

algarve,
europe's
most famous
secret

silves

municipality

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silves

The deep green foliage of orange trees in fertile valleys; the blue sea and the fast-paced life of an international seaside resort; the picturesque charm of houses surrounded by almond and carob trees; the broad sweep of hills that are a haven for ramblers and nature-lovers: these are among the attractions of Silves municipality, for holidays full of the joys of life.

HISTORY OF THE MUNICIPALITY

The presence of humans during the Palaeolithic period is confirmed by one archaeological site. However, the whole of the area of what is now Silves municipality was inhabited during the Neolithic period and the Bronze and Iron Ages, a fact borne out by numerous archaeological finds. Particularly impressive are the abundant megalithic monuments - menhirs - carved out of the region's red sandstone and of limestone.

From the earliest times, the Arade river was the route to the interior favoured by the vessels of different peoples - Phoenicians, Greeks and Carthaginians - who were drawn to the region by the copper and iron mined in the western Algarve. This much is evident from the archaeological site at Cerro da Rocha Branca - now unfortunately destroyed - less than a kilometre from Silves, which was inhabited from the end of the Bronze Age onwards, and which boasted a strong defensive wall in the 4th century B.C. and in the ensuing centuries was occupied by both the Romans and the Moors.

Silves owes its existence to the navigability of the Arade river and to its strategic position on the top of a hill that dominates a broad swathe of countryside. It was possibly founded during the period of Roman rule, but it was with the Moorish invasion which began around 714-716 that Silves became a prosperous city. By the 11th century it was the capital of the Algarve and according to some authors surpassed Lisbon in size and importance. At this time Silves was also a centre of culture, home to poets, chroniclers and lawmakers.

The religious and political tremors that rocked the Moslem world in the 11th and 12th centuries were felt in Silves too, where they manifested themselves in frequent changes of ruler, and sieges and struggles that pitted rival factions against each other. King Sancho I took advantage of this internal division to lay siege to the city in 1189. His army was aided by crusaders from Northern Europe who were on their way to the Holy Land.

The fight for Silves was long and cruel and, according to chronicles of the time, many of its inhabitants perished, killed by hunger and thirst or slaughtered when the crusaders sacked the town. But Portuguese rule was initially short-lived and in 1191 the city was recaptured by the Moors.

Despite having lost many of its inhabitants and much of its wealth, Silves was elevated to the status of Episcopal see and headquarters of the military government after the definitive conquest of the city as part of the Christian occupation of the Algarve - 1242 to 1249 - which was completed during the reign of King Afonso III.

The centuries that followed were a difficult time for Silves. With the loss of links with North Africa and the gradual silting up of the river, it found itself sidelined from the lucrative maritime trade. As a consequence its economic, political and military influence dwindled, while places like Lagos, Portimão and Faro grew in importance. Natural catastrophes like the plague, earthquakes and fevers caused by the swamp that formed where the Arade had once flowed also contributed to the town's decline. The coup de grâce came in 1534, with a papal bull allowing the transfer of the Episcopal see to Faro, a possibility that only became a reality some years later. Silves was never to recover its past splendour and for almost three centuries it was a city with a much smaller population.

But in the second half of the 19th century dried fruit and, above all, cork brought new life and prosperity to the city, which became one of the main processing centres for those products. Today Silves is a city proud of its past, at the heart of a municipality with a thriving and increasingly diverse economy.

VISITING SILVES

The dark red of mighty castle walls that loom over the city and the surrounding countryside; the interplay of stone and light in the architecture of a Gothic church; reminders of the Moorish presence in the city's history; streets of white houses that reflect the sun and the blue sky: herein lies the appeal of Silves, where the past merges with the present to make every visit an enduring memory.



Silves - LC

SÉ VELHA (OLD CATHEDRAL)

