

What to do in Portugal's Ria Formosa nature park and its islands? A hidden treasure in the Algarve



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By Floriane

Wondering **how to visit the Ria Formosa Natural Park**? Which cruise to choose? Which birds to spot? You've come to the right place! On the border between the Atlantic Ocean and the mainland, the **Ria Formosa Natural Park** is a must-see in the Algarve, a more raw, more peaceful place, far from the hustle and bustle of seaside resorts.

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During **10 days in the Algarve**, **3** of which **were spent in Olhão**, we loved exploring this very special territory: itineraries, **boat trips**, **car-free islands**, adorable fishing villages and **immense**, almost deserted **beaches**.

In this guide, we give you all the advice you need to **organize your visit** and make the most of the Ria Formosa Natural Park.

Key facts : Ria Formosa Natural Park

Where is the park located?

The nature reserve is located in **the western Algarve between Faro and Cacela Velha**.

Must-see

- **Boat cruise** for wildlife and birdwatching
- [Dolphin watching](#) with [Ocean Vibes Algarve](#)
- **Walking tour** of an island

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- Visit the towns around **Faro and Olhao**

Cruise from Olhao

Cruise from Faro

Our hotel in Olhao

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

What is the Ria Formosa Natural Park (+ map)?

The **Ria Formosa Natural Park** stretches along almost 60 km of coastline in the eastern Algarve, between Faro and Cacela Velha.

Here, there are no towering cliffs or spectacular beaches like in the western Algarve, but rather an **immense protected lagoon**, punctuated by **barrier**

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islands, salt marshes and **sandbanks** that change with the tides.

A veritable haven for wildlife, the park is home to **numerous species of birds**, which find ideal conditions in this unique environment, whether for a migratory stopover or for the nesting season.

The park's emblem is a perfect illustration: the **sultana talva**, a bird as spectacular as it is rare in the region.

Explore the park by boat

□ If there's one must-do activity, it's **visiting the islands by boat**, the main departure points being **Faro or Olaho**.

For our part, we embarked from **Olhão** for a full day sailing across the lagoon, skirting almost unreal sandbanks and discovering **several islands** (Farol, Culatra, and Armona) with very different atmospheres. With plenty of explanations about the local fauna and the life of the local inhabitants.

♥ For a first visit to the park, we clearly recommend this **3-hour excursion to**

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explore the islands and wildlife of the Ria Formosa from Olhão, in French, ideal for a first discovery and perfectly organized. We were able to observe a large number of birds, **flamingos, egrets, herons...** in a small group. We recommend [Odyssey Traditional Boat Tours](#).

□ [*Information and booking here for a 3-hour cruise in the Ria Formosa Natural Park*](#)

□ If you're **staying in Faro**, you might want to check out this [organized cruise through the natural park from Faro](#), it's the same one from Faro.

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□ [Information and reservations for dolphin watching in the nature park.](#)

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Explore the islands by ferry, then on foot

Which island to choose in the park?

The **5 main islands of the Ria Formosa Natural Park** are barrier islands, lined up between the lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean. They are easily accessible by ferry from **Olhão** or **Faro**. Each has its own identity, but all have one thing in common: their beauty. Whatever you choose, you can't go wrong.

- **Faro Island**: accessible by car from Faro, ideal for those who love beautiful beaches, but certainly the most visited.
- ♥ **Armona Island**: the closest island to Olhão, easily accessible by boat, famous for **its car-free village** and **long, beautiful ocean-side beaches**.

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The one we chose to visit: our article dedicated to [What to do in Armona?](#)

- **Culatra Island** (also known as Ilha do Farol): inhabited year-round by a **community of fishermen**, with a very authentic local atmosphere.
- **Barreta Island**: the wildest, with just 1 bar/restaurant and beaches, perfect for feeling alone in front of the ocean.
- **Tavira Island**: long and narrow, renowned for its natural beaches and easy access from Tavira.

