



Visit Olhão in Portugal: our complete guide

By Floriane

Wondering **what to do in Olhão** ? During our road trip in southern Portugal, we spent **several days in Olhão**, and it's clearly one of our favorite villages **in the Algarve**.

Less touristy than its neighbors, **Olhão** has retained a **true local identity**, focused on the sea, fishing and the **Ria Formosa** natural park.

In this article, we share with you **our experience**, our must-do **activities**, our **practical advice** and our **recommendations tested on site**.

Key facts : Olhão

Where is Olhão?

□ In southern Portugal, 20 min east of Faro airport in the Algarve

Our top

- **Boat cruise** to see the Ria Formosa Natural Park
- **Walking tour** of an island
- Visit the historic center and its markets

Cruise from Olhão

Our hotel in Olhão

□ [Information and booking for Hotel Cidade de Olhão](#) from 80€ per night with pool and breakfast

☐ **Recommended duration:** 2 to 3 nights

Explore the Ria Formosa Natural Park from Olhão

If there's **one must-do activity in Olhão**, it's **exploring the Ria Formosa Natural Park by boat**.

This immense protected lagoon stretches for almost 60 km and is home to **barrier islands, sandbanks, salt marshes and exceptional wildlife**. We loved it, because it's a complete change from the rock formations and natural caves we've seen in the west of the Algarve, such as [the cliffs of Ponta da Piedade](#) and the Bengil cave.

☐ **Explore the reserve by boat: our recommendation**

Of course, we advise you to spend several hours exploring the park by boat. We chose a **small-group guided cruise departing from Olhão**, with :

- lagoon navigation
- stops on **several islands (Armona, Culatra, Farol)**
- explanations of wildlife, fishing and local life

We recommend [Odyssey Traditional Boat Tours](#). Perfect for a first discovery, we advise you to book in advance, as it's a very popular activity - it's a must-do in Olhao!

☐ [Book a 3-hour boat trip in the Ria Formosa Natural Park](#)

Explore one of the reserve's islands and beaches

There are **5 main islands in the Ria Formosa Natural Park**, lying between the lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean. Lined up along the coast, they play an essential role in protecting the park. All are **easily accessible by ferry from Olhão or Faro**, so all you have to do is choose one to explore and spend a few hours on one of the superb beaches.

Each island has its own ambience, but they all have one thing in common: **fine**

sandy beaches and a real sense of disconnection. Whichever one you choose, it's hard to be disappointed.

- **The island of Faro:** accessible by car from Faro, this is the most attractive of the islands, with its long sandy beaches, but it's also **the busiest**, especially in summer.
- **♥ The island of Armona:** the closest to Olhão and one of the easiest to get to. We loved it for its **car-free village**, peaceful atmosphere and **long ocean-side beaches**.
□ *It's the one we chose to revisit and, above all, took the time to enjoy its beach (one of the most beautiful in the Algarve, in our opinion). Read our dedicated article: [What to do in Armona](#)*
- **Culatra Island (Ilha do Farol):** inhabited all year round by a **community of fishermen**, it offers a very local and authentic atmosphere, far removed from mass tourism.
- **Barreta Island:** undoubtedly the wildest. With just **one bar/restaurant** and vast natural beaches, it's the perfect island to feel **alone in front of the ocean** (*we wanted to explore this one, but the ferry schedules didn't match*).
- **Tavira Island:** long and narrow, renowned for its **unspoilt natural beaches**, easily accessible from Tavira.

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Stroll through Olhão's historic center

As is often the case in the small villages of the Algarve, **the historic center can be discovered on foot**, without a precise itinerary.

What we liked:

- the **white cube-shaped houses** typical of the town
- the slightly rough, sometimes slightly faded alleyways, we loved the colorful doors decorated with earthenware tiles.
- the **lively waterfront**, especially at the end of the day with the return of the fishing boats and cruise ships, ideal for enjoying a drink on the terrace while taking in the local atmosphere.
- Local markets (more about them later)

In short, it's a **real favorite**, and we loved getting lost here, far from the more touristy villages further west of Faro.

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The markets of Olhão: a true local immersion

It's impossible to pass through **Olhão** without visiting the market, housed in **two large red-brick halls**, side by side, facing the sea. Clearly, you can't miss them!

