

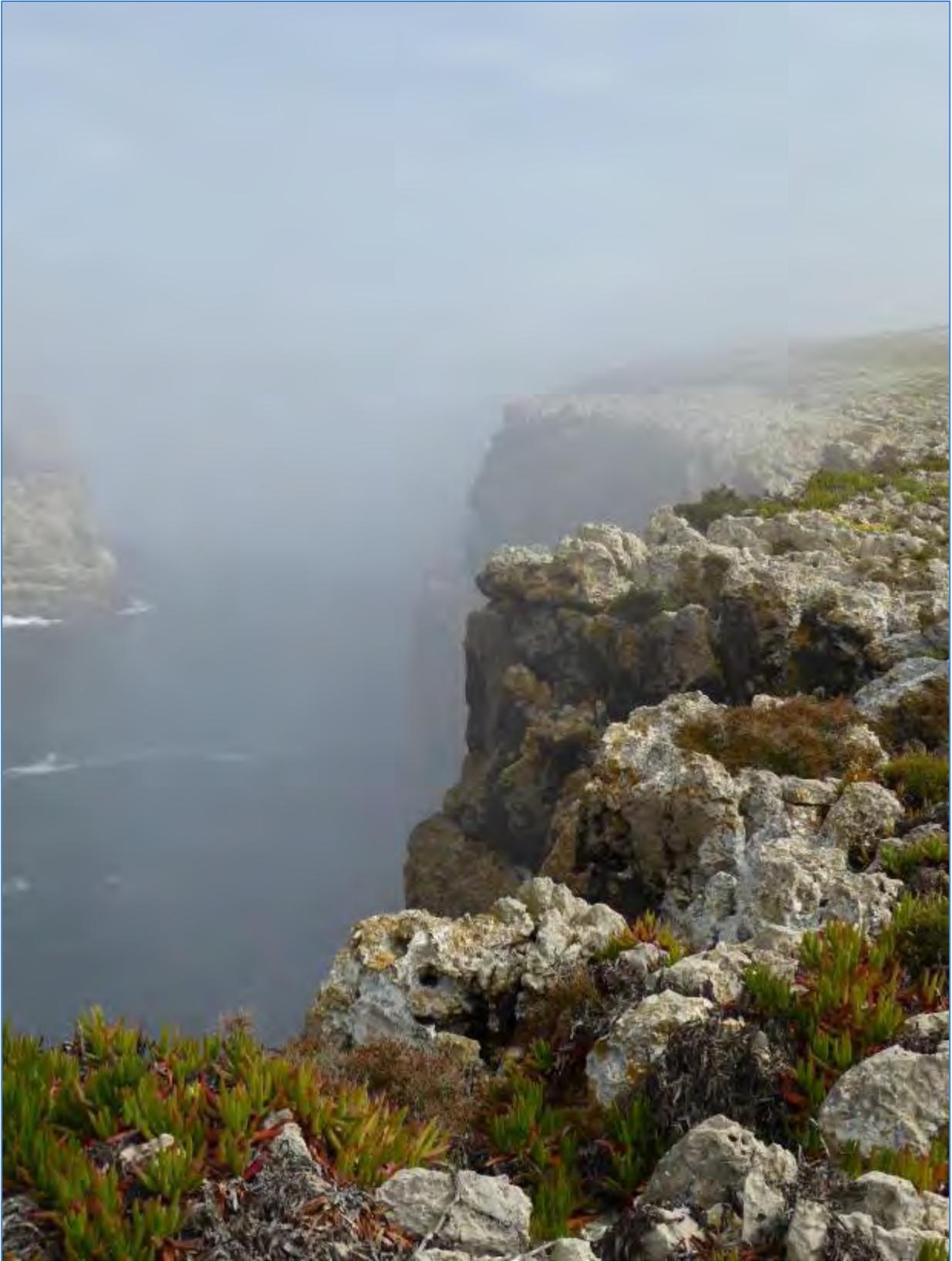
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MERLIN 633

A STUDY TOUR OF THE ALGARVE, PORTUGAL

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PROFESSIONAL GARENERS GUILD
TRAINEE



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A STUDY TOUR OF THE ALGARVE, PORTUGAL

As part of my Professional Gardeners Guild, three years practical traineeship, I traveled to the historic town of Sintra with four of my fellow trainees, for a week's work experience. We worked in the palace and gardens of Monserrate, visited local gardens and took a day trip to Lisbon, visiting the spectacular shaded glasshouse Estofa Fria. We then traveled to Silves in the Algrave...

