

# Europe



## Walking the walks

## Diverse goals lead hikers to Algarve

*Valerie Tamis Marier, a freelance journalist in Kennebunkport, Maine, who has contributed to magazines such as Walking, Modern Bride and Islands, recently explored Portugal's Algarve region on foot with Uniquely Europe. And she did not get blisters. Her report follows:*

SAO BRAS, Portugal — What kind of woman goes walking in the Algarve?

Blame it on the tinto. After only a few sips of this tasty local

Portuguese wine, the group of women relaxing on the sunlit terrace of a hotel here began divulging their reasons.

They talked about why they flew to southern Portugal in mid-October and why they came to test their mettle on a Uniquely Europe seven-day, six-night, guided hike through the Algarve region.

Phoebe, a 50-something athletic vegetarian, confessed that her goal was to "try to keep trim" on her vacation, "and walking seven miles a

day should do that. I'd also read that the Algarve cuisine features a lot of fresh fish."

Nikki, who is in her early 60s, admitted that she had a pacemaker and wanted the availability of a support van if she got tired on the hikes.

"Plus, I've been all over Europe but never to Portugal, and right now the escudo goes a long way for Americans," she said.

Beth, also in her 60s and a dedicated bird-watcher, hoped

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IN THE

### FEATURES

#### Cutting out the coddling,

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associated with many escorted hikes, Randonee Tours lets walkers in Italy arrange their own routes.

#### The Dordogne and Brittany

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are two regions of France where some operators of

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# Algarve walkers take in textures, colors of rural life

>ALGARVE P1

to focus her Bushnells on alpine swifts and other migratory birds that favor this

**For tour prices and more on walking in Portugal, see Page E25.**

rugged area hugging the Atlantic Ocean.

Me? I enjoy walking and had long dreamed of participating in a walking tour.

I was worried, however, that the group might consist of gung-ho hikers who liked striding out at dawn. Fortunately, that was not the case.

garve.

As we exchanged addresses and phone numbers, we agreed that it was one of the best trips any of us had taken.

Chalk that up to a daily itinerary that featured leisurely walks through stunning coastal preserves and lush river valleys, along the cobbled streets of whitewashed villages, where purple bougainvillea tumbled over ancient walls, and atop sandstone cliffs overlooking the roaring Atlantic.

Each hike was punctuated with a delectable lunch at a seaside cafe specializing in typical Algarve fare, such as chicken *piri piri* (hot sauce) and *arroz de lingueirao* (razor clams in green sauce).

On the last day we enjoyed a picnic by the sea, complete with chilled wine in crystal glasses and a buffet luncheon served on a linen tablecloth.

## Why walk?



Hikes along Portugal's Algarve coast reveal glimpses of medieval towns.

I also have a passion for Moorish architecture, which is showcased abundantly in this southwest region of Portugal where Phoenicians, Romans and Arabs from North Africa lived and battled centuries ago.

And truthfully, a recent vacation in Ireland where it rained nearly every day, had me pin-

The Algarve region nestles between the rolling foothills of the Sierra de Caldeirao Mountains and the Atlantic coastline of southern Portugal.

The advantages of visiting the Portuguese Algarve "off road" are many.

Tourists who drive or bike along the region's narrow vil-

wood forests and chestnut tree groves into sprawling grape vineyards and to rocky coastal coves.

I had taken enough biking trips to realize just how much concentration was needed to keep a wary eye out for rocks and bumps in the road.

While walking, I could easily stop and pluck a wild flower, stand and gaze at the sun setting behind the Monchique Hills or watch a warbler peck at a ripe fig that had dropped onto the path.

Strolling past stone farm cottages and barnyards filled with clucking chickens gave me a true sense of the timeless way of Algarve life, something I would have missed riding in a car or bus.

Another bonus of a Uniquely Europe Algarve walking tour was having an English-speaking and knowledgeable local guide accompany us daily. (Another guide drove the support van, delivering ice water at various points along the route and taking our luggage ahead to that night's hotel.)

Those who wanted to walk at a faster (or slower) pace were given maps and detailed itineraries.

Our group tended to stick together, perhaps because we did not want to miss hearing the guide reveal a historical nugget about the ancient Roman bridge at Tor or point out the two magpies sitting in the canopy of olive tree branches overhead.

## The route rap

Each day's walk lasted between four and six hours (plus an hour for lunch) and covered a distance of from five to seven miles.

Participants could quit the hike at various points, however, and board the support van for transit back to the hotel.

Uniquely Europe's brochure describes the Algarve terrain as "moderate" — "mostly flat with some hills" — but I'd say that "some" is an understatement.

Every morning after a hearty breakfast, the group gathered outside the hotel before 10 a.m. to lace up.

Each of us had brought well-broken-in walking shoes or hiking boots, but we worried about the possibility of blisters.

By the second day, we were slathering our heels and toes with Elizabeth Arden Eight Hour Cream, which Nikki swore was "a miracle cure for everything from wrinkles to blisters." (And it worked: no blisters.)

Because the Algarve is in one of Europe's sunniest climates, we also learned to dress in layers.

We might start the day wear-



ing sweaters or sweatshirts over our short-sleeved T-shirts and Bermuda-length shorts, but by midday, when the October temperature hovered near 80 degrees, we had stashed that outerwear in our lightweight backpacks.

(There are no scheduled walks during June, July and August because of the intense heat.)

## Peaks and valleys

Each day's wanderings included a visit to an Algarve village or city.

We poked around the castle town of Loule and spent time in the 18th century domed market building watching craggy-faced men carve plump pumpkins.

In Alte, we walked up the steep cobbled streets to photo-

But the prettiest building in the Algarve had to be the San Antonio Cathedral in Lagos.

This cathedral is ornately decorated with blue-and-white tile murals, intricate wooden wall carvings and extensive gold leaf on the altar.

Cultural sites, however, were not what made the trip special for me.

The memories I savor of this seven-day walking excursion focus more on the ever-changing textures and colors of the Algarve countryside: the low-lying, crumbly stone walls that hemmed grape vineyards, the spiky green cactus clumped near cork trees, the umbrella pines edging the serpentine path by the sea.

I truly appreciated that during our walks we encountered only local farmers, villagers or



Strolling outside Loule in Portugal's Algarve region.

graph and visit the church that dominates this village of white-washed stucco houses.

The highlight in Silves, the ancient capital of the Algarve, is the eighth century red sandstone castle that withstood centuries of attack from Christians who were trying to regain it from Moors.

fishermen, not other hikers.

Admittedly, the accumulation of walking seven miles daily is tiring.

When I boarded the plane for the flight home, I started reading an article in the International Herald Tribune but fell sound asleep before I got to the third paragraph.

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ing for some rays. I'd heard nothing but raves about the sunny Algarve climate.

Diverse goals and interests, for sure, but by week's end this group of strangers had become fast friends along the terracotta-colored trails of the Al-

lage streets might think they've "experienced" the Algarve, but what they've missed is the pristine countryside that is accessible only on foot.

Walking on the age-old paths that meander from town to town took us through cork