

We spent a week in the Southern Algarve in early February, 2013. We flew from Birmingham airport and arrived at Faro in the early afternoon on Monday 4th. The pleasant sunshine was very welcome after the freezing weather in Birmingham. We had already reserved a car from a local company via the Casa Rosa web site, hoping to avoid car-hire queues. As promised, we were met at the airport and escorted to their mobile office in the airport car park. Paperwork concluded, we were on our way in only a few minutes, which was a great start to our holiday. We will definitely use the company again on our next trip.

After a pleasant 30 minute drive on quiet roads we arrived at Casa Rosa and checked into our spacious apartments. Kjersti and Jan-Ketil are very welcoming hosts and the quiet location is delightful. We unpacked quickly as we were keen to explore the gardens and local walking- tracks. The main tracks lead to the nearby town, Moncarapacho, through pasture and almond groves, the trees already being in blossom. It is a lovely area to walk and watch birds locally. During the week, we saw Lesser Spotted, Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, Azure-winged Magpies and Great Spotted Cuckoos in the garden at Casa Rosa.

We made several visits to the nearby Parque Natural da Ria Formosa at Quinta do Marim. There is an office here, where permits are issued and maps provided at a cost of only a few euros. Ample shaded parking is then available behind the reserve road barrier. The reserve has areas of woodland and low scrub as well as tidal flats, saltmarsh and lagoons. The diversity of habitat within the reserve makes it an excellent area for birds. We saw a large number of waders, including Whimbrel and numerous Kentish Plovers (which we don't see very often in the UK). It was great to see White Storks and a large flock of (Greater) Flamingoes flying overhead. The woodland and scrub hold lots of warblers, mainly Chiffchaff, Sardinian Warbler and Zitting Cisticola at this time of the year. From the hide by the freshwater pond we had close up views of Stone Chats and the symbol of the reserve, the Purple Gallinule.

On other days we visited different areas of the Ria Formosa reserve, Ludo Quinta do Lago proving to be a favourite. This is near the airport, with lots of parking and easy access though the 'entry prohibited' signs on the gate. You soon realise that this isn't a problem, with the main track being very popular with joggers, cyclists, dog-walkers etc. The track has lagoons and saltmarsh on either side, which are great areas for birds - waders, ducks and numerous warblers in the bankside scrub. We enjoyed very close views of Spoonbills and also saw Black-necked Grebe, Bluethroats, Booted Eagles and Water Pipits. The track leads to a golf course complex, which has a reed-fringed lake overlooked by a large 2-level bird hide. This is an ideal place to look for Little Bittern while you have your lunch. We were fortunate enough to get good views of the Little Bittern, Glossy Ibis and Purple Gallinules fighting over nest sites. Following the track adjoining the golf course, we also saw flocks of Waxbills feeding on the fairways, Hoopoes, Crested Tits in the pines and a Wryneck in the scrub behind the lake. We watched Serins and Siskins bathing in puddles along the path, amongst flocks of sparrows and finches. This is definitely a site well worth a visit.

Much of the Ria Formosa is a maze of channels, lagoons and tracks where good access is not easy to find, if you don't know the area. A local bird guide is highly recommended to get the best from your visit. We contacted Georg Schreier (from Casa Rosa web site) and booked two full days birding. One of these

was spent visiting a number of sites in the Ria Formosa, around Tavira, Fuseta and also some areas further West. Georg is an excellent guide and provided us with some great sightings through his expert local knowledge. We had good views of Audouin's, Slender-Billed and Mediterranean Gulls, which Georg picked out of gull flocks with enviable ease. On both days he generously shared his knowledge, pointing out the crucial differences between similar birds and teaching us a lot in a short space of time. Highlights of the day for me were good views of Penduline Tits and the sight of 50+ Stone Curlews flying from their roosting area.

On one day we travelled inland to the Steppe grassland of the Alentejo, again with Georg as our guide. We hoped to see Great Bustards and possibly Great Spotted Cuckoos. Heading towards the Spanish border and then inland, it was a pleasant drive on very quiet roads, with a number of stops at places of interest. We were delighted to get good views of the cuckoos and many other birds along the way - larks, Southern Grey Shrikes and huge flocks of Corn Buntings. The Steppe grassland was actually a beautiful carpet of wild flowers at this time of the year, a wonderful area for birding. We saw Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a large number of raptors; Spanish Imperial Eagles, a close view of a Bonelli's Eagle, Marsh and Hen Harriers, Black-winged Kite, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon and a lot of Common Kestrels, Buzzards and Red Kites. We watched a distant flock of Common Cranes feeding in a wet meadow, while we ate our lunch at a very picturesque spot, high on a hill next to an old church. It was one of those great birding days. After lunch, the Great Bustards proved elusive for a while, but Georg tried a number of sites until he found a flock of 40+ birds in a meadow adjoining a walking-track. It was a fantastic sight with great views through the telescopes - a real highlight of our trip.

Many of the roads in the area are very narrow or single-track, with parking very difficult. It is not advisable to stop your car on the road, even though the roads are generally quiet, as a number of trucks and agricultural vehicles use the roads...quite speedily! Having Georg as our guide was a real advantage for us, as he knew the places where we could park safely and take short walks to good viewing spots in the rolling terrain. On the way back we stopped at a spot near the bridge at Mertola, where we saw 2 Blue Rock Thrushes. We also had time for a visit to Castro Marim, where Georg spotted the Long-tailed Duck that had been reported there. While we were watching the duck, a Great Spotted Cuckoo flew close by and gave us a great view as it perched in a tree next to the visitor centre.

We all really enjoyed our winter trip to the Southern Algarve; great weather, hospitality, excellent birding and local food (we enjoyed meals at Ponto de Amigos in Lagoao, Tapas e Pizza and Antonio's at Moncarapacho). We are already planning a return trip in Spring or Autumn, when we hope to take a boat trip from Fuseta. For anyone planning a trip, you will definitely enjoy your stay at Casa Rosa (We would also recommend dinner in their splendid dining-room).

Many thanks to Kjersti and Jan-Ketil at Casa Rosa and to Georg for our two great days birding.

Some of our photographs from the trip can be seen at;

[www.daveroachphotography.co.uk](http://www.daveroachphotography.co.uk) [www.flickr.com/photos/rogerwasley/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/rogerwasley/)