□ It's these islands that protect the Ria Formosa lagoon and explain the constant feeling of being **between two worlds: the sea on one side, the ria on the other**.

□ **Ferry company from Olhão**

To Armona and the other islands accessible from Olhao, boats depart from Olhão harbor **every two hours in June and September**, and **every hour in July and August**. The crossing takes around **15 minutes**, and costs a very reasonable **€4 round trip**. Tickets can be purchased directly at the port.

We were even lucky enough to **spot a dolphin** during the crossing.

□ Although it may seem logical once you're there, we advise you **to buy your return ticket at the ticket office in Olaho**.

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Why are Olhão and Faro such good starting points?

Faro and Olhão are two coastal towns on the edge of the reserve, and are the main departure points for boat excursions to discover the [Ria Formosa](#).

□ We chose **Olhão** almost by chance... and it came as a pleasant surprise. The town has retained a true local identity, with its cube-shaped houses, slightly rough alleyways and huge covered market facing the sea. There's nothing overdone here, and you can feel that fishing is still at the heart of daily life.

Spending two nights in Olhão (pronounced OLion) allows you to really take in the atmosphere. In the morning, we strolled along the harbor, watched the fishermen mending their nets, and took time for a coffee on the terrace before joining the boats for the islands.

Departures are frequent, excursions varied, and you can avoid the touristy hustle and bustle of Faro.

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Practical tips for visiting the Ria Formosa

After a few days there, a few things strike us as essential:

How long can I stay?

- **Allow at least 2-3 days to** really enjoy the natural park and surrounding towns.

Where to stay to visit the park?

□ **Staying in Olhão** for more **peace and authenticity**, we booked 2 nights at [Hotel Cidade de Olhão](#) because we wanted **a pool, breakfast included** and a **hotel in a good location**. We loved our stay, and the pool was a real plus, as it was very hot during our stay and especially so with the heat while we were there, especially as the ocean didn't exceed **17 degrees, even in midsummer**.

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

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Taberna D'Olhão

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How do I get to Ria Formosa Natural Park?

Driving to the Ria Formosa

If you're already in the Algarve, **Faro or Olhao** are about **1 hour's drive from Lagos**.

Driving is easy and the roads are well maintained. The car remains an excellent option for getting around freely between Faro, Olhão, Fuseta or Tavira and quickly accessing the various ports of departure to the islands.

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

Rent a car to explore the region

Renting a car in Faro is **easy** and often **very affordable**, especially outside the summer months. It's an ideal option for an Algarve road trip at your own pace.

□ To compare offers and find the **best value for money**, after testing several today, we use the price comparator [Discover Cars](#) a reliable and easy-to-use car rental service.

□ Another important point: **the comprehensive insurance offered via DiscoverCars** is often much cheaper than that added directly at the rental company's counter, while offering broader coverage. A real time-saver, and above all a way of avoiding unpleasant surprises when picking up or returning the vehicle.

□ [Compare offers on DiscoverCars](#)

Restaurants and final tips

- **Restaurants:** we recommend the **Casa de Pasto Almirante**, far from the port and therefore less touristy, with delicious homemade local dishes, and the [Taberna D'Olhão](#) with delicious tapas.
- Take water, hat, picnic and sun cream for the islands.
- **Checking the tide tables**, which have a major influence on the landscapes, didn't make too much of a difference to us, as we're already used to consulting them every day since we live on [the island of Oléron](#).

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We'll soon be continuing this series of articles dedicated to the **Algarve**, a region we've adored for its diversity, landscapes and art of living, and of which we still have plenty of corners and experiences to share.

Don't hesitate to drop us a **line** below to let us know if you're planning this trip, to **ask** any questions you may have or to **share** on social networks([our Instagram](#)) we'll get back to 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 Olaho
- [Visit the must-see Benagil cave](#)
- [How to visit the cliffs of Ponta da Piedade?](#) by boat and on foot

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