- ☐ In the **first hall**, you'll find the [fish market](#). The fish arrives straight from the auction, ultra-fresh, and if you come **early in the morning**, you can even witness the arrival of the crates fresh from the boats. Sardines, sea bream, sea bass, octopus, squid... it's all there, at **prices that really surprised us** (in a good way), especially when you compare them with those in France (we live on [the Ile d'Oléron](#), so we're used to buying fish).
- ☐ In the **second hall, fruit, vegetables and local produce**: colorful stalls, seasonal produce, herbs, olives, cheeses, Portuguese specialties...

Another highlight is the **numerous bars and restaurants surrounding the markets**, with terraces overlooking a pleasant seafront promenade.

Open every day except Sunday.

Where to stay in Olhão Our tried and tested recommendation

We booked **two nights at [Hotel Cidade de Olhão](#)** for one simple reason: we wanted **a pool, breakfast included** and **accommodation well placed** for exploring the city on foot.

And frankly, we loved our stay. The pool was a real plus, especially with the heat during our stay. Especially since, even in the middle of summer, **the ocean doesn't get above 17 degrees** in the area... being able to cool off in warmer water after a day's sightseeing makes all the difference.

- ✓ Swimming pool (essential as the ocean is cool, even in summer)
- ✓ Breakfast included
- ✓ Well located to do everything on foot

☐ [Information and booking for Hotel Cidade de Olhão](#) from €80 per night

Where to eat in Olhão

Here are two addresses we tried out during our stay:

- **Casa de Pasto Almirante:** home-style Portuguese cuisine at low prices, far from the tourist port (*menu only €10: main course, drink, dessert and coffee*)
- **Taberna D'Olhão:** excellent Portuguese tapas, friendly atmosphere, perfect

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for evenings in Olhão's historic center. We recommend sharing several plates of tapas to try out different specialities: Ria clams, pork brochettes, garlic octopus...

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How to get to Olhão

If you're already in the Algarve, **Faro and Olhão are about an hour's drive from Lagos**. The driving is easy, the roads are well maintained, and you soon feel at ease behind the wheel.

□ In our opinion, renting a car is still **the easiest** way to explore the Algarve at your own pace.

From **Lisbon**, allow around **3 hours' drive**, mainly via the A2 freeway.

Rent a car in the Algarve

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Renting a car in **Faro** is really easy, and rates are often **very reasonable**, especially out of high season. For us, it's clearly the best option for a **road trip in the Algarve**: you can move when you want, change your plans at the last minute, and you're not dependent on buses or timetables.

Compare offers on DiscoverCars

□ To quickly compare prices and find the **best value for money**, after testing several solutions, today we're going with [DiscoverCars](#): it's simple, easy to read, and convenient to see the differences between rental companies in just a few minutes.

□ A detail that changes everything: the **all-risk insurance** option via DiscoverCars often **costs less** than that offered over the counter, with coverage that's generally more comprehensive. The result: much less stress when collecting or returning the car, and above all, less risk of unpleasant surprises.

□ [Compare offers on DiscoverCars](#)

How long can I stay in Olhão?

□ This is obviously the question we ask ourselves all the time on a road trip to the

Algarve. We recommend staying **2 or 3 nights**, as it's ideal for :

- explore the Ria Formosa
- visit one or two islands in greater depth
- enjoy the village atmosphere without the rush

Our opinion of Olhão

As you'll have guessed by now, Olhão is one of those **less Instagrammed**, but deeply authentic places.

We loved its **leisurely pace**, its **closeness to nature**, and the fact that everything revolves around the **lagoon and the sea**.

□ If you haven't left yet, remember to slip on your neoprene wetsuits for a swim for yourself and any children, as the water in the Atlantic is cooler than on our shores. We know what we're talking about, because we live on [the Ile d'Oléron](#).

□ If you're looking for a **different kind** of stopover in the Algarve, **Olhão is an excellent choice**, and a perfect starting point for discovering the Ria Formosa.

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Feel free to leave us a **note** below to let us know if you are planning this trip, **ask** any questions or **share** on social networks([our Instagram](#)) we will answer you with great pleasure!

Before you leave, **find all our articles to help you organize your trip:**

- [☐ Where to sleep in the Algarve? our best addresses](#)
- [☐ Itinerary for your Algarve road trip?](#)
- [☐ Car rental in Faro in the Algarve: our tips and advice](#)
- Visit the villages of [Lagos](#), [Armação de Pêra](#), [Alvor](#), Albufeira and Olhão
- [☐ Visit the must-see Benagil cave](#)
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