QUINTA DA FIGUEIRINHA



The train passes through the Portuguese landscape, the temperature increasing the further south with travel. From the window I catch glimpses of its rich red soil, giving life to vineyards and groves of *Pinus pinea* and *Citrus* sp. Paths twist through the landscape, to the tops of hills and the occasional bright white villa, seemingly popping up in the middle of nowhere.

Our party of five arrives in the small town of Poco Barreto, not far from Tunes where we switched trains. We were met with a warm welcome from Dr. Gerhard Zabel and then piled into his classic Mercedes to complete our journey to his home, and our base for the next seven days at Quinta da Figueirinha.

When we had settled in, Gerhard returned to give us a short and informative tour. The Quinta (meaning farm) is surrounded by beautiful landscapes, wild flora and never ending terraced groves of oranges and other citrus, filling the air with their heavenly scent. As we walked, Gerhard talked passionately about his trees, in particular *Ceratonia siliqua*, the Carob tree, of which there are several specimens at the Quinta, centuries old. This Mediterranean native has a fascinating history; the name carob is possibly from Middle French *carobe*, or bought into Europe from the Arabic *kharrūb* meaning 'bean pod'. It's botanical name originates from the Greek word *kerátion* 'fruit of the carob' and the Latin *siliqua*, meaning 'pod'. The Ancient Greeks' method for measuring units of weight, were measured using seed pods. This form of measurement was standardized and referred to as *carat*, derived from *kerátion*.

The pods were not only used as a measurement, but as a food source for cattle. Its sweet green pods that ripen to a dark chocolate brown, are widely used for culinary purposes, in particular, as a substitute for chocolate.

We passed endless rows of oranges, tasting the warm and juicy segments of its fruit, identifying olives, almonds, figs and treading carefully to avoid *Ophrys speculum* (mirror orchid) and the bright yellow flowers of *Ophrys lutea* (yellow bee orchid).

After our walk, Gerhard invited us for a traditional Portuguese meal with his partner. We watched the brilliantly richly intense orange sun set over the neighboring hills. After our meal, we tried some of Gerhard's homemade Medronho, a popular liquor made from the fruits of *Arbutus unedo*.

INTRODUCTIONS



With a brilliant blue and cloudless sky, we made our way along a rocky red track, through the Quinta. Gerhard had shown us two routes on a map the previous day, so we took the shorter blue trail in the morning before we were to meet Rosie.

We passed countless *Citrus* sp. filling the warm air with their perfume, and our bellies with their fruit. We tried a lemon and grapefruit, fresh from the tree, the taste is something else; so sweet and juicy. *Ceratonia siliqua*, *Quercus coccifera*, *Olea europaea*, *Pistacia lentiscus* and *Prunus dulcis* form the backdrop to a variety of wild flowers; like the blue flowering *Cynoglossum creticum*, low growing *Anthyllis tetraphylla*, *Convolvulus arvensis* that has climbed to the top of neighboring plants and *Lavandula stoechas* being enjoyed by small blue butterflies. As we reached the end of one track (having walked passed the partly hidden painted blue arrow) we found ourselves surrounded by *Cistus albidus* and stunning views of the surrounding landscape.

Further along the trail, we spot *Muscari comosum*, *Prasium majus* and closer to our apartment, several *Acacia retinodes* displaying a mass of bright yellow flowers that are humming with bees.

