

## Portugal 2008: holiday planning guide

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**Wonderful though they are, there's much more to the mainland and the islands than the coastal resorts. Why not meander in port wine country, suggests Gill Charlton, or spot whales off the Azores?**

- [In pictures: highlights of Portugal](#)
- [Portugal 2008: accommodation directory](#)
- [Portugal 2008: activities and special interest tours](#)

The vast majority of visitors head for the Algarve's sandy beaches, yet Portugal is a country that deserves deeper exploration. As well as a rich cultural heritage, it has world-class national parks and nature reserves, clean blue rivers and lakes for swimming, boating and fishing, and a refreshingly undeveloped Atlantic coast.

Here are my top 10 reasons to visit Portugal this year.

**1** It is the **cheapest eurozone country**. The Post Office's recent Holiday Cost Barometer shows that popular tourist purchases cost twice as much in Spain.



Don't miss the extraordinary village of Monsanto, built among giant granite boulders

For example, a Heineken beer costs £1 in Portugal compared with £1.92 in Spain; a three-course meal for two costs £23.06 in Portugal, £46.13 in Spain.

**2 The Alentejo region**, easily reached by car or train from the Algarve, is becoming more attractive to tourists.

More handsome country houses on cork and olive estates are available to rent and they make good bases for touring the region's Neolithic and Roman sites, notably the university town of Evora.

The Atlantic coast is wild here, but there is good swimming at Vila Nova de Milfontes, where a new resort hotel offers activity holidays aimed at British families.

**3 Naturtejo**, in remote central Portugal, newly designated a Unesco Geopark ([www.naturtejo.com](http://www.naturtejo.com)), should prove popular with walkers and cyclists and is famous for its fossils.

Don't miss the extraordinary village of Monsanto, built among giant granite boulders. And don't take remoteness for backwardness: the locals have embraced YouTube and posted home videos of village life, from the olive harvest to the volunteer fire drill (see [www.monfortur.pt](http://www.monfortur.pt)).

- [Google Map: Portugal's highlights](#)

**4** The five-star **Aquapura Hotel** is a welcome addition to the limited accommodation options along the Douro River.

Near Peso da Regua, it is centred on a renovated country house. The lush gardens contain most of the architect-designed rooms and a full-on health spa.

Other new hotels include the **Pousada Sao Vicente**, a restored 19th-century palace in the northern town of Braga, and two modern "design" hotels in Lisbon, Jeronimos 8 and the Fontana Park.

**5** The Algarve has a good selection of **luxury family-friendly hotels** offering qualified nannies and all-day activity clubs for children of all ages, leaving parents free to relax in the spa or play golf.

The newest hotel is the Hilton Vilamoura, which offers apartments and hotel rooms on its five-acre site at the heart of the resort. The Paradise Island Kids' Club operates from Easter until the end of September and accepts children from the age of three.

**6** The first charter flights direct to the Atlantic island of **Porto Santo** start in May and coincide with the opening of two luxury resort hotels on the island's six-mile sandy beach. Both the Pestana and Colombo's Resort will have children's clubs, health spas and themed restaurants.

**7 Madeira** remains a year-round favourite with British visitors, who fly in for its relaxed pace, balmy weather and verdant scenery.

Thanks to a bigger choice of low-cost flights from regional British airports the island should attract more younger visitors who are keen to walk its levada trails and enjoy good food in countryside quintas.

**8 Whale-watching** is the big draw in the Azores and the best boats have marine biologists on board. The island of Pico is the closest base to their feeding grounds. Pods of sperm whales are seen all year, but in April/May and late September/October migrating blue, fin, sei, minke and humpback whales pass by. There is also the chance to swim with dolphins.

**9** For independent travellers, **Solares de Portugal** ([www.solaresdeportugal.pt](http://www.solaresdeportugal.pt)) is a good source of accommodation. These family homes are inspected for quality and range from manors to working farms and country cottages.

**10** Day-trip boats from Oporto will also accept one-way passengers with luggage - a great way to travel upstream to **port-wine country**.

Stay on one of the wine estates, such as Quinta de la Rosa, or rent a cottage. Most estates have timed tours for individuals and it's easy to explore the river valley by train.

There are two narrow-gauge lines still running north. Recent warm summers have brought forward the grape harvest so, to witness grape-treading, it's best to visit in late September.

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## Expect to pay

Rough guides for a week's holiday in June.

**Three-bedroom villa with pool in the Algarve:** £900 rental only.

**Three-bedroom cottage in the Douro:** £650 rental only.

**Five-star Algarve hotel (two-bedroom suite):** £2,600 b & b for family of four, including flights.



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**Sightseeing tour of Madeira:** £700 half board per person, including flight.

