

# Small – but perfectly formed

by Jonathan Broom



To my mind – and unfairly – the Iberian peninsula has always been all about Spain. Portugal – if I thought about it at all – I cast as the much smaller and poorer next-door neighbour; a humble two-up two-down in the shadow of a mighty Spanish castillo. Famous for port wine, and an illustrious past; but latterly rather down on its luck. ►

Famous, too, for the Algarve – far from down on its luck, but renowned as a retirement destination for Brits and other northern Europeans keen to see out their days “in the warm”.

And the Algarve is that – but it’s so much more too. Roughly rectangular, and no more than 80 miles across and perhaps 30 miles deep, the region packs so much into its tiny area that it’s hard to know what to see first.

So, visiting Rocha Brava for the first time, I did what I always do, and turned to the site manager for advice.

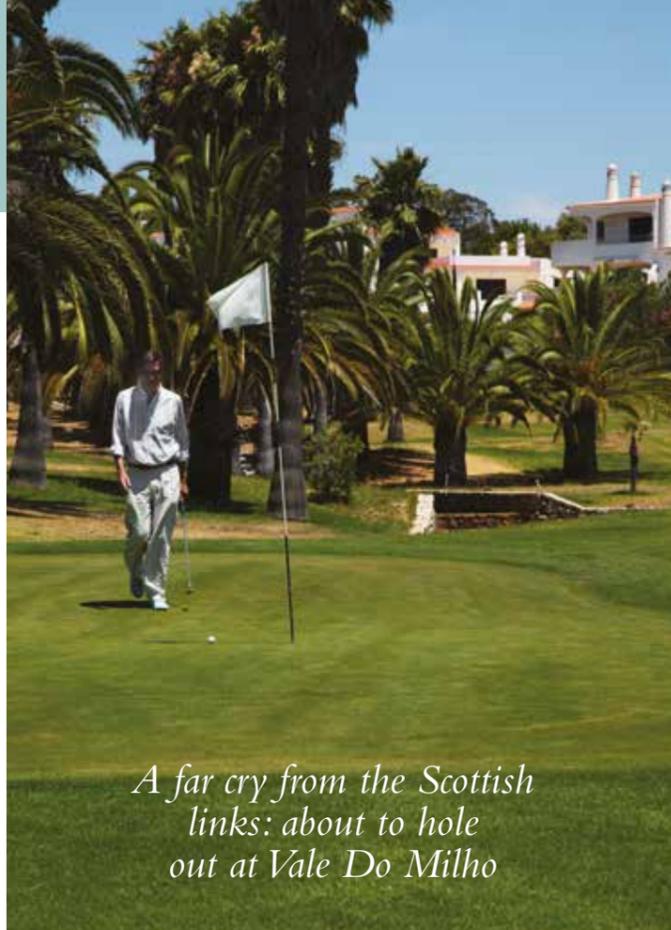
Anke Geurts has been managing what I’ll call HPB Rocha Brava, the Bond’s Portuguese home, for the past three years. However, her involvement with the Bond, while previously a bit tangential, goes back further than that; Anke was manager of the Quinta Do Rosal collection of holiday homes, many of which are included in HPB’s Tenancy programme.

As HPB Rocha Brava manager Anke looks after 51 properties (a recent increase from 48) – a sizeable estate, but rather dwarfed in view of the fact that Rocha Brava as a whole boasts in excess of 400 units. If I’m honest I’ve always been a bit snooty about the Bond’s shared sites – but having visited Rocha Brava I can now see the advantages. HPB Rocha Brava offers Bondholders the exclusive use of two outdoor swimming pools, a clubhouse, games room and so on – all the things you’d expect on a 50-unit site; but the sheer size of the Rocha Brava village resort means Bondholders have access to all sorts of other facilities – a further three swimming pools, a café, an à-la-carte restaurant, a well-stocked supermarket, tennis courts, gym facilities and more – all without leaving the site.

I hooked up with Anke at the Bondholders’ Monday barbecue and quiz night (the quiz, AKA “the Anke and Mario show”, was a riot. Who won? Modesty forbids) and together we formed a plan. In summary: beaches, food, and a side order of sport.

The 100 miles of the Algarve coastline boast some of Europe’s most spectacular beaches, many holders of prestigious Blue Flags. You can choose from broad expanses of white sand, small cove beaches backed by red cliffs, beaches where cosmopolitan beach parties are a summer constant, to the pristine, deserted beaches of the Western coast.

