

# ESCAPE

FIVE PAGES OF THE BEST TRAVEL IN THE WORLD



SEA THE SIGHTS IN MALTA, ITALIAN STYLE

# Surf'n' Turf on Portugal's west coast

MAKING WAVES: Will you brave the Portuguese waters?

With stunning sights and culinary delights, this place has it all, says **Eugene Costello**

**S**O, I'M standing in the car park, half-naked, in just my jocks, beside the luxurious people-carrier laid on by Visit Portugal and I'm wondering why everyone is laughing at me. We're by the beach at Peniche, the epicentre of Portugal's famous Atlantic strip that draws surfers like flies to the proverbial.

I was perturbed at the hilarity I was provoking. What practically naked, milky white man of 50 wouldn't be? And I didn't even have the excuse that it was really cold; it was a blazing hot summer's day.

Then, one of the two professional surfing journalists along for the ride took pity on me. Stefan, from Hamburg, put his hand on my shoulder and, after he managed to stop laughing for a few seconds, explained that I had put my legs into the arms of the wetsuit that our guide Joao, of local surf school NatureExperience, had provided.

Take two wasn't much better. When I'd put the outfit on, I asked the other surfing journo, Matt, from UK surfing hotspot Newquay in Cornwall, to "zip me up at the back" like a lady might instruct her husband before an outing to a "dinner-dance",

he - through barely suppressed chortles - explained the zip should be at the front.

Third time lucky, and I strode valiantly down to the beach with my board. OK, hobbled; my knees are in a sorry state after several cartilage operations. I had the theme music to the famous Guinness ad in my head; I looked, I told myself, pretty good.

Joao told me to paddle out, then "catch a wave, lie on the board and get ready to stand up". I launched myself into the Atlantic swell and paddled until I felt an uplift. Throwing myself into the wave, I attempted to lie on the board. Unfortunately, the

law of physics meant that my weight distribution - too much of it, probably - was all wrong and I flipped the board, upended myself and was soon upside down. With the powerful waves pressing me down, I panicked - unsure which direction was the seabed and which the sky.

I emerged coughing and spluttering, and seriously shaken. Surfing and I were not, it seemed, to become lifelong buddies... and I still had four days of this surfing trip to get through.

Now, I know you are all feeling gutted for me, enduring such trials and tribulations. But fear not, reader! This was



HOTSPOT: Eugene explores the seaside town of Santa Cruz



RECORD-BREAKER: US surfer Garrett McNamara



ANCIENT HISTORY: Battle of Vimeiro re-enactment



DIVE IN: Santa Cruz boasts beautiful beaches



## Need to know

● For more details on the superb Centro region, visit [www.centerofportugal.com](http://www.centerofportugal.com), plus [www.visitportugal.com](http://www.visitportugal.com), both sites of the official tourist boards.

● Aer Lingus, Ireland's only four-star airline, operates daily flights from Dublin to Lisbon with fares starting from €39.99, one-way, including taxes and charges. Visit [aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com) for further information.

COAST WITH THE MOST: Nazare is the Holy Grail for surfing acolytes

sunny Portugal, where the sardines and Sogrape take a co-starring role to the surf – Sogrape being one of many fine wines from the Alentejo region, though we are in Centro, which produces perfectly good wines of its own.

The only fly in the ointment was an irritating blogger who sported a top-knot, leading to us nicknaming him Man-Bun Boy (top-knots can only really be sported by soccer mums, Samurai warriors and 16-year-old lads).

Peniche was actually day two of the trip. After arriving in Lisbon the day before, our driver, the hospitable Jose of Coimbra-based Madomis Tours, took us straight to what is the Holy Grail for surfing acolytes – Nazaré, a 90-minute drive from Lisbon.

It was here that American surfer, and certified lunatic, Garrett McNamara set the still-standing world record for largest wave ever surfed, a whopping 78ft monster. Well worth a peek on Google Images or YouTube for those not of a nervous disposition...

