

Terry Bremner

ALBUFEIRA, Portugal - Jan2017

In March/April 2017 we headed off for two weeks in the Portuguese Algarve Region, travelling with friends, to our destination of Albufeira. At the time it did not occur to us to plan our departure from Montreal and so boarded our aircraft in Toronto and then stopped in Montreal to pick up other passengers. (In our subsequent trips to France, we used Via Rail to Dorval and then the shuttle bus to Montreal airport.) We had selected an Air Transat Vacation that took us first to Faro, Portugal where we transferred to a coach for the 40 km trip to our hotel, the Cerro Mar Atlantico. Situated on the top of a rather steep hill, the hotel is actually spread out among 3 or 4 buildings and our location was just across the street from the main building. The beach area is located quite some distance below the hotel site and is usually accessed by a lengthy, ancient but maintained staircase that proved to be beneficial for a strenuous, daily, physical workout. (Some days we were up and down 2 or 3 times.) The city portion below features numerous restaurants, bars, shopping facilities and the inescapable gelato vendors who offer their wonderful product in myriad flavours and colours. This area eventually gives way to the actual beach. Our vacation did not include meals, so we were able to pick and choose where we dined and if/when we opted to prepare our own meals in the well-equipped hotel rooms. The flights and apartment for the two weeks amounted to approximately \$3600.00 Canadian for each couple.

Many areas of Albufeira are not really suitable for people with mobility issues due to steep hills and rough or sandy walkways. The location of this hotel complex is on steeply sloped terrain. Faro and some other nearby towns/villages along the coast are on much flatter ground.

A small convenience store is located across from the main hotel building and two well stocked supermarkets are located about a 20 minute walk away - more good exercise for all. (The small shop stocks most essentials including bread and butter, fruit and vegetables and beer and wine.) Much closer to the hotel we found a neighbourhood restaurant, "Joseph's", which was recommended and where Canadians are particularly welcome. Here and at most other Portuguese dining spots, we found exceptional quality vegetables, delicious chicken dishes and seafoods including sea bass, salmon, octopus, shrimp, sardines (huge!), etc. Pork and mutton are also on some menus but beef is a rather rare and expensive option. Finding a nice, thick, juicy sirloin is not likely. Numerous beach area restaurants feature British style foods, such as the "full British breakfast" and "British fish and chips", as Brits have inexpensive and easy access to Portugal courtesy of several bargain airlines. Relatively speaking, Americans are few and far between. There are restaurants representing numerous different cultures. There are also many foreign workers from English speaking countries. There is a book swap corner in the main hotel lobby and some English language TV is available in the rooms.

The hotel rooms are very nicely equipped, especially the kitchen area which has beautiful state of the art equipment (lots of stainless steel) including a clothes washer hidden behind a cupboard door. There is no clothes dryer but an ironing board indoors and a wall rack outside on the balcony wall fill the bill. The entire hotel staff was great and the ladies that serviced the rooms did excellent work. Local shopping was fun and some very nice items were found, especially

those made of cork. We purchased a case for glasses, a ladies clutch purse and a gorgeous man's fedora. The cork items are not inexpensive but they are very attractive and unique in Canada.

On this trip we did take a couple of bus tours/visits to the towns of Selvis (pronounced Selvish, an ancient Moorish capital), Monchique (highest elevation village in the Algarve at 485m ASL where, due to a storm we were in fog and driving rain), Sagres (pronounced Sawgresh, is called "the end of the world" once a school for oceanic navigation and features impressive cliffs overlooking the Atlantic), Lagos (pronounced Laygosh, once a slave market, ancient walled city and markets), Loule (pronounced Loolay, very large market), Querenca (ancient church site and interesting bar/cafe), Barranco do Velho (cork producing area), Salir (site of an ancient fort under excavation/reconstruction, visible through glass floor) and Alte (tour lunch stop with a nice chicken lunch and lots of wine). The stops were all very interesting and the scenery along the way was terrific. One note of caution: There is an excellent east/west highway across southern Portugal that has almost no stop signs along the way to the coast. However, there are numerous roundabouts (about every 20 km or so) to facilitate getting to towns along the route and these necessitate the highway coach slowing down to negotiate the loop. Anyone prone to motion sickness could find this problematic as the bus leans into the turns.

Overall, we found this part of Portugal, including the airport, to be clean, efficient, friendly and interesting. The Portuguese people are warm and welcoming. There was always something to do if we wanted a change of scenery and always the option of just relaxing and enjoying the unhurried atmosphere of the country.

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