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secret

vila real de santo antónio

municipality

2013 . 3rd Edition

vila real de santo antónio

The pale gold of mile after mile of sandy beaches, the turquoise blue of the sea, the green of pine woods: the colourful setting of Vila Real de Santo António and its municipality delights visitors, and its natural beauty is complemented by the lively cosmopolitan atmosphere of a major tourist centre. The tranquillity of a coast where it is still possible to rediscover solitude, the fauna and flora of a nature reserve and a nature park.

HISTORY OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF VILA REAL DE SANTO ANTÓNIO

The origins of Vila Real de Santo António can be traced back to a specific date – December 30th, 1773 – the day on which the royal charter founding the town was signed. The town was built quickly – the demands of policy towards Spain and the iron will of the Marquis of Pombal, prime minister of the king D. José I (1714-1777), meant that it had to be. The task of marking out the street plan was started on March 2nd, 1774, the first stone was laid on March 17th, and by August 6th the Town Hall, the Customs House and the barracks had already been completed, and the church was in its early stages.

The end of the 19th century and the decades that followed were a time of prosperity for Vila Real de Santo António. The presence of sardines and tuna in the waters off the Algarve coast turned the town into a major canning centre, while its port was much frequented by the ships that sailed up the Guadiana to load the ore dug from the mines at São Domingos. One indication of the dynamism and wealth of the town at this stage is that it was the first place in the Algarve to have gas lighting (1886).

However, the municipality's history does not begin with the foundation of Vila Real de Santo António. This part of the coast had been inhabited since ancient times, as can be seen from the dolmen and tholos (a bee-hive shaped tomb) in Nora, near Cacela. Under the Romans and later the Moors, Cacela became an important town. After its castle was captured by Paio Peres Correia, master of the Order of Santiago (St. James), in 1240, Cacela was the starting point for the reconquest of the whole of the Algarve.

Santo António de Arenilha, a Manueline town built around 1512, predated the creation of the Vila Real of the Marquês de Pombal. Today, Vila Real de Santo António and its municipality have in the tourist trade, fishing, agriculture and commerce the mainstays of an economy that is expanding and diversifying.

VISITING VILA REAL DE SANTO ANTÓNIO

In the town centre stands an obelisk, a vertical symbol of the power of the king and his prime minister; the streets are arranged on a grid pattern, as stiff and straight as soldiers on parade, leading off from a broad, open square; the façades of the houses repeat the balanced forms of a sober and restrained architectural style: expressions of the 18th century Enlightenment of which Vila Real de Santo António is one of the perfect examples. Gentle landscapes along the banks of the Guadiana can be glimpsed in between outdoor terraces which provide oases of cool and welcome relief from the heat of the sun.



Seafont avenue - LC

MAIN CHURCH

Built in the 18th century this church underwent improvements in the 1940s and 50s. In the side chapels there are altarpieces in the “rocaille” style. The church contains a fine collection of 18th century statues, most notable among which is a Nossa Senhora da Encarnação (Our Lady of the Incarnation) by the sculptor Machado de Castro. The stained glass windows in the chancel and the baptistry, which were fitted in the 1940s, are by the Algarvean artist Joaquim Rebocho.



Main church - LC

MANUEL CABANAS MUSEUM

Home to an exhibition of xylography (engravings in wood) by the man from this municipality (Vila Nova de Cacela) after whom the museum is named. It contains the largest collection of wood engravings in Portugal, as well as an interesting collection of more than 200 stones that were once used as part of the lithographic process to print designs on tins of tuna and sardines.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVE

Located in the “Torreão Sul” (Southern Tower), it was for many years privately owned, serving as a residential and commercial property. It became part of the National Network of Archives in 1999. The Historical Archive is an institution of great importance for the reconstruction and study of local history, and contributes to the preservation of the collective memory of the municipality of Vila Real de Santo António.

