



Journey to the end of the
World

Tucked away in the Costa Vicentina Natural Park, and surrounded by unspoiled beaches on the very southwestern tip of Portugal, Sagres is a mecca for surfers, sun-worshippers and seekers of solitude. **Adam Waring** takes some time out... >>

Above An evening ritual that attracts hundreds to the lighthouse at Cabo de São Vicente, which marks the very southwestern point of Europe, is to watch the sun sink into the sea – the crowds are every bit as mesmerising a sight as the sunset itself...

"This used to be known as o fim do mundo – the end of the world – and it feels like it, with the ocean stretching as far as the eye can see"

Perched on the very southwestern tip of Portugal (and by extension Europe) sits the strikingly beautiful Costa Vicentina Natural Park, one of Portugal's largest. This protected area claims the entire western slice of the Algarve, covering 74,000 hectares, and with a coastline that stretches for more than 80 kilometres, from Burgau on the south coast and up the entire west coast to Odeceixe, and beyond into Alentejo.

The area is a mecca for surfers and sunseekers, walkers and nature lovers. The coastline here is predominantly rocky, with towering cliffs plunging into the sea, and which have been battered and shaped over millennia by pounding waves and fierce winds. Nestling among them are sandy coves, often only accessible by a suspension-rattling dirt track, and with little sign of the urbanisation that characterises much of the Algarve to the east. There are no high-rise concrete jungles here: for the most part, you'll be lucky to find anything more than a beach cafe or a surf shack on the plentiful, deserted beaches that dot the coast. Ah, paradise.

The extreme southwesterly point, the desolate, windswept Cabo de São Vicente, is marked by a lighthouse that warns ships of the dangerous, rock-strewn currents below, and the very nature of its geographical location is a big draw to tourists and the curious; watching the sunset here, where the Atlantic rollers crash into the waters pouring from the Mediterranean, borders on a religious experience. Huge crowds gather every evening for a spectacular show of nature, sitting mesmerised as the sun slowly dips into the sea. Before the seafarers knew better, this used to be known as *o fim do mundo* – the end of the world – and it feels like it, with the ocean stretching as far as the eye can see in all directions from the peninsula.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ADAM WARRING



Clockwise from above The Fortaleza de Sagres sits on a headland guarding the town; A surf shop open for business in sleepy Sagres; One of the countless beaches that dot the natural park; The view of neighbouring beaches and sheer cliffs from the fort is well worth the walk

The most southwesterly settlement in mainland Portugal (and thus Europe) is the tiny town of Sagres – its permanent population is listed at just 1,940, although at any time its numbers are swelled by a sizeable transient population of tourists and second-homers, even in winter. The town manages to be both sleepy and funky; there are few signs of life during the day, as residents and visitors head en masse to the town's many beaches or further afield into the park, but in the evening the bars and restaurants have a real buzz, drawing everyone from backpackers and young travellers staying at the many cheap rooms spread around town, to the more well-heeled visitors staying at the local Pousada (the first to be purpose-built in the country) and classy nearby resorts.

