

12/12/2017

It's been a bit busy recently, well since 2011 to be honest as that's when I retired, and time seems to have filled up since. Mind, I think I usually say that, so take no notice... However the latest element was a trip to the Algarve for a week from late November to early December. We took Mum and Andy, an old friend of Fiona's, and had a very pleasant stay in a villa in the Pine Cliffs resort. We had gone well off season as it was quite warm enough and considerably cheaper. August would have put me into heat-shock and financial distress. The facilities were excellent, although startlingly expensive, but our main interest was getting out and looking around. So an egg-white omelette at €15 was not going to attract us. We did get caught out on the first day as our arrival was delayed by the usual incomprehensible directions combined with the satnav map being completely out of date, so, getting in late, we didn't check the prices in the buffet. Very nice but ... well you live and learn.

Driving in Portugal is a mixed bag, some roads are a bit rough and the tolls on the motorways are ok as long as you have an electronic counter on the windscreen, I think the week of motorway driving cost about 16 euros, but the diesel was a fair bit cheaper. I'd have really liked an electric but they aren't available yet. The car was a BMW 1X, or something like that. Very comfortable and modern, if a little cramped for me climbing in.



It did remind me that the Zafira is now 7 years old, and there's been a lot of development since then. Most of it is just nic-nacs like keyless ignition and chairs with little motors in, but I think 'eco-pro' mode was quite a good idea. When we got it the thing was set in sports mode and tended to take off like a scalded cat. A teenager would love it, but if I could have moved the steering wheel across I'd still prefer the Zafira especially if I could swap the chairs. Being handed the keys by Hertz staff who were friendly but, I suspect, wanting to go home we had to work a lot of it out ourselves. There were a few sudden stops, I never did find the cruise control and the automatic stop-start seemed to have a mind of its own. I didn't feel too guilty though as the instructions of how to pick

up the car, and drop it off, were a bit hazy at best. I found putting the 'key' in the coffee cup holder and depressing the clutch made most of it work. Rather like MS Windows - "to turn off press start".

After the holiday the drive from Gatwick to Winchester reminded me that the Portuguese motorways were quite clear and in good condition. England seemed crowded and bumpy, and far too much concrete with expansion gaps.

We visited several towns that we'd been to in 2003, sufficiently long ago for me to have forgotten most of the details, although some was familiar especially the fortress at Sagres Point (the very south west point) and we found an exceptional fish stew at a restaurant which seemed to be called Pasteleria Porto Doce Jogos Sadly this seems to be an advert for ice-cream. Its actual title is, appropriately, Restaurante A Sagres. I would recommend it, in fact I did.

My report reads

11th November '17. Somewhat tired after a walk around Sagres fortress we remembered, from back in 2003, the best coffee in Portugal. That venue was closed for the winter so we wandered over the road to A Sagres and thought the fish menu looked attractive and well priced. Andy and mum went for the Massinha do Mar (for two) which I think translates as fish casserole and I had a very acceptable burger from the adjoining establishment which is more about pasta and meat. I'm not entirely sure what the arrangement was, but it all arrived on the same table in good time considering it was specially cooked to order. I would say that this is a restaurant for good, indeed excellent, rather than fast food, and anyway we were quite happy to have a chat in the sunshine with a beer or two. I notice that this like most Portuguese restaurants has a rather nice low alcohol beer. Useful as I was the driver and the drink driving regulations quite stiff. The coffee was very good too. The owner has a gruff appearance and voice but speaks several languages and is friendly in all of them, treating his guests as friends. If I was back in the area, say 50 kilometres or so, I'd go straight there again and have the Sea Bass.

The free bottle of wine was excellent, and a complete surprise. I cannot guarantee everyone will get that as an extra, but as the driver I was very pleased to have a glass when safely home.



'Home' at that point being Pine Cliffs. In front of the villa there is a lawn, and beyond that a golf-course. Most of the area seems to be golf courses, which is fine by me, though I have no aspirations in that direction.

I have played a round of golf a couple of times in the last 60 years or so, it was pleasant enough but the charges for carrying a few sticks and a small white ball were ridiculous. I'm perfectly able to walk around chatting without all the palaver, and if I need a reason I'll do a bit of wildlife spotting, though I'll eschew the funny trousers.

My approach to fishing is much the same, but my attitude extends to football (watching or playing) chess, stocks and shares, and card games I think it may be a bit more fundamental than not being any good at them, or the expense. Fiona observed that I just don't do 'games' and I think she's right. I'm quite happy to try them out, and sometimes do quite well. Water Skiing, darts, marksmanship with rifle and pistol, archery and snooker I did ok. Cricket and rugby less so.

Why? I have no idea, perhaps I'm not competitive. Or maybe I don't like making other people come second. Who knows? Answers on a postcard...

Here's a view of some of the Villas seen from ours, I must admit I always assumed a villa would be free standing, but that would be prohibitively expensive to build, and since most of it was unoccupied barring a few cleaners, it wasn't a problem.

