
Surfing in Portugal: Go with the flow

ABOUT



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Portugal by... Condé Nast Traveler

Like a chart full of pins, each point marking a dream spot. This is the map of Portugal for a surfer, finding in its 800 kilometres of coastline (plus the islands) a veritable amusement park full of loops, dizzying roller coasters and carousels that make the stomach churn. From north to south. We have selected the best spots, so you can choose which you prefer or simply let yourself go with the flow.

1- Ericeira

This is in the nose of Portugal, a short hop from Sintra and Lisbon. It's a parish in the municipality of Mafra. As well as being a very charming fishing village, one of those whose churches surround a cluster of rambling lanes and whitewashed houses, Ericeira has been declared a world surfing reserve with three major surf spots: Praia do Coxos, a small secluded creek where only the bravest dare to venture, going at dawn to get the biggest waves (which can be up to 5 metres); Ribeira d'Ilhas, an ambidextrous beach (with great waves coming from both left and right) sheltered by cliffs, which hosts the World Surfing Championships; and the Reef, a rocky enclave with great waves all year round.

To explore the area, we recommend that you stay at the Ericeira Sound resort (www.ericiraecosound.com). It's an ecological complex of bungalows where you can cook with vegetables from its own kitchen garden and spend your holiday with virtually no impact on the planet. For a more informal meal, while drying off after surfing, you can't beat the beach bars at Ribeira d'Ilhas.

2. Peniche

A massive mediaeval wall, rebuilt in the 17th century and housing a prison in the 20th century, is the most important monument in the fishing village of Peniche. Within a radius of a few kilometres, you can choose from a selection of more than a dozen spots where you can practice your surfing, regardless of your skills on the board. Consolação, for example, has very strong waves caused by its rocky bottom, and is perfect for intermediate level surfers. Whereas getting into the water at the Super Tubos spot requires a lot more than mere technique. Its name was hard won thanks to its famous left-handed waves that produce the perfect surf. It's probably the best in Portugal, which is why a round in the world surfing championship (WCT) is held here.

Between the waves and the surfing, and to gather your strength, go to the harbour to watch the boats unload the fish (Peniche is Portugal's second largest fishing port), and taste the sardines, tuna or lobster in the Nau dos Corvos restaurant, with its fantastic location overlooking the sea. In Peniche, too, you can't miss the night parties or concerts in the beach bars. Take a tour to the small Berlengas archipelago, especially if you're a fan of diving. A boat ride takes you to the Furado Grande, an ocean tunnel that ends in a wonderful cove (Cova do Sonho) surrounded by walls of red granite, which has a grotto (the Gruta Azul). You won't believe the colour of the water here.

3. Nazaré

It was here, at Praia do Norte and nowhere else in the world, that a few months ago the Hawaiian surfer Garrett Macnamara surfed the highest wave ever ridden: 30 metres. It was an especially giant wave (he himself defined it as "overwhelming"), but this was no exception. Throughout the year (especially in winter), there are perfect conditions for big riders, which has turned this spot into their personal mecca. The waves commonly reach 10 metres, but if you don't have the nerve for such high waves, you can always sunbathe at Praia do Salgado, several kilometres of sand dunes and cliffs, where nudism is practised.

4. Vicentina Coast (Algarve)

Besides being one of the best preserved coastlines in Europe, this is also the area most surfed in Portugal, with over 20 top spots and sparsely-populated wild beaches, with a generous dose of nightlife and a relaxed and informal ambience. There are options for everyone: choose the spectacular Arrifana, reached by descending some quite steep steps, or Carrapateira, if you want to improve your technique. For beginners, it is best to opt for one of the schools at the peaceful Praia do Amado to take your "first steps".

When it comes to the after-surf, there is no doubt that the liveliest city in the area is Sagres, with some popular bars like Pau de Pita, with live music, and the surf bar Warung, where you can have a beer with those who spend their days in a wetsuit. Don't miss Hotel Memmo Baleeira's yoga and surf promotions.

5. Madeira and the Azores

Surfing in Portugal doesn't just happen on the peninsular coast. On Madeira, the powerful, giant waves at Jardim do Mar are well known, but suitable only for pros. The waves in the Azores, particularly the islands of São Jorge and São Miguel, are wide left-handers that break on a round-edged seabed, which makes them particularly powerful, and are perhaps Portuguese surfers' best kept secret.