

Portugal

Special Report



**Tavira—An Ancient Town With
A Modern Calling**



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Tavira

An Ancient Town With A Modern Calling

BY:STEPHENPOWELL



In the southeastern corner of Portugal, where the Atlantic meets the shore, the ancient town of Tavira has found a modern vocation. Set on a sun-blessed coast of islands and lagoons, Tavira is proving a magnet for people in search of a new life.

I singled it out as my home after walking the whole length of the country, and many other foreigners have succumbed to its charm and put down roots here.→



PRAÇA DA REPÚBLICA. The main public square in Tavira is lined with shops and cafés...

Tavira is a river town, just a short ferry ride from the sea. It's not too big—the population of the municipality is about 28,000—so within minutes of driving out of town you pass through orange groves and up into gentle rolling hills.

The winters in the eastern Algarve are mild and spring comes early. The almond trees blossom in January and the first broad beans reach the table in February.

In town, the dominant colors tend to be the blue of the sky, the white walls of so many buildings, and the red of the

tilled roofs. Tavira is gloriously walkable, with narrow cobbled streets and plenty of cafés and restaurants with outdoor tables.

Foreigners, often of retirement age, have arrived in considerable numbers to live here, with Swedes, Italians, French, Germans, British, and Irish all represented. According to local realtors, in recent years Americans and Canadians have started to feature in the international mix.

One American who settled here four years ago is Allan Ensor, a former school psychologist. Ensor, 75, has on

his business cards the words “Missouri by birth, Tavira by choice.”

He said his original intention had been to settle in Lisbon. Then, his one contact in Portugal invited him to the Algarve for Thanksgiving. He was smitten.

Within days he had found an apartment in Tavira and everything just slotted into place. He now leads regular Tai Chi classes in a quiet city square, with a white-washed church on one side and a café on the other.

“I have become part of the community here, largely through the Tai Chi classes,” said Ensor. “This was all just luck and happenstance.”

“I like Tavira for the fact that it is such a nice mix of nationalities,” he said. “It’s a very easy place to meet people, and very interesting people with amazingly diverse backgrounds.”

Immediately after the Tai Chi, on Saturday mornings, everyone heads for the café, and typically there might be Italians, British, and Dutch gathering for a coffee and exchanging the latest gossip.

Ensor said that in his early days in Portugal, when he knew hardly anyone, he relied a lot on the website Expat Exchange to get his bearings in the new country. This site, with its discussion groups for dozens of individual countries, carries a wealth of information on practical matters from health care to tax. →



A Quick Tour Of Tavira

Let's go on a tour of Tavira, starting from the Ponte Antiga (Ancient Bridge) that spans the Gilão river. Much of the social buzz is in two squares on either side of this bridge.

On the south side is the Praça da Republica, which leads into a riverside garden with neat beds of white, yellow, and purple pansies, palm trees, and a 19th century silver-painted bandstand decorated on top with a lyre. A moat with goldfish and turtles surrounds the bandstand, which shed its musical calling long ago.

Past the garden is a handsome former market building, also from the 19th century, and beyond that is the point of departure for ferries to Tavira Island. For the modest sum of 2.20 euros, you can board the ferry for the 55-minute round trip, a perfect introduction to Tavira and its natural setting.

Bird-watching is one bonus on this ride. Tavira is on a stretch of coast called the Ria Formosa, the most important wetland of southern Portugal, a birdwatcher's paradise with flamingos, waders, and a host of other species.

About eight minutes into the cruise, on the left, you can often see flamingos feeding. They are fairly common in the Algarve's lagoons and wetlands, particularly between November and March.

At the one stop on the journey to the island, at Quatro Águas, terns wheel and dive for fish. On arrival at Tavira Island, you can get off the boat, bathe in the sea, and eat at one of the island's restaurants. Or you can just sit tight and ride back into town.