Built out of the region's fine red sandstone, possibly on the site of the old mosque, it was begun in the second half of the 13th century or the beginning of the 14th. Work continued into the middle of the 15th century after part of the structure collapsed. A number of architectural alterations were made in the 18th century. The main façade is dominated by the Gothic doorway with a surround surmounted by a balcony supported by corbels with gargoyles. The only other elements surviving from the original building are the circular window and the two buttresses, as the rest of the façade and the towers are Baroque. Also of note on the exterior of the cathedral are the big ogival window with four small columns next to the steps and the fine ensemble that makes up the apse of the church. The interior consists of three naves, with plain pillars and ogival arches. The beauty of the transept and the apse makes them a good example of Gothic art. The chancel is flanked by apsidal chapels with a ribbed vault. On the main altar is a statue in jasper of Our Lady with the Infant Jesus (16th century). On the floor are headstones, one of which denotes the former resting place of King João II (1455/1495), who died in Alvor and whose remains were later transferred to the monastery at Batalha. There are side chapels of the Santíssimo (Most Holy) and Nosso Senhor dos Passos (Our Lord of the Stations of the Cross) containing statues from the 18th century. Next to the main entrance is the doorway to the Gothic chapel of João do Rego, situated under the bell tower, which contains two arcosolia (arched niches containing tombs). The artistic heritage of the Old Cathedral includes two large paintings depicting São José (St. Joseph) and Santa Bárbara (St. Barbara) (18th century), the Renaissance altarpiece (16th century) in one of the side chapels and the marble tombs of João Gramaxo (1516) and a bishop, with a crozier in relief.



Sé Velha - LC

MISERICÓRDIA (MERCY) CHURCH

This building dates from the 16th century and its Manueline origins are apparent from a highly decorated side doorway, positioned above ground level, which was possibly the former entrance to the church. The main façade has a doorway of classical design. The interior consists of a single nave. The chancel has a ribbed vault and a Renaissance altarpiece (16th century) with paintings from a later period. The church has a collection of Misericórdia banners that are still used in processions.

PILLORY

A symbol of municipal power, the pillory was rebuilt from 16th century remains. This is the only such structure in the whole of the Algarve.

CHAPEL OF NOSSA SENHORA DOS MÁRTIRES (OUR LADY OF MARTYRS)

Located outside the old city walls, it was built initially in the 12th century to receive the remains of the Portuguese soldiers and crusaders who died during the first campaign to conquer Silves. It was rebuilt in the 16th century and again later in the 18th. The main façade is in the Baroque style while the dentelicate decoration above the chancel belongs to the Manueline period (16th century). The chancel has ribbed vaulting finished with Crosses of Christ and religious and military symbols. There is a 16th century altarpiece. The chapel also contains two carved and gilded altarpieces originally from the Cathedral (18th century).

CRUZ DE PORTUGAL (CROSS OF PORTUGAL)

Located next to what was the old road that used to be the link to the north and the kingdom of Portugal (hence perhaps its name), the exact date of its construction is not known (15th century or beginning of the 16th century). It is one of the most beautiful crosses in Portugal and has on one side a representation of the crucifixion and on the other the Mater Dolorosa. The base dates from 1824.



Cross of Portugal - LC

HISTORICAL CENTRE

Time and man have done much to change the Muslim and Christian city which was once the chief city of the Algarve. Silves does, however, retain much of its former charm in the streets of the old "medina", which are still laid out as they were in medieval times. The buildings that extend from the city walls to the river are, in many cases, fine examples of the bourgeois architecture of the end of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th, testimony to the new prosperity brought by the cork industry. Much of the city's past can be glimpsed to this day in the patterns of its streets and its architecture. What is now Rua da Sé used to be known as Rua Direita and was where the most important merchants had their shops. The Jewish quarter was situated between Rua da Porta de Loulé and what is nowadays the parish house, while the synagogue was outside the city walls. Access to the synagogue was thus by way of the Porta de Loulé (the Loulé gate) more or less to the east of the city, near to the castle. And, as was the case throughout Portugal, the conquered Moors had their houses outside the city walls, in the Moorish quarter, or "Mouraria", which occupied a site that corresponds approximately to the area delimited today by Rua Samora Barros and Rua Francisco Pablos.

CASTLE

The biggest castle in the Algarve and the finest military monument from the Islamic period in Portugal, it has its origins in the ramparts built around the town during the Moorish occupation, probably on the site of late Roman or Visigothic fortifications (4th/ 5th centuries). Its eleven towers and thick walls enclose an area of approximately 12,000 m². Two of the towers are “albarrã” towers, which are joined to the walls by an arch that supports the wall walk. The double entrance gateway is defended by two towers, and the doorway of the “traitors’ gate” in the north-facing walls still exists. Four of the towers, which were modified at the time of the reconstruction work carried out in the 14th or 15th century, have Gothic doorways, vaulted halls and stones bearing the marks of medieval masons.