Nazaré is split into two, both horizontally and vertically, in a sense. It has the seaside resort, Praia, down by the beach and the old town, Sitio, up along the clifftops, reached by funicular rail or up twisted cobbled roads through neighbourhoods of

bleach-white houses. And horizontally in the sense that Praia is a long, gently sweeping beach bedecked with brightly coloured windbreakers and tents that fronts the busy esplanade, crammed with bars, cafés and restaurants. While on the other side of the headland, at whose peak sits Sitio, is the Praia do Norte, favoured by surfers – though deserted the day we visited as the swells were too rough.

So we made the best of things and headed to a superbly authentic Portuguese restaurant called Sitiado, a small boutique full of rustic charm, with wooden-panelled walls, and country-style wooden chairs and tables. Huge portions of food were served on glazed pottery plates. Octopus, squid and the second best tuna steak I would have that week. Not to mention clams, cockles, sardines, grilled chorizo and fried potato-skin chips. Man-Bun Boy was thrilled when they brought out a plate of freshly fried calamares, in a light tempura batter. Relieved at spotting something familiar, he cried out, "Oh wow! Great – onion rings!" as he took his 126th photo of our lunch to upload to his Instagram account.

Still, morons aside, Sitiado is a gourmet's delight. Go there. It's fantastically authentic, with fresh



CATCH OF THE DAY: Taberna d'Adélia serves fresh seafood

seafood and steaks, it's affordable too (around €25pp).

That evening we ate at Taberna d'Adélia – a family-owned eatery in Nazaré. The first thing you'll see as you walk through the door is a slab-like counter, covered in crushed ice, displaying the catch of the day.

We started with petiscos, essentially Portuguese tapas that in this case meant sardinas fritas, sardines dusted in flour, deep-fried and eaten whole, washed down with cold beer or a dry white wine. Alongside came horse mackerel, octopus salad and two types of sausage. Man-Bun Boy, who confided his preferred fare was "cheeseburger and fries", had to be told that sardines are eaten whole – bones and all.

Unfortunately, he took that to be the case with the horse mackerel, and almost choked to death on a bone. I say, unfortunately... we were almost concerned. But the main event was the caldeirada de peixe, the huge cauldron of fish stew for which Taberna d'Adélia is famed locally.

It is a saffron-coloured broth thick with hunks of what I believe was monkfish, with clams, whole prawns, a handful of mussels and some squid, with a plate of boiled potatoes, skin-on just like back home.

The next day was the abortive surfing adventure, of which let us never speak again. In the afternoon, we trekked around the nearby walled town of Óbidos, a castellated gem in the Portuguese countryside, all cobbles and ramparts with pretty cottages in pastel colours, some thatched. It's a cracker, and be sure to visit – some hotels have real character built into vaulted and timbered medieval buildings for those with time to linger.

Our last port of call, where we spent two nights, was Santa Cruz. This is a really affable seaside town, perhaps my favourite of the three spots we stayed in, with second homers from Lisbon, some tourists but not

too many and plenty of cool beach restaurants and cafés. Be sure to have dinner at Noah, a decked terrace with retractable glass doors and an open-plan kitchen, all very boho chic, with more than a touch of Ibiza to it. Not least in the ambient live jazz that provided the soundtrack to the ineffable sky-streaked sunset out to the west, over the Atlantic...

Again, the food was sublime, with a marvellously seared, but still-pink, slab of tuna steak being

the best I can remember having. Ever.

On our last full day, my surfing



DRESSED TO IMPRESS: Actors at Vimeiro's battle re-enactment

colleagues went to hit the water. When it was clear that I couldn't be enticed back, Jose offered to drive me to a character-filled market town inland, Vimeiro, where there was a pageant – a historical re-enactment of a decisive battle between the British, led by the Dublin-born Arthur Wellesley, better known as the Duke of Wellington (Merrion Street, later Trim, Meath, for the anoraks among ye...).

To my irritation, Man-Bun Boy announced that he would join us so I made sure I sat upfront with Jose so I could erase him from my consciousness, and I made sure I lost him immediately once we reached the town square in Vimeiro.

Among the enthusiasts on the side of the British forces, dressed in the early 19th-century uniforms, I heard some distinctly Irish accents; sure enough, there were some there – representing Irish regiments. After enduring a long speech in Portuguese in the glare of the midday sun, by someone who could have been representing Wellington or Napoleon for all I knew, I wandered around the local market stalls.