In the center of Tavira is a little cluster of three places on a hill that richly deserve a visit. One is a camera obscura, installed in an old water tower, which in every sense gives you an overview of the city.→

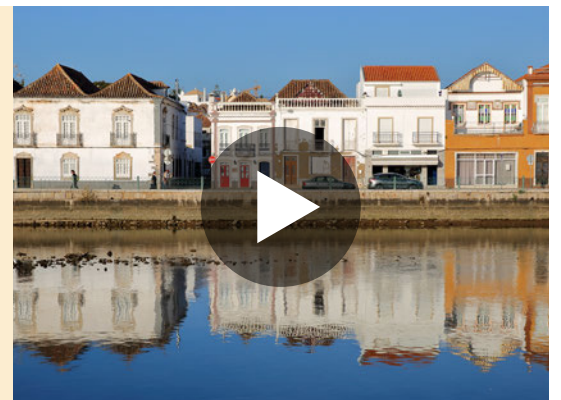


PONTE ROMANO. Roman bridge across the river Gilão, Tavira...

Tavira Video Resource

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Using an optical system of mirror and lenses, a 360-degree view of the settlement is projected onto a surface in a darkened room. The attraction's guide, originally from London but a long-time Algarve resident, holds forth on Tavira's history, starting with the salt-pans on the edge of town that have been worked for at least 2,500 years.

Almost next door is Tavira's castle, begun by the Moors in the 10th century on the site of a Phoenician temple complex. Today it has a most unmilitary vibe, with bougainvillea climbing the walls up to the height of the battlements and plants from Brazil helping to create a colorful, exotic garden.

Recommended as the final stop on this mini-tour of the hill is the Pousada Convento, a hotel set in a 16th century former convent. You can drop in for a coffee in the bar and then ask to see the 13th century Islamic ruins, which are down some stairs in a yard at the back. Bar staff have the key.

Tavira is known in Portugal for its great multitude of churches—there are more than 20 of them—so any tour of substance would have to include some of them.

The Portuguese Language

One thing which many newcomers to Portugal experience as a challenge is learning the language. Some take the route of not bothering, and they survive because many people in the Algarve, Portuguese and foreigners alike, speak English.

But if you're uneasy about moving to a place and not learning the local tongue, let's look a little more closely at the language question. Portuguese, a Romance language, is not particularly easy—it can come across as an impenetrable Slavic-sounding jumble.

But there is good news. The Portuguese are warmly appreciative of strangers who take the trouble to learn some of their



A picturesque street in Tavira with whitewashed houses decorated with bougainvillea flower...



JARDIM DA ALAGOA. A small, historic garden in the Praça Antonio Padinha...

language. If you persevere, heart-felt compliments will come your way.

Bear in mind too that Portugal, unusually for a European country, has only one indigenous language. Neighboring Spain has four, and Italy is a linguistic mosaic of some complexity. In Sardinian, Italy's second most widely spoken language, there are seven ways to say Friday.

For the big things, like buying a property, in all probability you will not have to utter one word of Portuguese. I speak the language, but when I bought a house close to Tavira I did not use my Portuguese at all. I purchased from an Englishwoman and both my lawyer and the estate agent who showed me the property spoke good English.→

The Algarve is so firmly established as a European real estate hot spot that realtors are generally multilingual. Go into a real estate office, even in a small Algarve town, and you might well find yourself talking to an energetic Dutchwoman, able to clinch a sale in English, Portuguese, Dutch, or German. That has been my experience anyway.

Now there is a real sense in which today's material acquisitions shape tomorrow's language needs...

Say you've bought yourself a house with a bit of land. After cutting back the growth in one distant corner of the property, you decide to have a bonfire. To do this legally, you'll have to go online and ask the fire service for permission to have that bonfire. Do you have the linguistic tools to do that?

Another example is buying a car. Go to the right place, and you'll be able to make this purchase in English, but further down the road there might be situations where you'll be grateful you learnt at least some Portuguese.

Recently I drove with a friend through rural Alentejo, the part of Portugal immediately to the north of the Algarve. In Alentejo, less English is spoken than in the Algarve. When a front tire burst, I had

to phone for assistance, and I used my Portuguese to guide a breakdown truck to my stricken vehicle.

