

# Spring in Southern Portugal

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly to Faro and transfer to Mertola
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- Day 2/3** Birdwatching and botanising excursions from Mertola
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- Day 4/7** Birdwatching and botanising excursions from Sagres
- 
- Day 8** Transfer to Faro, and fly UK
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### Departs

April

### Focus

Birds, flowers and butterflies

### Grading

A. Gentle day walks, part-day walks and excursions

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PRT04) or brochure

### Focus

Birds, flowers and butterflies

### Highlights

- Two-centre holiday combining the sunny Algarve with the magnificent steppes of the Alentejo
- Explore the region's Cork Oak forests, steppe grasslands & abundant coastal habitats
- Great and Little Bustards, Iberian Magpies & Black-shouldered Kite
- Bee-eaters, Rollers, shrikes, larks & more
- Peonies, cistuses & numerous orchid species
- A wealth of reptiles, butterflies & other insects



Lesser Kestrel (Peter Dunn)



Armeria pungens (Paul Harnes )



Hoopoe (Menno van Duijn)



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**NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.**

## Introduction

This is a two centre holiday timed to get the best of southern Portugal's spring weather, birds and flowers. Our first three nights will be spent at Mertola, a medieval hilltop town perched above the Guadiana river. Here we will stay in a simple, traditional, family run *pensao* and take our evening meals in local restaurants.

Having explored the steppes of the Alentejo, we next travel south-west to our base for the latter four nights of this 7-night holiday – a very comfortable hotel situated just a short distance from a fort which served as Henry the Navigator's 15th-century School of Navigation in Sagres, which produced some legendary explorers including Magellan and Vasco da Gama.

From these bases we will make daily excursions to a range of exciting destinations and explore, with fairly easy walks, the beauty and variety of the southern Portuguese landscape and its wildlife. Lunches will be picnics (or taken in local bars/restaurants if the weather is poor). All excursions will be optional to leave you free to explore at your own pace if you wish.

On occasions we may reverse the itinerary and travel first to Sagres before finishing the tour with three nights at Mertola.

## Day 1

## Fly Faro, Transfer to Mertola

We begin our holiday with morning flights from around the UK to Faro, choosing from the schedules of the many charter/no frills flights on offer for the most suitable timings. Arriving in Faro, the capital of the Algarve province, we will begin our journey north to Mertola. Driving cross-country we will enter the picturesque wooded northern regions of the Algarve where Gum-leaved Cistus is the dominant plant and its delicate, white, paper-like petals, (such a contrast to the tough, sticky leaves), dot the landscape at this season in their millions. Stopping for anything of interest en-route, Bee-eaters or a Woodchat Shrike perhaps, a hovering Short-toed Eagle or some roadside orchids, we will arrive at Mertola in the late afternoon. After settling in to our comfortable pensao there should be time for a stroll around the town before enjoying dinner at one of the nearby restaurants.

## Day 2

## Mertola

Mertola is a small market town perched on a hill above the spectacular Guadiana valley. Important as a bridging point on the river, its history stretches back at least as far as Roman times. Its more recent Moorish history is, however, more evident both in the towering castle that dominates the town and in the arabesque architecture and winding cobbled streets of the old quarter where our pensao is situated.

Around the town itself we can expect to see Blue Rock Thrush, Hoopoe, Crag Martin, Spotless Starling, Rock Bunting, Iberian Magpie and lots of White Storks. The undoubted stars here in Mertola though are the Lesser Kestrels which breed in cavities in the walls of the beautifully positioned 14th century Franciscan convent. These delightful little falcons are best seen in the evenings and we shall make the most of our opportunities to watch these special birds at close quarters.



From Mertola we will spend a day exploring the grassy plains to the west towards the town of Castro Verde. Though lacking in physical relief, this area is nevertheless inspiring because of the wide open views, superb birding and the wonderful spring flowers that clothe the landscape in a range of beautiful colours.

Making various stops and short walks during the course of the day we will be looking particularly for Great Bustards, but our explorations should bring us into contact with a wealth of bird species including Little Bustard, Red-legged Partridge, Stone Curlew, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Roller, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Red-rumped Swallow, Tawny Pipit, Black-eared Wheatear, Southern Grey Shrike, Spanish Sparrow,



countless Corn Buntings and lots of Montagu's Harriers. Indeed, Montagu's Harriers will rarely be out of view and their display flights and food passes will be one of the highlights of the holiday. Along the river banks we might find Hoop-petticoat Daffodils (*Narcissus bulbocodium*) and Jonquils (*N.jonquilla*) and in the river pools Terrapins, Crayfish and the harmless Viperine Snake. Under stones there are scorpions, whilst lizards such as Spanish Psammadromus are common. A stop at a small lake might bring us a surprise marsh tern, migrant raptor or

unusual wader. Everywhere the flowers will assail our senses.

