

Surf's up in Portugal

It doesn't matter if you catch a wave or not, surfing is one of the most invigorating holiday activities as KAREN CREED discovered in Ericeira

Portugal has always been one of my favourite destinations, even though I have yet to explore most of its rugged coastline. Like many other holidaymakers I have focused my attention on the jewel of its crown - the Algarve - taking leisurely breaks in Lagos, Albufeira, Praia da Luz and Sagres. So when an opportunity arose to visit Portugal recently for a surf holiday, I was keen to experience an area that was away from the tourist traps. What I didn't expect is that it would ignite a deeper affinity with this idyllic country.

Ericeira was the main reason for this, situated 30 kilometres north of Lisbon. Traditionally a fishing town, its long beaches and surfing prowess have turned it into something of an international hotspot. Fortunately for those who like resorts to retain their charm but boast all the tourist necessities - i.e. excellent restaurants and a diverse selection of bars and shops - Ericeira ticks all these boxes. Best of all, it is considerably cheap compared to its southern counterparts.

Even if they are not sporting Billabong shorts and havaiana flip flops, you will still spot the tourists in Ericeira. Such is the laidback nature of this town that it begs visitors to don their most informal attire, even if you are frequenting the more upmarket restaurants. Not everyone is here to surf, of course, but they are still likely to be tempted to walk, cycle, sunbathe or paraglide along one of the forty beaches in the area.

I was certain surfing would not expose one of my hidden talents, but nonetheless I was keen to try it out in a place that is notorious for its waves. Fortunately our instructor Tobi - who runs one of the main surf schools in Ericeira - put us in the right frame of mind before we even touched the shoreline. "It's not all about getting up on the board; most importantly it has to be fun." Inspired by this feel good advice I was still determined to catch a wave, especially with the challenge of beating my boyfriend to it first. We were quick to find out, however, that unlike skiing where you can head off whenever there is snow; surfing is not solely dependent on there being waves. It is all about making sure



■ Karen takes to knee surfing



the waves are safe and currents are not too strong. The surf experts explained the danger of barrels, caves and other threatening waves that were too temperamental for our first day at sea. Rather than miss out on a day of surfing we were taken up north - passing Santa Cruz and Penaltra - to arrive at Peniche. Dubbed a surfer's paradise, it is a prime spot for beginners because of its gentle rolling waves. It also boasts warmer waters than the south which only adds to the enjoyment for first time surfers.

For a beach that attracts a great deal of people, Peniche is spectacularly clean and compares to some of Ireland's best beaches on a warm day. We paced the shore of Peniche for our necessary warm up before practising surf's essential moves on the sand. Once we had mastered the key postures – paddle, jump up and face the shore while keeping our legs bent – we were ready to hit the water. As soon as I tried to recreate my perfect surfing on sand in the water, however, I knew it was not going to be easy. Never again will I laugh at a struggling beginner surfer. Not only is it extremely difficult to jump up on a board but to keep your balance as you rise up amid a rolling wave is inevitably tricky. After two hours the closest I got to surfing was on my knees. In fact I became so adept at knee surfing over the next few days that I had other people in the surf class copying my moves, much to the amusement of our instructor Flavio. He never gave up on me, however, encouraging me to jump on my board by showing me other techniques. Unfortunately I can't lie and pretend I caught a wave. I didn't come close. Failing a challenge would usually disappoint, but for once this didn't turn me off a sport. Even if I was officially known as a frube (a person who never catches a wave for the whole time they are in the water), after every lesson I came out of the water feeling refreshed and eager to go back in the following day. The body does take some battering with the ferocity of the waves but for all round toning; I can see why many aspire for the surfer body. The butt cheeks, tummy muscles and shoulders would be defined in no time.

Of course the other perk of hardcore activity during the day meant we could eat exactly



■ The eco lodges in Ericeira

what we liked. In Ericeira it is easy to build up excitement after breakfast, simply because of the number of Portuguese specialities begging to be sampled for lunch and dinner. The *pastelarias* were our guilty pleasure before and after surfing with windows of fresh baked cookies, custard creams and other delicacies luring us in off the street. We would demolish them in seconds, only to order more. Washed down with a steaming hot galou (white coffee served in a glass) was my idea of snack heaven. The good food didn't stop there. Tik Tak became our local away from home, a restaurant in the heart of the town that served our favourite dishes in generous portions and in a vibrant setting. Run by Pedro, he seems to understand the need of surfers and holidaymakers alike, offering tantalising dishes and fine wines to match. From Tik Tak we moved on to Tik Tapas, which offers similar food in smaller tapas style portions. It is just one of ten excellent restaurants in the town including a few fish restaurants near to the port.

While I was not making any impression with my surfing skills, I can vouch for success with the choice of accommodation. Eco lodges are a relatively new addition to Ericeira, encompassing six wooden style homes set around a fresh water pool and zen like garden. The natural haven is evidently different from

typical high rise resorts and this is what makes it all the more appealing. Instead of battling for balcony space, you can while away the evenings in your own hammock after bathing in the fresh water pool below. The fun also comes in the form of a wine cellar, pool table, library and outdoor grill to cook your fresh fish from the market. Those on a tight budget have an option to sleep in converted barrels which is the latest addition to the eco lodge resort. Being just a ten minute walk from the town, the eco lodges lend themselves perfectly to families and those who want everything within walking distance.

Most holidaymakers in Ericeira will include a day trip to Lisbon given its proximity to the coastal resort. I went a step further, choosing to spend two nights in the Portuguese capital. Armed with recommendations from friends who had already visited the Cuban like city, I was just as impressed with it as they had been. Lisbon is a pot pourri of cultures and although poverty is rife, the city somehow exhumes a definite *joie de vivre*. The historical Bairro Alto was my favourite, a maze of narrow cobbled streets with restaurants and bars that spill out onto them in no particular order. As night falls the cobbled pavements turn into a spectacle of music with jazz, reggae and fado (traditional Portuguese music) being played in the bars while the sangria and caparinhos are in

constant flow. Alternatively the Docas is the cosmopolitan part of Lisbon, where the marina is flanked by expensive looking yachts on one side and opulent restaurants on the other. The price is not as appealing as the inner city, but it is still worth a visit if you rather a formal setting for a meal.

Where to rest your head is not a costly choice in Lisbon either with some award winning hostels and cost effective hotel accommodation. We stayed in the Fontana Park Hotel, a chic city centre abode that has been awarded for its innovative design. This is clearly evident from the slick bar with bamboo seating to the all over colour scheme of black, white, green and fuchsia. With the intention to create an urban haven, the rooms are exceptionally spacious and bright with beds so comfortable that we fell into a routine of daily siestas. The hotel was also a great base from which to walk everywhere and even when we treated ourselves to taxis, we relished the mere €4 tab in this value for money city.

While sightseeing is unlikely to set you alight, the Lisbon experience for me was rambling up and down the seven hills, window shopping in the elegant Chiado area, and getting a rickety tram up to the castle district to watch the sun set. ■

Karen went to Portugal with www.surfholidays.com Prices are from €339pp for one week with accommodation in the eco-lodges, airport transfers, surf lessons for six days and lunch on the beach every day. Surf holidays also organise holidays in France, Spain and the Canaries. Visit www.surfholidays.com for more deals and information.

Karen stayed at the Fontana Park Hotel in Lisbon. Visit www.hotels.com for the best rates on Lisbon hotels and for hotel accommodation worldwide

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