Bear in mind there are two variants of Portuguese, the Brazilian and the European. I find Brazilians easier to understand because they tend to pronounce every syllable, while the Portuguese don't. Words can have different meanings in the two countries. One trap is the word *rapariga*, which means girl in Portugal but can mean prostitute in Brazil.

One resource for language learners is the Academia Senior de Tavira, an establishment in the tradition of universities of the third age. For an annual fee of 80 euros, you have access to a range of classes including Portuguese.

A retired Portuguese actor, still with talent as a performer, teaches beginners in the language. (The Tai Chi sessions, mentioned earlier, are also run by the Academy.)

Getting Here

From North America, get on a flight to a major European center like London or Paris and then catch a plane directly to Faro, the Algarve capital.



A narrow street in Tavira's old town...

From Faro airport to Tavira is about a 35-minute taxi ride, costing around 40 euros. A slower and cheaper way to travel is bus from the airport to the center of Faro (2.25 euros) and then a train to Tavira (3 euros). It is a short walk from Faro central bus station to the trains.→



Weather

In Tavira, the climate is so benign that you can enjoy a meal at an outside table of a restaurant any month from January to December. The Algarve offers more than 300 days of sunshine a year.

Tavira has fairly mild winters, with the lows around 45°F (7°C). Some heating system in your home is strongly advisable. The highs in the summer are around 86°F (30°C). Sea temperatures rise to an agreeable 79°F (26°C) in the hotter months.

Economy

Tourism has been the main game in town for some time, really since the end of tuna fishing half a century ago. There is a little octopus fishing still, but that is economically insignificant. The real estate sector is vibrant, with realtors' offices every few meters in the town center.

The broader economic picture in Portugal as a whole has been challenging. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the country's tourism-dependent economy hard, because of all the international travel restrictions.

In 2020, the national economy shrank by 7.6%, its sharpest fall since 1936. Food banks in the Algarve greatly expanded their activities to meet the need and times are still hard for many Portuguese. Tavira, buoyed by so much foreign spending power, seems relatively prosperous.

A Brief History Of Tavira

For thousands of years, the history of Tavira in particular and the Algarve in general was closely bound up with the tuna fish. According to the town's tourism literature, Tavira boasts the oldest tuna fishing net found anywhere



TAVIRA TOWN CENTER. Tourists walk along the Ponte Romano bridge...



SAINT MARY CHURCH WITH CLOCK TOWER. As seen from the castle in Tavira...

in the world. About 2,500 years old, it is kept in a museum in Praça da Republica, but is not on public view because of its delicate state.

It was the Phoenicians who brought tuna fishing and fish-salting to this part of ancient Europe, which was the western limit of their civilization. In the heart of Tavira, the visitor can see impressive Phoenician remains, a wall section from

the 8th century BC that is 13 meters long and up to 9.5 meters thick. When the Romans arrived in the 1st century BC, Tavira was already old.

Under Moorish rule, from the 8th to the 13th centuries, Tavira's castle and port made it one of the important strategic centers in the Algarve.

After Portugal began making conquests in North Africa, from 1415→

onwards, Tavira became the biggest port sending provisions to these new African garrisons of the Portuguese crown. This trade brought wealth to the town and in 1520 it was made a city.

But the gradual silting of the channel to the sea later made it impossible for ships to use Tavira as a harbor and the city went into decline. From the late 19th century, tuna fishing and the canning industry put Tavira back on its feet.

Eventually, in the 1970s, over-fishing of tuna brought this millennia-old chapter in Tavira's history to an end. Now tourism has established itself as the main economic activity.

Two expats living in Tavira, Peter Bellchambers and Yvonne van Roekel, plan to publish a history of the town, "Tavira Through My Eyes," later this year.

What's There To Do Close To Tavira, Heading West?

When you live in a place, it isn't just about the immediate surroundings. Where do you go for a little jaunt to somewhere new? Where do you take visiting friends or family to give them a feel for the beauty of your adopted country?

