

Ria Formosa Nature Park

Faro District · Portugal

TRAVEL GUIDE

Tripomatic



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Overview

Ria Formosa is a lagoon about 60 km long on the eastern Algarve coast. A chain of sandy barrier islands and two peninsulas shelters it from the Atlantic. Inside are salt marshes, salt pans, mudflats and tidal channels. The lagoon connects to the sea through six inlets and was voted one of Portugal's seven natural wonders in 2010.

It suits a relaxed trip of beaches, boat rides and birdwatching. Faro, Olhão and Tavira are the bases, and each has ferries or water taxis to the islands. Some islands have no cars and only a few small villages. Clams and oysters are farmed in the lagoon and appear on many menus.

When to visit

Beach and island season runs from June to September. Days are hot and dry, and the islands are most popular in summer. Spring and autumn are mild and good for walking and birdwatching, because many birds stop here on migration. Winter is mild but wetter. Check the last boat out of season.

MONTH	CONDITIONS	DAY °C avg / max	NIGHT °C avg / min	
January	Good Good for wildlife watching	15° / 18° Feels like 12°	10° / 6°	Dry air
February	Great Great for hiking	16° / 19° Feels like 13°	10° / 7°	Dry air
March	Great Great for hiking	18° / 22° Feels like 15°	12° / 8°	Dry air
April	Great Great for wildlife watching	20° / 24°	13° / 10°	Dry air
May	Great Great for sightseeing	23° / 28°	15° / 12°	☀ 20 sunny days · Dry air
June	Great Great for sightseeing	26° / 31°	18° / 15°	☀ 23 sunny days · UV 8 (Very high)
July	Great Great for the beach	29° / 33°	20° / 17°	☀ 29 sunny days · UV 9 (Very high)
August	Great Great for the beach	29° / 33°	21° / 18°	☀ 28 sunny days · UV 8 (Very high)
September	Great Great for sightseeing	26° / 30°	19° / 16°	☀ 21 sunny days
October	Great Great for sightseeing	23° / 27°	17° / 13°	
November	Great Great for wildlife watching	18° / 22°	13° / 9°	Dry air
December	Great Great for wildlife watching	16° / 19° Feels like 13°	11° / 7°	Dry air

Best months: April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November

Climate data: NASA POWER + Copernicus ERA5-Land and ERA5 · 1996–2025

Top sights

- A Ria Formosa is the whole lagoon system. Salt pans, channels and marshes are home to flamingos, herons and spoonbills.
- B Praia da Ilha de Faro is the easiest beach to reach. A bridge links it to the mainland near Faro, so no boat is needed.
- C Praia da Ilha de Tavira is a long, quiet beach on Tavira Island. Boats leave from Tavira and Santa Luzia.
- D Praia do Barril is also on Tavira Island. Its field of rusting anchors recalls the old tuna fishing here. A tourist train from Pedras d'el Rei serves the island.
- E Cacela Velha is a small fishing village on a hill above the eastern end of the lagoon. It has narrow lanes and wide views.
- F Forte de Cacela is the village fortress above the lagoon.
- G Sé de Faro stands in the walled old town of Faro, the main mainland gateway to the park.
- H Igreja do Carmo in Faro has the Capela dos Ossos, a small chapel decorated with human bones.



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What to experience

- Island hopping by ferry or boat trip. Many operators visit Culatra, Farol and Ilha Deserta in one day.
- Walk from the village of Culatra to Farol on Culatra Island. The path passes Hangares, a former naval seaplane base.
- Watch flamingos and other waders on the salt pans east of Olhão, best at dawn or dusk.
- Follow the bird-hide trail at Quinta de Marim, near Olhão. A tide mill museum is also there.
- Paddle a kayak or stand-up paddleboard in the sheltered channels. Some channels are closed to boats, so ask the operator.
- Walk the Ludo Trail, a 7 km loop through wetland and salt pans near Faro.
- Stay for sunset drinks at Farol, a popular spot in summer.