## Day 3

## Mertola

Another day today dedicated to exploring the plains around Mertola. Amongst the rewarding options open to us might be a drive north along the Guadiana valley through remote savannah country to the spectacular waterfall and punchbowl at Pulo de Lobo (The Wolf's Leap) where the mighty river forces its way through a gorge only a few metres wide. The valley here is very wild and the birds undeniably exciting. Black Stork, Bonelli's Eagle and Eagle Owl have bred here in recent years. The surrounding parkland country also holds such elusive species as Black-shouldered Kite, Great Spotted Cuckoo and Black Vulture.

## Day 4

## Sagres

Packing up and leaving Mertola behind, we will head west across the plains, past Castro Verde and Ourique to the Barragem de Monte de Rocha, a tranquil lake surrounded by rolling Holm Oak parkland so typical of large parts of the Alentejo. Here there is a varied and interesting bird community that includes Hoopoe, Woodchat Shrike, Orphean Warbler, Rock Sparrow and Hawfinch. This is also a good area for Oscellated Lizards (Europe's largest lizard species) which frequent the rocky outcrops and also for raptors. Amongst the regular Black Kites and Montagu's Harriers we should look out for Booted Eagles, migrant Ospreys and even Black-shouldered Kite.



Woodchat Shrike

Continuing on south past the pretty village of Santa Clara, our journey takes us down to the far southwestern-most point of the European mainland and the coastal town of Sagres.

After checking in at the hotel, we will have a chance to explore the coast and heathland nearby for its botanical interest and such birds as Blue Rock

Thrush, Thekla Lark and Black Redstart.

## Day 5

## Sagres

The Algarve coast has been intensively developed for tourism in recent years. Sadly this has meant that many former wetlands have been drained for conversion to golf courses or holiday complexes. Few wetlands remain intact west of Faro. Indeed, almost the only one that does is at Quinta da Rocha near Portimão where the estuaries of the Odiaxiere and Alvor rivers meet behind a huge sand-bar. The peninsula between the two estuaries and the estuaries themselves form a compact and varied mosaic of habitats that will provide us with rewarding opportunities for birding and botanising. The estuarine habitats support a range of migrant waders plus breeding Black-winged Stilts, Kentish Plovers and late wintering Caspian Terns. The salt marshes ring to the songs and calls of Spanish Yellow Wagtails, Zitting Cisticolas and Short-toed Larks. Spring flowers are excellent here too, and under the fig and almond trees we can look for a variety of Mediterranean orchids and asphodels, Tassel Hyacinth (*Muscari comosum*) and many others. On the sea wall we can admire the impressive stands of the parasitic *Cistanche phelyphaea* in the foreground and the myriad of fiddler crabs on the mud below. We will round the day off with a trip to the spectacular limestone cliffs and stacks at nearby Ponta da Piedade, where we shall enjoy some sea-watching.

## Day 6

## Sagres

A nice leisurely day today and a short drive from the hotel.

At Sagres Point the extraordinary flora of the limestone pavements will provide much of interest to the botanists. The dominant plant of the area is *Cistus palhinhae* but we should also see such species as the endemic Sea Pink (*Armeria pungens*), the incredibly blue *Anagallis monelli*, *Halimium commutatum* and

*Silene colorata*. The birders amongst us can look out for Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush, Thekla Lark and passing seabirds that may well include skuas and Cory's or Balearic Shearwaters. Sagres Point also holds Henry the Navigator's 15th century school of navigation. Dramatically positioned, this was where many of the intrepid early Portuguese explorers learnt their skills before embarking on their daring voyages of discovery.

A few kilometres further west, the land rises up to the tremendous cliffs of Cape St. Vincent, the spectacular south-western extremity of Europe. The cliffs here provide a breeding ground for both Choughs and Peregrines, whilst the windswept grasslands and heathlands of the hinterland support an interesting range of plants and insects (including ever-busy dung beetles) and open country birds such as Thekla and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit, Spectacled Warbler, Black-eared Wheatear and Montagu's Harrier. Cover is sparse, but what little there is should be carefully checked for migrants as virtually anything can and often does turn up here!

