restaurants in Resort Hotels
For the full works such as crayons and high chairs, most of the Algarve’s resort hotels have a range of eating places that cater especially for families and even just for children. The luxury Le Méridien Penina, near Alvor, has a special children’s restaurant, Penguin Mac, as part of its Penguin Village for children, as well as children’s menus at its other restaurants (see p. 112).

Fish Restaurants
Portimão wins hands-down when it comes to fish and seafood
restaurants, with a string of half-a-dozen modern establishments serving fresh-caught sardines at sunny outdoor tables on the quayside north of Largo Francisco A. Maurício, where you can watch the fishing boats and yachts on the river while you wait for your meal. More authentic fish restaurants can be found hidden beneath the arches of the road bridge, just inland from the former fish market at Largo da Barca, where at *Forte y Fejo* (see p. 115) you can select your sea bass, bream or huge grouper from trays of crushed ice, or choose your lobster from those living beneath the aquarium-style dining-room floor.

**British-style Pubs & Restaurants** Around half of those who visit the Algarve each year come from the UK, and there’s also a large expatriate population. British-style (and often British-run) pubs and restaurants have appeared to service this captive market, so families who get homesick for familiar home cooking (from roast beef and fish and chips through to chicken masala, pizza and chilli burgers) are spoilt for choice. The biggest hot-spots for this kind of culinary experience are Quarteira and Albufeira’s famous (some would say notorious) strip, a continuous avenue of pubs, bars and restaurants – including, at last visit, the Kilt and Celt pub, the Rover’s Return and the Dog and Duck, which gives you some idea of the ambience of the area. A great compromise in Quarteira is *Fernando’s Hideaway* – a local institution that serves massive steaks, Sunday roasts and fish and chips as well as Portuguese standards, and has a children’s menu and some vegetarian specials.

**Vegetarian Restaurants** Like the rest of Portugal, the Algarve could do more for vegetarians. Portuguese cooking leans heavily towards meat and fish, sometimes in unusual combinations such as pork with clams, and in most places veggies will be fobbed off with omelettes and uninspired salads. *Restaurant Ribatejano*, in Faro (see p. 74) promotes itself as a purely vegetarian eating place but strict vegetarians will be surprised to see bacalhau (dried salt cod) dishes on the menu along with vegetable rissoles, tofu omelette and soya burgers. More upscale restaurants within the upmarket hotels and pousadas generally make a bigger effort, with at least one gourmet veggie offering on their costly menus, but at street level vegetarians are better off choosing self-catering accommodation and relying on the plentiful supply of lovely fresh fruit and vegetables, local cheeses, olives and other non-meat treats in local markets and shops.

**Luxury Restaurants** The Algarve has more than its fair share of very posh restaurants for
special occasions, including some with Michelin stars. At the **Hotel Vila Joya** in Albufeira, Austrian chef Dieter Koschina’s cooking stands head and shoulders above the rest – he’s the only chef in Portugal to hold two Michelin stars. Koschina sources the finest ingredients – such as lobster, crayfish and turbot – from local markets and imports truffles, goose liver and caviar for superb combinations.

**Henrique Leis**, whose restaurant is located between the Vale do Lobo and Quinta do Lago resorts, ensuring a steady flow of well-heeled customers, has one Michelin star.

**Restaurant Willies**, at Vilamoura, has not yet earned a Michelin star but as owner-chef Willie Weger has won stars elsewhere this may only be a matter of time.

**Places for Picnics** You really need to take a picnic along to make the most of some of the Algarve’s more extensive beaches, such as the huge stretches of **Ilha de Tavira** and the vast sands of **Carrapateira**. You can buy the essential kit – an insulated chilly-bin for cold drinks, plastic cups and plates, something to sit on, and a sharp knife for cutting things up – at any local supermarket (there’s a good choice of picnic equipment in branches of the Intermarché supermarket chain) and stocking up on picnic snacks is dead easy in local markets and supermarkets. Beaches can be blisteringly hot in summer and a sun umbrella is a must. There are cooler picnic spots inland, such as those on the shores of the fjord-like **Barragem de Bravura**, an artificial freshwater reservoir of jade-green water about 15 minutes’ drive inland from Lagos, or the **Barragem do Arade**, a five-minute drive north-east of Silves.