Day trips

The park itself is the day trip for most visitors. These places are close and easy to combine with it.

- A Olhão: a fishing town and the main ferry port for Culatra and Armona. Allow time for the market and the old lanes.
- B Tavira: about 30 km east of Faro. Visit its seven-arched bridge over the Gilão river and the castle.
- C Faro: a walled old town beside the lagoon with a cathedral and a museum.
- Cacela Velha: a quiet hilltop village at the eastern end of the park.
- Culatra and Armona: car-free islands with ocean beaches, reached by ferry or water taxi from Olhão.



Where to explore

Ria Formosa lies between several larger towns.

- West: Faro has the airport, the main station and a walled old town.
- Centre: Olhão is the busiest ferry port for the islands.
- East: Tavira is a historic town with a river, a castle and island beaches nearby.
- Far east: Vila Real de Santo António and Castro Marim lie near the Spanish border.

Getting there

- By air: Faro Airport is beside the lagoon, a short drive from Faro and Praia de Faro. It is the gateway for the whole park.
- By train: Comboios de Portugal runs trains on the Algarve line. Alfa Pendular and Intercidades trains serve Faro, and regional trains continue to Olhão, Fuseta and Tavira. CP – Comboios de Portugal
- By car: The A22 runs along the Algarve coast and is toll-free. The A2 from Lisbon to the Algarve is still tolled.

Getting around

- Ferries: Ferries to the islands run all year from Faro, Olhão and Tavira. Check the last boat of the day, especially out of season.
- Water taxis: Water taxis serve the islands from Olhão, Fuseta and Cabanas de Tavira. They cost more than ferries and are useful after the last sailing.
- Trains: The Algarve line links Faro, Olhão, Fuseta and Tavira.
- Tourist train: A small train runs from Pedras d'el Rei to Tavira Island.
- On foot: Culatra and Armona have no cars. Walk the boardwalks between beach, village and lighthouse. There is little shade, so bring water and a hat.
- Park information: ICNF, the nature parks authority

Getting around on foot & by bike

WALKABILITY

Moderate

Island villages are car-free and walkable. Mainland sights are spread out along the lagoon.

CYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Moderate

Flat terrain, but cycle routes along the lagoon are limited.

Driving

- A car is not needed for the islands, which have no cars. It helps for Cacela Velha, Pedras d'el Rei and Quinta de Marim.
- Park in Faro, Olhão or Tavira and take the ferry on foot.
- The A22 is toll-free. The A2 from Lisbon is a toll road.

Food & drink

Seafood is the main reason to eat here. Clams and oysters are farmed in the lagoon, and local boats supply fish, prawns and squid.

For a market meal, visit the red-brick market halls in Olhão. They are open in the morning, and local producers set up outside on Saturday. Waterfront streets in Olhão and Tavira have many fish restaurants. Cacela Velha has a few seafood restaurants in the village. On the islands, Farol on Culatra and Ilha Deserta have seafood restaurants.

What to eat & drink

LUNCH

Caldo Verde
A simple, comforting soup of shredded kale, potato, and slices of chourico sausage.

Francesinha
A hearty Porto specialty: a meat-stuffed sandwich covered in melted cheese and a spiced tomato-beer sauce.

DINNER

Bacalhau
Salt cod, Portugal's national dish, said to be prepared in hundreds of different ways across the country.

Sardinhas Assadas
Charcoal-grilled sardines, especially popular in summer street festivals and along the coast.

Arroz de Marisco
A rich, soupy seafood rice, similar to paella but wetter, packed with shellfish.

SWEETS & DESSERTS

Pastel de Nata
A small custard tart in flaky pastry, best eaten warm with cinnamon and sugar.

DRINKS

Vinho Verde
A young, light, slightly sparkling white wine from northern Portugal, meant to be drunk within a year of harvest.