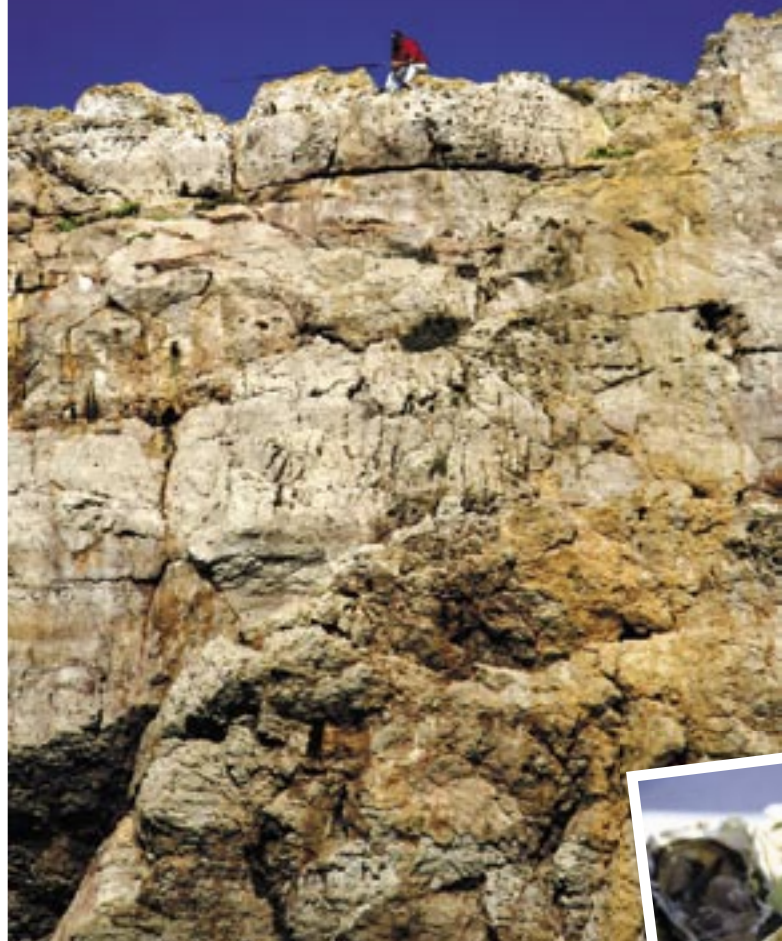
Fortaleza de Sagres

Dominating the town is the huge 16th-century Fortaleza de Sagres, which occupies the large peninsula at Ponta de Sagres and has an imposing heavily fortified wall separating the headland from the mainland. You can see why they built it here; keeping watch over the ocean in all directions, it is a formidable defence, and rusting cannons still point out to sea.

The fort is looking a little jaded nowadays – with crumbling plasterwork and peeling paint, it's certainly due a facelift, and the tourist authorities are planning a €7m investment into tourist infrastructure in the area, which should see amenities improved somewhat. Inside the fort is a small



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15th-century church and the remains of a ‘wind compass’, which is reputed to be from Henry the Navigator’s days here. The great Portuguese explorer is said to have set up his school of navigation in Sagres, which was instrumental in leading to the country’s Age of Discoveries (and which proved all that ‘end of the world’ stuff to be somewhat wide of the mark, putting Portugal on the map as a great seafaring nation and discovering parts of Africa, the Americas and Asia), with many expeditions setting off from the nearby port of Lagos.

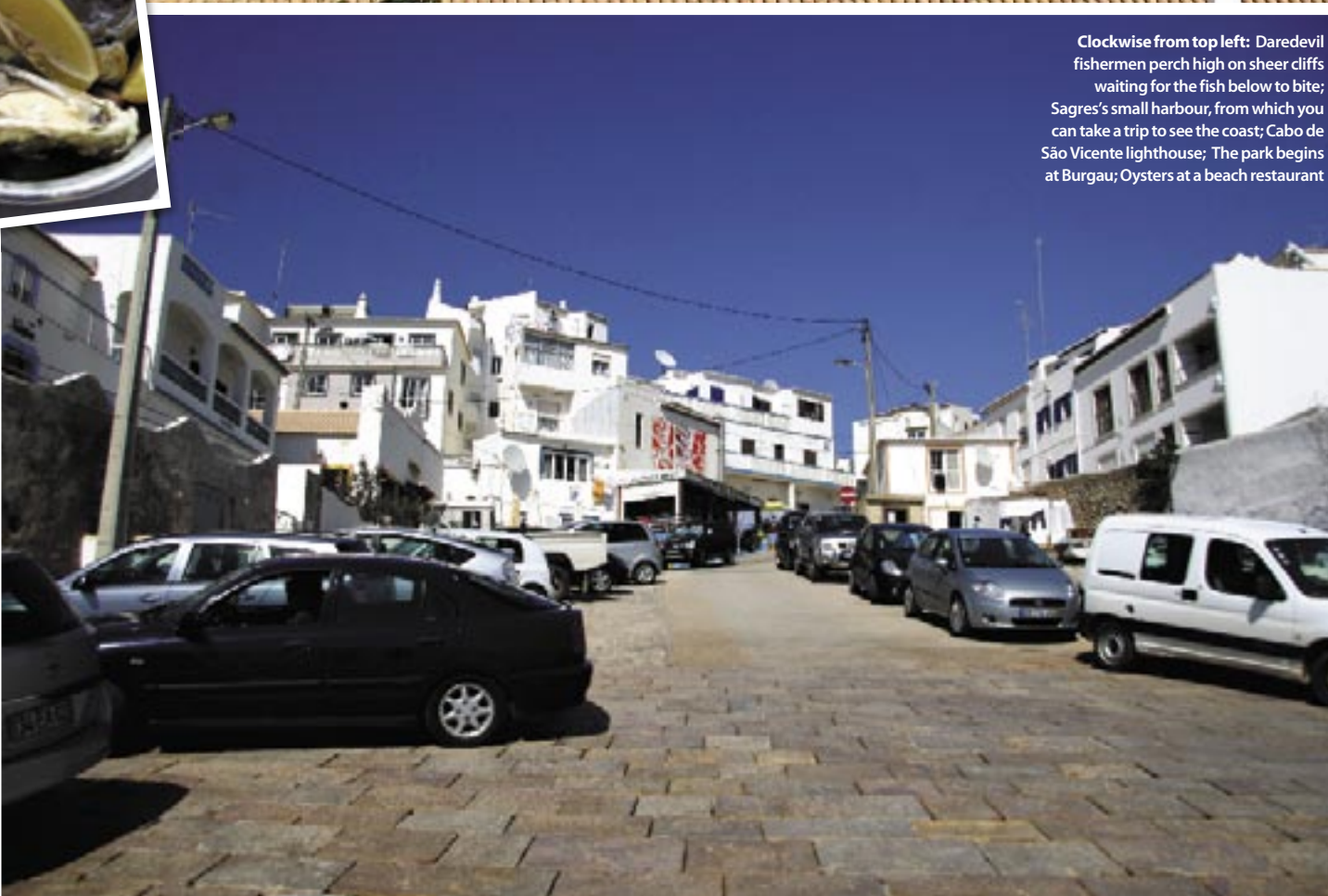
There isn’t an awful lot else nowadays – an earthquake in 1755 levelled most of the historical buildings that once stood here – but it’s worth visiting the *fortaleza* for a stroll around the headland alone; a panoramic circuit offers truly magnificent views over the spectacular cliffs and beautiful beaches for miles around.

