



Western promise

PORTUGAL'S WESTERN REGION TO THE NORTH OF LISBON IS ATTRACTING MAJOR INVESTMENT IN GOLF, HOTELS AND REAL ESTATE

BY PATRICK STUART

Since Portugal first woke up to tourism in the '60s and '70s it has been the Algarve, with its southern coastline sheltered from the open Atlantic and idyllic year round climate, that has received the lion's share of investment.

Until recently, few attempts had been made to attract holiday makers and overseas property buyers to the west coast of the Algarve, let alone other areas of coastline further north.

Portugal's only alternative destination to the Algarve, offering beaches, golf courses and quality tourism infrastructure was, until very recently, the Estoril coast, neighboring

Lisbon. The rest of the coastline, save a few small pockets of development had been left relatively untouched and only now has a third destination started to emerge.

Known collectively as the Western Tourism Region, the area of rolling hills and vast stretches of beaches to the north of the capital is currently experiencing something of a boom.

DEVELOPMENTS TO RIVAL THE ALGARVE

As world class golf courses, 5-star hotels and real estate developments to rival the Algarve's best take shape, it is inevitable

that property buyers and holiday makers alike will start to weigh up the pros and cons of each region, much as they would when choosing Portugal in the first place over competing destinations such as Spain. So, what are the differences? In a nutshell, the Algarve wins hands down if you are looking for a sun and sea-based holiday, especially as a family. The sea is calmer and a good few degrees less chilly, the weather more stable and a few degrees warmer. There are theme parks and bustling resort towns as well as quieter areas still unspoiled by mass tourism. The Algarve seems to have it all, including over 20 easily accessible



MAIN IMAGE, THE MAGNIFICENT GOLF COURSE AT PRAIA D'EL REY. INSET, THE BEACH AT PRAIA D'EL REY, ÓBIDOS TOWN AND BERLENGA ISLAND

golf courses. Also important for anyone visiting from Ireland is flight connection options, with Faro now well served out of Dublin and elsewhere year round.

But if you prefer the weather a little cooler, enjoy Atlantic rollers rather than a calmer sea and are happier in an environment where, outside of your resort, you will rarely bump into another tourist, then the up-and-coming Western Region may be for you. Lisbon, with its cultural attractions and shopping is within easy reach and the area itself is rich in culture and historic sites as well as natural beauty. The town of Óbidos for instance, the

principal tourist attraction in the region, is a picture postcard medieval town widely recognized as the most beautiful in the country. The nearby Óbidos lagoon is a haven for watersports enthusiasts and just offshore lies the Berlenga islands natural park.

The golfer is also well served with two championship courses already open in the immediate vicinity, another opening later this year and more in the pipeline, not to mention those in the Lisbon and Estoril Coast area an hour or so away.

The only dampener for many potential Irish visitors is the flight connections.

The only scheduled airline currently serving Lisbon from Dublin is Aer Lingus and the flights are not expected to run during the winter meaning a connecting flight via the UK. It may not be for everyone, but as the success of the new resorts in the region becomes apparent, the Algarve is becoming very aware of some new competition.

ALTERNATIVE DESTINATION

It all started with the Praia D'El Rey Golf & Country Club. Located close to Óbidos and fronting a spectacular stretch of Atlantic beach, the last ten years have seen this 238-hectare estate of pine forests and sand ►►



ABOVE, THE MARRIOTT HOTEL AT PRAIA DEL REY AND TOWNHOUSE VILLAGE WITHIN THE RESORT. BELOW, AN ARTIST'S IMPRESSION OF THE WESTIN HOTEL AT CAMPO REAL

►► dunes transformed into a fully fledged resort destination. The principal attraction is the magnificent golf course, a blend of dramatic links holes and woodland rated amongst the best in Europe. There is also a 5-star Marriott hotel that opened last year adding a wealth of new facilities to the resort including a spa, conference centre and various restaurants.

Real estate sales at Praia D'El Rey were launched in 1997 and with over 800 properties now sold the resort is solid proof that the region is indeed a serious competitor to the Algarve. Properties are grouped into individual villages of villas, townhouses or apartments with prices

ranging from around €250,000 for a two-bedroom apartment to upwards of 1.2 million for large villa on a sea-view plot.

The next major resort to be launched in the region was Campo Real. Closer to Lisbon and roughly 15 minutes from the coast, this is a golf and residential resort with a 5-star Westin hotel. The proximity to Lisbon has attracted a large percentage of permanent residents from the Lisbon area as well as holiday home buyers from the UK, Ireland and elsewhere. Sales here have also been brisk since its launch two years ago. The first phase is completely sold out and the second phase has just been launched ahead of schedule.

The golf course at Campo Real, designed by Donald Steel and open from May 2005, is a par 72 layout backed up with a driving range and academy. Additional facilities include tennis courts and a riding centre. The hotel, the result of the conversion and extension of the estate's original quinta building, will open in 2007 and the Westin group's involvement extends to the overall management of the resort. This offers property buyers the option of purchasing an apartment with a guaranteed fixed rental income for the first two years of ownership. Prices at Campo Real range from €200,000 for apartments to €500,000 and over for villas.

The success of the Praia D'El Rey project,►►





LAGOA DE ÓBIDOS



► spurred on by Campo Real, have put this western region of Portugal firmly on the map both as a golfing and second home destination. The Marriott hotel at Praia D'El Rey has also opened up the region to the important conference and incentive market - also targeted by the new Westin at Campo Real. This vote of confidence has attracted numerous other developers to the area, mostly on a far smaller scale, except for the last in the list of the "big three" developments in the region - the Bom Sucesso Design Resort.

This 150-hectare project stands out as one of the most ambitious and certainly the most original projects of its kind yet seen in Portugal. The difference lies predominantly in the striking modern architecture and planning at the hands of a veritable dream team put together by the developers. This includes American company WATG, responsible for creating some of the world's

most impressive leisure projects, from cruise ships to hotels and resorts along with the crème de la crème of Portugal's top architects.

Sports and leisure facilities at Bom Sucesso will include an 18-hole championship golf course, a spa located in a small design hotel and an equestrian centre. The resort will also be served by its own heliport. Construction work on the site at present is concentrating on general infrastructure and the golf course is planned to open in late 2006.

The first phase of real estate was released for sale off-plan last year and 50% of the 199 villa plots and 161 townhouses have already sold, mostly on the national market. Earlier this year, however, the developers launched the project onto the international market appointing UK-based agents Hamptons. Prices range from €165,000 to €300,000 for townhouses and €390,000 to €690,000 for a villa on its own plot. ■



◀ ▲ BOM SUCESSO

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