Port Wine · Vinho do Porto
A fortified wine from the Douro Valley, aged in cellars around Porto, ranging from sweet ruby to complex aged tawny styles.

Ginjinha · Ginãa
A sweet liqueur made from sour cherries, traditionally served in a small cup, sometimes with a cherry at the bottom.

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Safety & health

This is a safe, low-crime area. Most problems are small. Take care of bags on crowded summer beaches and at ferry piers.

- Sun and shade: There is little shade on the islands. Bring water, a hat and sunscreen.
- Boats: Check the last ferry. If you miss it, a water taxi is the only way back.
- Nature: Stay on boardwalks to protect the dunes. Some channels are closed to boats to protect seahorse beds.

History

The lagoon has long supported fishing and salt making. In Cacela Velha, excavations in 2007 showed that the village stood on the site of an Islamic town in the 10th century. The old fortress above the lagoon is Forte de Cacela.

In Tavira, a seven-arched bridge over the Gilão river is often called Roman. Surveys found it was a Moorish bridge from the 12th century. Tuna fishing once shaped life on the coast. The anchors at Praia do Barril are a reminder of it.

In 1808, people in Olhão rose up against the French occupation. The town later added "da Restauração" to its name. The main Faro–Olhão inlet is man-made. Work began in 1927 and finished in 1952, to improve access to the port of Faro.

Country facts

Quick practical facts for Portugal at a glance:

CURRENCY
EUR €

EMERGENCY
112

ELECTRICITY



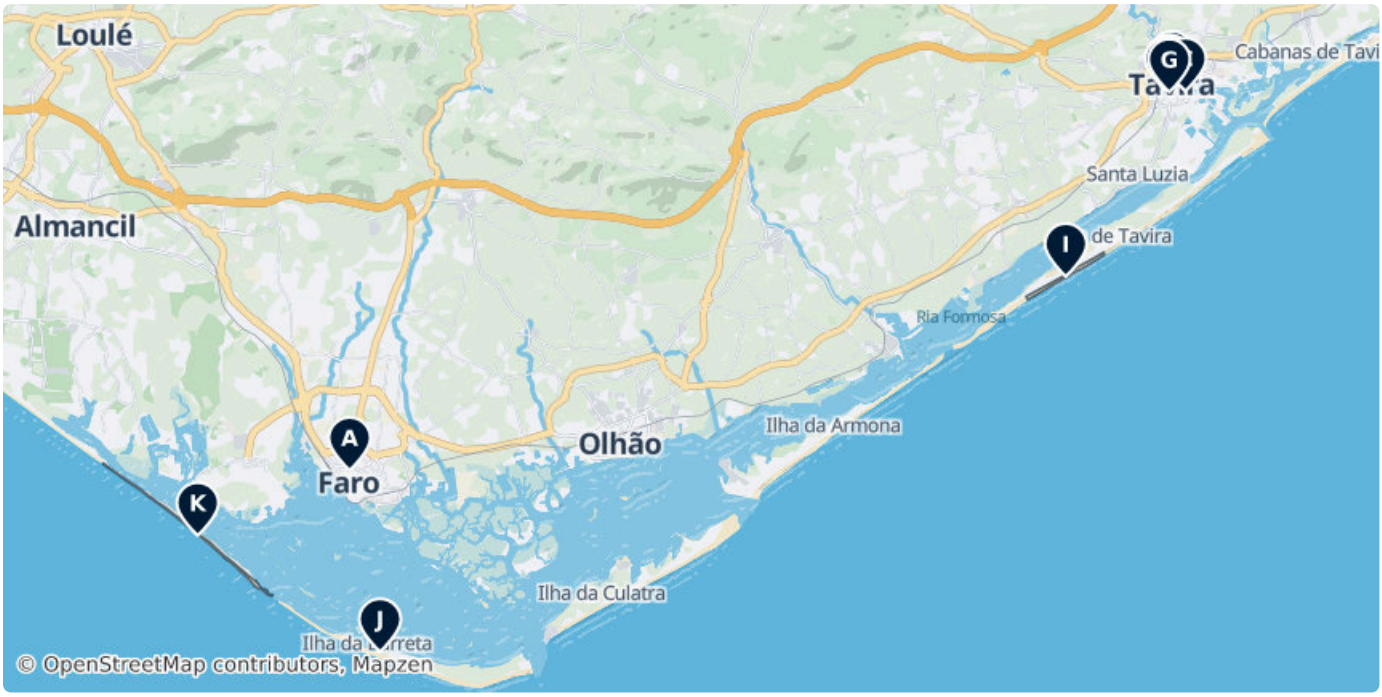
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LANGUAGES
Portuguese