By early afternoon, we are joined by Rosie Peddle who greets us warmly and is beaming, full of life and enthusiasm, armed with supplies and some delicious homemade cake! The kettle goes on and we start discussing our schedule for the week. Rosie tells us all about herself and the work she does with the Mediterranean Garden Association. We sit and chat for a while, introducing ourselves and talking briefly about our backgrounds and interests within horticulture.

Rosie now lives in the Algarve with her husband and is passionate about educating the locals to use native species in their gardens. There is an ever increasing population of British citizens living in the Algarve, most desiring lawns, a few palm trees dotted about the place and a few other 'pretty' plants here and there. With this type of planting, water is a must, but with an increasing cost, Rosie and a group of like-minded gardeners are trying to encourage people to use plants that can survive in the hot and dry summer months.

We were each presented with a copy of 'Field Guide to the wild flowers of the Algarve' by Chris Thorogood and Simon Hiscock, which looks good and I can't wait to find the plants featured. We talked about the local topography, geography, climate and plants.

That evening, we joined a few local members of the MGA and were given a presentation on Gardening in the soils of the Algarve; soils, rocks and stones. It was a great introduction to the area and helped bulk up our knowledge and understanding from our discussion with Rosie.

The Algarve, which is not geographically part of the Mediterranean basin, but shares its climate and flora, covers an area of southern Portugal, approximately 5,500 km². The land is split into three geographical regions; litoral (south and west), barrocal and serra, each with their own characteristic vegetation and flora. The coastline is low-lying (the *litoral*), with a mix of sedimentary rocks, alluvia and sand. As you make your way north, the land gradually rises, through a region of rolling hills formed of limestone (Cretaceous and Jurassic), known as the *barrocal*. You then come across an intermittent mountain range (the *serra*), composed of shale and syenite, forming a natural boundary with the province Alentejo. There are around 200 different types of soil in the Algarve because of their geographical regions and pH levels; litoral and barrocal are alkaline, the serra acidic (mainly).

The Mediterranean climate means the Algarve has long, hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters. In the cooler, wetter winter period, it is an ideal time for planting; meaning less maintenance and water consumption. Temperatures average highs of 20-30° and lows of 4-10°, but because its westerly region borders with the Atlantic, the Algarve is generally wetter and windier than true Mediterranean regions.

Rosie and other members of the MGA are trying to change the way people garden in the Algarve; planting in the cooler, wetter winter months, using local and native species, planting in zonal groups (plants that need similar watering requirements) and creating bowls around plants to help the water reach the root more efficiently. All these things are simple, but can save a great deal of time and money, as well as enjoying and protecting local and native species. Although the winter rains can help to irrigate new plants, they can also be disastrous for plants not in free-draining soils.

It is also important to know which plants do well in the three different ranges. Litoral feature *Pinus pinea*, *Agave americana* (invasive), *Bupleurum fruticosum*, *Cistus monspeliensis* *Genista hirsuta* var. *algarbiensis*, *Stipa gigantea*, *Phlomis lychnitis* and *Drimys maritima*, which signal the end of summer.

The barrocal regions feature *Lavandula luisieri*, *Gladiolus illyricus*, *Scilla peruviana*, *Cistus albidus*, *Pistacia lentiscus*, *Retama monosperma*, *Prunus dulcis* which is a traditional crop, the shells of which are used for fuel, and a variety of Orchid (*Anacamptis morio*, *Ophrys speculum* and *Orchis italica*).

Serra's brittle and rocky region include *Quercus suber* (harvested July to August), *Quercus ilex* subsp. *rotundifolia* and *Cistus ladanifer*. The bark of the cork oak is flattened and steamed after harvest; the tree is then marked with the date to ensure it is left between 7 and 9 years, before it can be harvested again. You need a license to harvest the bark.



GARDEN VISITS

We were able to visit the private gardens of Rosie's friends and acquaintances around the Algarve, as well as her own garden. It was a great insight into gardening in the Algarve.



Quinta das Sesmarias, is the home of Rosie and her husband Rob, located on the eastern side of the Algarve (Barrocal region). They have a four acre garden which they have gardened for the past ten years. Before they acquired the land, it was used for agriculture which had been neglected for five years before Rosie and Rob took it on.

