

# Comporta and chill

Low-key luxury and A-list neighbours await if you buy into this trendy stretch of the Atlantic coast, says Carol Lewis

‘**W**hichever analogy you prefer — St Tropez in the 1950s or the Hamptons in the 1970s — the message is the same. Comporta, in Portugal, is an unspoiled hideaway for those who need a break from the tribulations of being rich and famous.’

That is what I wrote after visiting the undeveloped stretch of Atlantic coast, dunes and forests, a 90-minute drive south of Lisbon, in 2016. Today, driving from the Portuguese capital, nothing appears to have changed, but among the Alentejo’s distinctive umbrella pines everything is different.

Much of the land was owned by the Espirito Santo banking group and tied up in legal disputes after its financial collapse. Now carved up and sold, it is being developed and starting to attract a lot of attention — not all of it good.

Teresa Barros, the chief executive of Xpose, the brand agency that christened Comporta the “Hamptons of Portugal”, says: “It’s definitely changing, but we couldn’t keep the area a secret for ever. It was always going to change. We can’t be stuck in the past, and generally the projects are good ones. It was always an area that attracted artists, designers and architects, and that hasn’t changed.”

In 2016 Goncalo Pessoa was a pilot for TAP Air Portugal and ran a 14-room boutique hotel with his wife, a former air stewardess. Initially they did everything themselves, including cooking, but after opening a restaurant on site the country retreat developed a reputation among the French fashion crowd, with Philippe Starck and Christian Louboutin regular visitors.

Today Pessoa runs Sublime Comporta full time as chief executive, and it has 23 rooms and suites, plus 22 villas and a beach club. Next he is set to triple the size of the resort with the purchase of 51 hectares next door, where he will build 43 more villas, another restaurant, a kids’ club, events centre and wellness retreat plus staff accommodation.

Meanwhile Louboutin, who lives near Melides Lagoon, has built his own boutique hotel, called Vermelho (which means red, like the soles of his shoes), in Melides, with plans for a couple more in the region.

Pessoa says: “Comporta is not yet a mature destination but awareness is growing. Before, there was nothing here, but the area is so vast and the construction regulations are so strict it is impossible it will become like the Algarve or Costa del Sol. The coastline won’t be destroyed; the density is very low. Also the developers know that if they damage the beauty of the area

they will damage their own goals — no one wants to visit a development full of concrete.”

Next to the new Sublime beach club on Carvalhal beach is Sal restaurant. In 2016 this was a fisherman’s café serving basic dishes, now it is one of the trendiest places on the coast. There is a laid-back luxury vibe that Vasco Cunha Mendes, a local businessman, says encapsulates the area. Just a little south of Sal is the newly opened JNcQUOI beach club, “the place people want to be seen”, according to Mendes.

“Comporta was always the place where the posh people of Lisbon came — all the rich people and chief executives have homes here. It already had the cachet,” says Mendes, who grew up in Lisbon and came with his family on holiday here long before Madonna hit the headlines by galloping on horseback along the beach in 2017.

His father bought 500 hectares in the early 2000s before the financial crisis “with the idea of doing some farming. Now I and my sister, Vera, own it.” Mendes’s company Eurosuez is building hotels and homes on the land in two developments, Spatia Comporta and Spatia Melides. He is keen to keep the bohemian local vibe he has always known. “Spatia is a hotel brand without the bling,” he says. Set within pines and olive trees, low-rise contemporary hotel residences at Spatia Melides cost from €3.79 million. Villas start at €5.69 million for three bedrooms and €6.85 million for four (through Savills).

“It’s a very different vibe to what you have in the Algarve. Here it is like that of old Ibiza before the discos and the like. It’s very relaxed and everybody dresses casual and has a green Jeep to go to the beach in. There’s no nightclubs and bars,” he says. And although he has plans to build a beach club he says there won’t be music.

