

## The story:

## get on board

High sea adventures on a Portuguese house boat

By Amy Fallon

## Not nautical by nature

"I can't believe they're letting us do this," exclaims Kieran, one member of our party, as he wanders around the back of a boat, moored at Amieira, on Portugal's Grande Lago (Great Lake).

Our expedition of four has been given a big toy to play with: a €120,000 houseboat and... there's no license required!

Fully equipped with a kitchen, four bedrooms, sun deck and canoe hanging off the back, the Nicols 1350 vessel is ours entirely, uninhibitedly for the next three days to navigate the country's Alentejo region, not as well-known as its touristy Algarve.

Besides it and four days off work, we've also been blessed with sizzling weather, a bottle of the country's best wine (Herdade da Figueirinha Alentejo Reserva Vinho Branco), a small, portable barbie and a map, albeit written in Portuguese. Happy days.

As we excitedly prepare for our voyage to Monsaraz, an ancient town 50km away, Manuel Maia, the commercial director of houseboat company Amieira Marina, the man who's letting us do all of this, actually challenges us. "Try to sink," he says. "It's not easy." We may not sink in the end. But there's still a 'we're stealing our parents car keys' kind of feeling lingering in the 38-degree air.

The safety demonstration doesn't do much to dampen my fears. We're promised that our boat, which we'll be driving at 10-11 km/h, is easy to drive and dock using a GPS and plotter. Besides the gears, a "little patience and sensitivity" is all we need, Manuel assures us. The safety talk however focuses on much on the places that we can't go to, forbidden Spanish water or areas where the water's too shallow. Showing us photos of these regions though, only whets our curiosity. I start to daydream what will happen if we sail into uncharted territory – will Captain Jack Sparrow appear?

## Gangway!

As soon as our first skipper Paul starts reversing out of the marina, I'm with Kieran in thinking: These people are absolutely bonkers to be letting us do this!

Our departure quickly descends into an Amazing Race meets The Sydney

to Hobart in the Alentejo meets the Titanic comic romp.

When yours truly put her captain's hat on, I begin to see what Manuel meant about "sensitivity". There's a lot of correcting involved with steering our 'ship'. And buoy oh buoy... it certainly helps if you can spot the next one! At one stage I end up doing three 'donuts' to reach the next marker, causing the boat's sonar depth reading to plunge from 60 metres to a shallow 3.2 in a matter of seconds. As my fellow sailors gasp, we spot another nearby boat turn around and head in the opposite direction.

Well that was one way of ensuring we have The Grande Lago all to ourselves.

## Portugal's treasures

We dock at Estrela where it's time for a quick swim and canoe. Lake Alqueva, Europe's largest artificial lake, is a perfect temperature for a quick dip.

Estrela is a sleepy hillside village (and our boat's namesake). Population: about 55, but many of the town's residents have recently migrated. However, with Amieira Marina, which owns 15 boats now targeting overseas tourists (about 70 per cent of the operator's current market are Portuguese), the quaint town may be seeing more visitors in the future.

In the meantime, it's like Christmas has come for the owner of the local restaurant Sabores da Estrela when we walk in. Dinner is migas, a traditional wet, crumbly bread dish with asparagus and codfish.

We spend the night on Estrela, in Estrela. By the next day we're so comfortable at the helm of our vessel that we're steering the ship from the top deck, with the Baywatch theme song very aptly pumping out of the iPod.

Our next port of call, Monsaraz, slightly bigger than Estrela, is a village with narrow streets and cobbled pavements. Used to help guard against the Spanish section of the River Guadiana, it was captured from the Moors in 1167 by the soldier Generaldo Sem-Pavor. We explore its 13th century castle before having a cheeky drink at Xatrez, where guests can pull up a bean bag and take in the stunning view of the Alentejo plains. The bar also offers delicious sandwiches. What else would you wish for when in Portugal?

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AYE, AYE: The good ship and Captain Amy at the helm.





Image by paulo.s.perry via flickr



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**What a corker**

The next day we sail back to Amieira and then drive to the city of Evora, where I'm given the answer: 'Aunty Teresa's Rabbit', which is on the menu at Aqueduto restaurant where we dine.

Our final day is spent on a tour of Evora. A UNESCO World-Heritage listed city, Evora is partly enclosed within ancient walls, a medieval castle, and a Roman temple built for Emperor Augustus. As well as the lively central square, we stumble across O Cesto, a souvenir shop where everything from shoes to hats to postcards is made from cork (Portugal, we're told, is the world's largest cork producer and generates about half of the world's commercial output).

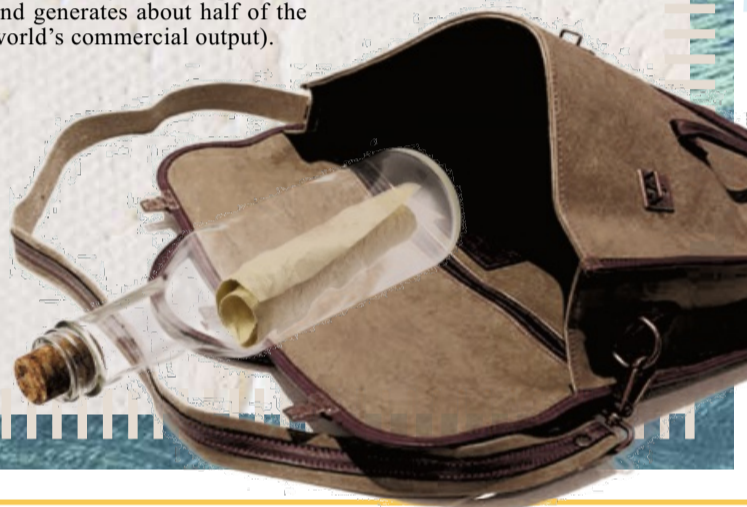
**Bone-a-fide delight**

Just as I'm deciding whether I'll be back to Portugal, we're taken to The Capela dos Ossos (Chapel of Bones), fittingly the last sight we'll see in Portugal. The monument, built in the 16th century by a Franciscan monk using the bones buried in the graves of the town, carries a chilling message written in marble at the grave of Bishop Jaeinto Carlos da Silveria, killed by Napoleon's soldiers in 1808.

*"We bones that are here, we are waiting for yours."*

Looks like I may be back.

*AustralianTimes.co.uk/travel*



**Facts**

*Amieira Marina*

Boats sleep two to twelve people and features include bathroom, fully equipped kitchen, living area, bedrooms, sun deck and barbecue, as well as safety equipment and navigation technology including GPS. Boating licenses are not required and a short training session is given upon arrival.

A three night break starts from €753 (approx £672) for the Duo vessel (2 people) and €804 (approx £717) for the 1010 vessel (6 people). Price includes boat insurance, cooking gas and technical assistance. Valid for travel between until 31st July 2011. For more information, visit *Amieiramarina.com*

*Flights*

Monarch, the scheduled leisure airline, operates flights to Faro from Birmingham, London Gatwick, London Luton and Manchester airports with fares, including taxes, starting from £38.99 one way (£67.99 return). For customers looking for added comfort, extra legroom seats are also available offering up to six inches of extra space from only £17.99.

For further information or to book Monarch flights, Monarch Holidays or Monarch Hotels, visit *Monarch.co.uk*  
For further information on the Algarve, go to *Visitalgarve.pt.org*

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