

Portugal – The Algarve at Christmas

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly to Faro and transfer to Tavira
- Day 2/3** Birdwatching excursions from Tavira
- Day 4** Transfer to Sagres
- Day 5-7** Birdwatching excursions from Sagres
- Day 8** Transfer to Faro, and fly UK

Departs

December

Focus

Birds

Grading

A. Easy day walks

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code PRT09) or brochure

Highlights

- Little Bustard, Red-billed Cough & Black Redstart among the resident birds
- Explore coastal wetlands & lagoons for wintering waders, raptors & other birds
- Greater Flamingoes & Eurasian Spoonbills at Castro Marim
- Little Stint, Marsh Harrier & Booted Eagle winter along the coast
- Day trip to look for Great Bustard & Black-bellied Sandgrouse in Alentejo



Hoopoe by Menno van Duijn



Little Bittern by Menno van Duijn



Great Bustards by John Willsher



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Introduction

Lying at the far south-western tip of mainland Europe, Portugal's beautiful Algarve region combines some genuinely warm hospitality, plenty of interest from a bird and wildlife perspective, and with some decent December weather to boot. Famous for its golf courses, beaches and winter sunshine, there's another side to the Algarve, away from the high-rise hotels and beach-bound holidaymakers, and on this tour we'll take you off the tourist trail, to the windswept cliffs, sand dunes and heaths of the west coast, the marshes and saltpans of the south, and the Cork Oak forests and wide open plains of the Alentejo. A relaxed pace of life prevails away from the tourist hotspots and we are sure that you will soon be seduced by southern Portugal — not only by its excellent birdwatching opportunities, but also by its beautiful language, charming people, and delicious food and wine.

On this two-centre holiday, our base for three nights we will be based in the eastern Algarve municipality of Tavira, staying at the well-appointed Hotel Rural Quinta do Marco set amongst 18 peaceful hectares of countryside. This base which will allow us easy access to both the extensive wetlands of the central Algarve and the steppes of the Alentejo.

For the second part of the tour, we will be staying in the excellent Memmo Baleeira Hotel, situated in Sagres in the extreme south-west of Portugal just a stone's throw from a fort which served as Henry the Navigator's 15th century School of Navigation. Comfortable, clean rooms are enhanced by an airy modern design and, with outstanding views over the Sagres coastline, this hotel provides a relaxing retreat.

Whatever birds we see, the hospitality of our hosts at this special time of year, together with a glimpse of winter warmth, should see us heading home with a healthy glow in our cheeks!

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. On occasion we may run the tour in reverse.

Itinerary

Day 1

Fly Faro

Our tour begins with a flight to Faro from where it's a roughly 40-minute drive to our accommodation in Tavira. Depending on flight times (we hope to bring people in from regional airports around the UK), we may explore some of the central Algarve marshes before heading to our hotel.

Days 2 – 3

Excursions from Tavira

For the next two days we will make excursions from our base in Tavira.

The Castro Marim wetland on the Spanish border is a complex system of creeks and natural saltmarsh as well as man-made saltpans. This is an important site for wintering Greater Flamingoes and Eurasian

Spoonbills, and it is perhaps the only site in Portugal where Lesser Short-toed Larks may regularly be found. Numbers of Black-necked Grebes winter here, together with a few Stone Curlews. We may well combine these reserves with a walk at the golf course and coastal lagoons of Quinto do Lago where Sardinian Warbler and Black-winged Stilt can be found.

The Parque Nacional da Ria Formosa just east of Faro consists of coastal lagoons, vast areas of tidal-flats, and saltmarsh and saltpans that are enclosed by a belt of sand dune islands and peninsulas. This is a great site for wintering birds from northern Europe, especially waders such as Black-tailed Godwit and Little Stint. Western Marsh Harriers are resident and Booted Eagles are regular in winter. It is also possible to find Yellow-legged and Audouin's Gull.

We will also drive north for a day to the wide plains of Castro Verde in the Alentejo. Within the Castro Verde Special Protection Area, we'll hope to see Europe's largest flying bird, the Great Bustard, as well as Little Bustard and Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

Several exciting raptors hunt over these open plains and we will survey the rugged steppe country from the region's highest point, Sierra de Aracelis, for Black and Griffon Vultures, Hen Harrier and the magnificent Spanish Imperial Eagle.



Black-bellied Sandgrouse

Day 4-7

Excursions from Sagres



Iberian Magpie

We will head to our second hotel in the far southwestern corner of the Algarve in Sagres. Over the next three days we hope to combine some of the top birding sites in southwest Portugal and some relaxation time around the hotel.

Near to our hotel are the spectacular cliffs and wild surfing beaches of Cabo de São Vicente — Portugal's and mainland Europe's 'Land's End'! Here, Red-billed Chough, Peregrine Falcon, Blue Rock Thrush and Black Redstart are all resident, and in winter there are usually a few Alpine Accentors to be found.

Travelling north up the coast we arrive at Vale Santo (Sacred Valley) where we may find Little Bustard, Corn Bunting, Iberian Magpie, Raven and Skylark.

The Boca do Rio is a small valley about 30 minutes' drive east from the hotel where we may find Blue Rock Thrush, Crag Martin, Thekla Lark and Western Marsh Harrier. Nearby we can visit Martinhal, a beach

area where we may find Water Pipit, Grey and Kentish Plovers and the introduced Common Waxbill. The Salgados Lagoon, also known as the Pera Marsh, is superb coastal area for waterbirds and we may see Western Marsh Harrier, Ferruginous Duck, Eurasian Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, Caspian Tern and Bluethroat.

On another day we will visit Monchique, the highest area in the Algarve at 900 metres, north of Sagres. Here we can find Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Dartford Warbler, Rock Bunting and Firecrest. It is also home to the very rare evergreen Algerian Oak (*Quercus canariensis*).

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 Ludo Marsh near Faro Airport for a last taste of Portugal and its wildlife. This is also a marvelous place to watch terrapins, easily visible loafing on half-submerged logs or on mud banks at the reed-bed edge.



Tour grading

This is a gentle-paced tour; our walks will be between two and five kilometres in length and at a slow pace so that we can enjoy the birds 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. Breakfast and the evening meal will be taken at the hotel restaurant.

Weather

December is generally the wettest and coldest month on the Algarve, but it is all relative. Average daytime temperatures are 12-13 degrees C with an average spread of 7 degrees C to a pleasant 17 degrees C. An average December sees 11 days of rain (114 mm of precipitation) compared to an average of 10 days of rain (57mm) in London. Needless to say, we will plan our excursions around the weather, possibly using a wet afternoon to use the wonderful spa facilities and pool in the hotels.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. The hotels are both very comfortable 4-star properties. <http://www.memmohotels.com/> and <https://www.quintadolago.com/en/>

Regional Departures

Faro is a popular destination and subject to confirmation we may be able to offer direct flights from a selection of regional airports from around the UK. 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, 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.