

# Look at Dad, he's hanging out with the Fatboys again

Phil Davies gets very attached to the huge bean bags at a family resort in Portugal

**O**UR stay at the luxury Martinhal family-focused beach resort in the untouched far west of Portugal's Algarve turned into a week of discoveries for the four of us.

My six-year-old son Hal found out that the bidet was not, as he thought, 'a children's sink'. Tilly, nine, developed a love for traditional Portuguese custard tarts for breakfast and my wife Michele got a taste for locally produced Algarve rosé.

And after more than 50 years of eschewing white fish, I discovered that, in fact, freshly caught and grilled sea bass with olive oil and rosemary baked potatoes is up there in my top five most memorable meals.

Hal also discovered that the best way of getting around the vast complex was to hail one of the electric buggies primarily used to transport guests and luggage on transfer days. Fortunately the obliging staff appeared to be happy to operate as an ad-hoc taxi service on the occasions Hal felt limb-weary from all his jumping into the pool, although I didn't let him push it too far, given the ready availability of bicycles.

Nothing could be further from the hackneyed high-rise image of the Algarve. Retro furnishings and large terraces are the watchwords of the 55 'upside-down' Ocean Houses at Martinhal. They have two bedrooms, a wet-room shower and bathroom on the ground floor and, upstairs, a living area created to make the best of the vistas across the bay to the remote fishing village of Sagres.

Now one of Portugal's top surf spots, Sagres is famed as the place where Prince Henry the Navigator built a school of navigation in the 15th Century. It earned Sagres its place in history as a spot where mariners, astronomers, shipbuilders and cartographers were brought together to create and sail the great ships of the Age of Discovery.

Our modern-day list of discoveries was pretty impressive, encompassing the special sand yachts called blokarts, windsurfing, deep-sea fishing and dolphin-watching, to name but a few. We also found a surf school and, of course, a spa. But, for me, the best form of re-energising

was lying back in the spring sunshine on a massive poolside Fatboy beanbag. The multi-coloured Fatboys make it virtually impossible to get up for a dip, let alone a trek to the nearby beach for a spot of snorkelling or body-boarding.

From my prone position on the wooden decking of the stylish Beach Club Pool, I could keep an eye on Tilly and Hal as they romped in the water while Michele pored over a chick-lit novel. I wasn't alone in

enjoying this particular mode of chill-out – I spied a well-known ex-breakfast TV presenter with her family around one of the four pools.

There are all too few resort hotels where parents can totally switch off. That's why, when our children were of pre-school age, I was a big fan of the four UK-based Luxury Family Hotels – Woolley Grange near Bath, the Ickworth in Suffolk, Fowey Hall in Cornwall and Moonfleet Manor, near Weymouth. They achieved the

seemingly impossible task of comfortably catering for kids while also pampering their parents.

A particular favourite was Moonfleet Manor on the Jurassic coast of Dorset, where everything a stressed-out new parent required was on tap, from baby-bottle warmers to a creche. No one batted an eyelid as excited youngsters careered around the corridors because they knew that keeping the little ones happy was the key to stress-free breaks

**DADDY COOL:** Phil, Tilly and Haf sprawl on Fatboy bags at Martinhal



for the adults. So when the founders of this hotel group, Nigel Chapman and Nicholas Dickinson, sold up and re-emerged as part backers of an £89 million new purpose-built resort in Portugal, I was keen to see whether the concept could be trans-



planted overseas. Just around the bay from the Cabo de Sao Vicente, Europe's most south-westerly point and a 90-minute drive from Faro airport, the ultra-modern Martinhal development combines a boutique hotel with a family-friendly resort, all surrounded by national parkland. The kiddie-comforting ethos of the original Luxury Family Hotels remains reassuringly intact.

It's an acceptable two-and-a-half-hour flight away and hassle-free holidays for those with babies and small children are a speciality.

**I**N ADDITION to the Raposinhos (little fox) children's club and creche and babysitting facilities, the resort's complimentary baby concierge service provides a range of pre-bookable equipment such as potties, baby baths, bottle-sterilisers, safety gates and nappy-changing mats. Travel cots cost €15 (about £13) a night and pushchairs €5 (£4.50) a day. But be prepared to lug your buggy up and down flights of steps to the beach.

When I raised this with the general manager, jolly Dutchman Rob Veltman, he assured me that there are many paths available to push babies around and promised to make these clearer through signposting.

We had been warned in advance that Martinhal can be susceptible to high winds, given its position on a promontory overlooking a stretch of perfect sand beach.

Luckily, all we experienced were blue skies and calm seas - ideal for swimming, dozing and lazy alfresco fish and seafood lunches at the beachfront As Dunas restaurant, which we enjoyed as Tilly and Hal happily jumped on the trampoline in the adjacent playground. Once they had built up a healthy appetite, the chef would make any dish the children wanted, so spaghetti and grilled prawns, no problem; spaghetti with parmesan and olives, no problem at either lunch or dinner.