They began by clearing areas of the garden, keeping mature trees and shrubs, forming paths through the mess of vegetation and planting the right plant in the right places. They moved soil, creating terraces and improving existing areas. Rosie allowed wild flowers to come through, nurtured them and in return, they have colonized. Rosie collects their seeds and scatters them about the garden to further help their establishment. Native species have been planted around the garden, so there is little watering and the plants thrive because they are happy in their environment.

Rosie has a lovely collection of plants, including *Serapias parviflora* (small-flowering tongue Orchid), *Phelipanche nana* (Branched Broomrape, Holoparasite), *Tropaeolum tuberosum*, *Spartium junceum*, *Plectranthus barbatus*, *Iris albicans*, *Leptospermum* sp. and *Aloe striata*.

They have inherited a 90 meter bore-hole which they found using the dowsing technique. The price of water has gone up considerably, which is why Rosie is so passionate about sharing her knowledge and teaching others about using the right plant for the right place, no lawns, just natives and plants that can cope in the long, hot, dry summers.

Rosie gave us a map of her garden and a list of plants that we had to go and find, collecting it's foliage to prove we had correctly identified the plant. It was a good test to see how much we knew and had learnt over the past few days. It was lovely to walk around and see the plants Rosie has, there was such a variety, all looking happy and at home.

Quinta das Salinas, Quinta do Lago

Small urban garden



The house is angular, modern and a crisp white. As you step into the garden you are greeted with sleek stone pathing, that border a small swimming pool, surrounded by an abundance of plant in pots and narrow borders. Looking out into the garden you see graveled paths leading you through plants, everywhere you look something catches your eye and pulls you towards it. This is a modern plantsman's garden with function.

Margret, an architect by profession and has dedicated her time to seeing this garden designed to her specifications. Her love of the garden is shown through her choices of rare plants, growing in harmony with local and native species; and so uses less water. It is a small garden, but there are many interesting areas, helped by a winding hedge of *Myrtus communis*.

It feels spacious, but at the same time enclosed and private.

You have traditional backbone plants, *Olea europaea*, *Pistacia lentiscu* and *Pinus pinea*, planted alongside classic interest plants like *Cycas revoluta*, Aloe, cacti and succulent species. Some are familiar, yet a little different, adding intrigue, interest and focal points to talk about and wonder over; like the black and white Bird of Paradise, *Strelitzia nicolai* and the Mexican blue palm *Brabea armata*.

Mandihari, Almancil

11,000sqm



Garden designer, Vivian Hurst has lived at the property since the 1980's. The garden surrounds the house and is divided into different climate zones, giving each space a different feel, atmosphere and interest. The soil is a mixture of heavy clay and sand, allowing a variety of plants, from all over the world to thrive.

A large pond, planted with a variety of waterlily can be view from a Monet style bridge. *Eucalyptus macrocarpa* and *Corymbia citriodora* tower above the water, enjoying their view of the garden, happy in the sandy soil this area of the garden provides. Summer houses and patios around the house provide the perfect places to enjoy the garden from, most shaded by pergolas, plants covering their framework.

Walking through the garden, you find yourself surrounded by different plants from around the world. Vivian lived in the Canary Islands for a time, so there are many exotic plants of that influence visible in the garden. Mediterranean natives appear throughout, but there is a real tropical feel to the garden. Every turn brings you to a new space, intrigue drawing you through to discover what's around the next corner.

Other plants noted: *Phanera purpurea*, *Cassia didymobotrya* (smells like peanut butter), *Streptosolen jamesonii*, *Kalanchoe beharensis*, *Duranta erecta* and *Hibiscus* sp. hybrids.

No 1 Rua do Cadoico, Loulé Town Centre garden

Small terraced garden



Stepping through the arched gateway from the small town, you are greeted by a pleasantly quiet and shaded cobbled courtyard, thanks to a dome shaped Carob, the result of removing the top. From the edge of this terrace, a waterfall begins its descent to the river below, each terrace gives you new perspective as you descent towards the river.

