

BILLIONAIRE



THE NEXT GEN ISSUE SUCCESSFUL SUCCESSION

FAMILY FORTE • How fifth-generation port producer Symington re-wrote B-Corp history.
GAME CHANGER • Powering the first fossil-fuel-free flight.

RETRO RETREAT • Paul Ricard's great-grandson revitalising his Mediterranean island dream.
ROCK SOLID • The diamond billionaire transforming India's water conservancy.

LUX LIBRARY • Alexandre Assouline on stepping up at the iconic publisher.
STEALTH-WEALTH • Patricia Gucci's carry-on luggage is consciously unbranded.

Far From The Madding Crowd

Wild and authentic beauty in Portugal's
answer to the Hamptons.

Tara Loader Wilkinson

Along the dramatic coast of the Atlantic, the laid-back villages of Comporta and Melides are creating a buzz among the international jet set, as tastemakers cultivate luxury hotels and homes.



Spatia Melides Residences.



Left: Details from Pa.te.os, a collection of luxury boutique accommodation in Melides.
Right: Husband-and-wife team Miguel and Sofia Charters, founders of Pa.te.os, with Portuguese architect, Manuel Aires Mateus.



Anyone who has visited, and fallen in love, with Portugal's Comporta, has the Espírito Santo banking dynasty to thank for its wild and authentic beauty.

It's a 52km stretch of coastline in the Alentejo region, an hour south of Lisbon where city life is stripped away. Fringed by undulating empty white sand dunes and set against a sparkling turquoise sea, it was originally, and partly still is, a rice farming community, (Comporta means 'gate', referring to the lock that holds back water in a rice paddy.)

The 48 square miles of farmland made up the Herdade de Comporta Estate, the summer playground of the Espirito Santo family members. Except for a few whitewashed fishing villages, as well as schools and basic infrastructure for the community, tourism was kept to a minimum thanks to the private ownership and the region's strict construction codes.

Comporta's cachet grew among wealthy tastemakers; the creative community was drawn to its isolated, chilled-out charm. French interior designer Jacques Grange, now age 79, first came to Comporta over 30 years ago. He fell in love with a thatched fisherman's cabana amid the pines, and restored it. In his wake followed legendary shoe-maker Christian Louboutin, model and documentary maker Farida Khelifa and artist Anselm Kiefer. Others, such as Andy Warhol, Princess Caroline and Albert of Monaco, joined too, intrigued by its 'stealth wealth' status.

In 2014 however, the Espírito Santo family's crown jewel and Portugal's then second-biggest bank, Banco Espírito Santo, filed for bankruptcy.

Assets were seized by administrators and select parcels of land were auctioned off by the family, but strictly to those developers who could show plans for low-density construction aimed at deep-pocketed tourists and buyers. The plan was to become a model for sustainable development while still operating as an agricultural estate.

"There were lessons learned from the Algarve, parts of which underwent a series of unfettered high-rise development in the 1960s," says Vasco Cunha Mendes, who, with his sister Vera, is the second generation of the Eurosuez family-owned real estate development group. It focuses on developing boutique resorts and farmland estates in unique locations in Portugal; Eurosuez was one of a handful of developers that have been granted permission for sites in the area. Spatia Comporta was its first hotel, which opened in 2019. There are also 38 homes for sale, designed in the local vernacular with thatched rooves, white walls, fireplaces and clean architectural lines.

"Comporta is where it all began," says Vasco. "It's got an Ibiza vibe but like old Ibiza, everyone very casual, it's not really a party town, it's relaxed." If you are looking to party, he adds, the beach clubs are buzzy, including the classic Sublime Beach Club.

The centre of gravity moved half-an-hour south to the humble, 500-year-old fishing hamlet of Melides, with its cobbled square and chimney-nesting storks.

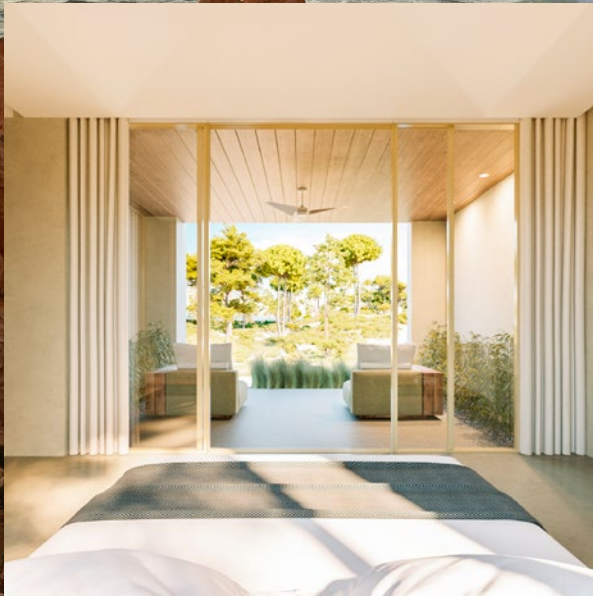
As it became more fashionable, inevitably some of the original Comportans started to grumble about the newcomers. The centre of gravity moved half-an-hour south to include the humble, 500-year-old fishing hamlet of Melides, with its cobbled square and chimney-nesting storks, against a backdrop of the Arrábida hills with the Atlantic visible on the horizon.