After a brief trip into nearby Carvoeiro for essential supplies (more on Carvoeiro later), Anke and I headed for Benagil – an easy half-hour walk from Rocha Brava, though perhaps more challenging in the heat of summer. One of the few remaining small Algarve fishing



*A far cry from the Scottish links: about to hole out at Vale Do Milho*

villages which would once have typified the Algarvian coast, Benagil is ranged on the cliff tops either side of a small ravine which leads to a beautiful beach. Quiet and intimate, it is an idyllic place to start exploring the unspoiled coastline. It’s also still a working fishing village, with a number of cliff-top restaurants selling “straight-off-the-boat” fish and seafood dishes. Where better, then, to have lunch?

Overlooking the beach, Casa Lamy is famous for its varied dishes including casseroles of fish and shellfish. The food is exceptional; the ambience and setting delightful; and the bill, surprisingly cheap. It being lunchtime we passed on the casserole; I chose the squid, Anke the sea bream. Both were cooked to perfection.

After lunch we walked down to the beach itself; busy, but not overly so. I would happily have whiled away the afternoon there, but Anke was keen to show me more: Praia da Albandeira, small but equally scenic, with its own beach bar; Centianes Beach, a wide, sweeping beach boasting its own restaurant (the O Stop) and again, a beach bar – Algarve holidaymakers clearly don’t like to be too far from refreshments – as well as jet-skis, banana boats and pedalos for hire; and perhaps most spectacularly of all, Carvalho Beach, a smugglers’ cove in bygone days and not all that easy to find – or once found, reach. But the walk down, while tortuous, is well worth it; there are some great features to this beach, the entrance is amazing

and there is also a small room carved into an area to the left of the steps. Perhaps most spectacular of all is the sea stack in the middle of the bay. There are, however, no facilities on the beach, and it’s a long climb back up.

Beached-out, hot, and tired but happy, it was time to call it a day. By evening, however, I had found my second wind and was keen to check out the local nightlife. Destination: Carvoeiro.

The nearest town to Rocha Brava of any real size – it’s about two miles away – Carvoeiro is a seaside resort of a type with which most Brits will be familiar. Souvenir shops, bars, restaurants, cafés and night spots abound. The beach – though small – offers a variety of watersports equipment for hire. The town, in season, is full of happy holidaymakers. Carvoeiro is biggish, and a bit brash – but in my view none the worse for that. Cruising the strip for an eatery – so many to choose from – I was assailed on all sides by waiters and maitre d’s trying to drum up trade. But the appeal from the head honcho at A Rede, on the Estrada do Farol – “Hey, big boss! Come eat with us!” – finally clinched it. As it turned out the food was so-so; but the antics of the staff more than made up for it. Oscar-winning performances all round.

As you know, this winter HPB Rocha Brava is once again taking part in our Winter Wonders programme – activities programmes at a number of your favourite sites, at home and abroad (full details are enclosed). In Rocha Brava’s case, that means guided walks; free use of the gym, including free pilates and tai chi classes; and free tennis, including coaching.

Now I love sport; but one of my life’s biggest disappointments is that sport doesn’t love me back. Tennis in particular I find a trial. My backhand and forehand aren’t bad; I can slice with the best of them; and being fairly gangly I have good reach. But I can’t serve for toffee. So when Rocha Brava tennis coach Christian Brockman called the next morning to offer me a one-on-one training session, I jumped at it. I’d like to say it worked – and I think it helped – but I’ll never be Andy Murray, I may as well accept it. Christian, however, was infinitely patient, working at my pace and only occasionally unleashing a devastating serve of his own. “I’ll coach anyone, at any level,” he says. “Taking a complete novice (said with a meaningful glance at me) and turning them into someone who can hold their own on a tennis court is an achievement for both of us. And with experienced players, there’s always room for improvement. Even your Andy (Christian is Swedish) has a coach!” Christian is looking forward to welcoming as many Bondholders as want to attend this winter, and I urge you to give it a go.

I also met up with Elke Dalkmann, who runs both the tennis courts and the adjacent gym. Elke too is hoping for a Bondholder invasion this coming winter. “Thanks to its climate the Algarve has always been a popular winter-sun destination,” she says. “But a bit of guided exercise really



puts a spring in the step; it’s what makes a good holiday a great one, and makes sure you return home really revved-up and ready for anything.”

That evening I headed out again, to Armação de Pêra. Hitherto a small fishing village, perhaps only a little bigger than Benagil, over the past 30 years the place has exploded into a sizeable, and unattractive, town. It’s also a half-hour drive from Rocha Brava. So what makes this a worthwhile trip? Because the beach is lovely – not spectacular like Carvalho or Centianes, but with its own quiet beauty. Because despite the hideous high-rises, this remains a vibrant, working fishing port. Because there’s enough of the old village left to fuel one’s sense of romance. And because – and I don’t know how they’ve done it – the Portuguese have managed to make most of the tower blocks all but invisible from the sea front. And, once again, there are some great restaurants to choose from. I chose Búzio, right on the seashore on the Praia dos Pescadores (Fishermen’s Beach). Again, the food was exquisite, and very good value; I went for mackerel. The ambience would have been too, but for the fact I



*“A bit of guided exercise really puts a spring in the step; it’s what makes a good holiday a great one, and makes sure you return home really revved-up and ready for anything.”*

chose the wrong time of day; sandflies and mosquitoes were up, and out, and looking for blood. Mine, apparently. But Búzio for lunch, on a warm day in January? Very heaven.

