
Diving

ABOUT



Photo: Turismo dos Açores / Nuno Sá

Diving

The Portuguese coast is stunningly beautiful on the surface, but the depths of the Atlantic offer a wealth of biodiversity that is well worth discovering.

Portugal's seas can offer a fantastic surprise for those who don't know them, due to the **diversity of fish, the beauty of the sea bed and the wrecks of ships** which have crossed the ocean over the centuries. There are many attractions to explore both near the surface and deeper down, in caves and rocky recesses with diverse habitats.

There are safe **diving programmes** and excursions in place all over the country. Even for complete beginners, there are "baptisms" and courses for all levels, covering techniques and the rules to be respected. For more experienced divers, operators organise outings to places with the most potential and also hire all the necessary equipment.

The **Azores** are particularly attractive as a scuba diving destination due to their clear, deep and unpolluted waters. Several islands provide facilities and have companies geared towards this activity, suggesting the best ways to enjoy these exceptionally beautiful seabeds. The same is true of the **Madeira** archipelago, where the sea has a pleasant temperature all year round, and the underwater world teems with a widely diverse and rich life.

On mainland Portugal, Peniche, despite the cold seawaters, is a popular diving destination to discover the flora and fauna which populate the **Berlengas Islands**. Close to the Arrábida Natural Park, **Sesimbra** is another place much sought after by divers. Further south, the Alentejo coast and the entire Algarve coast offer diving locations teeming with diverse, colourful sea life. There is much to explore underwater in Portugal.

THE AZORES



Right in the middle of the Atlantic ocean, the Azores archipelago is acknowledged by specialists as one of the best diving destinations in the country and all the islands offer spectacular underwater views.

The sea here has a unique visibility which can reach down to 30 metres, depending on the weather conditions. And diving can be undertaken all year round, although the best time is the summer. The water temperature is an added attraction, ranging from 17°C to 24°C throughout the year, and sometimes in winter it is warmer than the outside air. Some areas are marine reserves and have restrictions as to area and time of year, but you will find in the São Miguel, Santa Maria, Terceira, São Jorge, Pico, Faial, Corvo, Flores and Graciosa diving centres all the information you need to engage in this large portion of the Atlantic.

Here, the seabed offers breath-taking sceneries for the variety and quantity of fish and its geological configuration with large caves and archways. The islands' volcanic origin, with the so-called "thermal fields", is one of the most spectacular deep underwater landscapes. In these areas, hot water gushes from inside the rock, like thermal springs on land, offering conditions for organising tourist and even scientific excursions. You will also find the remains of shipwrecks, which are home to amberjacks, jewfish and groupers, whereas the deep sea is the habitat of groups of manta rays.

Although it is hard to just name a few of the many diving locations, good starting points would be the islands of Flores and Graciosa. But there are many other unmissable places like Ilhéu das Cabras and Cemitério das Âncoras (Anchor Graveyard) in the Island of Terceira, and in the central group, between the Islands of Faial and Pico, Baixa do Canal which is visited by divers from across the world. In São Miguel, Galera, Ilhéu de Vila Franca, Mosteiros and Costa de Feteiras are famous and offer excellent diving.

Find out more:
<http://dive.visitazores.com/en/>

MADEIRA



With a mild climate all year round, and sea temperatures ranging between 17°C and 23°C, Madeira is a very

attractive diving destination.

The extremely clear waters allow visibility to more than 20 metres to observe a wide diversity of species, such as jewfish, rays, moray eels, dolphins and manta rays.

Quite close to Funchal there are several spots, like the Clube Naval. And you can also go night diving in complete safety, as part of a programme organised by one of the various schools. Marine reserves are places not to be missed, but nature should be respected by not disturbing underwater life. Some areas even enjoy the status of full reserve, which bars any visits, so you should obtain comprehensive information before setting out.

On Madeira's southern slope, the Garajau Nature Reserve is the only exclusively marine one in the country and a world reference. Diving in its waters is unmissable to observe an abundant and diverse fauna, with large fish such as the jewfish, an emblematic species of the reserve. The diving spots are the cleanest, with easy access and only a few minutes away by boat. The most well-known locations are Corais Negros (at 35 metres), Pão de Açúcar, Garajau Baía, Garajau Este (where the largest jewfish lives), Recife dos Monges and Gruta dos Reis Magos, a favourite night diving spot, accessible by land.