This is where Christian Louboutin, who sold his place in Comporta apparently because it was becoming too 'sceney', recently opened his first hotel. The kitsch-yet-glamorous 13-room Vermelho, is all antique Venetian mirrors, baroque panelling and plenty of glossy scarlet tiles in a nod to his signature shoe soles. French designer Philippe Starck, British painter Jason Martin and Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen also have second homes here, as well as Xavier Niel, the French telecoms billionaire.

This is also the home of Spatia Melides (Spatia means 'space', in Latin) an under-construction collection of residences and a hotel being built by Eurosuez and being sold by Savills International. Prices for villas start at €3.79 million and extend up to €6.85 million. There will be 42 three- and four-bedroom villas and 37 two- and three-bedroom residences for sale, each one with a private pool, spa pavilion, outdoor kitchen and fire pit. They will be secluded, spread out across 170 hectares of ancient olive groves and 400-year-old cork oaks, the warm air scented with eucalyptus.

"These are for people looking for a place they've not seen before, somewhere totally unique and private," says Vasco. He points to the hotel chain Aman as a role model, in terms of its low density, high numbers of staff per client and flawless service and design.

Due to environmental protection laws developers are not allowed to build closer than 800m to the beach. So electric bikes will be



Details from Spatia Melides Residences, and the expansive coastal views. © Renee Kempis

This is where Christian Louboutin, who sold his place in Comporta apparently because it was becoming too 'sceney,' recently opened his first hotel.

available for residents to get to the stunning white-sand beach, as well as regular shuttles.

Amenities at the Spatia Club will include a large adult-only pool lined with green marble, a spa with state-of-the-art gym, hammam and sauna, yoga and pilates studio and a hair and beauty salon. In the extensive grounds, a 2,000-square-foot organic farm planted with an orchard, vegetables and herbs will cultivate produce with a neutral-carbon footprint for the Mediterranean restaurants.

Vasco points out that the Golden Visa programme is still helpful for foreigners looking to buy in Portugal, granting a temporary residence permit for third-country nationals that intend to invest in Portugal, through the acquisition of residential properties in inland municipalities such as Grândola (Comporta and Melides) at a minimum of €400,000.

Spatia Melides is in good company. Other developers and hoteliers are now making a stamp on the area, including the star-studded Costa Terra Golf and Ocean Club in Melides, a development of 146 family homes and a wellness centre. It is financed by Discovery Land Company, run by entrepreneur Mike Meldman, who is also the business partner of George Clooney and Cindy Crawford's husband, Mexican businessman Rande Gerber, both of whom have reportedly bought plots, along with Princess Eugenie and her husband Jack Brooksbank.

There is also Melides Art, a collection of 34 sandstone residences and a hotel set in a 270-hectare pine forest,

the brainchild of Miguel Carvalho, designed by architect Esteva I Esteva and full of contemporary art and sculpture.

Boutique hotels popping up too. Husband-and-wife team Miguel and Sofia Charters recently opened Pa.te.os in Melides, a project designed by one of the most renowned Portuguese architects, Manuel Aires Mateus. A clutch of four separate houses from one bedroom to three bedrooms offer luxury self-catering accommodation; rates range from €500 a night up to €2,250.

"Melides has been a family holiday destination since our teen years, and about 17 years ago we decided to acquire a weekend and holiday farm," says Miguel and Sofia. "Pa.te.os was originally a guesthouse for family and friends; but soon we realised how much potential there was to share it."

Architect Manuel Aires Mateus, who is building various other houses in Melides, believes Melides has a magic hard to find elsewhere. "Melides is the sea front of an extraordinary coast, still preserving a scale, a territory, that transports us to other times. The proximity to the sea, its distance from Lisbon, with a scale that still allows the experience of a village, are natural characteristics that result in successive interest," he explains.

With all this development, will the area look very different in 10 years? Vasco shakes his head and gestures around us at the forests of cork oak and eucalyptus. "There are strict environmental laws protecting the nature here and much of the new development will be hidden in the trees. It will keep its beauty and exclusivity for the foreseeable future." ◇



Details from Vermelho, the first Christian Louboutin-designed hotel, in Melides. All © Ambroise Tezenas.