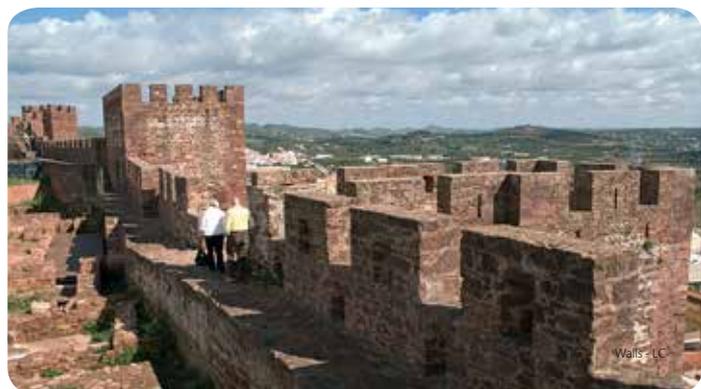
The castle once housed the old Moorish “alcáçova”, immortalised as the “Palace of Verandas” in poetry of the time. Remnants of the “alcáçova”, which was the residence of the lord of the city and its highest dignitaries, have been found in the course of excavation work at the site. The castle itself contains a deep well, approximately 60m, a large water tank with four vaults supported by tall columns, and spacious underground silos that were used to store grain. Its towers and walls afford magnificent views over the surrounding countryside.



CITY WALLS

According to a description left by a crusader who took part in the conquest of Silves, the town’s defences consisted, in addition to the castle, of three lines of walls. All that remains of these defensive walls are a few stretches built of red sandstone and “taipa” - a mix of clay, gravel, sand and lime - and a number of towers which once protected the residential area, or “medina” of Silves. A little more than 1 kilometre in length, they encircled an area of seven hectares.

Of the four gates to the “medina” all that remains is the Torreão da Porta da Cidade (the Tower of the City Gate). This consists of an “albarrã” tower, built in the 12th or 13th century, which gives access, by way of two corridors, to the city. Inside the tower are two rooms and annexes which were for centuries the home of the Municipal Council and which, since 1983, have housed the Municipal Library. The tower is entered by way of an external stairway built at a later date and two high walkways which are original.



BRIDGE OVER THE ARADE RIVER

Dating back to the medieval period, this was the bridge that connected Silves to the coast until relatively recently.



MUNICIPAL MUSEUM

With its back to a section of the city walls, this building contains a cistern-well of Islamic origin (11th century) dressed with stone and “taipa” that is 18 metres deep and 2.5 metres in diameter. A spiral staircase leads down to the bottom. The well was blocked up in the 16th century and a house was built on top of it on the site where the museum is now located. The museum’s collections include archaeological finds from throughout the municipality, including a particularly interesting collection of Moorish ceramics from digs conducted at the castle.



getting to know the silves area

SÃO BARTOLOMEU DE MESSINES

Situated in a long, fertile valley, São Bartolomeu has some streets - such as Rua do Remexido - that retain the charm of a typical Algarve village. The poet João de Deus (1830-1896), whose reader “Cartilha Maternal” was widely used to teach reading and writing at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, was born here. The two houses in which he lived are indicated by plaques.

MAIN CHURCH 18

The original church was built in the 16th century, in a transitional style between Manueline and Renaissance. To this was added a Baroque façade at the beginning of the 18th century, which makes a powerful visual impact thanks to the contrast between the white of its walls and the stonework in red sandstone, set off by the spacious churchyard with a flight of steps and the pillared entrance. The interior is made up of three naves with round arches supported by Solomonian columns. The triumphal arch in the chancel has non-twisted triple columns. The altarpiece is carved and gilded (18th century).

The two chancel chapels have ribbed Manueline vaulting, while the arches of the side chapels show the influence of the later Renaissance style. There are fine gilded and carved altarpieces (18th century) and the bas-relief polychrome pediments, with their markedly Baroque decoration, are worthy of particular attention. Above the side naves are two panels of 17th century polychrome tiles depicting the Eucharist and Nossa Senhora da Conceição (Our Lady of the Conception). Also dating from the 17th century are the tiles that cover the inner sides of the three side altars.

The elegant pulpit is made of local marble and is a little Baroque masterpiece (early 18th century). Other objects in the church, including the table and holy water font, are fashioned of the same marble.

The church also boasts a fine collection of 16th to 18th century statues, in which pride of place goes to the pieces dedicated to the Virgin Mary: Nossa Senhora da Conceição (Our Lady of the Conception), Nossa Senhora da Glória (Our Lady of Glory) and Nossa Senhora da Saúde (Our Lady of Salvation).

A number of small rural chapels, known as “ermidas”, evoke the holy figures who have been the object of religious devotion for many years: São Sebastião (St. Sebastian) in the town and, on the low hills that surround it, Santa Ana (St. Anne), São Pedro (St. Peter) and Nossa Senhora da Saúde (Our Lady of Salvation), which has a cross made up of 17th century tiles on one of its walls.