On the Island of Porto Santo, the beauty of the seabed and its clear, warm waters offer an unexpected tropical setting, much appreciated by divers. One of the most sought after spots is located south of the harbour, where the wreck of O Madeirense is to be found. Ilhéu de Baixo and Ilhéu de Cima, uninhabited rocky islets off the south coast, are other places with excellent diving conditions.

PENICHE AND THE BERLENGAS ISLANDS



It is well worth diving in the waters of Berlengas, about 90km north of Lisbon, and discovering the flora and fauna that populate these islands to the northwest of Peniche, 7 miles from Cape Carvoeiro.

This Nature Reserve, established in the 15th century and the oldest in the world, is an archipelago comprising Berlenga (the largest island), Estelas and Farilhões-Forçadas (the adjacent reefs).

The group resembles a living oceanarium, considered by many as the most attractive diving area in mainland Portugal, for the excellent visibility and richness of the seabed which offers a large number of sites for diving for all levels of experience. You can get there on a 30-minute boat ride from the Port of Peniche, and the crossing is operated by many companies, which also organise diving activities.

These clear, turquoise waters teem with an abundant and diverse marine life, from which the huge schools of white sea bream are easily made out. The ocean sunfish, the heaviest known bony fish in the world with a curious circular shape, is also a feature of these waters. Other attractions to discover are the boats which sunk in these parts over the centuries and the caves, such as Furado Grande, crossing the Berlenga island from side to side and ending in Cova do Sono.

FROM SESIMBRA TO THE ALENTEJO COAST



About 40km south of Lisbon, Sesimbra is one of the most popular diving spots in mainland Portugal, which is possible virtually all year round.

With an exceptional location in a sheltered south-facing bay, it is surrounded by places that offer unforgettable, even thrilling diving experiences. To the west up to Cape Espichel, there are various spots such as Ponta da Passagem, Ponta Furada and the River Gurara, a wrecked ship which shelters a rich and diversified underwater life.

Sesimbra is also on the edge of the Arrábida Natural Park, which extends eastwards, the unique environmental richness of its cliffs stretching to the sea. For this reason, a protected marine area was created here, containing a vast profusion of fish, sea urchins and starfish. The clear waters by Pedra da Anixa, formed by a complex structure of underwater platforms, crevices and cavities, hold an immense wealth of flora and fauna, which attracts divers from all over the world.

Further south, the Alentejo coast also invites diving. Sines, Porto Covo, Vila Nova de Milfontes and Zambujeira do Mar boast some stunning spots for this sport, such as Pessegueiro Island, a favourite haunt for snorkelling. But there are other spots to explore with a huge diversity of marine species, such as Burrinho, Aivados and Malhão beaches, to name just a few.

ALGARVE



There is great beauty to be discovered in night-time and daytime diving off the 200km coast of the Algarve, and excellent conditions all year round which captivate experienced divers from all over the world. For the practice of this sport under safe conditions, there are various companies and schools all over the region, which organise activities under safe conditions for experienced and inexperienced divers alike.

It is also advisable to obtain information on any constraints since the Costa Vicentina, for example, at the western tip of the region, is a Natural Park, and authorisation for diving is mandatory. This is where Sagres stands, with its attractive seabed and famous for the Vapor das 19, a steamship from World War I, sunk at 30m to 35m, sheltering a

wealth of marine life. And off Portimão, there are old Portuguese Navy warships which form a unique man-made reef.

However, there are other places along the coast where older wrecks, archaeological remains from the intense traffic headed for the Mediterranean Sea over the centuries, can be observed. There is actually an underwater museum where archaeological finds are properly marked, in Boca do Rio, opposite Praia de Salema.

Near Lagos, you can explore various underwater projections and caves by Ponta da Piedade or in the Porto de Mós rocky formation. These large recesses shelter diverse fish species and in summer, you may even find dolphins. Another good diving spot is Pedra da Torre, in the municipality of Lagoa, where you can mingle with cuttlefish, crabs and much vegetable life at 10m to 15m, very near the coast.

The highlight of diving in the region is Pedra da Âncora, a huge reef off Praia da Rocha. The small galleries are excellent for sighting lobsters, zebra sea bream and other local fish, and it is also possible to see a huge anchor stuck between the rocks.

But there are many other good diving spots. Off Albufeira, Faro and Tavira, for example, you can explore many spots, especially if you hire the services of expert professionals who will help you find the most interesting.