

POSTCARD

Culatra, Algarve

Discover a small island community setting new standards for sustainability, just a stone's throw from the popular resorts of the Algarve. **Juliet Dennis** reports

The minute I set foot on Culatra, it was like stepping back in time. Life not only goes at a slower pace, it is quieter too, with no cars or paved roads, no hotels and not even a swimming pool in sight.

Around 1,000 residents – some 400 families – enjoy the peaceful atmosphere on this barrier island in the Algarve, known for its fresh oysters, unspoilt nature and sustainable way of life.

I visited with agents and tour operators from Aito, The Specialist Travel Association, on its annual 'famference', designed to seek out hidden gems in well-known destinations. Culatra was one such spot.

We boarded a small ferry in the coastal town of Olhão, part of the Ria Formosa Natural Park, not quite knowing what to expect – and arriving less than an hour later, I was struck by the open spaces and lack of buildings. Bar a few children who skipped past giggling, the island appeared deserted, though its sparse development is part of the charm.

Our tour guide offered a quick potted history: once just a stop-off for fishermen, a few shacks were built in the 1920s, before developing into a community that now works as a co-operative. The population aims to be completely self-sufficient, operating a circular economy – which relies on reusing, repairing and recycling existing materials rather than consuming more resources – by 2030. She proudly pointed to a seahorse sculpture on the waterfront made completely from rubbish found in the sea.

The more I heard, the more intrigued I became by the simple way of life on Culatra. The island's primary school has 20 children, and it boasts one library, one nurse, a heliport for emergencies, a social centre, three mini markets and eight restaurants. Each time a new baby is born, the community sets off fireworks to celebrate.

We visited the head of the co-operative, Silvia Padinha, who is celebrated for championing the island's way of life. She invited us into her home like old friends to knock back a few oysters and delicious Portuguese wine in plastic beakers we were encouraged to keep and reuse.

We then headed off for a quick dip – and who needs a swimming pool when you have a lagoon all to yourself?

With no new development permitted, Culatra is purely a day-trip destination, and a pricey one at that – though a quarter of our tour cost was ploughed back into area. But a trip here offers a glimpse into how life could be and into a community trying its hardest to become sustainable. If you have clients who want to get away from it all, enjoy nature and wildlife, it's perfect. I just hope they like oysters, too. **TW**



BOOK IT

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TOP: Traditional fishing boat on the Portuguese island of Culatra ABOVE: The area is known for its oysters

PICTURES: Juliet Dennis