

WHAT THE PRESS SAY...

FROM INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY, MAY 2010



THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY  
23 MAY 2010

# Travel

A WORLD OF INSPIRING HOLIDAY IDEAS



## Think outside the box

**Kate Simon** visits an audacious new resort on the shores of the Algarve

# WHAT THE PRESS SAY...

FROM INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY, MAY 2010



**See and be seen**  
The best ocean views are reserved for the glass-fronted restaurant with terrace on the first floor

## Put away those golf clubs, this is the Algarve resort of the future

The founders of Woolley Grange are behind a bold new hotel in Portugal. **Kate Simon** reports

**W**hy do I love the beach at Martinhal, a wild stretch of sand in the western Algarve? The Atlantic is in a constant strop. You have to hide in its grassy dunes to find shelter from the wind or shade from the sun. And it's got no funfair and no souvenir shops. Well, there are a few good reasons for a start.

My 10-year-old son, Quincy, seems to like it, too. He's entertaining himself by making a flag from a stick and an old paper bag to lay claim to his new sandy fiefdom, Quincy Island. It's a sight to warm a middle-class mum's heart – next thing, he'll be turning off the computer and asking for some wooden toys to play with.

Martinhal's charm is its simplicity. There's lots of space for lounging around or running about. It's got two beach bars serving home-made food. And when you tire of your holiday reading, you can stretch your legs with a walk across the headland to see the ruins of Henry the Navigator's fort, the Cape Canaveral of the 15th century. Or you could always just while away the time watching surfers ride the waves, or gulls and waders seek out the waters of the tidal pool. True relaxation. What more could you want?

Well, turn your back to the sea and consider a new vision of what visitors to Martinhal might desire. At the top of the beach, where there was once just the pines and maritime scrub of the Costa Vincentina Natural Park, stands a flash new hotel with a legion of holiday houses, the Martinhal Beach Resort & Hotel.

Sounds like eco-vandalism. But it isn't, at least to my mind. You have to understand that this plot of land had been scythed by a road and earmarked for development back in the 1980s – before people gave much of a thought to letting diggers mow down Mother Nature and get so close to the seashore. All sorts of monstrosities could have scarred this fragile landscape. Fortunately, the final plan was put in the hands of Roman and Chitra Stern, Nigel Chapman and Nicholas Dickinson.

Fans of hotel breaks might recognise those last two names as the original team behind Woolley Grange, the stylish, unstuffy, family-friendly

retreat in Wiltshire that won a generation of affluent British parents over to the idea that hotels could genuinely welcome rather than tolerate kids. Chapman and Dickinson rolled out their now much-copied formula to three more properties before the collection, Luxury Family Hotels, was snapped up by Von Essen in 2006. That family-centred boutique approach also impressed the Sterns, who asked the hoteliers to create and run the hotel at Martinhal, to fulfil an essential part of the planning permission for the whole project.

But Chapman and Dickinson's influence hasn't been confined to the hotel. They also prompted a radical rethink of the resort's architecture, which led to the traditional Portuguese style of the 50 villas completed in the initial build being ditched in favour of an audacious modern interpretation of the landscape by London-based architects Conran + Partners.

Conran conceived a long, two-storey structure for the hotel and set it on the brow of the beach, placing 10 bedrooms with sea-facing terraces at ground level and a glass-fronted lounge and restaurant on the floor above. Twenty-eight more bedrooms and suites were set at one side, in a sequence of huge wood-clad boxes. And, directly below the hotel, the architects laid out a beach club, with a large pool, bar and restaurant.

The box concept was repeated for the design of the 132 resort houses, where the concrete was left bare. Conran made the most of the confines of the original plot by positioning some units to overlook the beach and others facing the bay and the pine woods of the surrounding nature reserve. At the centre of the site, a landlocked space was turned to the resort's advantage with the creation of a walled and gated complex focusing on a vast garden with a pool, designed to appeal to families with youngsters.

