

Portugal at Leisure

Hills, Plains & Lagoons in Autumn

Sunday 17 September – Sunday 24 September 2017

Principal Leader: Frank McClintock

2017 Cost: **£1,899** single room supplement **£200**



To most tourists, a holiday in Portugal means a week or two spent in the southern Algarve with its rash of modern hotels, apartments and restaurants sprawling along the south coast. This tour reveals an altogether different side to the country. Our base for the week, located in the remote and unspoilt countryside that lies in the border zone between the provinces of the Algarve and Alentejo, is the guest lodge that is owned by Frank and run by his friendly staff. In fact, by hard endeavour spread over a period of 20 years, Frank has converted a few rundown buildings, situated on a scrub-covered slope, into a comfortable and homely lodge set in a lush terraced garden. The view out over the man-made lake is stunning; so too the silence. The whole ambience of the place is warm and welcoming. The food is mainly local produce, home-made and simply delicious. Frank also keeps a modestly priced cellar of Portuguese wines. Added to all this, the garden has been planted with birds in mind. Here at least three species of warbler can be seen at this time of the year: Sardinian, Dartford and Blackcap.

Because we are able to cover a range of habitats from this one centre, our bird list will be equally varied from Great Bustard to Zitting Cisticola, from Black-winged Kite to Azure-winged Magpie. So if it is peace and quiet, comfort, fine scenery, a feeling of being off the beaten track and some colourful birding, then this is likely to be the tour for you. Its appeal is increased by the fact that the autumn migration will be under way and that there will be opportunities to see both the late departures south as well as the early migrants from the north. Thus we may have Montagu's and Hen Harriers as well as Northern and Black-eared Wheatears and it is an ideal time to pin down those differences in the flesh.

This tour will generally be run at a relaxed pace with three full days away from the Quinta with a picnic lunch and three days spent locally with lunch at the lodge when there will be a chance to relax, explore the natural history of the area immediately behind the lodge or perhaps take a refreshing dip in the lake, which is quite warm at this time of year.

ITINERARY

Day 1

We leave London or regional airports on a flight to Faro on the Algarve coast. We spend a little time looking at the lagoons and salt pans in the vicinity of the airport with their Greater Flamingos, Pied Avocets and Black-winged Stilts before we make the 90-minute drive to our base near Santa Clara a Velha, where we stay for seven nights. Firstly we

travel west along the relatively built-up Algarve coast and then north up into the Alentejo. As we do so, the country becomes wilder and more sparsely populated. This is highlighted by the remoteness of our lodge, which is located some four kilometres off the metalled road in a truly idyllic setting.

Days 2 to 7

During our stay here we will make three day-long excursions. One will explore what is literally the

extreme south-west corner of mainland Europe. Our route takes us first up into the Serra de Monchique, a range of hills of volcanic origin. A stop at Foia allows us both a wonderful panoramic view as well as a suite of birds that includes Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Woodlark, Common Stonechat and Winter Wren, while possibly including an early Ring Ouzel. On our way down to the west coast, we will visit some pinewoods in search of Short-toed Treecreeper, Long-tailed Tit and European Robin

Eurasian Hoopoe





Great Bustard



Osprey

Outline Itinerary

- Day 1** Fly to Faro and transfer to Santa Clara
- Days 2-7** Santa Clara
- Day 8** Depart Faro

Party size

Maximum of 13 clients (two leaders with more than seven clients).

Accommodation

Comfortable accommodation in twin/double and single rooms, with private facilities.

Transport

By minibuses driven by leaders.

Includes

All flights, meals, accommodation, transport, services of leaders, VAT, airport taxes and tips.

Gradings

-  Good
-  110
-  Warm
-  Low
-  Normal
-  Relaxed
-  Good
-  Easy
-  Scheduled



Little Owl

(not an easy species in these parts!). We will eat our picnic lunches on a heath-covered cliff-top, keeping an eye on the sea for passing gulls and terns with the chance of a Peregrine Falcon stooping on Rock Doves resident on the cliffs. Suitably refreshed we will drive down to the Cabo de Sao Vicente. Besides admiring the scenery, we will look for Black Redstart, Red-billed Chough, Tawny Pipit and perhaps some migrants using this location as a stepping stone in their southward journey to Africa. If we have time, a period of sea-watching should allow us to see passing Cory's and Balearic Shearwaters, skuas and terns. It is here also that we may become most aware of the raptor migration pathway that cuts across south-western Portugal. Likely migrants include Booted and Short-toed Eagles, European Honey Buzzard and Osprey. During the remainder of the afternoon we will visit two lagoonal areas along the south coast. Hopefully, they will offer us a range of waders and water birds, and some of the local specialities such as Purple Swamphen, Black-winged Stilt and terns.

A second day tour will involve travelling northwest to the coast at Santo Andre. Here we will explore the Lagoa Santo Andre and extend our list of waders and water birds. We would hope to find Purple Heron, Eurasian Spoonbill and Red-crested Pochard, as well as Western Marsh Harriers. The fringing vegetation may still hold Great Reed and Savi's Warblers as well as Zitting Cisticolas. If the water level is good, we will spend much of the day exploring the shores of the lagoon and its adjacent woodlands and meadows, expecting to see Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Nuthatch and European Green, Great Spotted and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers. Failing this, we will drive further northwards to the south side of the estuary of the Sado River where, in addition to marshes and mudflats, there are rice-fields which hold flocks of Common Waxbill. The return journey from both locations will take us through areas of open cork oak woodland, a habitat favoured by breeding Black-winged Kites. Maybe there will

still be some that have yet to move south. Other raptors we would hope to see during the day include Booted and Short-toed Eagles and Black Kite.

The third excursion will involve exploring the rolling plains of Alentejo that lie to the north east. These hold good numbers of Great and Little Bustards. Other notable species include Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Stone Curlew, Iberian Grey Shrike, Lesser Kestrel and Little Owl. Five species of lark – Calandra, Crested, Thekla, Greater Short-toed and Wood – can be observed, whilst at the many ponds that dot the landscape, we should find Little Ringed Plover, Common and Green Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilt and even perhaps a late Collared Pratincole. As we make our way along the traffic-free roads, we will see that most poles, masts and chimneys are crowned by White Storks nests, now empty, but with Spanish Sparrows still in residence.

Two of the local days will involve gentle walks near to the lodge. They will take us through a range of micro habitats, from closed woodland to hillsides newly planted with cork oak, from streamside meadows to cottage gardens, from thickets to ponds and reedbeds. The common species to be found on these walks include Eurasian Hoopoe, Rock and Corn Buntings, Azure-winged Magpie, Spotless Starling, Cetti's Warbler and Iberian Chiffchaff. It is on these walks that we will be able to give more attention to the plants and late-flying butterflies. There will be the opportunity to visit the new Water Rail Hide which overlooks a slow-moving part of the River Mira with reeds bordering the edges where Water Rail, Common Kingfisher, European Serin and Rock Bunting could be seen. One day will be at leisure at the Quinta where there is the opportunity to relax with time to explore the walks around the lakes, use the Golden Oriole Hide, catch up on diaries or take photographs.

Day 8

After breakfast we will depart for Faro where we catch return flights to London or regional airports.