

# Surf's up Nazaré

*With monster waves that eclipse even those on Hawaii's North Shore, the Portuguese village of Nazaré is one of the world's hottest new destinations, writes Emily McAuliffe.*

**I**N SUMMER, PRAIA DO NORTE COULD BE mistaken for any Portuguese beach. Soft sand sprawls down from craggy tufts of coastal vegetation before disappearing into gentle waves. But come October, the lolling ocean starts to get restless. As swells gather force they channel a deep submarine canyon off Nazaré's coastline and make an explosive exit, creating waves up to 30m high.

Thrillseekers from around the globe vie to conquer Mother Nature's rage at Nazaré, and in November last year Brazilian Rodrigo Koxa rode a 24.38m Praia do Norte giant into the Guinness World Records. His accolade of "largest wave surfed" pipped American Gareth McNamara, who took the former record out at the same beach in 2011.

While incredible skill (and perhaps a touch of madness) is needed to tackle the waves of Praia do Norte, witnessing the surf from shore is absolutely a bucket list experience.

The best view is from the lighthouse – a photogenic red beacon dwarfed by the monster waves. This lighthouse is a symbol of the town's historic relationship with the ocean, a history where many fishermen lost their lives trying to make money in tumultuous conditions. Many local women still mourn a loved one lost at sea.

## FOOD AND FARE

These days, fishing activities are protected by a harbour and the town offers a fine selection of seafood dishes, including the Portuguese fish stew caldeirada, garlicky Bulhão Pato clams drenched in olive oil, and gooseneck barnacles or percebes, which are a local delicacy.

Opposite the Praia do Norte headland, old women sun-dry mackerel and slimy octopi



on wire racks along the beach. This is just one of many customs that run strong in the small community, making Nazaré one of the best places to experience true Portuguese culture. Women can be seen flaunting colourful skirts layered seven times over during festivals, while men sell sweets and nuts dressed in puffy trousers and tasselled stocking hats.

**COLOURFUL CULTURE**

Nazaré is also strewn with handicrafts, including fishing nets hand-woven by elderly gents on the streets and little wooden boats that represent the traditional vessels which were once the lifeblood of the town.

Real-life examples of these colourful boats can be found on the beach. And while you're exploring, keep an eye out for a mural painted on tiles across the town depicting a man on horseback teetering on a cliff. This scene is set in Sítio, an elevated neighbourhood that overlooks Nazaré's terracotta roofs, where folklore says the Virgin Mary saved a nobleman from falling to his death in heavy fog. A quaint blue and

**“Nazaré pulls together history, culture, food, leisure and a freak show of nature to create a destination worth travelling to”**

white tiled chapel, Capela da Memória, was erected in gratitude and became such a popular pilgrimage site that the much larger Santuário de Nossa Senhora da Nazaré was built to handle the influx of devotees.

A 130-year-old funicular developed by a student of Gustave Eiffel connects the main beach, Praia da Nazaré, to the church's location in Sítio, but the steps that wind up the hillside aren't as challenging as they look.

Fitness lovers can also climb to the 156m summit of Saint Bras Hill. The peak has exceptional views across the town. You can join a pilgrimage on 3 February three up the hill to kick off Carnival celebrations.

Little Nazaré pulls together history, culture, food, leisure, beauty and a freak show of nature to create a destination worth travelling to. The town is just 100km north

of Lisbon, so it makes for a comfortable day trip from Portugal's capital, although a day will certainly cut sightseeing and seafood sampling time short.

**IN THE AREA**

The surrounds are also worth a venture, with other eminent beach towns Peniche and Ericeira within easy reach. Like Nazaré, Ericeira is known to roll astounding waves, and its surf spots range from gentle beach breaks to powerful reef breaks. Based on the quality and consistency of these waves, which are at their best between October and May, Ericeira has been named Europe's only World Surfing Reserve. A modern surf interpretation centre in the heart of town explains the mechanics behind the phenomenal waves.

About 40km south of Nazaré is Óbidos, a delightful, touristy village that shows off remarkably well-preserved city walls that visitors can circumnavigate. An Óbidos tradition is to sip the sour cherry liqueur ginja out of tiny chocolate cups, which is served from carts and souvenir shops along the cobbled streets. Feign nobility by booking a room in the castle, which now functions as a swanky hotel.

On the way back to Lisbon, the Palace of Mafra covers a whopping four hectares and is one of Portugal's best examples of baroque architecture. The building is a reminder of Portugal's former position as a global superpower, with the palace primarily funded by Brazilian gold. It was also where Portugal's last king was exiled in 1910, shifting Portugal from a monarchy to a republic.

These small towns thread together the modern day with Portugal's history and culture, and stage some of nature's greatest acts. And let's face it, eyeballing the world's wildest waves makes for a pretty impressive trip report. **✎**