TAP WATER
Safe to drink

Ria Formosa Nature Park Unmissables

This selection highlights the diverse landmarks within the Ria Formosa Nature Park, ranging from Faro's historic religious sites to the barrier islands of Tavira. Key features include the 18th-century Igreja do Carmo with its bone chapel and the medieval Castle of Tavira. The park's natural landscape is showcased through the sand dunes of Ilha da Barreta and the unique Anchor Cemetery at Praia do Barril, while the architecture of the Gilão River bridges reflects the region's Roman and 17th-century heritage.



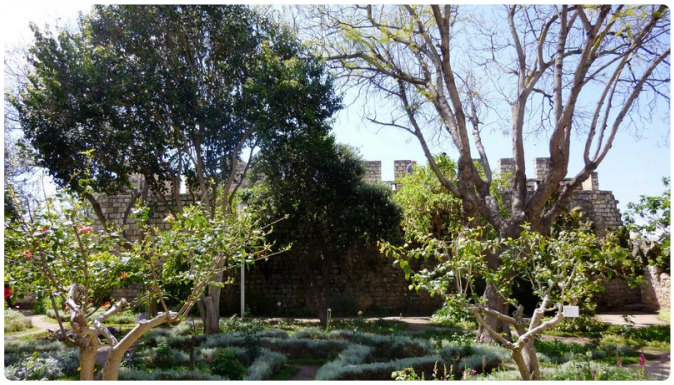


A Igreja do Carmo

18th-century Baroque church featuring the Capela dos Ossos, a chapel constructed from the bones and skulls of over 1,000 monks.

22 Largo do Carmo, Faro 8000148, Portugal
(37.02020, -7.93473)

Mo–Fr	15:00–17:30
Sa	10:00–13:00



B Castle of Tavira

The Castle of Tavira is a medieval castle located in the parish of Santiago, Tavira municipality, Faro district of Portugal.

2 Calçada Dom Paio Peres Correia, Tavira 8800, Portugal
(37.12517, -7.65115)

C Tavira

Ferry terminal providing boat transport across the Gilão River to the beaches of Tavira Island.

174 Travessa José Pires Padinha, Tavira 8800, Portugal (37.12495, -7.64526)



D Igreja de Santa Maria do Castelo

Igreja de Santa Maria do Castelo is a church in Tavira, Portugal. It is classified as a National Monument.

29 Calçada dos Sete Cavaleiros, Tavira 8800, Portugal (37.12539, -7.65180)

Su	11:30–12:30



E Igreja de Santiago

13th-century church built on the site of a former mosque, located in Tavira's historic Santiago district.

35 Rua Dom Paio Perês Correia, Tavira 8800407, Portugal (37.12493, -7.65195)



F Igreja da Misericórdia de Tavira

16th-century Renaissance church notable for its carved stone portal and interior walls lined with blue and white azulejo tiles.

8 Rua Damião Augusto de Brito Vasconcelos, Tavira 8800343, Portugal (37.12588, -7.65073)

Mo	09:00–12:00, 14:00–17:00
Tu–Sa	09:00–12:30, 14:00–17:30
Su	Closed



G Capela de Nossa Senhora da Consolação

Small religious hermitage located near the castle, featuring traditional Portuguese ecclesiastical architecture.