A large open-air "Village Square" was also marked out to become the heart of the off-beach action, with an indoor/outdoor pool, shop, bistro, ice-cream parlour, gym, crèche and a club for older children. Tennis courts and a spa with six treatment rooms, sauna and steam room were positioned in further-flung corners of the resort.

But the use of so much concrete on a nature reserve, however attractively



Ocean colour scene: the furnishings, above, have been exclusively commissioned from Michael Sodeau. Martinhal beach, below



**COMPACT FACTS**  
Martinhal Beach Resort & Hotel (00 351 282 620 026; martinhal.com) offers 25 per cent off a minimum two-night stay in a terrace room for bookings made by 7 June, with B&B in a double from €152 per night until 15 July, based on two sharing. From 1 July to 31 August, seven nights in a two-bed grand deluxe bay or ocean house costs from £1,725 per house, without breakfast, for four sharing (includes use of resort facilities, except spa treatments, crèche and payable sports activities). Kate Simon flew with Monarch (monarch.co.uk), which has flights from Gatwick, Luton, Birmingham and Manchester from £84 return. Car hire was provided by Carrental.co.uk, which offers a week's hire for £83 out of Faro.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**  
Algarve Promotion Bureau (visitalgarve.pt).



arranged, was bound to prove controversial and the project wasn't without its planning wrangles. The owners maintain that using concrete was unavoidable because the site is in an earthquake zone, and point out that the resort is low density, having been modified to sit as sensitively in its surroundings as possible. What's more, they have a prominent environmentalist on-side, Chris Hines, whose role as a founder of Surfers Against Sewage and work at the Eden Project, among other tasks, has won him an MBE for services to the environment.

Hines has consulted on the project for the past year, though he maintains that a lot of the green-proofing had been completed before his arrival. "I

was impressed with the instinctive way they'd done a lot of the work," he says. "All the buildings had excellent insulation and had been orientated to the sun. They were using the rainfall from the roofs on the soil and not allowing it to mix with waste water, avoiding putting pressure on the local sewage works. And they had chosen indigenous plants that required minimal watering – in the Algarve, one of the biggest environmental issues is the over-extraction of water."

Other projects now under consideration include contributing towards a wind turbine to offset energy use, trying to secure Toyota Prius hire cars as an option for guests, and reviewing tariffs at certain times of year to encour-

age longer stays rather than short breaks. The resort has also renewed the electricity supply to nearby Sagres, and hired many of the 250 staff from the local area; 250 further indirect jobs have been created, practical acknowledgements of its role in the community.

Hines is developing this green awareness. "We measure our footprint in the sand. There are three footprints: the social, environmental and financial. For example, I drove the waste-neutral project at Eden and we reduced our landfill by nearly 60 per cent. You can make a huge difference. The drinking water isn't great [at Martinhal], so they had to decide, did they supply rooms with throwaway bottles? Instead, they have put in five-litre bottles in the houses which can be refilled. That also creates local jobs.

"And a valued staff is hugely important: fair pay for the area, good working conditions and ongoing professional development. This is how the footprints link back together. A good-quality happy staff makes the visitor experience better, so that makes more money, which loops around in staff remaining in employment."

That visitor experience begins with a choice of checking into a hotel room or, from 1 July, one of the one- to three-bedroom resort houses, which have been sold fully furnished to private investors and are let and managed by the Martinhal team – the main source of funding for this €60m project.

The interiors of all the lodgings are as striking as the buildings, with furniture commissioned from Michael Sodeau, whose work features in London's Victoria & Albert Museum. His covetable designs use such materials as Portuguese wood and cork fashioned into deceptively simple softly angled shapes. The in-house interiors team, led by Chapman, has embellished the practical look with soft fabrics and fun touches such as sheepskin beanbags and giant basket-weave lamps, sourced with help from London design dealer Twentytwentyone.

The quality of finish could be no less for a hotel calling itself "Europe's finest luxury family resort". More surprising are the prices, which start at £129 a night in the hotel and £1,100 a week for a house sleeping four – very competitive for the five-star market. But the biggest pull for me is still that wonderful beach.