There are potted succulents and bulbs on each terrace, shrubs (some clipped) climbers, ferns and other interesting plants. Pools of water help to keep the garden cool and make for interesting features, like a small grotto and poll close to the edge.

Among the collection are *Canarina canariensis* and *Grewia* sp. a towering, three terrace high *Morus alba*, *Bletilla* sp. a clipped *Punica granatum* and of course, the classic, Mediterranean must-have, *Olea europaea*. Even though the garden is small, it is full of interesting plants, features and offers a cool hide-away from the hot sun, a peaceful escape from the town above.

We met Marilyn Medina Ribeiro towards the end of our week long stay. After working in London for a year as a graphic designer, Marilyn changed focus and took a course in Land management, learning to read your surroundings; the topography, plants, soil and more. It was this change in career that opened new opportunities, resulting in a move to the Algarve.

Seven years on, Marilyn now has her own business designing gardens and helps with their ongoing maintenance. We visited two of her gardens.

Garden One



Beside a dominating lush green lawn (despite Marilyn's advice), a bouldering rock garden is planted mainly with *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *nulfenii*, *Tulbaghia violacea*, *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* var. *repens*, *Cycas revoluta*, *Convolvulus cneorum*, succulents and *Aloe* sp.

At the end of the rock garden, you descend to a long planting strip, designed by Marilyn and planted at the start of 2014. It uses a simple planting scheme, repeated throughout. The design features *Stipa tenuissima* and *S. gigantea* that add a lovely texture and movement to the border, *Cistus x skanbergii*, *Phlomis purpurea* and *Salvia clevelandii* 'Allen Chickering' add colour. There are several *Euphorbia* species adding interest and structure too; *Euphorbia characias*, *E. rigida*, and *E. characias* subsp. *nulfenii*. A hedge of *Eugenia myrtifolia* separates this area from a larger site, soon to be

transformed by another of Marylins designs. The choice of hedge was used despite Marylins concerns and recommendations and is now looking chlorotic.

At the end of the strip, another rock garden and a display of *Cyperus papyrus*, reaching the terrace above, with its built-in added planter of brightly coloured succulents. This rock garden is similar to the first, but this is planted with Rosemary and succulents.

The next stage in this gardens development is the large area Marylin has designed around four old Olive trees.

Garden Two



An open garden composted of different planting schemes, creating pockets of interest and atmosphere, whilst allowing you to see beyond, to the surrounding garden. A path twisting under a young pagoda, the plants not quite tall enough to create a shaded tunnel are one of the noticeable features in this garden; a different climber on almost every post, offering a wave of fragrance, colour and interest. *Lonicera implexa*, *Jasminum officinale*, *Rosa* sp. *Stephanotis* sp. and *Thunbergia* sp.

The main, central planting scheme is simple, using a limited range of plants, but each plant adding a different colour, texture, fragrance or style. Other areas around the outskirts featured more shrubby plants like *Dodonaea viscosa*, *Myrtus communis* sbsp. *tarentina*, *Polygala* sp. and *Grevillea robusta*. *Salvias* add colour to the central borders; *Salvia* 'Royal Bumble', *S.* 'Bee's Bliss', *S. jamensis*. These bright blues and reds are accompanied by *Echiums* *Phlomis frutescens*, a *Lavandula* cross and simple tones of green from *Euphorbia myrsinites* and *Sideritis cypria* (a Greek herb). At the very front, closest to the house are low growing shrubs, like *Ballota pseudodictamnus*, growing through the off-white gravel. A planting of grasses in the center of the two main beds add texture and movement. A simple yet effective garden, full of interest, pockets of colour and fragrance.

WILD FLOWER WALKS



Rocha da Pena is situated in a protected landscape between the parishes of Salir and Benafim, in the Barrocal region. A stunning geological formation of hard limestone rock, eroded slowly over the years, creating fissures and caves. These limestone rock formations feature a 2km long plateau and a rocky slope 50 m high, with a maximum altitude of 479 meters.