Jose found me and insisted I follow him to a stall selling all shades of honey; he wanted me to try a fiery, honey-infused white spirit, which set my throat on fire, then soothed it with the aftertaste of the busy bees' business.

Man-Bun Boy was there chatting to the stallholder, doubtless angling for a free jar, since bagging freebies seemed to be his primary motivation. I listened, trying not to laugh as he said, "I don't see myself so much as a journalist as an 'inspirer', or 'influencer' if you like..." (I have since deduced that he meant "an influencer"). "So," he continued. "Who is Mel? Are you Mel?" Seeing the poor chap's look of incomprehension, Man-Bun-Boy raised his voice to aid understanding, "Mel! It says it on all your jars! Are you Mel or is Mel the boss?" Realisation dawned upon the chap's weather-beaten face, which split into a broad grin. "Ah, mel! Neither – mel is Portuguese for honey..." Jose and I were too busy clutching our sides from the fit of the giggles for me to find out what Portuguese for 'moron' is...

Now, top-knots aside, the Centro region of Portugal has become one of my favourite sun-spots in southern Europe – great weather, superb food, wonderfully friendly people. Not overrun with tourists, and everything is really affordable. What more could you ask for?

If surf floats your boat, with surf schools and beach shacks a-plenty, head for Peniche and its gently shelving slopes into the sea at Baleal. For a classic seaside resort with sandy beach and plenty of bars and restaurants, Nazaré is yer man. And for something a bit cooler, with chic hangouts, great food and a laid-back almost Balearic vibe, Santa Cruz is bang on the money.

Just remember – if you see a top-knot and it's not on a gorgeous girl in beachwear, be afraid. Be very afraid. ✦



## Discover Italy's hidden treasures

A trip to Lake Garda is not just about lying back and looking at the views. You can see so much more with an escorted tour, including a visit to the scenic Alpine town of Bolzano, the medieval city of Padua and beautiful Vicenza, one of northern Italy's best-kept secrets.

A week-long holiday with the Travel Department will see you based on the northern tip of the lake, in the charming town of Riva Del Garda. The holiday also includes a boat trip, with stops in the picturesque towns of Malcesine and Limone.

You'll enjoy the art and architecture of Bolzano, before a cable car ride to the high plateau of Renon and a short train journey through the breathtaking Dolomites. There will also be three days of leisure time to explore the beautiful region at your own pace.

Prices start from €649pp, including return flights from Dublin, seven nights' half-board hotel accommodation, transfers, excursions and expert local guides. Flights depart April-October 2018. Call 01 637 1600.



## Beat the blues in Belfast

The Europa Hotel in Belfast has launched a flash sale giving people the chance to enjoy an overnight stay in January from €110 per room. The price includes accommodation and a full Irish breakfast – what better way to banish the winter blues?

The Europa Hotel is located right in the heart of the city centre, making it the perfect base to enjoy a spot of sightseeing and shopping.

The offer is available on selected dates in January and can be booked by calling the Europa Hotel, on 048 9027 1066, and quoting FLASHBB.

## Take flight for the Canaries

Cassidy Travel has seven-night, self-catering packages to Fuerteventura from €279pp in May. Or you could go upmarket and stay in the four-star adults-only KN

Matas Blancas in Costa Calma from €385pp. A short walk from a white sandy beach, the hotel features a hammam alongside its outside pool.

The price includes flights from Dublin on August 21. Call 01 822 4000.



## Thrills await in Sunshine State

This could be the summer that you visit the theme park capital of the world – Orlando. The American city has something for every age with multiple park attractions such as Universal, Disney and SeaWorld.

Sunway has a selection of accommodation for families including flights to the Sunshine State this summer. The cheapest option is seven nights at the Rosen Inn International in May, from €449pp, based on two adults and two children (under 12) sharing. Orlando's major theme park attractions are easily accessible from the Rosen Inn.

Another option is to stay at one of the theme park hotels. The Universal Cabana Bay Beach Hotel has two massive pools, a winding lazy river, a bowling alley and much more. A week here costs from €569pp in May.

Disney's All-Star Movies Resort, the All-Star Sports Resort and the All-Star Music Resort are all themed accommodation close to Walt Disney World. A week at one of these costs from €599pp, room only. For more information see [sunway.ie](http://sunway.ie)