HOW VILA REAL DE SANTO ANTÓNIO CAME TO BE BUILT

In the 16th century a town called Vila Real de Santo António de Arenilha stood near the site of the present town, though most probably nearer the sea. By the 18th century it had disappeared, swallowed up by the waves and the shifting sands. There remained a need to control the arrival of merchandise via the Guadiana, to keep the fisheries of Monte Gordo under royal supervision and to take a firm stance against Spain, with whom a war had been fought in 1762/1763. And so the construction of Vila Real de Santo António was inspired by pressing economical and political motives, rather than being purely an act of royal will.



A. Aleixo Cultural Centre - LC

HOW TO BUILD A TOWN IN FIVE MONTHS USING “POLITICS”

The experience gained in rebuilding Lisbon after the earthquake of 1755 was put to good use in Vila Real de Santo António. Firstly, in the careful planning of the urban structure, a task made easier by the flat lie of the land. Then in the use of rigid architectural modules. And lastly in the prefabrication of standardised building materials, such as the stone blocks which were brought by boat from Lisbon, cut and dressed ready to be put into place immediately on arrival.



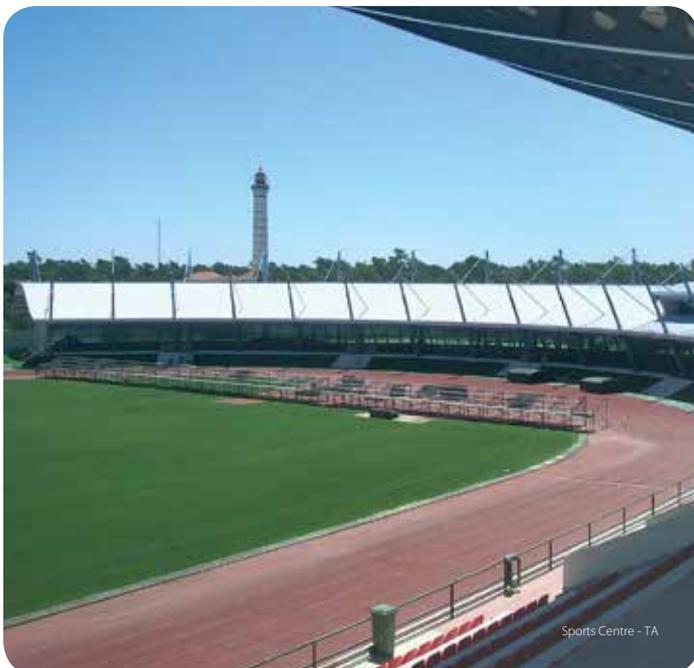
Marina - LC

HISTORICAL CENTRE

To appreciate the harmony of Vila Real de Santo António's ordered layout, there is no substitute for walking through its streets. The best place to start is the Praça Marquês de Pombal at the heart of the town, where the stone pavement radiates out from the obelisk erected in 1776. This square contains three of the town's most important 18th century buildings: the church, the town hall and the former guardhouse (nowadays occupied by a bank). After that it is worth walking around a few of the blocks, which were built by private individuals, but which stick to the same unifying architectural formula. The route ends with the line of façades of Avenida da República, which is delimited by two towers and contains the former customs house, with its broad gateway and triangular pediment. Nearby, there are gardens on the banks of the Guadiana and across the river, the Spanish city of Ayamonte.



Marquês de Pombal square - LC



Sports Centre - TA

getting to know vila real de santo antónio municipality

CACELA - A TOWN WITH A HISTORY

Settled by the Romans, Cacela was an important 'villa' connected with the fishing and fish salting industries: several tanks used in the latter process have been discovered. During the period of Moorish occupation it had a defensive rampart and after the Christian reconquest it became a town with a Charter granted by the king D. Dinis in 1283.

The gradual silting up of the Pedra Alva river, which flows close by, and the formation of the strip of dunes making up the Ria Formosa left Cacela cut off from the sea and related activities and contributed to a decline in its population. The "coup de grâce" was delivered by the earthquake of 1755, which devastated what remained of Cacela. As a result it lost its status as a town and was merged with the territory of the newly founded Vila Real de Santo António. Today Cacela Velha is a small town of farmers and fishermen with whitewashed single-storey houses and a magnificent view over the sea and the vast dunes of the Ria Formosa.