71 Rua da Liberdade, Tavira 8800, Portugal (37.12466, -7.65080)



H Ponte antiga sobre o Rio Gilão

Seven-arched stone bridge spanning the Gilão River. While known as the Roman Bridge, the current structure dates largely from the 17th century.

1 Ponte Romana, Tavira 8800, Portugal (37.12685, -7.64985)



I Praia do Barril

Beach on Tavira Island famous for the Anchor Cemetery, a memorial of hundreds of rusted anchors left by former tuna fishing fleets.

8800, Portugal (37.07374, -7.68663)

Mo–Su Open 24/7

J Praia da Ilha da Barreta

Uninhabited barrier island at the southernmost point of continental Portugal, accessible only by boat and characterized by expansive sand dunes.

8000, Portugal (36.97004, -7.92416)

Mo–Su Open 24/7



Praia da Ilha de Faro

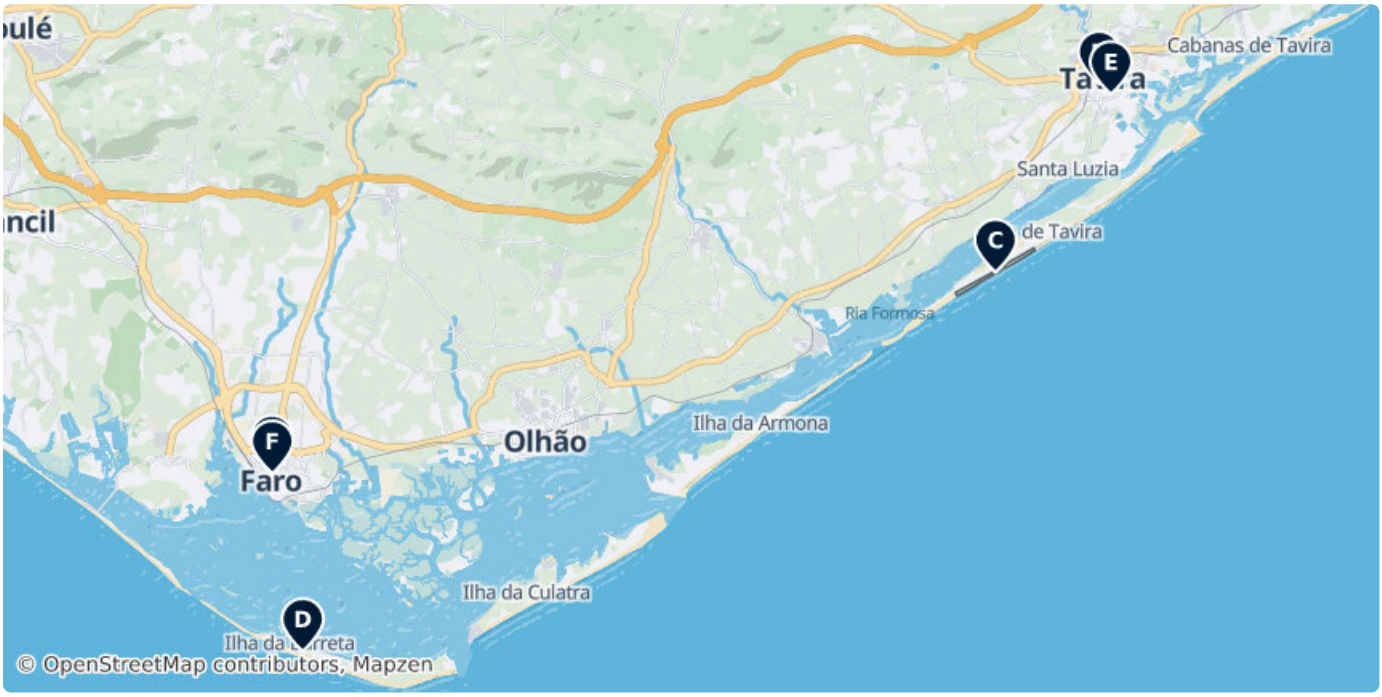
Sandy beach on the Ancão Peninsula, accessible by bridge and situated between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ria Formosa lagoon.