His two projects are joined by four other large developments (ADT Torre, ADT Dunas, Herdade do Pinheiro and CostaTerra) and 10-15 notable smaller developments (including Sublime, JNcQUOI and Melides Art) stretching along the coast from Comporta in the north to Melides in the south. There are reports too of a future Six Senses and Soho House. Few developments have finished properties available to buy on the open market yet, although several are selling off-plan.

Not all the developments have managed to maintain the low-key vibe though. The most famous, and expensive, CostaTerra Golf and Ocean Club — a 292-hectare development by the US-based Discovery Land Company — has rarely been out of the headlines



since it began selling off-plan just before the pandemic.

The A-listers Nicole Kidman, Sharon Stone and Cindy Crawford are rumoured to have paid up to €25 million each for plots with villas bought off-plan. George Clooney is said to be an investor, while the Duke and Duchess of Sussex reportedly visited Princess Eugenie and her husband, Jack Brooksbank, at CostaTerra last month on their way back to the US after the Invictus Games.

The glitz factor hasn’t impressed everyone, though, with many of the almost 200 people who have reviewed the resort on Google — despite there being little there yet — giving it one or two stars, with comments claiming it is “taking Portuguese land from Portuguese people”, “nothing but greed” and “trees chopped, dunes dismantled, fauna and flora displaced”.

The last would be surprising if it is true, given the strict conservation rules in the area. There can be no construction within 2km of the coastline, the dunes are protected and buildings have to be low-rise.

Charles Roberts, a managing partner of the estate agency Fine & Country in Portugal, says: “We are talking about an area about 70 per cent the size of the Algarve, and it’s only just started. Development started in the Algarve 50 years ago and still isn’t finished.” He adds: “Developmental approval is slow, bureaucracy is slow and it’s very difficult to find builders. People buying now probably won’t get a front door key for over two years. Much of the area is in suspended animation. It’s probably more for speculators than holidaymakers right now.”

He also points to the lack of infrastructure. There are no local hospitals or international schools, and the roads and parking facilities will need upgrading if there are to be a lot more

**Clockwise from top: the Spatia Melides resort; Gale Beach; the Sublime Comporta resort**

## **i** Need to know

- The nearest airport to Comporta is Lisbon, about a 90-minute drive away
- The main towns in the area are Grandola and Sines (where you will find a hospital)
- The nearest international schools are in Lisbon, including the United Lisbon International School and British School of Lisbon. Another, the Lisboa International School, opens in September 2024
- Portugal’s Golden Visa scheme has been curtailed, and it has announced that its non-habitual resident tax scheme will close to new entrants on December 31
- British passport holders can stay a maximum of 90 days in a 180-day period in the Schengen area, which includes Portugal

tourists. Property prices are already rising, however. Roberts says that four to five years ago the average house price in the area was about €400,000; today it’s €1.75 million, with most being sold off-plan and off-market.

Nonetheless, Roberts says, “I think most locals see it as an opportunity. I have not come up against or heard of a lot of local resistance.”

Miguel Lacerda, the head of residential for Savills Portugal, says: “In Comporta 30 per cent of sales are to the domestic market and 70 per cent to international buyers [mostly Spanish, French and Belgian]. We don’t have that much development in the market yet, except Spatia, though most are waiting for permits for construction.” He adds that those who “buy at the beginning of construction will see more or less a 30 per cent increase in prices, but for the right property it can be more, maybe even 60-70 per cent”.

Joanne Norris, 50, the chief executive of a technology company, and her husband, James, 52, are not interested in making a fast buck. They have bought a three-bedroom villa in Spatia Comporta. They want to retire here and in the meantime plan to visit often.

The couple, from Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, first visited in August 2019. “We’d never heard of [Comporta] but fell in love with it,” Joanne says. “The house is finished now and we stay there every school holiday. When our daughter [Alice, aged 13] finishes secondary school we’ll go there for winters too. We have rented it out since May 2022, and will rent it during the winter and come for the summers and a few weekends with friends. I’m learning Portuguese and we are applying for our residency visas. There is an awful lot of construction in the area, but I think they are being very careful — fingers crossed.”