

## travelmail

This Algarve resort is a

# PLAYTIME IN PLUSH PORTUGAL

**A** CHILD hissing into your ear 'What are we going to do today?' at 6am is never the best way to wake up on holiday.

But the reply I had ready for my seven-year-old silenced him. 'A surfing lesson, swimming, football on the beach, fresh fish and chips followed by ice cream, computer games to let your lunch digest, then a boat trip to look for dolphins'... and that was just Monday.

I had come to see whether Nigel Chapman and Nicholas Dickinson, who used to run the child-friendly Woolley Grange, near Bath, have managed to repeat their winning ways at Martinhal Beach Resort & Hotel, in Portugal.

Martinhal opened last year, on the south-westerly tip of the Algarve. The drive from Faro airport takes an hour or so, and by the time you run out of motorway — about 40 minutes into the

journey — you are unwinding. The last part of the trip meanders through a windswept landscape sprinkled with almond blossom and mimosa, alongside tiny white-washed houses, sometimes edged with blue to ward off the devil and graced by tall chimneys with geometric designs, a leftover from the invading Moors.

Arriving at the hotel — a low building perched high above the golden beach — we were given ample opportunity to witness the staff's expertise with children.

One child was having a tantrum, another was sulking and a third was bouncing up and down with intent to damage an inviting squashy pink sofa in reception.

There were no parents in sight, either. Perhaps they had sloped off to the spa for a massage.

Then a couple of the numerous young Portuguese staff scooped up the children and headed out to tempt them with a bicycle obstacle course and a huge 3D noughts and

crosses board in the village square outside.

Most impressively, they pulled mine along, too. When I went to fetch them, they were riding bikes with English, Irish, Spanish and Portuguese children.

Holiday spirits high, we went to see our villa just behind the hotel.

We had three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a huge sitting room upstairs with an ocean view. We were chuffed.

And so to lunch. For the children, fresh fish, crunchy chips and a trampoline to bounce on while waiting for their food. For me, a glass of cold vinho verde and a perfect

sea bass while I surveyed the restaurant for the 'luxury family holidays' checklist.

Was everyone looking happy? Was the setting luxurious? Harmony seemed to reign with the staff handing out crayons and replacing spilt ice creams.

Our few days passed in a haze of contentment. We didn't often leave the place. It seemed unnecessary — a view shared by other parents.

There was a Kids' Club for under-eights with painting, puppet-making and more.

There was a Blue Room for over-eights with Wii consoles, computers and PlayStations, which my children loved



dream for parents, says **MARY LUSSIANA**

when the sun was too hot. For teenagers, there was a juice bar, tennis courts and a pool. But the sea — even the cold Atlantic — and the sand were the main lures, with football and volleyball on the beach, plus surfing when the weather is right.

The real highlight was seeing dolphins in the wild. We went out in a boat from the little port of Baleeira. After searching for ages, suddenly we were surrounded.

There must have been 20 of them. Like outriders, they dipped and danced beside and beneath our rig until, as fast as they had encircled us, they vanished. It was

#### Family favourite: The beach at Martinhal

such a thrilling few moments I began to think it had been a set-up by Nigel and Nicholas. Certainly, their magic formula has worked at Martinhal.

#### TRAVEL FACTS

ROOMS at Hotel Martinhal start from £128 B&B per room per night. Martinhal Beach Resort & Hotel: 00 351 282 240 200; [martinhal.com](http://martinhal.com) BA flies from London Gatwick to Faro from £127 return: 0844 493 0787; [ba.com](http://ba.com)