

# Companionship – when you want it

More than just singles holidays for the over-50s, ‘friendship tours’ are booming. Anna Selby heads to the Algarve and finds the formula more flexible than she had thought

Travel, they say, broadens the mind. And getting to know people you wouldn’t normally meet perhaps broadens minds even further. Certainly, some travel companies seem to think so, and are offering the concept of “friendship travel”, where you meet like-minded folk with whom to enjoy your holiday.

First and foremost – and I really do need to be clear here – we are not talking about singles travel. Have no fear. We are definitely not in 18-30 territory or auditioning for *Love Island*. Romance is not unheard-of, but nor is it the stated aim of friendship travel. Rather, it is designed principally for the 50-plus age range – an ever-increasing group and one with a more plentiful disposable income than most – who don’t want to holiday alone. Let’s face it, for most people, completely solo travel is not a particularly appealing concept. An experience – be it a meal, a beautiful view or even the current vicissitudes of travelling – is usually better shared.

With this in mind, there is a growing number of niche travel companies that offer holidays for single people where everyone has their own generously sized room and bathroom (even people who are already friends like a bit of privacy). There are sociable dinners every night and activities during the day that encourage conversation. One such company is Friendship Travel, with whom I travelled for a week to the southern Algarve coast.

Key to the friendship concept is that the group gels and, for that, you need a host. In my case this was Suzi, who met us at the airport, checked us into the hotel and gave us all the information for our first dinner. In fact, only two of us were on the plane from London City Airport – the other six came from airports dotted around the country: Manchester, Belfast, Leeds Bradford and East Midlands. This meant that Suzi spent a day at Faro Airport, though – since hosts are far from holiday reps, showing up once a day and arranging transfers – this was far from all she did. Hosts are with you all the way, smoothing out problems, joining you on trips and for dinner, suggesting options if you want to do something on your own.

Some people had arrived in the morning; my plane landed around 5pm; and some of the group, inevitably, had their flights delayed. Nevertheless, everyone met up for dinner eventually, at MauMau Maria in the heart of the town of Olhao. It was a typically balmy Algarve evening. We sat outside in a small cobbled square and the food was sensational – I shared a smoked tuna salad with Suzi and then had octopus baked with vegetables. Sitting round the table that first night, the ice was easily broken – conversation flowed freely (no doubt helped by the equally free-flowing wine).

So, who was there? In fact, this was an unusually small group of eight with just one man and seven women (20 is

the maximum for any trip, around 15 is the norm). Mostly, they were single, divorced or widowed (about 20 per cent of first-timers are recently widowed). The overall ratio is around 60 per cent women to 40 per cent men. Being married, I was an exception to the rule, though there are apparently a few people who like to go on holiday without their spouse. Two of the group were already firm friends, having met several years earlier on a similar friendship tour. They had stayed in touch and have been on several trips together since.

The next morning we got our briefing from Suzi, a run-through of where we would be having dinner each evening and various excursions, as well as the amenities of the hotel and the town. She told us about the company ethos.

“It’s important on a trip like this that no one feels left out,” she said. “And we are always careful to make sure everyone is included. Remember the first time you went on a singles holiday and maybe felt nervous and anxious? So even if you already know someone from a previous holiday, please try now and then to mix with everyone and ensure a first-timer is not left out. But then, judging from last night at dinner, I think you are all going to do that anyway.”

She outlined the various trips: a visit with a chef to Olhao’s market, followed by a cookery demonstration and lunch in an idyllic shady courtyard; a tour of Faro followed by dinner in a waterside restaurant with a particularly good view of the sunset; a longer tour to the hilltop town of Tavira, driving along the



beautiful coastline of the Ria Formosa Natural Park, finishing with a late lunch (paella over the border in Spain); and finally a boat trip around the Ria Formosa itself with its lagoons, islands, vast beaches and sand spits (“formosa” means “beautiful” and it is aptly named).

The trips are not merely fun in themselves: they are designed to bring people together and create talking points. The excursions, though, are by no means compulsory. People are free to dip in and out as they want – after all, if you have come because you are stressed and exhausted, you might just want to spend your time by the pool reading a book, or in the spa. And then there is independent exploring. Olhao is ideal for this: a small, pretty town, not as touristy as much of the Algarve. Several people went shopping or out for lunch with others from the group on the quieter days.

There are different kinds of holidays on offer, too, because sightseeing isn’t for everyone. There is the BodyHoliday in St Lucia, focused on exercise and wellness (very popular, this one). There are ski trips, Caribbean cruises, cultural trips to Morocco or Egypt and, if you are in need of a rest, fly-and-flop holidays to Greece, Turkey and the Med. Just to keep everyone in touch while they are on the trip, the host sets up a WhatsApp group and many people use it to stay in touch when they get home. There are organised reunions back in the UK, too, where one previous guest (now personal friend) of Suzi’s found love – aged 81.

So, what are the pluses? These are well organised trips with a lot of hands-on support (particularly useful for those who find it hard to get back to travelling after the last two years of restrictions and setbacks) and a variety of excursions on offer to do or not as you please. There is obviously no single supplement for your double room, and there is companionship if and when you want it – you have no one to please but yourself.

But I must be honest – on my trip there were a few bumps along the way. A couple of first-timers were clearly anxious about how it would work out (though they did relax as time went by), and the sole man felt a little sidelined at times. I suspect a larger group,

with more people in the mix, would help – and I would advise against going along expecting to find a dozen soul-mates: my group was varied in many ways (backgrounds, where people lived, interests) but clearly you are not going to have something in common with everyone.

But the friendship tour is definitely a promising concept. If you go with an open mind, it can certainly make for a fun and interesting way to travel. And who knows – you might just come home with a new friend or two.

*Anna Selby was a guest of Friendship Travel (0289 446 2211; friendship-travel.com), which offers a seven-night tour to Olhao, Portugal, from £1,330 per person. The price includes flights, four excursions and accommodation. Departs October 2, 2022*

**‘I LOOK FOR COMPANIONSHIP’**  
*Laurence, 71, retired*

This is my 10th trip with Friendship Travel, my third this year, and I have been on similar holidays with other companies, too. In the past, I have just booked a hotel and travelled alone, but you can find yourself with 50 couples and families and you end up on your own all day long. For me this is a positive alternative. To be honest, before I went on the first one, I thought they might be all losers and weirdos! But of course they are just normal people who want a bit of companionship.

**‘I LIKE TO FEEL LOOKED AFTER’**  
*Dawn, 50, owner of an engineering firm*

I started my firm 10 years ago with my partner, but since he died two years ago, I have been running it on my own. I often work until 11pm and at weekends – a 55-hour week is normal for me – so I really needed a holiday. I had never

done anything like this before, and I wanted pleasant weather and a short flight and, as I am rubbish with directions, I liked the idea that you were met by a host at the airport and there were trips someone else was organising. It makes you feel looked after. I could have gone away with family, but I like my own space and I wanted to feel I could do what I wanted but also join in with people the rest of the time. I didn’t realise how much I’d enjoy the company. I’ll definitely do this again.



*‘Let’s face it, an experience – be it a meal or a beautiful view – is usually better shared’*





GETTY IMAGES

▶ The group explored Faro, then watched the sun go down at a waterside restaurant



▼ In the same boat: Anna (centre) with her 'varied' group





◀ Gold coast: the beach near the town of Tavira