We set off up the red, dusty path, full of anticipation in finding wild Peony, orchid and other flora treasures. It didn't take long before we found ourselves surrounded by *Cistus crispus*, *Pistacia lentiscus* and *Quercus coccifera*. *Ophrys lutea* amongst it all, bright yellow gems amongst the grey and silver tones of the surrounding foliage.

A few meters along the track we spot our first wild Peony. Single stems of *Paeonia broteroi*, modestly stand in pockets of vegetation, simple and beautiful. Their delicately rich pink petals, paler at the tips, create a dish to hold their bright and bold yellow stamens. They love this sloped and rocky hill side.

Sedum sediforme grow in the smallest cracks on rocks and boulders next to the path which is getting paler as we advance up the hill. Surrounded by panoramic views that get better with each step and exposed rock towering over us, the plants still hold our main focus. We spot the white flowers of *Cistus monspelinensis* growing amongst the pink flowering *C. crispus*. Further up the path, we spot the interesting, ragged and cut looking, acid green flowers of *Ruta angustifolia*.

Up ahead, one of our group members is on his hands and knees, *Ophrys scolopax*! This happy looking, waist-coat wearing orchid seems to beam up at us with open arms. Three or four stems have emerged on the edge of our dusty, stony path. We all spend some time admiring these lovely Woodcock orchids, till we pull ourselves away, keen and greedy to find more!

Further up, we did spot more orchids; *Anacamptis* sp. and more of the common *Ophrys speculum* and *O. lutea*. We take in the stunning scenery, fragrant *Rosmarinus officinalis*, and head back down. I seem to spot more still, clearly taken in and blinded by the Peony and other genus on the way up, I now notice drifts of the bold, yellow flowering gorse-like shrub *Genista hirsute*, about to burst into full bloom. A lizard sunbaths on the rock covered in *Sedum sediforme*, *Scilla peruviana* erupt from the red soil, undercover of trees and butterfly enjoy the vast flora around them.

As we come to the end, to meet back at the car park, the air is filled with the thick scent of *Jasminum officinale* which is covering someone's front wall.



Parque Natural da Ria Formosa, Olhão, is a beautiful coastal walk where we were able to discover new flora, like the *Tamarix africana* flowering in the car park, its pink flowers clustered like clouds on stems.

The path leading down to the coast cut through a planted area full of interesting flora; *Armeria pungens* with its beautiful pale pink flowers forming a globe atop long stems, *Dipcadi serotinum* which looks like our native blue-bell, but the flowers are a creamy caramel to burnt orange/brown. *Genista hirsute* were opening, more advanced than the ones at Rocha da Pena, white, bowing heads of *Leucojum tricophyllum* and *Raphanus raphanistrum*.

As the sea comes into view, so do the crisp white walls of the tide mill, built around 1885. The mill used the tides energy to grind cereals. We walk down a raised wooden decked path, through more coastal plants, the sea stretched out in front of us. *Silene gallica*, is dotted amongst great drifts of the low growing shrub *Helichrysum italicum* and an invasive low growing, trailing succulent, native to South Africa, *Carpobrotus edulis*. There are also large specimens of a white flowering *Cysisus* sp. Blue flowering *Lupinus micranthus* appearing in naturalised groups accompanied by the purple flowering *Vicia sativa* and *Echium plantagineum*. A small body of water, surrounded by *Cyperus capitatus* is enjoyed by the red legged coastal bird, black-winged stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*).

We drive through the countryside and came across a field of yellow *Lupinus luteus* which can be cultivated for animal feed. It was a magical sight to see so many all in one spot. We pulled over in a spot planted with *Quercus suber*, on a fairly steep sloping hill. The majority had been harvested, their stripped bark exposing a dark red staining on newly cut trees, which fade as they repair themselves over the years. I found it a sad sight, seeing these beautiful trees naked from the bottom to the first branches. I know it is a crop, but I think it would have been better if they were grown as that, in fields, not randomly chosen along the road side.