And undoubtedly Sagres’s biggest draw are its beaches. It’s surrounded by them and, due to its position bestowing it with both south and westward-facing beaches, is particularly popular with surfers and windsurfers; if the conditions aren’t favourable on the west coast, simply head to the south where they’ll be better, and vice versa. And while these town beaches are pretty uncrowded, go a little further afield and the chances are you’ll have the entire beach to yourself.

A walk in the park

Venturing deeper into Costa Vicentina, there are dozens of walking trails criss-crossing the countryside, and this is the best way to discover the huge variety of flora that is found within the park, with around 750 plant >>>

Clockwise from top left: Daredevil fishermen perch high on sheer cliffs waiting for the fish below to bite; Sagres’s small harbour, from which you can take a trip to see the coast; Cabo de São Vicente lighthouse; The park begins at Burgau; Oysters at a beach restaurant



"Fishermen supply local restaurants and hotels with the freshest fish from their daily catch"



species, a dozen or so of which are unique to the area. The aroma of the wild lavender and rosemary is delightful, and it's a haven for birdwatchers too, with around 200 species attracted by the wetlands or nesting in the cliffs.

Walks can be steep, and the terrain is rocky, but the views are often breathtaking and you'll stumble upon hidden coves and beautiful beaches that aren't marked upon any map. The southern coast has long, sandy beaches and the sea is generally calmer, while the west coast

feels much wilder, with small coves appearing between the towering cliffs.

But the best way of getting to grips with the geography of the coastline, and to get your head around just how isolated its many beaches actually are, is from the sea. A number of boat trips take day trippers out from Sagres's small harbour. Chopping through the waves, you really get to appreciate the full majesty of the cliffs, dotted with caves and grottoes.

The rocky coast is littered with thousands of inaccessible islets, whose only

Above The resort of Lagos lies just outside the natural park and has a quaint old town and a bustling waterfront and marina area, plus good nightlife and great restaurants
Inset Shopping for something nice to eat at Lagos's fish and vegetable market

visitors are the seabirds that hunt in these rich waters, a bounty they share with the fishermen that supply the local restaurants and hotels with the freshest fish from their daily catch.

But not all fishermen take to the sea to reel in their supper; all along the high cliffs you'll spot daredevils, seemingly risking life and limb as they casually stand at the cliff edge, their lines dangling hundreds of feet into the frothing waters below. It's a vertigo-inducing sight.

If you want to cook up some of the freshest fish you'll ever taste yourself, then head to the fish market in Lagos, the nearest town of any size to the natural park. This small but bustling resort has a charming old town and is fronted by a busy marina, and is home to a number of top-class restaurants and great nightlife.

But even in this low-key resort town, the pace of life feels frenetic, and a visit here serves to remind you just how peaceful and special that Costa Vicentina, the last unspoiled corner of the Algarve, really is. 🇵🇹



Essentials SAGRES

GETTING THERE

Faro is well served with flights from UK regional airports. Carriers include **easyJet** (www.easyjet.co.uk), **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) and **TAP Air Portugal** (www.flytap.com).

PLACES TO STAY

Martinhal (+351 282 620 026; www.martinhal.com) is a swish

resort of luxury accommodation with an enviable setting on Sagres's Martinhal beach. A two-bedroom townhouse is from €900 per week in low season.

Eco-resort **AlmaVerde** (+351 282 697 857; www.almaverde.com) borders the natural park and offers a range of villas for rent, with three bedrooms from €735 per week.

PLACES TO EAT

Mar À Vista (Praia da Mareta, Sagres; +351 282 624 247) has a wonderful setting above a popular town beach in Sagres. It specialises in seafood. Try Arroz de Peixe, a delicious fish and rice risotto-like dish served straight from the pan.

In the middle of town, **Vila Velha** (Rua Patrão António Faustino,

Sagres; +351 282 624 788) dishes up some excellent Portuguese specialities and moreish deserts in a cosy atmosphere.

The main strip in Sagres has a handful of bars open late into the night. My favourite was **Dromedário** (Av. Comandante Matoso, Sagres; +351 282 624 219), which has some great cocktails.