**WAKE-UP CALL:** A table laid for breakfast at the As Dunas restaurant, with a commanding view of the beach

**GETTING THERE** Western & Oriental Travel (0845 277 3355, www.wandotravel.com) is offering a ten per cent discount and free child places at Martinhal, Portugal, for stays between September 1 and December 23 this year, valid on all bookings made 90 days before departure. This means a seven-night break in an Ocean Villa House is available from £999 per adult and £279 per child, including return flights from the UK and airport transfers. One night in a Terrace Room at Hotel Martinhal (www.martinhal.com) costs from €129 (£115) per room per night, including breakfast. EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) flies to Faro from Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool, Gatwick, Stansted, Luton and Newcastle, with return fares starting at £55.98 from Liverpool rising to £83.98 from Bristol. Five days' car rental from Faro airport with Alamo (0871 384 1086, www.alamo.co.uk) starts at £154 for a VW Polo or similar.

Our Ocean House was one of five types of accommodation available and came complete with high-tech kit such as an MP3 docking station, 32in flatscreen TV with video on demand and internet access, Nespresso coffee machine and a fully equipped kitchen.

Alongside the 38-room boutique-style hotel building there are 26 stylish wooden-clad Beach Rooms in blocks of four and two duplex suites featuring loft-style double-height living spaces, with the open-plan bedroom on the mezzanine. If you're looking for extra privacy, try one of the ten Pinewood Houses, each with private pool.

The nearby semi-detached Garden Houses are arranged around a garden with a free-form children's pool, designed to provide both privacy and a carefree environment for families with toddlers.

While the resort oozes style,

complete with state-of-the-art spa, gym, sauna and part-covered pool, that doesn't mean it lacks practicality. Hal loved the pizza takeaways from the bistro-style Os Gambosinos cafe, a service that is being expanded to include curries and Portuguese dishes.

There is a classy shop and deli in the central village square for those wanting a night in. It provides day-to-day essentials, fresh bread and pastries and a home delivery service for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The lone missing link for Michele and me - and other British holidaymakers - was the lack of bar for pre-dinner sun-downers, other than the lounge at the somewhat formal O Terraco restaurant. A minor gripe.

Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama may have made greater discoveries, but for us, this is a find to which we will certainly return.

# Cruise your way to a town on top of an Italian hill

By Frank Barrett

TARQUINIA is one of those exquisite Italian hilltop towns girdled by ancient walls entered through huge fortified gateways.

Here we were less than an hour's drive from Rome yet very far from the madding crowd. In one direction there were lush gently rolling hills; to the west the blue sea; and, on the horizon, the Tuscan isles.

Somewhere nearby a church bell tolled for Sunday Mass and swifts darted overhead from tiny nests on the battlements, the small birds squeaking with joy as they whizzed through the clear morning air.

This is the real Italy: as fresh and seductive as the cup of cappuccino that was waiting for me at the pavement cafe across the street.

The idea that this sort of idyll can be enjoyed by common-or-garden cruise passengers will probably strike the seasoned independent traveller as sheer heresy.

But that's exactly what we were - a bunch of cruisers on a morning excursion from Rome's port of Civitavecchia. For a couple of carefree hours we cycled the largely traffic-free streets of Tarquinia, ending at an ice-cream shop where the owner's mother provided a crash course in the art of making authentic gelato (greedy sampling included).

'This is what I love about cruising,' observed a fellow traveller, plunging her spoon into a 'chocolate drop special'. 'Every day seems to bring another new treat.'

The Tarquinia treat came seven days into Adonia's 16-night maiden voyage to the Western Mediterranean.

The itinerary highlighted that this smaller ship - now the smallest in P&O Cruises' fleet - will be able to treat passengers to more off-the-beaten-track destinations.

Alongside 'big' stops such as Barcelona and Rome, it included calls to Alghero in Sardinia, Portofino in Italy, Sete in France, and Mahon in Minorca. Launched a decade ago by Renaissance cruises, the ship has since seen service for Swan Hellenic as Minerva II and for P&O's sister company Princess Cruises as Royal Princess.

It's easy to see why she has long been a popular vessel, offering what P&O Cruises managing director Carol Marlow says are 'all those things our regular passengers love': a classic dance floor, crow's-nest observation lounge, formal nights, classical recitals, guest speakers and silver-service dining.

Food-lovers will love the Pacific Grill Restaurant, where they can enjoy a menu designed by Marco Pierre White.

The ship carries about 700, a minnow in a world where new ships can have seven times as many. Those who value peace

## GETTING THERE



**EXCLUSIVE:** Adonia, a relative minnow, carries just 700 passengers

P&O (0845 3554 444, www.pocruises.co.uk) offers a 17-night cruise on Adonia, departing Southampton on August 30. Ports of call include Lisbon, Valencia, Rome (from Civitavecchia), Propriano, Florence/Pisa (from Livorno), Sete, Barcelona, Tangier and La Coruna. Prices start at £2,582 full-board with entertainment.



**TASTE OF PERFECTION:** Frank checks out the tempting options at Tarquinia's gelato shop

and quiet will enjoy the fact that Adonia carries no children.

But the main attraction will be Adonia's ability to visit ports currently outside the scope of bigger ships. In Alghero, for example, within a few minutes of getting ashore we sat down to dine alfresco in one of the town's best pizza restaurants. As we left the ship there were no rapacious sales people anxious to sell 'special tours' - because cruise passengers are such a rarity here.

After finishing our ice cream in Tarquinia, we crossed the square and entered the town's museum.

While our guide could tell you all you needed to know about the rise and fall of the Etruscans, he seemed keener to chat about football. At one point a magpie flapped away from a tree: 'Magpies? Newcastle United. Your "Toon Army";' he observed. 'Howay the lads! Alan Shearer!'

As I say, the whole thing is a treat from start to finish.