Can it be coincidence that with its high proportion of reasonably well-to-do retirees the Algarve also boasts some 30-odd top-notch golf courses? I think not. So on my final full day, accompanied by a courageous Anke (who doesn’t play but was up for giving it a try), I decided to sample a typical course, at the Vale Do Milho Golf Club, just half a mile from the site. The Vale Do Milho offers a free pick-up and drop-off service to Bondholders, plus 15% off the already very reasonable green fees.

When I was about 13 I pestered my parents not just for a set of golf clubs but golf lessons to boot. Astonishingly, they acquiesced. I had, I think, four lessons – and then shoved my set (OK, half-set) of clubs in the loft, where they remain to this day. The memory still shames me. ➤



But anyway, on Thursday 4th July in Portugal I discovered I had never forgotten the rudiments. What's more, reader – I couldn't miss. Just one of those days when everything went right; a glorious shot off the first tee, into the bunker but easily out again, putted into the cup from maybe five feet... Simple. Naturally it all went south from there on in, but that first hole at Vale Do Milho will forever hold a special place in my heart.

The following day I bade farewell to Anke, over lunch (natch) at O Farol, Rocha Brava's on-site à-la-carte restaurant, overlooking one of the site's numerous swimming pools. A set menu for lunch, very reasonably priced. Again. Fish for me. Again. But as we ate and chatted, and on the flight home, I reflected that Portugal is far from being Spain's poorer neighbour. The climate, the food, the scenery and the friendliness of the Portuguese make it a great place to be – and, down at the bottom of the country, the Algarve is the tops! ☐

## ROCHA BRAVA, THE ALGARVE

About two miles from the popular seaside resort of Carvoeiro, Rocha Brava is a large and mature holiday development benefitting from a raft of facilities and amenities. The Bond's 51 properties on this shared site enjoy exclusive use of:

- ☐ An outdoor swimming pool and a covered swimming pool (heated October to June)
- ☐ A pétanque court, table tennis and a pool table
- ☐ Barbecue facilities
- ☐ A children's play area
- ☐ Free internet and WiFi access

### Within the Rocha Brava complex there are:

- ☐ Three further swimming pools
- ☐ Four pay-as-you-play tennis courts
- ☐ A fitness centre
- ☐ A restaurant, coffee shop & supermarket
- ☐ A free "Kids Club" (May to September)

## The Algarve's history: the clue's in the name

Or more precisely the first two letters; "Al" comes up a lot on the Iberian peninsula, thanks to the region's Moorish one-time overlords – long gone now, but far from forgotten. Mostly eschewing the beaches and that beautiful rugged coastline, Bondholders Tim and Jay Price instead headed north, into the Algarvian hinterland – and found history and culture in abundance. Tim takes up the story...

The beautiful beaches around Rocha Brava are great; however we wanted to explore further afield during our fortnight at "RB". By car so many places are easily accessible within an hour or so. Our first car tour took us to Caldas de Monchique in the mountains (not to be rushed, soak up the atmosphere and have a coffee in the dappled shade of the square above the flight of steps and waterwheel) then up to the summit at Fóia, 2,960 feet, stopping at the A Rampa restaurant for an authentic chicken piri piri lunch and enjoying its spectacular views to the western Atlantic coast. The seascape entices us to the magnificent surfers' beach at Praia da Arrifana surrounded by precipitous cliffs and finally on to Cape St Vincent, the most south-westerly point in Europe, finding the excellent small museum (1.50€) next to the lighthouse with brilliant nautical and celestial navigation exhibits, all well explained in clear English.

During our fortnight we had so many rich experiences. The Moorish architecture of Loulé we found so attractive. Mid afternoon we stumbled across a band next to the castle adjusting their sound system in readiness for that evening's music festival. Meanwhile Silves Castle is said to be the grandest monument to Islamic rule in the Algarve and is stunning, largely intact with superb views from the ramparts.

An early morning walking tour of Faro old town saw us climbing up the 13th-Century cathedral's open-air bell tower to enjoy its wonderful urban and maritime views.

Our final tour of the picturesque Algarvian inland villages took in Paderne, with its strategically important 12th-Century Moorish castle (now in ruins but well worth the scramble from the riverside car park) and nearby Alte for a picnic stop next to the pretty fonte and the cooling stream. So much to do, we could have done with another week or two!