

Cartier

I N T E R N A T I O N A L P O L O

*“When you are on a
great horse, you have the best
seat you will ever have”*

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

GUARDS POLO CLUB
SMITH'S LAWN, WINDSOR GREAT PARK

VILA VITA PARC

Let's face it, says Ed Victor, great golf courses and great hotels don't usually go together.



Yes, there are occasional exceptions to this rule (the Breakers in Palm Beach, Las Ventanas al Paraiso in Los Cabos, Mexico and, for those fortunate enough to be invited there, the so-called “cottages” at Augusta National spring to mind), but for the most part the hotels at – or nearby – excellent golf courses are so-so at worst, merely good at best. So Vila Vita Parc in the Algarve region of Portugal was a real find for us: a truly outstanding luxury hotel located right smack in the middle of over thirty of the finest golf courses in Europe.

Vila Vita is a collection of attractive whitewashed Moorish buildings set in 54 acres of beautifully cultivated sub-tropical Mediterranean gardens. It is perched right above a lovely, curved bay with a white sand beach and surrounded by a dramatic rocky coastline. Although it is easy to get to – a half hour drive from Faro airport, which is only a two hour flight from London – you feel as though you have escaped to another world entirely (especially when your escape is from London in April!).

My wife and I were shown to an impressive suite in The Residence, which overlooks the beach and has views to distant mountains from its large terrace. We were driven there over cobbled walkways from the Main Building in a golf cart by our “butler”, a wonderful Lithuanian woman called Jolita. She and her fellow butlers looked after us impeccably throughout our stay – making sure every minute of our holiday was as perfect as it could possibly be. Every tee time, every restaurant reservation, every spa appointment, was meticulously planned. And, when the time came to leave our suite for one activity or another, there was a discreet knock at the door and there she was – waiting to whisk us away in her golf cart.

Although we could have indulged in many other activities at Vila Vita – swimming in both the ocean and the indoor and outdoor pools, tennis, horseback riding, deep-sea fishing or yacht excursions among them – our desire was simply to play golf during the day, have spa treatments in the evening and eat well at night. And all we had to do was tell the hotel where and when we wanted to play, what spa treatments we wanted, and which of their five restaurants we wanted to dine in. Jolita – and Christian, the excellent driver provided by the hotel – did the rest.

The Algarve is blessed with some of the best golf courses we've ever played. During past visits, we have played courses like San Lorenzo, Pinheiros Altos, Quinto do Lago North and South, and Vale Do Lobo Royal. This time, on the first two days of our stay, we played the two new Oceanico courses nearest to the hotel – The Faldo Course designed by Nick Faldo and The O'Connor Jr Course designed by Christy O'Connor Jr, both of which opened in late 2008. As all golfers know, new courses need time to grow into themselves.

But, for very new courses, these were both in excellent condition and the staff well organized. We saved the best – the Old Course at Vilamoura – for last. This old beauty, designed by Frank Pennink in 1969, has gorgeous fairways lined with ancient umbrella pine trees and meanders through beautiful hilly countryside. For some reason, we both played way above our game there, so left feeling incredibly satisfied with our round.

Each evening, upon our return to the hotel, we had delightful massages: my wife took hers in our suite, while I went to the well-appointed spa (again driven by one of the butlers in their ubiquitous golf carts). Then, totally relaxed and happy, we would go to dinner. On the first night, we were driven to a nearby (2 kms) beach restaurant Arte Nautica, where I had one of the very best grilled fish of my life – a gilt-head bream perfectly cooked and served in a charming wooden beach front shack. Then we tried the Portuguese restaurant, Adega, right on the property, where, after a long discussion with the

charming young chef, we chose to sample his excellent version of cataplana, the traditional fish stew of Portugal. And, on our last night we went to the Aladin Grill, which features an open kitchen so we could watch the chef grill our T-bone steaks.

The only disappointment of my stay at Vila Vita was of my own making. I had decided to take the month of April off of alcohol, so was not able to sample the fine wines available at the hotel – many of them made at their own nearby country wine estate, Herdade dos Grous. Particularly difficult was the evening when I was taken to the Cave de Vinhos, an impressive arched wine cellar with over 11000 bottles of wine – and couldn't sample one drop of the great wines, both Portuguese and French, offered to me.

We had a perfect weekend. Golf, massage, dinner/golf, massage, dinner/golf, massage, dinner. It's a tough life, but somebody's got to lead it. And there is no better place to lead it than Vila Vita Parc.

