

VINTAGE PORT

A SEASIDE SURPRISE ON PORTUGAL'S ESTORIL COAST.

By Joseph Mark Passov

Mention "Portugal" to the average American and the immediate response tends towards a bit of head-scratching. Ultimately, the realization dawns on most of us that Lisbon is a capital city with a vibe, that port wines have for years made a marvelous capper at suppertime and that some of the planet's legendary maritime navigators—Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama, for instance—had Portuguese roots. Still, not enough images jump to mind...which simply proves one thing: Americans who are into exploring hitherto uncharted vacation options need to set course for Portugal.

Heat-seeking Europeans on golfing holidays have long treasured Portugal's Algarve region, but only recently has the capital city itself, four hours to the north, been stamped with must-play status, primarily due to the arrival of a fistful of striking new courses within an hour's drive from the airport. Most heralded of the newcomers is Oitavos Golfe.

Situated 30 minutes west of downtown Lisbon, along what some call the Estoril Coast, in the heart of what others label the "Portuguese Riviera," Oitavos is the centerpiece of perhaps the country's most upscale development, Quinta da Marinha. Among the offerings at Quinta da Marinha are a hotel, homes and villas, a spare-no-expense health and racquet club and an unparalleled equestrian center that includes the Opicadeiro restaurant, which overlooks an indoor horse riding arena. Watching the locals put their equine companions through their paces as you put your taste buds through theirs will have you bucking with glee.

The community has been in the capable hands of the Champalimaud family since the 1920's. Under chairman Miguel Champalimaud, the family's holdings have also expanded to wine production, and there's no shortage of remarkable Douro Valley







reds and whites on property, as well as the fabulous ports that are permanently ingrained in the nation's identity.

As easy as it is to lose yourself in a four-hour lunch, push back from the table and squeeze in as much golf as possible at Oitavos. The course is that good.

Home to the 2007 Estoril Portuguese Open on the PGA European Tour, the five-year-old, 6,893-yard, par-71 course benefits from a delightful confluence of aesthetics, design and environment. The terrain alone would set any architect drooling. A rolling, out-and-back routing peers down at the Atlantic Ocean at every turn and traverses three distinct landscapes, from dense stands of umbrella pines to massive scrub-covered dunes to open, coastal areas bracketed by vegetation and buffeted by sea breezes. Jutting up to the north, at the far end of the layout, are the forested mountains where the medieval town of Sintra is drenched in craft-filled shops and storybook castles.

As for the design itself, done by Arthur Hills and spearheaded by senior associate Drew Rogers, its astonishing variety is partly a product of that natural landscape. Still, the Hills team managed to infuse a perfect blend of shot-making demands and playability with holes that are far from alike, while still sequenced seamlessly into

the whole. Strong players will relish the beefy par-4s, such as the boldly bunkered fifth, the uphill seventh, and the dogleg-left 18th, which curves around a sandy, tree-covered ridge. Still, the most memorable stretch arrives early on the back nine, notably at the driveable par-4 11th, with an out-of-bounds fence and the Atlantic Ocean to the right; and the one-of-a-kind 14th, a 170-yard par 3 that plays over a restored sand dune valley and is backdropped by the ocean.

The climate around Oitavos is akin to San Diego's, so it's never as warm as it gets in the Algarve, and yet frost delays in winter are nonexistent. Its sandy soil means the course never closes in the rainy season and if you prefer to ride, you can drive right to your ball. Nature aside, the Champalimauds are superb stewards of the land. Oitavos was the first course in Europe to attain Audubon International's highest designation, Gold Signature status. It remains one of only eight worldwide.

There's more to do in nearby Cascais too, which holds wonderful shops and just-caught-that-morning seafood. Down the road, Estoril yields a taste of big-city nightlife via its famous casino that served as inspiration for Ian Fleming when he penned the James Bond tale, "Casino Royale." Even a drive up the coast to the craggy cliffs and lighthouse at Cabo da Roca, Europe's most westerly point, is a treat. Still, in a country full of surprises, the most pleasant of all is the seaside splendor that awaits at Oitavos Golfe. ●

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