Portugal (37.00215, -7.98733)

Mo–Su Open 24/7

Algarve's Hidden Gems

Explore the Ria Formosa region through its historic architecture and coastal landscapes. This selection includes Faro's 18th-century Igreja do Carmo, known for its bone chapel, and the medieval Castle of Tavira. Coastal sites feature Praia do Barril, distinguished by its anchor cemetery, and the uninhabited Ilha da Barreta. Religious heritage is represented by the Ermida de São Sebastião and the 16th-century Igreja Matriz de São Pedro, offering insight into the area's recovery after the 1755 earthquake and its maritime history.



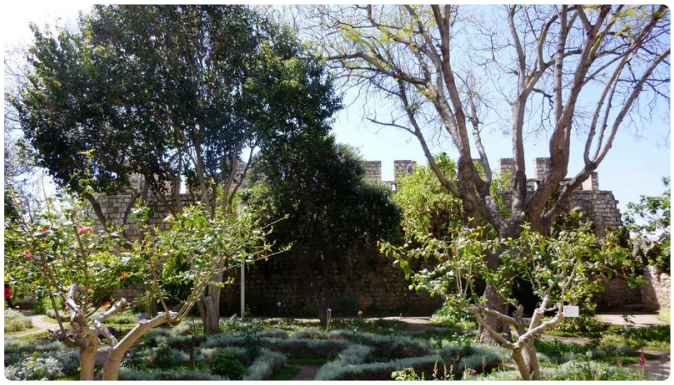


A Igreja do Carmo

18th-century Baroque church featuring the Capela dos Ossos, a small chapel lined with the skulls and bones of over 1,000 monks.

22 Largo do Carmo, Faro 8000148, Portugal
(37.02020, -7.93473)

Mo–Fr	15:00–17:30
Sa	10:00–13:00



B Castle of Tavira

The Castle of Tavira is a medieval castle located in the parish of Santiago, Tavira municipality, Faro district of Portugal.

2 Calçada Dom Paio Peres Correia, Tavira 8800, Portugal
(37.12517, -7.65115)



C Praia do Barril

Sandy beach known for the Cemitério das Âncoras, a memorial of hundreds of rusted anchors from a former tuna fishing community. Accessible by foot or a miniature train.

8800, Portugal (37.07374, -7.68663)

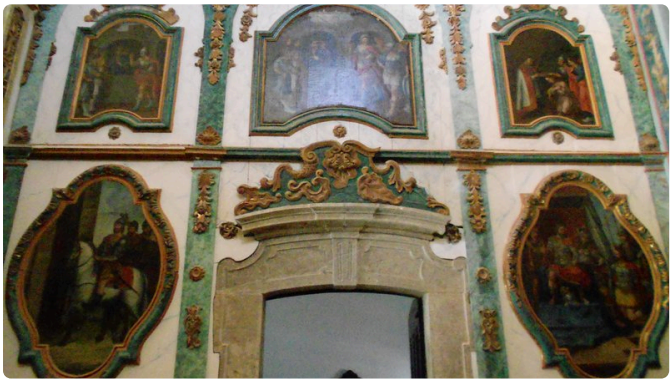
Mo–Su Open 24/7

D Praia da Ilha da Barreta

An uninhabited island marking the southernmost point of mainland Portugal. Accessible only by boat from Faro, it features seven kilometers of coastline and diverse birdlife.

8000, Portugal (36.97004, -7.92416)

Mo–Su Open 24/7



E Ermida de São Sebastião

A small chapel in Tavira with 15th-century origins, reconstructed after the 1755 earthquake. It features simple architectural lines characteristic of the region's religious heritage.

