

# Where The World Once Ended

Wild, untamed and dramatic Sagres, at the south-western tip of the European continent, was the end of the known world till the 15th century!

Text and photographs **Gustasp and Jeroo Irani**

This spread: A fisherman on the edge of the wind-swept cliffs of the 16th-century fort built by Prince Henry the Navigator.

For thousands of years it was believed that beyond Sagres and the Cape of St. Vincent was the end of the world, or as the Portuguese evocatively put it, *fin del mundo*. There, where the horizon ended was a sinister black hole inhabited by sea monsters and other fearsome creatures...Was that a flotilla of frail sailing ships riding the heaving waves of the Atlantic Ocean like wild horses at a rodeo?



**Clockwise from left:** Fishing boats bob around in the harbour; A cavern carved out by the force of the water at the base of a sea cliff; An aerial view of the The Lighthouse of Cabo de São Vicente.



Russ Heinly / Shutterstock.com

Could they be the ghostly wraiths of Vasco da Gama's armada, cleaving uncharted waters in search of a maritime route to India?

Intrepid Portuguese explorers, armed with grit and courage but little knowledge, imagined that to go beyond this point, located at the most south-westerly tip of Europe, would mean falling into an abyss. Today, we know better. But Sagres and the Cape, on Portugal's sunny southern coast, the Algarve, are still draped in an indefinable end-of-the-world feel. There, cliffs soar over 200 ft; raptors ride the thermals and the wind sometimes whistles like a mad banshee.

We were staying at Martinhal Sagres Beach Family Resort, a 37-room hotel which also has swish self-catering villas of various sizes, sculpted into a cliff. The resort lassoes jaw-dropping vistas of a magical bay, book-ended by sun-baked, wind-swept cliffs that glow a fiery orange-red in the rays of the setting sun.

From the timber deck of the resort's O Terraco restaurant, we could see the fishing harbour in the misty distance where seafood auctions, famed for delectable piscine quality, are held. With a national park at the back and a smooth-as-silk beach in the foreground, Martinhal balances contraries – it has a lavish designer décor and a child-friendly focus in a wild, sparsely populated expanse. The great outdoors invade the indoors via ceiling-to-floor glass windows, generous patios and terraces. For three days, we indulged in the luxury of space, a cutting-edge spa, multiple swimming pools and restaurants, beachside bar, tennis court, gym, watersports club and the absence of obsessive Instagrammers.

Sagres turned out to be a haven for surfers, idlers, walkers and beachcombers like us who yearned for fresh air laced with the salty tang of the ocean. We walked down the curving beach to the raffish, intimate little village of 2,000 souls, studded with cheery cafes and bars; along ancient smugglers' routes and fishermen's paths which ended at scalloped coves where the horizon and sky meet in a blur of blues. Near the harbour, fishermen pulled in their colourful boats, imparting to a quiet corner of the beachscape, the aura of a tiny working fishing village, thankfully devoid of suntanned bodies roasting in the sun.

Despite its wild, almost rustic air, Sagres and the Cape have a rich nautical past. It was in Sagres that a prince called Henry the Navigator ushered in the



**Above: The Martinhal Resort's boardwalk to the beach.**

**Below: A model of a cargo ship at the maritime museum at the lighthouse.**

Portugal Golden Age of Discovery in the 17th century. He set up a school to deepen contemporary knowledge of geography, map-making and navigation. Many of his sponsored explorations began from Lagos, 46 km away from Sagres. But Henry had a dark side. He is also known to be the founder of the Atlantic slave trade who set up the first slave market in Lagos. Henry died in 1460, and 28 years later Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa to reach India.

One evening, we took the scenic coastal road to the Cape of St. Vincent, just 6 km to the west of Sagres. The wind-carved headland, often blasted by storms was not in the mood to showcase one of its intense pyrotechnic sunsets. The wind gusted and almost swept us off our feet and would have had us airborne and into the sea below that vented its fury on a rocky shore. In summer, eager crowds throng the headland and wait near the lighthouse, The Lighthouse of Cabo de São Vicente, said to be one of the brightest on the continent, visible from 96 km away! It was a magical place, beautiful in a wild desolate way; seemingly remote in a world that's now largely

mapped and charted. We retreated instead into the tiny maritime museum located in the lighthouse which gives an insight into Portugal's maritime and navigation history. On display is a replica of a 1561 atlas and Vasco Da Gama's sailing ship.

Equally thrilling was our visit to the isolated and empty Sagres Fortress where, it is believed that Henry the Navigator mapped many of his sea voyages. Belligerent 60m-high cliffs rose on three sides and there too, vistas of the roiling sea below. Within the walls of the fortress is the Igreja da Nossa Senhora de Graça Church, a 16th century church, housing a baroque carving of São Vicente protecting a vessel,





**This page: The imposing Fortress of Sagres, built in the 15th century, was used to defend Sagres from the permanent harassment of pirates.**

a cistern-tower, and a large 43-metres-in-diameter wind rose. In its interiors, you will also find the Museum of Portuguese Discoveries, an interactive museum focused on the Portuguese discoveries.

From the enchanting wilderness, we retreated to the familiar – the luxe comfort of our resort where life bubbled and kids, toddlers and teens collectively let their hair down. Meanwhile, over candlelit dinners, parents rekindled their romance. ■



**Jet Airways operates daily direct flights to Amsterdam and Paris. From here, connect to Lisbon with codeshare partners KLM and Air France, respectively. Sagres lies 326 km from here.**

### Fact File

#### Currency

1 Euro = 79.85 Indian rupees (approx.)

#### Upcoming events

- August 16-17: The Sagres Festival takes place in honour of the patron saint Nossa Senhora da Graça, where a procession of boats make their way to Cabo de St. Vicente as part of the celebrations.
- August 29: Festa do Banho 29 (Bathing Party) celebrates an old tradition when villagers came down from the hills to celebrate summer and spent the night on the beach enjoying picnics and a dip in the sea!

#### For more information

Log on to [www.algarve-tourist.com](http://www.algarve-tourist.com)