If you become a Tavirense, a resident of the town, the Ria Formosa is a big part of your new surroundings, just waiting to be explored. Five islands and two peninsulas are the main topographical features in this lagoon system, which stretches about 60 kms from close to Faro in the west to the beach of Manta Rota in the east.

I have done most of my exploring of the coast by electric bike. What can work well is to combine bicycle and train, since the Algarve coast has a railway line running from Vila Real de Santo António, on the border with Spain, in the east, to Lagos in the west.

Here is a gentle itinerary that I have done more than once...



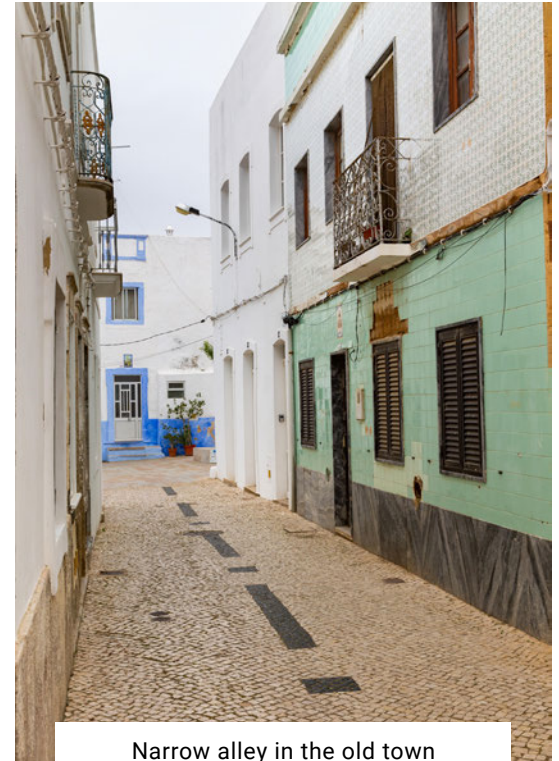
RIA FORMOSA. At Cacela Velha...

Leave Tavira on your bike following the signs for Santa Luzia—there is a bicycle lane for the short distance to this little fishing port known throughout Portugal as the country's octopus capital.

Santa Luzia is not on the open sea but on the channel between the mainland and Tavira Island. Along the waterfront are several seafood restaurants, where you can sit and eat with views of the gulls and the fishing boats moored in the channel and just soak up the atmosphere of a quiet coastal town.

One popular restaurant is the Casa do Polvo (House of Octopus), which, among other dishes, offers spicy octopus samosa, fried octopus croquette, pasty filled with octopus, octopus carpaccio, octopus salad with tomato, octopus roe salad, octopus rice, octopus curry, and octopus stew with beans.

If you're not weighed down with an octopus lunch, after Santa Luzia keep following the Ecovia cycle route, which sometimes weaves between saltpans and lagoons and is a great way to see the east Algarve coast. You eventually emerge in the friendly little fishing port of Fuseta where you can catch a train back to Tavira.



Narrow alley in the old town in Olhao...

A little further west, after Fuseta, is the coastal town of Olhão, with a character utterly different from Tavira. It has industry still and is less picture postcard pretty. But it has character and passionate devotees.

For writing on Olhão that is both lyrical and informative, see Kevin Gould's 2020 Guardian newspaper article "The real Algarve: A white-washed village adrift →

in the kissing sea.” Gould writes that Olhão’s big attraction is that there is no big attraction. How right he is!

My favorite things to do in the town are to lunch at Gould’s Chá Chá Chá restaurant, shop in the big food market near the waterfront, or take the ferry to the nearby island of Armona.

Chá Chá Chá, tucked away in an alley with indoor and outdoor tables, is one of my favorite Algarve eateries, serving dishes with great depth of flavor, like marinated anchovies, tuna mayonnaise, and a cheese that arrives wrapped in an exotic leaf.

What’s There To Do, Heading East?