Below these trees we spotted *Anacamptis morio*, the green-winged Orchid and *Lavandula viridis* which display white flowers and green bracts.



Cape St. Vincent

On our last day in the Algarve, we traveled to the coast. The scenery was stunning, the sandy beaches stretching out into the blue and turquoise sea, high cliffs enclosing bays and a flora display like no other.

We set off with no real direction, just out to explore the carpet of wild flora before us. We didn't venture far at first; there was so much to see. The range of plants happily living and thriving in the rock and sand that covers the area was astonishing.

Narcissus bulbicodium, grow in pure sand, the white and intriguing flowers of *Cerinth gymnandra*, *Asteriscus martimus*, *Lithodora diffusa*, *Medicago marina*, *Lotus creticus*, *Armeria pungens*, *Silene* sp. *Antirrhinum majus*, *Chamaerops humilis*, *Dipcadi serotinum* and *Cistus salvifolius* all growing together, a brilliant and bright display of flowers in every colour and structure.

I also managed to spot *Ophrys fusca* on the side of the road, luck must have been on our side as it seemed to be the only one.

As we walked along, a mist rolled up from the sea, so we headed in the opposite direction, towards more cliff faces and views out to sea.

We sat and watched the world pass by from the edge of the cliff, surrounded by the most spectacular flora display I have ever witnessed.

ANCIENT TREES



There are several protected ancient trees around the Algarve, we went to visit a few, close to areas we visited. We visited a 250 to 300 year old Carob tree and an ancient 1,000 year old Olive.

An ancient *Quercus ilex* subsp. *rotundifolia*, surrounded by apartment blocks dominates its space and is a spectacle to see.

The final tree was in a place called Quinta de Para. A Carob, *Ceratonia siliqua*, possibly 1,000 years old, with a canopy of 25 meters. It was amazing!

NATURA GARDEN CENTRE ALMANCIL



Rosie took us to a garden center where they sell and transport ancient Olive trees up to 1,000 years old, in tubs. The garden center is owned by Jean-Claude Defrance, whom Marilyn knows and orders plants from. It was fascinating to see, as well as large, mature palm varieties; *Phoenix sylvestris*, *Livistona muelleri* and *Chamaerops humilis*. The garden center also featured an *Opuntia maxima* (prickly Pear cacti) 'hedge', which seems to be common.

As well as ancient trees, a range of 'bedding' plants, shrubs and climbers were available, they also sold a lawn alternative; *Zoysia tenuifolia*. It is a mound forming ground cover plant that looks similar to grass, a lovely, healthy bright green, soft to touch, can reduce watering by 70%, has no pest or disease and is low in maintenance.

A PROJECT AT QUINTA DA FIGUEIRINHA



We spent the last part of our week working in an area of the Quinta Gerhard wants to turn into an area of botanical interest, possibly a botanic garden.

We mapped out the selected area with Marilyn, splitting it into manageable sections so that we could start listing the flora.

The next task was to list the flora in each section and then mark any orchid with a cane and hazard tape. Phase two will be to create paths through the vegetation.

The main orchid specimens were *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, *Ophrys speculum* and *Ophrys lutea*. The two *Ophrys* sp. were scattered around, unlike *A. pyramidalis* which were clumped together, in one specific section.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Merlin Trust and the Professional Gardeners guild for making this trip possible, it was truly amazing and I learnt a great deal from it. Thank you!

PHOTO GALLERY











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Lupinus luteus

Lupinus luteus field

Ophrys scolopax

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Top four; the garden at Quinta das Salinas, Quinta do Lago (including *Dietes grandiflora*, top right).

Middle two; the garden at No 1 Rua do Cadoico

Bottom two; the garden at Mandihari, Almancil

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Top two; 'Garden one'

Second row, two photos; 'Garden two'

Bottom four (taken at Cape St. Vincent); *Armeria pungens*

Cistus salvifolius

Silene colorata

Iberis procumbens

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Cape St. Vincent

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Group photo with Rosie and Vivian

