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PAULO LOPES/HEMIS/ALAMY



**ESSENTIALS**

**GETTING THERE**  
 EasyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) has flights from London and several regional airports to Lisbon. There are three trains daily from Lisbon to Évora at €16 (£13.30) return or regular buses from Lisbon and Faro to Évora for €21.50 return. Amieira Marina (00351 266 611063; [www.amieiramarina.com](http://www.amieiramarina.com)) has seven sizes of boat all year for rentals of two days or more. Sample weekly prices for two adults are from €1,262 (£1,046) or eight adults from €1733 (£1,436), graduated according to season. Fuel is extra. Angling gear and licence, €20/£16.60 weekly.

# Life as a lakeland Robinson Crusoe

**Ray Kershaw** finds peace and quiet on Portugal's sparsely inhabited Grande Lago

**W**e moor the first night on our own desert island. Black bass are jumping. Our chicken and pimentos are simmering on the stove. Serenaded by cicadas we uncork another bottle of chilled Alentejo rosé as a full moon rises over the shore.

Tonight we are sharing 180 square miles of water with just nine other boats. There are myriad uninhabited islands and 700 miles of virgin, sun-drenched coast. There's nothing to suggest that a few years ago Portugal's vast Grande Lago – Europe's biggest man-made lake – did not exist.

The Alqueva dam on the Guadiana river was conceived in 1952, during the Salazar dictatorship. The scorched Alentejo region would be transformed into an oasis. Democracy delayed the scheme, which was eventually completed in 2002, giving lonely hilltop villages new waterside

locations. The lake is now more than 60 miles in length.

Our small rented cabin cruiser, the Alandroal, comes from the pioneering Amieira Marina, whose founders hope to inspire similar eco-friendly projects on their landlocked new sea, now billed as the "all-year-sunshine Grande Lago". The round trip to Juromenha, where the lake borders Spain, should take us a week. Reassuringly, the boat comes with landlubber-proof charts and from our first island we steer a confident course to the village of Luz.

The Grande Lago may be new but in the old Guadiana villages life has scarcely changed for centuries. Men doze in the shade; black-costumed widows clank with buckets to fountains. This is archetypal Portugal. The rare tourists are normally greeted like guests, save for in Luz.

Ancient Luz went the same way as Atlantis when the town was

submerged. The new Luz dazzles like a brochure for villas in the sun – a virtual replica of the original, where everyone received new homes for old. They even moved the cemetery. Yet it seems as soulless as a stage set and the village's strangest sight is its underground museum. Sumptuously built in marble, it is like a mausoleum of happier days. Locals come repeatedly to see their flooded homes on videos.

The bay covering old Luz makes an idyllic mooring but we are hooked on island hideaways. Life is as simple as Robinson Crusoe's; back to basics, fundamentals. Or almost, because the boat's stainless-steel kitchen is always at hand. Wherever we moor, the Alandroal becomes a luxury apartment, complete with a kayak and



**After the flood: many villages were submerged during the creation of the lake, top, but not Monsaraz, above, which rises 1,000 ft above the water**

lake-sized swimming pool.

Our next destination, the tiny town of Mourão, seems cheerfully content to be attractively redundant. The ancient paper mill was flooded but the houses are so white you'd think the paint was still wet. Many of

the homes have curious minaret-like chimneys built by the Moors, from whom the town takes its name. A handful of bars girdle the plaza's manicured gardens. Here we draw stares – foreigners are oddities – but our mangled Portuguese also triggers friendly smiles.

As we progress towards Spain we hone our island-landing skills. While I inch the prow forward, my wife peers for rocks and bellows commands: "Back a bit! Slow! Bit to the left!" It is a heart-pounding manoeuvre. "Back again! Stop!" Just before collision, she springs ashore

with the ropes. A few days ago such feats were unimaginable.

In the midday stillness the heat is fragrant with rosemary. Raptors wheel above the lake. They say the big bass queue to be hooked but we have forgotten to load the marina's angling gear. Jeering fish jump around us when we moor for a swim. Sometimes it gets choppy. Even at our modest flat-out seven knots the waves make satisfying clunks. Steering at the outside wheel, spray igniting rainbows, is exhilarating. Our day's destination is any place we choose.

The lake nearing Spain narrows to a river. Both banks are equally wild but occasional Spanish flags betray the international border. Juromenha is Portugal's far-flung final outpost. This is the Guadiana proper. Portuguese and Spanish fishermen are casting lines from skiffs midstream. Although its monolithic castle glowers northwards towards Spain, it feels at Europe's outer edge.

We moor up in an olive grove where sheep graze between the trees. A dozen laughing women are drying washing on the battlements.

We have saved the lake's loveliest bay for our last night. Magical Monsaraz, which has produced wine since Roman days and was Moorish for seven centuries, would remain a hilltop village if they flooded all of Portugal. Known as the *Ninho das Águias* – the Eagle's Eerie – it soars 1,000ft above its new beach. The enticing whitewashed labyrinth inside its ancient ramparts feels centuries away from the Portugal of the Algarve.

Yet this happy time warp will soon come to an end. Five golf courses are planned with luxury hotels and holiday homes. Soon our isolated mooring may be a lakeside fairway, but tonight our deck-top dinner is watched only by drinking crows.

As a finale it feels an obligation to see the dam itself. Though 30ft tall, it still looks too puny a plug to restrain the inland ocean we have travelled for a week. Inspecting the mechanics that engineered the spell feels rather like *The Truman Show*, in which the hero finds his hometown is all a filmset hoax. Yet the infant Grande Lago still seems as pretty close to paradise as you could invent.