Heading east out of Tavira, so towards the Spanish border, two places

in particular are worth a visit. The first is Cabanas de Tavira, a favorite haunt for foreign vacationers, with a waterfront, restaurants, and quiet charm.

Further east along the coast is the village of Cacela Velha, which unusually provides views over the lagoons and sandbanks of the Ria Formosa because it sits on a little hill. Beyond the sandbanks is the Atlantic.

In the summer, it seems sometimes that the world and his wife is going to Cacela Velha, and the narrow lanes leading there become clogged with cars. Part of the attraction is a restaurant with outdoor tables, next to the village church, that serves oysters and other seafood dishes.

You can’t book a table over the phone. The trick is to arrive before you’re hungry, get your name onto the restaurant’s waiting list, and then enjoy a beer or two

while savoring the views over the water. If you don’t have the patience to wait for a table, you can order takeaway oysters.

Amenities

Tavira is well provided with a lot that the expat might need, from an Irish pub, The Black Anchor, with its lunchtime quizzes, to a well-stocked library housed in a former prison. There are banks, English-speaking lawyers and realtors, and a big municipal food market.

Other options for food shopping in Tavira range from a Continente hypermarket to a 7-hectare organic farm called Maria Flaminga in the southwestern part of town, tucked behind an Aldi supermarket. The farm shop, open Tuesday to Saturday, offers a good selection of vegetables and fruit.→



CACELA VELHA. A street in this old fishermen's village...

Cost Of Living

Portugal is the poorest country in Western Europe and wages are low. The cost of living too is generally low, though some things, for example electricity tariffs, are expensive, as are second-hand cars. Little service jobs tend to be moderately priced. At my local barber's shop in Tavira, I pay 6 euros for a serious beard trim.

Portugal has an extraordinary selection of good wines at reasonable prices and a lot of Algarve produce, from oranges to honey, is abundant and inexpensive. Organic fare comes at a premium.

Here are some sample per-kilo prices for fruit and vegetables from the Maria Flaminga organic farm in February: onions 2.85 euros, butternut squash 1.90 euros, sweet potato 2.90 euros, celery 4.10 euros, zucchini 2.90 euros, beetroot 2.50 euros, apples 4.20 euros, oranges 2.90 euros, kiwifruit 5.60 euros, and cherry tomatoes 5.50 euros.

Most foreigners coming to live in Portugal can rely on their pensions. For those who still need to earn a living, Portugal is not the easiest of places.



PRAÇA DA REPÚBLICA. Town square in Tavira...

Established ways in which foreigners in the Algarve earn money range from hairdressing to painting, from working in real estate to life coaching.

On a visit to the local office of Finanças, the government finance department, residents can easily set themselves up with official status as independent workers. But creating income in Portugal is not a path for the faint-hearted.

Safety

Portugal is considered one of the safest countries in the world. According to Vision of Humanity's 2021 Global Peace Index, Portugal ranks as the fourth most peaceful country after Iceland, New Zealand, and Denmark.

This does not mean there is no crime at all. Isolated properties in the Algarve do sometimes suffer burglaries, but there has been no recent repetition of violent residential burglaries carried out in 2009/2010 by East European and Brazilian crime groups.

Rental Market

Realtors in town say demand is brisk, and it's often hard for them to find properties that match the kind of thing clients want, like a house with a garage and a view over the lagoons.

They quote monthly rents of about 750 euros for a one-bedroom apartment, 1,000 to 1,200 euros for two bedrooms, and around 2,000 euros for a house with a swimming pool.→



JARDIM PÚBLICO DE TAVIRA. Garden with a band stand, some monuments, and an esplanade...

In Tavira, unfurnished accommodation is often hard to find, and you might have to accept a furnished let. The Facebook group East Algarve Expats is one place where rental properties are advertised.

Property Market

According to the professionals, the market is buoyant. “Demand is outstripping supply,” said Paula Martins at RE/MAX, the biggest realtor in Tavira.