Anyway, beyond the lawn and the golf there are some cliffs, not surprisingly topped with pine trees, and below that the beach. There was even a lift for the frail, or lazy. I consider my use going back up to have been more of an adventure than a necessity.

The beach made for a really nice walk with perhaps a dozen other people on a couple of miles of beach. Mostly couples, a few dogs and one swimmer. The cliffs themselves are made of relatively soft stuff and are eroding, with the





occasional tree descending the 45 degree slope, sometimes with its soil and roots, neither very deep as you'll see, and still growing half way down. I would guess faster erosion produces a steeper cliff, although the actual material would be a major contributor.

All things considered the villa was quite luxurious and, mainly because it was almost deserted, very quiet. Certainly warm enough for those of us from Scottish climes and the lawn outside moist enough,

thanks to one overnight storm, for a crop of shaggy ink-cap mushrooms and some others that looked like penny buns to me. The [Ink caps](#) (That's a link if you want to check) were consumed immediately as they break down very quickly and the others, as yet unnamed but with a 'nutty' taste, eaten the day after, both supplementing breakfast.



Fortunately there were no other visible guests, with the exception of a few golfers on the horizon, so they were

not destroyed by small children, confused adults or dogs. We did lose a few to lawnmowers, but had cropped most by then. I should explain that Andy could identify the types, and even knew the latin nomenclature.

Portugal, or at least that bit of the Algarve was pleasantly warm and most of the facilities open, there are quite a few castles and museums and as long as you avoid the English strip of Albufera (Sun, Mail, beer, behaviour and TV football all imported daily) and it is still interesting, adequately foreign and relaxed. Although the Portuguese taxi driver has a tendency to climb into your boot, the majority are relaxed and proceed at their own pace, have a chat, doze in the sun and have another excellent cup of coffee. I got the impression the system was less authoritarian than the Spanish, and I saw fewer signs of governmental corruption. They seem mere relaxed about religion and still

manage to get things done in reasonable time. Also, and just as well for us, most can manage much better English than our Portuguese.

Most of the driving was on quite acceptable motorways and whatever they call A roads, although the satnav, which I had updated a few weeks before, was rather baffled by major undocumented roadworks, including one major road near the resort where no left turn was allowed for several miles. However we managed to get where we wanted to go, and didn't bend anything. Some of the minor roads were a bit rough, and, as I have found before, the satnav had difficulty distinguishing between C roads and farm tracks. Very occasionally there were outright errors which caused the computer to issue instructions that would have been rather dangerous, so you certainly shouldn't engage auto-pilot driving.



Over the week we visited among others, Silves, Sagres, Albufeira Portimao, Faro, Loulé, and Mértola, and various museums and castles, I think this one is Mértola,



There are plenty of Roman remains, archaic streets and old churches, though I prefer the bustle of open air markets to churches. They were interesting architecturally, but we saw plenty of them last time in 2003.



Fiona and Mum heading off up hill. I'm pleased to say Mum seemed pretty good on the slopes, the exercise and the marble cobbles improved her balance I think.

In the markets I got the impression of a (fairly unregulated) wide selection of local produce including cheeses, tons of fresh fish and, as they say, seasonal vegetables. Olives, oranges and lemons are growing everywhere in spite of what we perceived as a drought, so it's a reasonably wide season. Most of the countryside seemed to be growing scrub, a bit of grass and a lot of olives, but the markets were bulging with food, and a fair bit of work was going into 'product enhancement' in the form of wine, cheese, and smoked pork sausages. I got the impression their diet was healthier than ours although smoking is still popular.

We didn't swim in Resort pool (probably expensive) or the sea, though there was one hardy soul out there, (looking a bit cold) but in my case because I'm not that bothered about swimming and don't trust any coastline with what I'll call contamination issues. With the walking I managed to develop a bit of a tan, but I tend to lose it just as quickly. Coming back to ice and snow was no great hardship, and looking a bit pink counts as a tan, it had been snowing on the day we left Tarbrax. Now however it looks as though Shropshire is getting a tad chilly at -13c, but we don't take much notice until -10c and are used to a fair bit lower than that. Of course the Canadians point the finger of scoff, but I've seen one or two of them look a little cautiously at one of our 70mph horizontal blizzards. Wouldn't mind one of their 'domestic' snow ploughs though.

On returning, with just the lightest of frosts, we did get the chance to wander around the local derelict Bangour Village Hospital before it gets

closed to the public. I used to visit the General Hospital next door with a mobile Gamma Camera. Must be 30 years ago now and I think both have been closed for at least 15 years...



Such a visit might not seem a lot of fun, but it's the size of Tarbrax, quite out of date for modern uses and could make a really nice 'new' village, if the developers

who are now thinking about it, can be persuaded to retain some of the nicer buildings, put in a few shops and general amenities, and not jam as many ticky-tack buildings in as possible. The locals are constantly swirling around the place all day as it makes an excellent walk, with or without dogs.

Ah well, that has caught up a bit, although I think I may have missed a few months out. Have a happy Christmas if I don't see you before.

Jim