

Portugal – Walking and Birdwatching

8 days from £879 April & October



Sunshine and fantastic beaches – the Algarve is a great place for a holiday. But the eastern Algarve, with its vast wetlands which stretch from Faro to close to the border with Spain, is a nature lover's wonderland. The system of barrier islands and peninsulas creates a variety of habitats in which wildlife, especially birds, can thrive in the spring we visit the Alentejo. Inland from the coast, the Alentejo is an entirely different landscape to the Algarve, but just as enchanting. Great plains dotted with cork oaks stretch to the horizon. Protected areas, where hunting is banned and only traditional methods of agriculture are practised, have become one of the most important bird watching centres in Portugal and a perfect environment for the Great Bustard, the heaviest of flying birds. In the autumn, the Alentejo is replaced by a walk in Portugal's wild west at Cape St Vincent. Your holiday hotel is on the outskirts of the historic town of Tavira. The busy market town has no less than thirty-seven churches and a lovely arched Roman bridge spanning the River Gilau. The pleasant old centre has arcades, shops and cafes.

• 7 nights hb near Tavira • 3 included walking excursions • Walks accompanied by an expert birdwatcher

PROGRAMME

DAY ONE: Flight to Faro, transfer to your hotel, forty minutes away, for seven nights half board accommodation.

DAYS TWO TO SEVEN: In resort with three included walking excursions.

Walk 1: The Ria Formosa Natural Park. In the morning, transfer to the start of your walk near Faro (27 miles). The Ria Formosa nature area is one of the most important protected areas in the south of the Iberian Peninsula. You walk towards Quinta do Lago, passing salt marshes carved into a labyrinth of tidal flats, salt ponds, warm water lagoons and channels which provide shelter to many bird species, including Flamingos, Spoonbills, Storks and Hoopoes. The walk takes you through the area of Ludo, located in the middle of a complex of salt pans at the edge of the São Lorenzo River, passing along salt mountains, eucalyptus and pine tree forests. The walk is level and about 4 miles. You return to the hotel in the late afternoon.

Walk 2: 15-mile transfer east to the wetlands of the Castro Marim Nature

Reserve, on the mouth of the river Guadiana, the natural border between this side of Portugal and Spain. From the main road near the old town of Castro Marim you do the first part of the walk next to salt marshes, salt pans and cultivated fields towards the Visitor's Centre – a good area for waders, warblers and even the Little Bustard in the dry flats of the marsh. 2.2 miles, ascent/descent 30m. Short transfer to the next walk through the more industrial salt pans of Cerro do Bufo. Along this dirt road you can see waders, gulls, terns and herons on one side and ground birds in the fields on the other side. Expected birds to be seen on the day are Crested Lark, Black-winged Stilt, Flamingo, Spoonbill, Avocet, Osprey, Marsh Harrier, Kentish Plover, Dartford Warbler, Stone Curlew. 3.75 miles, ascent/descent 10m.

Walk 3 (Spring departures): An early start for the journey to Castro Verde in the inland province of Alentejo (83 miles). Alentejo is one of the most beautiful and sparsely populated areas of Portugal and holds one of the best-preserved steppes

in Europe. The Special Protection Area of Castro Verde is full of birdlife and in the spring the fields are carpeted with wild flowers. You pass the grassland and oak woods in search of the iconic Great and Little Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Bee-eaters, the first Rollers of the year, Black-eared Wheatear, Iberian Grey Shrike and raptors such as the Black-winged Kite, Booted and Short-toed Eagle, Red and Black Kite, Griffon and Black Vulture and sometimes even young Golden, Bonelli's and Spanish Imperial Eagles. 6.8 miles, ascent/descent 200m. Depending on the day of operation, lunch is included in the Castro Verde LPN visitor centre. Time permitting, a stop will be made on the return journey in the old walled town of Mertola on the Guadiana river. Return to the hotel late afternoon.

Walk 3 (Autumn departures): An early start for the 82-mile transfer to the start of today's walk from Vila do Bispo to the lighthouse at Cabo São Vicente. It is the most south-westerly point in mainland Europe and was considered by the Romans to be the end of the known world. Our walk affords stunning views of the ocean and takes us across the Vale Santo where, in October, migrating raptors may often be seen including Booted, Short-toed and Bonelli's Eagles, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Honey-buzzards and Black Kites, various falcons plus Black Storks. The walk is a little under 8 miles and has a few gentle inclines. Return to the hotel in the late afternoon.

DAY EIGHT: Free time until your departure transfer to the airport for your flight home.

YOUR HOTEL

VILA GALE ALBACORA ★★★★★, Tavira (seven nights)

The hotel is situated in a protected area at the mouth of the River Gilau on the outskirts of Tavira. It is a 40-minute walk to the town centre. The hotel operates a courtesy bus during the day Wednesday to Sunday (schedule subject to change) and taxis are cheap. The hotel is built on an old tuna fishing settlement and has a tuna fishing museum. There is plenty of nearby birdlife at the salt pans and low-tide mudflats of Forte do Rato, a 10 minute walk away. The hotel has a bar, restaurant, outdoor pool, and spa area (charges apply). Wifi is free throughout the hotel. Bedrooms (converted from the old fishermen's houses) have bath/shower and wc, hairdryer, cable TV and minibar. Prices are based on standard rooms. Rooms with river view are available on request at a supplement. (www.vilagale.com)