Main Church of S. B. de Messines - LR

IN SEARCH OF MENHIRS

The area around São Bartolomeu de Messines is rich in traces of the past. Prominent among these are menhirs which bear witness to the Algarve's thriving Megalithic community in the 4th to 3rd millennia B.C. The menhir at Monte de Alfaroqueira was converted into a decorated stele during the Bronze Age, while the Cerro da Vilarinha, Gregórios and Abutiais menhirs have since toppled over. The Rocha Sanctuary, in Vale Fuseiros, which consists of small hollows carved in the rock over a distance of almost 100 metres, dates from the same period.

ALGOZ

Verdant orange, fig and almond trees surround this village, which still retains a few old houses with prettily decorated chimneys and modest whitewashed chapels.

MAIN CHURCH 15

Displaying the architectural simplicity of the 18th century on the outside, this church has within it a number of artistic treasures: 17th century tiles covering the walls and vault of the baptistery to great artistic effect; the gilded, carved altarpiece in the "rocaille" style that adorns the Capela do Santíssimo (Chapel of the Most Holy); the altarpieces on the two side altars (18th century); and the statues, which include two processional figures of Christ dressed in an undergarment.

GRANARY OF MONTE DA PIEDADE (MOUNT OF PIETY) 16

This building belonged to the old mutual association which would support its members with help in the form of loans. The entrance was possibly built using stone work from the 16th century. In addition to a plaque bearing the date 1704, the façade has a decorative circular window and a cross made with patterned polychrome tiles (18th century).

CHAPEL OF NOSSA SENHORA DO PILAR (OUR LADY OF THE PILLAR) 17

Located on top of a hill, this country chapel is a good place from which to view the surrounding landscape. The small altar achieves a striking harmony between the carved altarpiece, the pediment and the tiles (beginning of the 18th century). There is also a triumphal arch with decorative paintings depicting the Stations of the Cross (18th century).

ALCANTARILHA

With its whitewashed walls, Alcantarilha's church dominates this village which is located on a hill.

MAIN CHURCH 13

All that remains of the original 16th century structure is the Manueline chancel, to which an 18th century carved and gilded altarpiece was added. The baptismal chapel has a tiled dado (17th century) and in the sacristy there is a fine chest above which there is a niche decorated with acanthus leaves (18th century). Adjoining the church is the Capela dos Ossos (Chapel of Bones), its walls and ceiling clad with approximately 1,500 skulls.

MISERICÓRDIA CHURCH 14

Unremarkable from the outside, inside this church the statue and carved, gilded altarpiece are worth seeing, as are the banners used in processions (18th century).

CASTLE

Medieval in origin, the castle was built to defend the population of Alcantarilha and the surrounding villages from marauding Moorish pirates. Rebuilt in the 16th/17th centuries, it now stands in ruins.

PÊRA

In the streets around Pêra's church many of the houses are typically Algarvean in appearance, with whitewashed walls and coloured parapets

MAIN CHURCH 11

The outside is of little architectural interest. The carved and gilded woodwork of the altarpieces in the chancel, the chancel chapels and the chapels of Nossa Senhora do Rosário (Our Lady of the Rosary) and Sagrado Coração de Jesus (the Sacred Heart) is representative of art in the Algarve at that time (18th century). The side walls of the chancel are decorated with tiles depicting the four evangelists framed with Baroque mouldings, while the vault has tiles with different designs (18th century). There are several statues dating from the same period. The church's holy treasures include vestments and a finely-crafted silver monstrance. The churchyard affords excellent views of the surrounding fields and the sea.

CHURCH OF THE ORDEM TERCEIRA DE SÃO FRANCISCO (THIRD ORDER OF ST. FRANCIS)

The modest architecture of the façade conceals a chancel with a carved altarpiece whose fine design is evident in its columns and tabernacle (beginning of the 18th century). From a later period and in the "rocaille" style are the decoration on the walls and ceiling and the carving on the canopy over the tribune. The church also contains paintings by the Algarvean artist Rasquinho (18th/19th centuries).

A LONG AND PRETTY BEACH

Armação de Pêra was for centuries a fishing village, a focal point for fishermen attracted by the abundance of fish, especially sardines and tuna, which was salted and sold in the south and centre of Portugal. To defend the settlement against raids from pirates and corsairs, a small fort was built in the 17th century on the initiative of a prosperous owner of boats and fishing equipment. One of the walls of this old fortification, with a doorway and above it the royal coat of arms, still stands on a slight elevation overlooking the sea. The chapel inside, which is dedicated to Santo António (Saint Anthony), dates from the same period. Even today, Armação de Pêra retains the charm of a typical fishing village at the Praia dos Pescadores (Fishermen's beach). But it is to the tourists who come for its broad sands and warm waters that Armação de Pêra now owes its lively, cosmopolitan atmosphere.