Foreigners dominate the market. In 2021, said Martins, about 55% of their business came from foreigners. She mentioned interest from French, British, and Irish buyers, and increasingly from Americans.

She said it was hard to pin down a price per square meter because values varied a lot from one part of Tavira to another,

but she gave a reference figure of 2,392 euros per square meter.

Prices were moving up. “The great rise in prices is mainly due to the high number of buyers,” said Martins.

“At the moment there are many more people wanting to buy than there are wanting to sell. Also, there’s the fact that new construction has excellent finishes and the price of raw materials has risen quite a lot, as has the price of labor.”

Asking prices in Tavira range from about 160,000 euros for a one-bedroom flat in the town center to villas for around 5 million euros. A three-bedroom house with a little land in the countryside near town costs around 450,000 euros. Bargaining over price is very much part of Portuguese culture.

Recommended practice is to hire a lawyer who checks that what actually exists on the ground corresponds to what

it says on the official documents lodged with the authorities. For example, does that swimming pool or borehole have the necessary official permission?

My English-speaking Portuguese lawyer came with me to check out a property that I wanted to buy. She nodded her approval. With my lawyer present, I then signed the papers and gave the owner a cheque representing a 15% deposit.

My lawyer takes a fee of 1% of the property purchase price and another 6% goes on government property taxes and other fees.

Health Care

Portugal has a tax-funded public health care system, known as the Serviço Nacional de Saude (SNS), which is similar to the one in the U.K.→



View of Tavira from the castle walls...

Most essential medical services are free of charge. Typically, patients need to cover a percentage of medicine costs at the pharmacy. The SNS generally does not cover dental care.

If you need an ambulance, call 112. The nearest big hospital is in Faro. Private health insurance is also available in Portugal, with costs varying from several hundred euros a year to thousands.

Internet

Tavira has good internet connection, with fiber optic being the norm in the town itself and increasingly in Cabanas de Tavira. In the countryside, fiber provision is patchy.

The company MEO offers two-year contracts at 57.99 euros per month, with

200 Mbps downloading speed and 100 Mbps uploading speed. Power outages are not common.

Education

Tavira's private fee-paying Colégio Santiago Internacional, or International School in Algarve, caters for students from 4 to 18.

Housed in a 15th century building in the heart of the old town, the school opened in 2012. The instruction is bilingual in English and Portuguese and follows the National Curriculum of England.

The school, with a current student body of about 100, says its exam results are above the average in U.K. schools. Look for their website in the [Rolodex](#).

There are state schools, of course, teaching in Portuguese. According to one major international survey, Portugal tends to occupy the middle ground in terms of the quality of its state education.

In 2018, the Program for International Student Assessment ranked Portugal 27th out of 77 countries worldwide for its teaching of mathematics, science, and reading.

In state schools, the academic year starts in September, with an enrolment period generally between January and May of the previous year.

Algarve Ecology —The Land

With Mother Earth as a whole experiencing severe ecological stress, not surprisingly the Algarve has its share of problems. It seems right to spell this out.

Fire and water have become two big talking points in Portugal over the past few years. In 2017, wildfires ravaged Portugal, killing at least 116 people and burning 520,000 hectares of forest.

Since then, no fires have caused suffering on this scale, but anyone arriving→



Train rail railway on a bridge in Tavira...



PRAÇA DA REPÚBLICA. Town square in Tavira...

to live in the Portuguese countryside today needs to be aware of the risks.

To consider the linked question of water, it's best to look at the whole of Iberia, because both Portugal and Spain are living through drought. Rainfall is diminishing and intensive agriculture, particularly of fruit for export, is using up more of this precious resource.

One tragic tale concerns the Doñana National Park in Spain, about a 90-minute drive east of Tavira. These wetlands, a UNESCO World Heritage site famous for their rich birdlife, are drying up.

In Portugal, a severe drought that began in November 2021 has gotten significantly worse. By late January, according to the Portuguese Institute of Meteorology, nearly all of the country was experiencing moderate to severe drought. Many Portuguese farmers are struggling to find enough grazing land.