MAIN CHURCH (5)

The present church dates from the 16th century and was rebuilt in the 18th. It boasts a doorway in the Renaissance style, with busts of the Apostles São Pedro and São Paulo (St. Peter and St. Paul) and ornate pilasters. The interior consists of three naves, with ogival arches held up by columns with bases and capitals decorated with hemispheres and rope motifs. The chapel of Nossa Senhora dos Mártires (Our Lady of the Martyrs) has a painted vault and an arch in the Renaissance style. There is a statue of Nossa Senhora da Assunção (Our Lady of the Assumption) (18th century) and two of Christ (16th century). This church's holy treasures include a processional cross in wrought iron decorated with figures.

FORT (6)

Polygonal in shape, the fort was rebuilt at the end of the 18th century.



Fort of Cacela Velha - VC

CACELA RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CENTRE

A busy scientific centre, for the interpretation of the area of Cacela, whose aim is to enable people of different origins to enjoy its heritage, as a source of information, for those interested in museums and for the purposes of leisure and tourism.

THE PLEASURES OF SEA AND SUN

Children love warm and calm water to play and swim safely in. Grown-ups love wide beaches, where space and the horizon are the main aspects. Charming beaches that increasingly attract all those who love the sun and the sea of the Algarve.

Monte Gordo

For centuries fishermen's shacks were the only sign of human life on the broad sands surrounded by pinewoods.

The beauty of the beach and the warm, safe waters attracted the first foreign tourists in the 1960s, making Monte Gordo something of a pioneer in the development of tourism in the Algarve.

Today it is an international tourist destination and its many attractions include a casino.



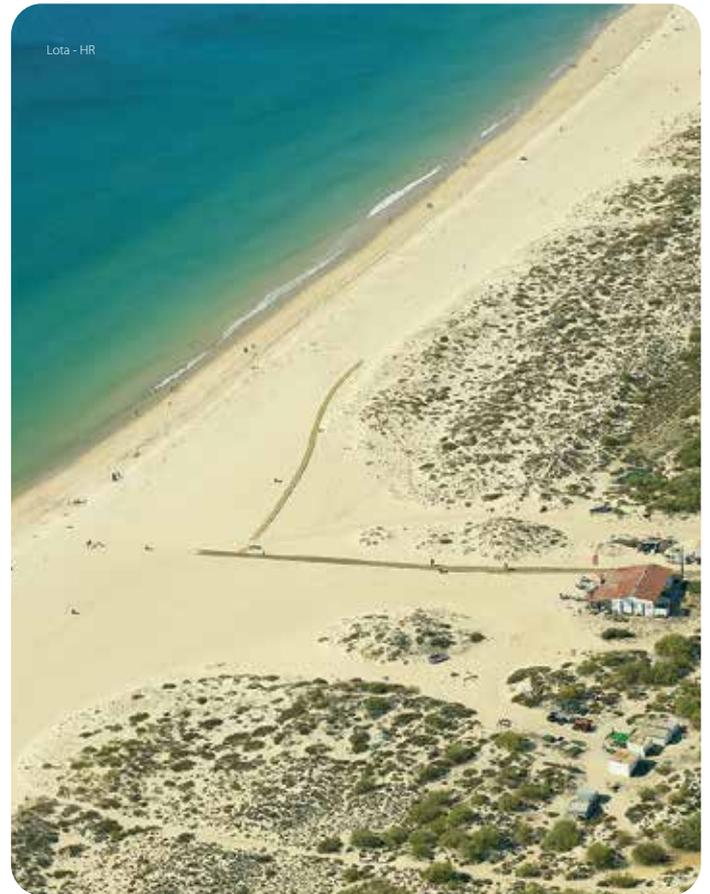
Santo António

A lighthouse marks the location of this calm family beach, with its long sweep of sand.



Lota

Pine-fringed sands. Support facilities.



Manta Rota

This is a tourist spot that still manages to preserve something of the flavour of a fishing village. There is a long beach. Support facilities.



Cacela Velha

Opposite the historic town of Cacela Velha. Fishing boats ferry visitors across the creek that is part of the Ria Formosa to a beach that stretches away as far as the eye can see. Support facilities.

