

WE JOIN IN A SOCIABLE BREAK WITH SOLO TRAVEL SPECIALIST

Learn art of friendship in Portugal

Sun travel

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GO: CASA ROSA

GETTING/STAYING THERE: Friendship Travel runs its seven-night Portugal painting holidays in September and October this year and from April 2027. Prices from £1,495pp include double room for single use at the Casa Rosa Boutique Hotel, buffet breakfast, four lunches and five dinners with wine as well as flights from various UK airports and transfers. See friendshiptravel.com.

THE thought of going on holiday alone may fill many with terror but if you're struggling to find a travel companion, a solo travel specialist is the perfect solution.

Friendship Travel, which creates sociable breaks for solo travellers, offers trips across the globe, from snowboarding in France to safaris in Kenya, Nile cruises, walking tours, pottery-painting experiences and book-reading breaks.

You can even just flake out on a Caribbean beach.

I'm just back from a watercolour painting week in Olhao, a fishing town in Portugal's Algarve region.

I have a husband and two grown-up kids who could travel with me, but none of them shares my love of art.

So a week-long retreat with budding painters, coached by an

experienced artist, sounded perfect.

It's only a two-and-a-half hour flight from Gatwick to Faro in Portugal, so I passed the time reading *Plein Air Painting With Watercolours* by Grahame Booth, our tutor for the week.

Moment of panic

As I flipped through the glossy pages of stunning step-by-step landscapes, I wondered if I would be able to paint as well as he could. Spoiler alert: I would not.

I'd been nervous about travelling alone, but flying solo was so peaceful that the only time I missed having a companion was when I had to drag my 23kg suitcase (included in the trip) off the baggage carousel.

After a 20-minute transfer, I arrived at Casa Rosa, a pretty boutique hotel on a quiet side street near the market and harbour. It has en-suite bedrooms, plunge pool, sauna, sun terrace, and fully equipped artists' studio.

On the first night, all the guests were due to meet over dinner in the dining room. I had my last moment of panic before I left my room that evening, picturing myself either being an immediate outcast or swallowed up by a group of misfits.

But I was wrong on both counts.

There were ten of us, ranging in age from early 20s to mid-80s.



Eight women (including me), Jasper, a very posh elderly gentleman from Dublin, and Grahame, our tutor.

Over the wine and three-course meal (included in the price), we all bonded and shared our reasons for travelling solo. Some, like Jasper and Kate – a cool, retired film producer from Florida who was travelling with her daughter Liz – were widowed and wanted to spend time with fellow art-lovers.

Others, like Oonagh, a glamorous ex-pat living in Portugal, and Pauline, an outgoing Irish woman who runs her own craft shop, had husbands at home who weren't keen on painting.

Sue, one of the younger guests, runs art classes online and wanted to pick up new techniques.

It was a fun, chatty group, and as I crashed out in my enormous double bed at 10pm, sipping from the complimentary flask of herbal tea that had appeared on my bedside table, I felt I was among friends.

The week followed an easy routine. Every morning we'd all meet at 8.30am and eat a buffet-style breakfast together at a long, sunny table outside on the terrace. There were warm pastries, oats, local honey, cold meats and cheeses, fresh coffee and juice.

To give you an idea of the quality of the food, the jeans I wore flying over to Portugal wouldn't button up for the journey home.

Then we'd gather up our art materials and Grahame would lead us to a variety of local beauty spots and attempt to teach us how to sketch and paint outdoors.

He is a very funny teacher, who'd regularly offer down-to-earth advice like, "If you can't draw cars, don't!" or, "If it looks right when it's wet, then it's wrong".

We all sat behind him, watching in awe as his brush rapidly covered his paper in sloshy, brisk marks that eventually became the bustling outdoor cafe, a calm church or the fish market. At lunchtime we were left to our own

devices and I took to escaping for a Sagres (the local beer) to boost my confidence for the afternoons, when we'd paint our own pictures.

We could either paint out on the streets – where passers-by would pause next to my sketchbook and shoot confused looks between my picture and the landscape I was failing to recreate – or upstairs at the hotel's own studio.

The three-course dinner each night featured local dishes including quiches, pork, soups and barbecued fish.

The hotel happily catered to the vegetarians and gluten-free guests, as well.

On two nights we went out as a group to a restaurant, and treated locals to a medley of Les Mis songs as we walked back to the hotel.

There was lots of free time to go shopping. Olhao is famous for its hand-made cork, ceramics and mosaics, and one day we all took a boat trip over to Culatra Island.

On the last evening, Grahame organised a critique of everyone's work.

My nerves returned and I expected him to either set fire to my sketchbook or suggest I book myself on to Friendship Travel's other activity holidays (pottery painting, perhaps, or book reading), but he was shockingly positive.

And then we had a riotous and boozy last dinner together, with a talent show organised by Pauline.

It's a week I'd gladly repeat.

The service from Friendship Travel was kind and personal, and I felt supported every minute of the trip.

Mind you, it was lovely to see my husband waiting for me in arrivals – so I could finally stop dragging my own case.

KATE TAYLOR



