

LOVE MATCH ON THE ALGARVE

Pine Cliffs resort serves ace coaching in tennis and Portuguese cuisine, writes *Jason Allardyce*

Tennis racquet in hand, I arrive in the Algarve on a mission: to learn how to serve something no one could ever return. I had no idea it would be mouth-watering cataplana and gazpacho.

Welcome to Pine Cliffs, a stylish five-star Marriott resort in a spectacular 168-acre clifftop setting in Albufeira, half an hour from Faro – and home to an Annabel Croft tennis academy, a spa, golf course, watersports centre and a truly magnificent beach.

Croft, the former British women's No 1, retired early and, as I land the first few serves straight into the net, I'm wondering whether her experienced head coach Gonçalo Portas privately thinks it's time for me to do the same.

But as the Portuguese sun smiles on our first training session on the red clay, with wood pigeons in the pines providing the match commentary, Gonçalo is having none of it, enthusiastically willing me on.

The long and the short of it, well, the short of it really, is that as someone who stands at only 5ft 9in, I hit as many serves into the net as over it. Happily, multilingual Gonçalo, who toured with many of the

greats for 30 years and bears an uncanny resemblance to golfer Seve Ballesteros, soon sorts me out, getting me to leap in the air for extra height like a caffeinated bunny.

Ace. So now we can take it easy on the Algarve's answer to centre court? Think again. Gonçalo's no-pain, no-gain approach ensures through repetition that you remember to take what you've learnt back home with you.

"Again! Good one! Go! Yes. Get ready ... again! Hit the ball! Come on, one more. Last time. Good. Again. One more ..." Be prepared for a proper workout, best enjoyed early morning or

in the evening, and you'll come away with a lot. As well as two clay and three hard courts, there's also a court for padel.

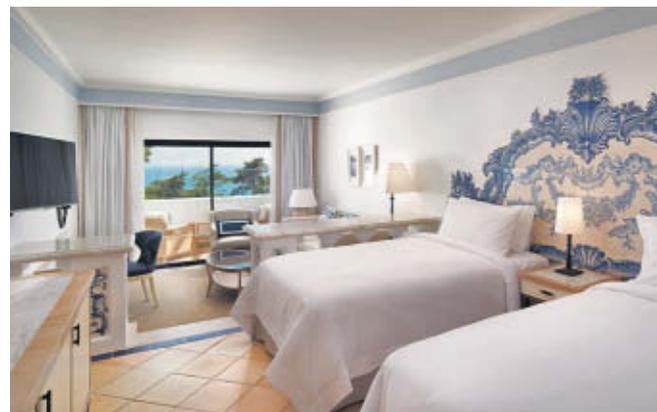
Once you've given tennis the elbow, there's so much available for everyone that there's no need to leave the resort. I mean, how many

hotels have their own glass lift down to a boardwalk leading to the beach? Pristine and peaceful, the golden sands of Falesia beach are set against beautiful ochre cliffs, "like a mini Grand Canyon," as my daughter says excitedly. Down here, whether you're swimming in the ocean, enjoying some fizz or trying Berlin balls (a local carob donut delicacy), life's a cool Atlantic breeze.

In the spa, which offers a vast array of treatments using local ingredients, I think I've died and gone to heaven with a gentlemen's tonic facial and back massage. In heaven there are no double faults or unforced errors, only Catarina and her team working little miracles amid the shimmering Swarovski crystal chandeliers. While spa staff tend to your



Pine Cliffs is home to an Annabel Croft tennis academy, left, with new ocean suites by golden Falesia beach, bottom



laughter lines, younger kids can have fun in the children's village, Porto Pirata, where there's mini golf, basketball and a dedicated pool. Older kids have the junior club, with supervised activities ranging from football and crossbow to waterball. New for

independent teens this year, Scott Dunn's CREW offers unstructured fun and new sports and skills away from a kids' club environment – and hopefully away from their phones. Activities include tennis, golf, high ropes, surfing and kayaks.

Needing sustenance after all that? Top-notch food and drink – local and international – is served at a dozen eateries, whether it's a massive buffet breakfast at the peacock-tiled Jardim Colonial, fresh seafood at O Pescador, a chick-pea curry or cleansing beets smoothie at Zest, or drinking in the view at the beach Mare.

Or cook for yourself, guided by passionate foodie, Lucia Ribeiro. Born in a small Algarve fishing village, Lucia has cooked in restaurants such as Gordon Ramsay in London, and now offers unforgettable cookery-school sessions at Pine Cliffs, serving up great conversation, infectious enthusiasm and all manner of Michelin star secrets, including how to peel garlic without touching it and how to cut a pepper in seconds. You'll cook local delicacies such as cataplana stew, using a clamshell-shaped copper pot, which rocks as if dancing as it slow-cooks stews based on seafood, pork, chicken or tofu. Easy(ish) once you know how.

We stayed in the new two- and three-bedroom ocean suites, where Moorish mixes with minimalism. These are elegant, contemporary, spacious and luxurious affairs with rain showers and vistas across landscaped grounds or the Atlantic. Luxuriate and slowly exhale among the bougainvillea because it's all here. Game, set and match.

Jason Allardyce was a guest of Pine Cliffs (pinecliffs.com) where doubles cost from £117.50, B&B (family rooms from £151, room-only, sleeping four). Fly to Faro from Glasgow, Edinburgh, Prestwick and Aberdeen with Ryanair (ryanair.com), easyJet (easyjet.com) and Jet2 (jet2.com).

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