## Day 7

## Sagres

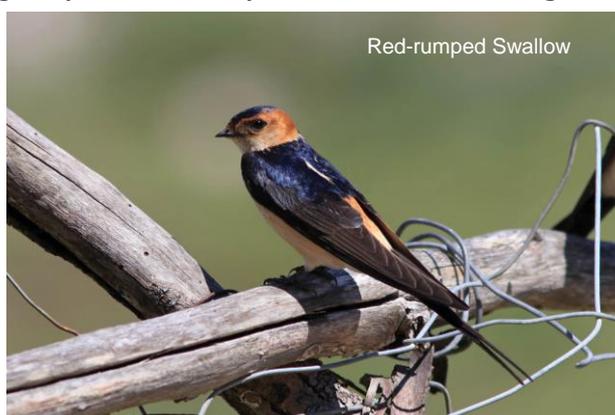


Spanish Festoon

Our plan is to drive inland today, through some fine Cork Oak forest, where we will stop to look for plants such as Violet Bird's-nest Orchid (*Limodorum abortivum*) and the strange insectivorous *Drosophyllum lusitanicum* and listen out for Firecrests, Short-toed Treecreepers, Wrynecks and Crested Tits. Our destination is the Cork Oak forests of the Serra de Espinacao da Cao. Here we will be looking for flowers, such as Paeonia broteri, Scilla monophyllos and Serapias parviflora, butterflies that should include such spectacular species as Common and Scarce Swallowtails, Spanish Festoon and Cleopatra; and otherwise elusive birds

such as Wryneck, Subalpine Warbler, the dusky Iberian race of Long-tailed Tit and perhaps even Bonelli's Eagle. The local people gather the fruits of the Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*) here to make the Portuguese liqueur, Madronia.

After lunch we will continue on to Aljezur on the dry coastal plain where an attractive valley runs through a range of habitats from the town itself, complete with Moorish castle, to the sea. A mere 5 km takes us from farmland and orchards, through river-bank scrub, gallery forest (a very rare habitat in the Algarve now), scrub covered hills, water meadows and salt-pans to a tidal lagoon, extensive dunes, a broad sandy beach and geologically spectacular cliffs. The dunes will be the focus of our attention, supporting as they do, a remarkable flora including the locally endemic clambering Snap-dragon *Antirrhinum magus linkianum* and the delicate Three-leaved Snowflake *Leucojum trichophyllum*. Not surprisingly, the birds are varied here too, and we will look out for Short-toed Eagle, Red-legged Partridge, Bee-eater (which breed in large



Red-rumped Swallow

numbers here), Pallid and Alpine Swifts, Red-rumped Swallow, Tawny Pipit, Thekla Lark, Southern Grey Shrike, Dartford Warbler and Cirl Bunting amongst others.

## Day 8

## Fly UK

Regretfully we must make our way back to Faro for our return flight but, if we have time, we will stop at the famous Ludo Marsh near Faro Airport for a last taste of Portugal and its wildlife. Here, amongst a good range of birds we can hope to see Purple Gallinule plus perhaps Osprey, Purple Heron, Little Bittern or Collared Pratincole. This is also a marvellous place to watch terrapins, easily visible loafing on half-submerged logs or on mud banks at the reed-bed edge.

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## Tour grading

Most of our walks will be between two and five kilometres in length and at a slow pace so that we can enjoy the birds, plants and other wildlife we encounter. Breakfast will be taken at around 8.00 a.m. and we aim to leave between 8.30 and 9.00 a.m. for each day's excursion. We will break each day with a leisurely lunch, generally a picnic, and will usually be back at our hotel quite by 6.00 p.m. for tea or an evening drink. On some days there will be optional early morning or late evening bird walks. All walks and excursions are optional to allow you to take a day off if you wish.

## Weather

Mid-April is a prime time for migrant birds and for the spring flowers; it is also an ideal time to visit southern Portugal as daytime temperatures average around 70°F and the evenings cool. We can expect plenty of sunshine but April can also be showery and breezy, and sometimes decidedly chilly while out in the plains, so a range of layered clothing is required. In April, after good winter rains, southern Portugal is lush and green and covered in flowers - a dazzling destination!

## Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

## Regional Departures

Faro is a popular destination and subject to confirmation we hope to be able to offer direct flights from a selection of regional airports including Gatwick, Stansted, Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Bristol. Contact us for details, or make your preference known clearly to us upon booking.

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.