Armação de Pêra - HR



Praia Grande - HR

SILVES AND THE VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY

Silves played a role in the first phase of the discoveries, the daring voyages of exploration inspired and orchestrated by Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460). The first voyage of reconnaissance to the islands of the Azores was made by a certain Diogo of Silves. João do Rego, Knight of the Household of Prince Henry, and Gastão da Ilha, whose name is linked with the settling of the island of Madeira, are buried in the Old Cathedral. And a bishop of Silves equipped a caravel to explore the African coast. Yet by making the ports of the Algarve coast the focus of political and economic power, the discoveries ultimately contributed to the decline of Silves.

SAILING DOWN THE ARADE RIVER

For thousands of years boats from the Atlantic and Mediterranean alike have sailed up and down the river, and to follow their route down to the sea is to take a trip through time. The journey begins in Silves, and then rounds the old peninsula where the tradingpost and fortress of Cerro da Rocha Branca once stood. Further downstream are the remains of a medieval lookout tower and, on Rosário Island, vestiges of the Roman presence.

It was on this stretch of the river that the crusaders landed their boats when they captured Silves for the first time. Before that, in 966, a Viking fleet which had come intent on plunder was surrounded and partially destroyed on the same spot. Continuing downstream you reach Portimão and the sea, and the fortifications that defended the mouth of the river.

BETWEEN ORANGE GROVES AND HILLS

The vast triangle defined by Silves, São Bartolomeu de Messines and Armação de Pêra is a land of fruit trees and vegetable gardens, of small villages where the houses have whitewashed walls, with doors and windows picked out in blue. A walk through this region is a chance to appreciate the glowing colours of oranges and pomegranates, the pale green foliage of almond trees, the broad crowns of carob trees and the dramatic shapes of the fig trees close to the ground. To the north lie the hills, smooth and round as pebbles, covered with typically Mediterranean vegetation consisting of holm oaks, strawberry trees, cork oaks, cistus and heather. In addition, many other species of flora that have adapted to the poor schisty soils and harsh climate flourish here that are interesting from a botanical point of view. In a landscape of heat and light, the cool of the Arade and Funcho dams provides a welcome respite and the white houses of villages break up the emptiness of the upland scenery. The whole area is home to a variety of animal life, including approximately eighty species of nesting birds. The hills of the "Serra" are a particularly good place to observe birds such as goshawks, sparrow hawks, woodpigeons, woodpeckers, melodious larks, thrushes, nightingales, and goldfinches.



Orange Tree - TA



Arade Dam - LC

CRAFTS PAST AND PRESENT

A number of traditional crafts are still carried on in the municipality: in Silves there is a craftswoman who makes delicate bobbin lace, while in the surrounding hamlets women still weave wicker and coarse "esparto" grass to make useful domestic objects. More in line with contemporary tastes are the tiles, pottery and miniatures of typical Algarvean houses made in Silves, the quilts and cushions fashioned out of brightly coloured rags, also in Silves, and the jewellery and other decorative objects made in the upland village of São Marcos da Serra.



Cork Museum - VC

CULINARY PLEASURES

In places near to the sea, fresh fish is understandably the star attraction at the dinner table. Sardines, horse mackerel, sea bream, sea bass and many other types of fish are caught and served grilled. Shellfish, including lobster, prawns and clams, is also abundant. And for those who want to try traditional fishermen's recipes there is "Caldeirada à tia Chica" (a fish stew), sardines "albardadas", dipped in flour and fried, and "carapaus alimados", marinated baby horse mackerel. Further inland the cooking has a different slant: "papas de milho" made from maize flour and "fatias de Barrocal" (made with bread, eggs and sugar). As far as sweets and puddings are concerned, Silves is famed for its "morgodos", which are decorated with leaves and flowers made of sugar, and its "lesmas", which are filled with a sweet egg paste, while in Messines "folhados" are a speciality. To round off a meal, nothing beats the sweet oranges and tangerines, pomegranates, grapes and figs grown in the fertile orchard which constitutes most of Silves municipality; and also the honey with the flavour of rosemary and lavender, and the brandy made from the fruit of the strawberry tree and distilled in the villages of the serra.



Silves "Morgado" - TA





Almond Blossom - TA

silves



Fábrica do Inglês - LC

Data sheet

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