Spain had its driest January in 20 years, according to the country's State Meteorological Agency, and the province of Andalusia, adjacent to the Algarve and home to the Doñana reserve, was among the worst affected.

One Algarve-based initiative looking for solutions is the Mediterranean Gardening Association Portugal, run by a couple from England, Ron and Rosie Peddle.

A 20-minute drive southwest of Tavira, close to Moncarapacho, the Peddles have a 1.6-hectare property, a former carob farm, where they showcase their learning about life in a dry climate.

They took me on a tour of their garden with a difference. There is not even a hint of that notorious water-guzzler, a lawn. They have a swimming pond, inhabited by a few grass snakes, collectively called Sidney, who keep down the number of frogs.

On chalky soil, in the Algarve sub-region called the *barrocal*, the transition zone between coast and mountain, the couple concentrate largely on local plant species. "This is classic rewilding," said Rosie.

They have carobs, olives, umbrella pine, almonds, Mediterranean oaks, and a profusion of shrubs and aromatics. The mix of fragrances is remarkable: there are curry leaves, smelling of a very delicate and superior pungent curry, lentisk, a bush with a musky scent, native lavender, and many others.

I asked Rosie about her advice for gardeners new to the Algarve. She took the permaculture line of masterful inactivity for the first year, while you get to know the land, and attention to the integrity of the topsoil.



A picturesque narrow street in Tavira...

"Try to do nothing for 12 months, never allow a JCB (digger) on the land, never remove trees or larger shrubs unless absolutely and unavoidably necessary."

Ron, a mechanical engineer who once looked after tanks in the British army, shares his wife's enthusiasm for dry climate gardening, which has the benefit of being low-maintenance. So did he do any watering? "About once a month, if I remember," he said. →



Our conversation touched on the growth of international agri-business in Portugal and its thirst for water. With so many Portuguese leaving the land, there has been a move away from small-scale traditional orange growing, which requires only modest use of water but also provides relatively modest income.

Foreign business has moved in and grown more lucrative options such as avocados, which need a lot of water. The expansion of intensive agriculture in southwest Portugal has become an issue even beyond the country's borders. Activists in Germany have called for a boycott of Portuguese produce.

"There has been a huge controversy over all the avocados and soft red fruits. It is a continuing controversy," said Rosie. She added that avocado production had now arrived in the eastern Algarve, where several hectares of Portugal's oldest nature reserve, the wetlands of Castro Marim, had now been planted with the fruit.

Algarve Ecology —The Sea

In the glossy Portuguese publications on eco-tourism, the Algarve is rightly lauded as a biodiversity hot spot. But there is one story that they pass over in silence.

At the turn of the millennium, the Ria Formosa had the densest population of seahorses in the world, an estimated 2 million of them. Two decades later, these numbers have dwindled to about 100,000.

I talked to Miguel Correia, a marine biologist based in Lisbon, about this sharp decline. In his youth, he said, on holidays to the Algarve, he regularly saw seahorses. Not anymore.

He said the decline was probably due to a combination of factors, but he highlighted habitat loss caused by illegal "bottom trawling," which involves towing a fishing net along the sea floor.

This practice had reduced the amount of seagrass, a preferred habitat for seahorses where they can hide from predators. Correia said the reduction in seahorse numbers had been discussed in the Portuguese parliament and the creatures were now legally protected.

Who Is Tavira For?

Lovers of the seashore and nature in general, bikers, birders, hikers, those who appreciate living in a human-scale provincial town with a very international population.

Who Need Not Apply?

People who crave the buzz of the big city. Tavira has some excellent restaurants but not the range of cultural events that capital cities offer. ✂



About The Author

Stephen is a British journalist, with 27 years' experience in Reuters, who is now based in Tavira. In 2018 and 2019 he walked the length of Portugal, covering nearly 1,500 kms on foot. He has published two travel books, "Walking Europe's Edge, Reflections on Portugal" and "The First Toast is to Peace, Travels in the South Caucasus."

You can find out more on his [website](#).



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