



Ericeira's seas treat newcomers to surfing gently

See the light

or those who want to discover what makes Portugal tick, or for those who are simply Algarved out, the area around Estoril has a lot going for it: A few miles down the coast you sway from the panoply of deserted Gothic palaces and villages that are great to stroll through, before enjoying a beer, coffee and great food while you marvel at how everything costs about half of what it does at home and one-third less than on the Algarve.

The hotels and restaurants here are not owned and run by big corporations that come in and build places to barbecue a tourist. They care about their visitors. Ask the golfers who have been coming here for years. Some of the courses get crowded, but only occasionally. Is there a better course anywhere than the Campo Real? Ask the surfers, too. Or better still, try to surf yourself off one of the beautiful beaches around Ericeira, where the washing-machine churn of Portugal's Atlantic coast makes it the ideal spot for it.

Processions of vast rollers compete for attention. In between, the backswell will sweep sand over your toes, or worse. If the waves don't knock you flying, the backwash will at Fordo do Lizandro, an epic beach two kilometres from Ericeira. It

Take a break from the Algarve's tourist traps and head to Ericeira on Portugal's western shore



Picturesque Ericeira seems to have been built to be painted

is like visiting a beautiful resort and being confronted by a savage-looking dog. But the menacing beast merely licks your toes and before you know it, you've forgotten your fear and are standing on a surfboard. "One thing surfing teaches you is patience," explains Tobi Ebner, who used to be a ski instructor and now runs a surf school. "Visitors don't understand that surfing is not like skiing; the conditions have to be right.

"The waves are terrific as we're on the Atlantic coast, but sometimes you have to wait. The countryside is beautiful too. It is not like the Algarve, with one beer pub after another. When you go to order your meal, you don't point at a photograph on a menu. You even have to speak Portuguese sometimes."

Half of Tobi's customers, many of whom come each year, are Irish, sent out by Nick Kelly of surfingalgarve.com, one of the republic's niche travel success stories.

When the last golf ball has been sunk and the last wave has crashed humbly around your ears, there is even more to see. You can walk through little Ericeira until your legs hurt, church to church, there are four) or restaurant to restaurant (there are 35).

This is one of those towns that needs an ease! It has an exotic romantic landscape

painter's finish, derived no doubt from its narrow streets of sheep-white houses with exquisite blue finches and azulejo tilework, and the crossroad wells adorned by early 20th-century birthdates.

The whole shiny huddled lot is plonked on a cliff top overlooking three horseshoe beaches, with precipitous steps descending to each in turn and to the rose-coloured rocks that divide them, the waves splashing you as you hop along the half-fashioned paths.

Ignore the Nonghties developments on either flank and you can imagine the old fishing village is still here, shaking its scaly tail in resistance.

One restaurant, Reina, looks down on the small pier from where the Portuguese royal family fled in October 1910 during a republican revolution. On an Easter Saturday, I was there with my teenage daughter. It rained and it rained. And it rained some more. What to do?

There was an escape, thanks to Hertz, which had provided me with a new Mini Cooper. Cubanman D1600 hatchback — small, zippy and slyish. Ohhides was an hour's drive away. It is an unmissable Unesco world heritage site: a white town crowning a hill with encircling, matchcoated medieval walls. The old house in the castle is one of the formerly state-run

historic hotels of Portugal, a pousada, which is beautifully furnished and well kept.

The walks offer amazing views across the hillside, plus the thrill of balancing on a narrow path with a sheer drop on the inside.

The drive along the coastal road is also spectacular, past the round hills and windmills, the little towns with age-old estalagens serving welcoming beer, and the large houses with the steep falling gardens that are used by the Portuguese bourgeoisie who spill out from Lisbon to these villages in the summer.

We soaked up the romantic beauty of the region, great trees growing from the endless chaos of rocks, our GPS diverting us down small tracks and tiny roads, across level crossings and through ladyprints of unfenced vineyards.

Watched by the Atlantic all the time, it is as if the tourist is the attraction here.

Portugal

■ Surf holidays (+3531 482 2828, surfingalgarve.com) offers surfing breaks for individuals, couples and groups, including teaching, on the Lisbon coast. Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) flies daily to Lisbon