20A Campo dos Mártires da Pátria, Tavira 8800, Portugal (37.12238, -7.64705)



F Igreja Matriz de São Pedro

Originally a 16th-century construction, this church was rebuilt following the 1755 earthquake. It houses a Mannerist main altarpiece and various Baroque side chapels.

9 Largo de São Pedro, Faro 8000145, Portugal (37.01871, -7.93460)

Coastal Gems

This collection spans the barrier islands and peninsulas of the Ria Formosa Natural Park in the eastern Algarve. Stretching from Faro to Manta Rota, these beaches are characterized by vast sandy dunes, calm lagoon waters, and Atlantic surf. Notable features include the historic anchor cemetery at Praia do Barril, accessible via a narrow-gauge train, and the uninhabited stretches of Ilha Deserta. Several locations offer designated nudist areas and Blue Flag certified waters, accessible by ferry or pedestrian bridges.





A Praia do Barril

Features the 'Cemitério das Âncoras' (Anchor Cemetery), a memorial to the region's tuna fishing history. Accessible via a small tourist train or pedestrian path, it includes a designated nudist area.

8800, Portugal (37.07374, -7.68663)

Mo–Su Open 24/7

B Praia da Ilha da Barreta

The southernmost point of mainland Portugal, also known as Ilha Deserta. Accessible only by boat from Faro, this uninhabited island offers over seven kilometers of shoreline.

8000, Portugal (36.97004, -7.92416)

Mo–Su Open 24/7



C Praia da Ilha de Faro

Located on the Ancão Peninsula and connected to the mainland by a narrow bridge. It borders both the Atlantic Ocean and the Ria Formosa lagoon.

Portugal (37.00215, -7.98733)

Mo–Su

Open 24/7

D Praia da Ilha Deserta

An uninhabited island accessible by ferry from Faro. It features a designated nudist zone and the Cabo de Santa Maria, the southernmost point of the Portuguese coast.

Portugal (36.96329, -7.87754)

E Praia do Homem Nú

A secluded, wild beach on the western end of Tavira Island. It is an officially recognized nudist beach with no permanent infrastructure or services.

8800, Portugal (37.06178, -7.71103)



F Praia do Ancão

Situated between Quinta do Lago and Vale do Lobo, this beach is bordered by protected dunes and pine forests within the Ria Formosa Natural Park.

(37.03236, -8.03798)

G Praia do Lacém

A quiet maritime beach in the parish of Cabanas de Tavira, known for its natural state and lack of commercial development.

8800, Portugal (37.14211, -7.57075)

H Praia do Barril

Sandy beach on Tavira Island accessible by foot or a small train across the lagoon. Features calm waters and extensive sand dunes.

8800, Portugal (37.08553, -7.66262)

Mo–Su

Open 24/7

I Praia da Culatra

Located on a traditional fishing island accessible by boat from Olhão. A wooden boardwalk leads through the dunes to the Atlantic side of the island.

(36.99986, -7.81108)

J Praia de Cabanas

A narrow sandbank beach located across from the village of Cabanas de Tavira. Access is provided by short boat transfers across the Ria Formosa lagoon.

Portugal (37.13242, -7.59195)

K Praia dos Cavacos

A small, tranquil beach within the Ria Formosa lagoon, frequently used for birdwatching and observing traditional shellfish gathering.

(37.03620, -7.79608)

L Manta Rota Beach

This great beach featuring sunbeds and umbrellas boasts a blue flag and you can see for yourself that it really is clean and pristine like...

8900, Portugal (37.16131, -7.52268)



M Praia da Ilha de Tavira

The primary beach on Tavira Island, accessible by ferry from the town center. It features established infrastructure including restaurants and a campsite.

Portugal (37.11138, -7.62114)

N Praia de Cacela Velha

Also known as Praia da Fábrica, this beach is located at the eastern edge of the Ria Formosa. It is accessible by boat or on foot during low tide.

8900, Portugal (37.15244, -7.54758)

DATA SOURCES

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