**Douro cruise:** £900 full board per person including flight.

**Group walking holiday:** £600 half board per person including flight.

**Group B car hire:** £130 (no insurance excess).

## Getting there

### By air

There is a big choice of low-cost regional flights to Faro in the Algarve and Funchal in Madeira.

### Scheduled services

**Bmibaby** (0871 224 0224, [www.bmibaby.com](http://www.bmibaby.com)): Birmingham to Lisbon; Birmingham, Cardiff and East Midlands to Faro.

**British Airways** (0870 850 9850, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)): Heathrow to Lisbon; Gatwick to Faro and Funchal.

**EasyJet** (0905 821 0905, [www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)): Bristol, Liverpool, Gatwick and Luton

to Lisbon; Belfast, Bristol, East Midlands, Glasgow, Liverpool, Gatwick, Luton, Stansted and Newcastle to Faro; Bristol, Gatwick and Stansted to Funchal.

**Flybe** (0871 522 6100, [www.flybe.com](http://www.flybe.com)): Exeter and Southampton to Faro.

**Flyglobespan** (08712 710415, [www.flyglobespan.com](http://www.flyglobespan.com)): Aberdeen, Durham Tees, Edinburgh and Glasgow to Faro.

**Jet 2** (0871 226 1737, [www.jet2.com](http://www.jet2.com)): Manchester, Leeds-Bradford and Blackpool to Faro.

**Monarch** (08700 405040, [www.flymonarch.com](http://www.flymonarch.com)): Birmingham, Gatwick, Luton and Manchester to Faro.

**Palmair** (01202 200700, [www.palmair.co.uk](http://www.palmair.co.uk)): Bournemouth to Faro and Funchal.

**Ryanair** (0871 246 0000, [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)): Stansted to Faro; Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool and Stansted to Porto.

**SATA International** (0870 606 6664, [www.sata.pt](http://www.sata.pt)): Gatwick to the Azores, Tuesdays and Saturdays from April.

**TAP Air Portugal** (0845 601 0932, [www.tap-airportugal.co.uk](http://www.tap-airportugal.co.uk)): Gatwick and Heathrow to Porto and Lisbon.

**Charter flights** The seat broker Avro (0871 423 8550, [www.avro.co.uk](http://www.avro.co.uk)) offers seats on flights to Faro from regional airports including Edinburgh.

**XL Airways** (0870 320 7777, [www.xl.com](http://www.xl.com)) flies from Gatwick and Manchester to Faro and Funchal and from Birmingham to Funchal. Thomsonfly (0870 1900 737, [www.thomsonfly.com](http://www.thomsonfly.com)), First Choice Airways (0870 850 3999, [www.firstchoice.co.uk](http://www.firstchoice.co.uk)) and Thomas Cook Airlines (online bookings only - [www.flythomascook.com](http://www.flythomascook.com)) fly from regional airports to Faro and Funchal.

## By train

The excellent website [www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com) gives a choice of routes from Britain to Portugal. For Lisbon, Mark Smith, the site's author, recommends taking the 11.05am Eurostar to Paris and the TGV service to Irun, on the Spanish border, which connects with the overnight Sud Express to Lisbon, arriving at 11.03am. (The train to the Algarve takes three hours longer.) The cheapest return is £226. Book through Spanish Rail (020 7725 7063, [www.spanish-rail.co.uk](http://www.spanish-rail.co.uk)).

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## Getting around

### By car

Car rental offices at Faro Airport have a reputation for making you pay for every tiny scratch on a returned car. Make sure you have zero-excess CDW insurance or buy an annual excess policy for £49 through Insurance4carhire (020 7012 6300, [www.insurance4carhire.com](http://www.insurance4carhire.com)). The best deals are usually available through brokers such as Holiday Autos (0870 400 4461, [www.holidayautos.co.uk](http://www.holidayautos.co.uk)) and Suncars (0871 664 9680, [www.suncars.com](http://www.suncars.com)).

### By train

For timetable information see the Comboios de Portugal website, [www.cp.pt](http://www.cp.pt), which has an English-language option. **Ffestiniog Travel** (01766 512400, [www.festtravel.co.uk](http://www.festtravel.co.uk)) has a guided northern Spain and Portugal rail tour.

Further information from the **Portuguese Tourist Office** (0845 355 1212, [www.visitportugal.com](http://www.visitportugal.com)), 22-25a Sackville Street, London W1.