TRAVELLING UP THE GUADIANA

Flowing between hills bright with the colours of wild flowers and the green of cork oaks and pine, the Guadiana River has for centuries marked the frontier between Portugal and Spain. From Vila Real de Santo António there are regular boat trips up the river and these provide an opportunity to become acquainted with a different Algarve. Among the sights to be seen are villages of whitewashed houses overlooking the Guadiana and the thousand-year old castle at Alcoutim proudly standing guard over the river.



THE DELIGHTS OF NATURE

The Nature Reserve of the Castro Marim and Vila Real de Santo António Salt Marsh and the Ria Formosa Natural Park are wonderful places for birdwatchers and botanists alike. Both have visitor centres offering advice and information. The cool shade of the pine trees in the National Forest which lies between Vila Real de Santo António and Monte Gordo is an invitation to take invigorating walks and get to know the indigenous flora and fauna.



TASTY FISH AND SEA FOOD

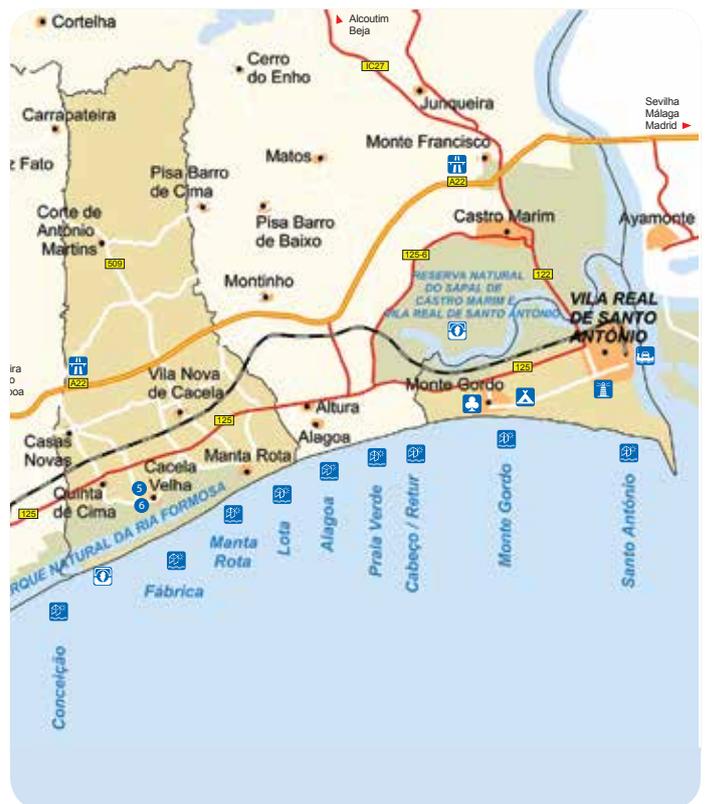
Fishing communities mean fresh fish: bream, bass, horse mackerel and sardines among others, all delicious grilled. In terms of seafood, special mention must be made of the clams and "conquilhas" caught in the sand at low tide, and the superlative prawns and lobsters.

Traditional recipes include a variety of ways of cooking fresh and salted tuna: thick steaks, with onion and bay leaf to add flavour, or "estupeta" where the tuna is served with a refreshing salad of peppers, tomato and onion. And who can resist the delights of baby cuttlefish served in their own ink, a delicacy that leaves you with a black mouth but tastes divine?

To round off a meal there is nothing better than a juicy orange or one of the many desserts typical of the Algarve.

THE ART OF THE PEOPLE

Fine lace, which has long been associated with the wives of the fishermen, is the hallmark of art in the municipality and is still produced in Vila Real de Santo António. From a bygone era are the tack and mule collars, decorated with coloured wool, which are made by saddlemakers and are worn by mules that are used for farm work in the hills of the interior. Nowadays, the new trends in handicrafts are exemplified by marionettes for puppet theatres and collectors, by ceramics such as the traditional chimneys, by basketwork and items made of wood or tiles.



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Data sheet

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