

VIANA DO CASTELO

// FeelViana CEO José Sampaio prepares to take to the water and enjoy the fruits of home at Cabedelo Beach, Viana do Castelo.



Words Finn Mullen // **Photos** Arménio Belo, Bruno Abreu, FeelViana Hotel, Katie McAnena and Finn Mullen.

FEEL VIANA

Finding a windsurfing holiday destination that offers attractions for partners and families can be challenging but FeelViana, a new hotel in Viana do Castelo, North Portugal offers all that and more. Great conditions for all abilities, luxurious accommodation and day spa, incredible food and a range of other activities all set in beautiful surroundings beside a city rich in history. Best of all, it's within easy reach of the UK.

Finn Mullen reports on a compelling spot, well worth a visit!



“ It’s a windsurfer’s dream – side shore winds, sunny skies and everything from dead flat water to fun waves. ”

NATURAL ATTRACTIONS

The area’s natural attractions are obvious, the river Lima meanders to the sea through the verdant hills that fringe the coast. The sea air mixes with the essence of the rich greenery that surrounds for a healthy cocktail to inhale. But perhaps most attractive for a windsurfer is the wind. Thermal by nature, it arrives with clear skies and is accelerated by the local topography of the hill overlooking the beaches. For the thermal effect to work requires a north component to the forecast direction, clear skies and forecast temperatures of a very comfortable mid 20°C., with all that in place you can rest assured that the strength will be much greater than what forecasting services like windguru will predict. Locals claim it has the most consistent wind in Portugal and typical sail size is 4.7 but what really sets the area apart is just how long the wind blows; the wind can settle in as early as 10 or 11 am and blow until sunset. That means you can binge on multiple sessions during the day or relax knowing that it’s there for whenever you need it. The range of water states available is equally impressive. The large breakwaters that form the entrance to the port of Viana do Castelo mean that inside the harbour area is dead flat water for slalom or learning while just immediately outside and adjacent to the breakwaters, the water is again flat unless there is swell, which the breakwaters actually then do a good job of cleaning the waves up into refined peaks which increase in size as you move down the bay. The wind is side shore and if you think all this sounds too good to be true then put ‘Viana do Castelo windsurfing’ into YouTube and you will soon see its potential!

The natural ‘horseshoe’ shape of the bay means you can’t end up in too much trouble, but as an added safeguard the main windsurfing area is well patrolled by lifeguards. Indeed to ensure safety, José kindly funded a rescue boat for the lifeguards that operates in the main windsurfing season from May to September and offers free safety cover for customers of the hotel’s windsurfing centre. The predominant direction is starboard tack and in the course of the week that I visited in July we experienced the normal summer conditions of easy cross-shore sailing with flat water or some small waves. Local sailors will often sail further down the bay for bigger waves or less crowded conditions and whilst the number of sailors and kitesurfers in the main area was busy, the size of the beach meant it never felt crowded, rather an assuring number of like minded water users to enjoy the conditions with. Indeed the whole beach has a very relaxing vibe with families enjoying the sand and sea, nestling into the natural windbreaks of the dunes if the wind is too strong.



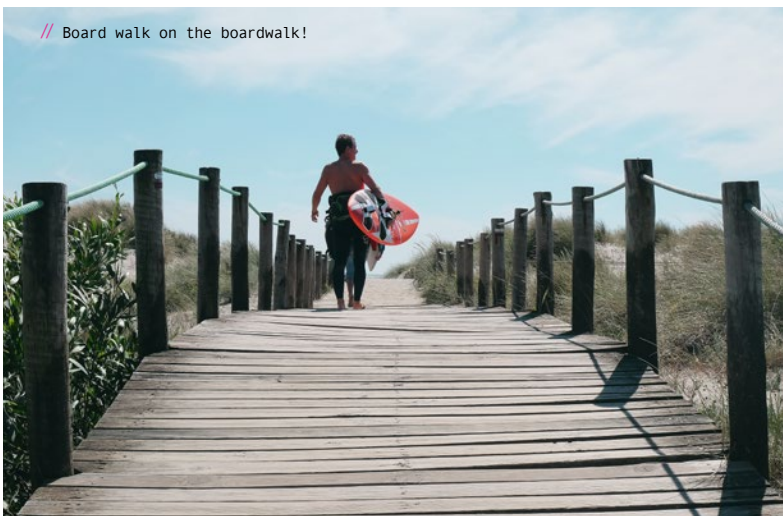
I’m standing beside José Sampaio, CEO of hotel FeelViana, taking in the stunning Atlantic view while my daughter plays in the sand. José is a windsurfer who after travelling the world and enjoying many of the best windsurfing spots had a dream to come home and build a hotel that would not only showcase the beauty of Viana do Castelo but also be something completely different in terms of luxury and facilities. Behind us lies his impressive creation, a futuristic wooden structure that sits seamlessly with its natural surroundings. In front, it’s a windsurfer’s dream – side shore winds, sunny skies and everything from dead flat water to fun waves. To the south, the white sand backed bay stretches as far as the eye can see, to the north the old city lies with its historic buildings keeping watch on our shoulder. As a location, it’s hard to not be seduced by its charm. I ask José what inspired the name of his hotel, FeelViana. I expect a long answer, a chance for a CEO to extol and praise his project of passion but in typically relaxed Portuguese fashion he merely waves his hand from north to south, pointing to the medieval architecture of the city, the glistening sea and inspiring vistas. You don’t need to sell it, it sells itself.

VIANA DO CASTELO

// Sanctuary by the sea - aerial view of Hotel FeelViana and the beautiful Cabedelo Beach.



// Board walk on the boardwalk!



// Stunning scenery to sail in.





At the main entrance to the beach is the hotel's hire kit centre and beach bar/café for a refreshing pre or post sail snack or drink. The walk from the hotel to the beach takes about 5 minutes and is a great way to start the day with a beach check by foot or my preferred option – renting one of the hotel's 'fat bikes' with huge oversized tyres that make it possible to cycle on the sand. The paths to the beach are beautiful wooden boardwalks in keeping with the well managed dune systems and nature reserves they cross. Both José and the local council are very keen that the tourism they develop is sustainable and protects the beauty of the environment that is the area's drawcard.

SANCTUARY BY THE SEA

If you don't feel like checking the conditions at the beach with your toes in the sand then José has that covered too, the sea facing side of the hotel has captivating sea views and you can check conditions from the decking by the pool or lounge / dining area. It's worth pointing out that even when the wind is in full swing the pool area is well protected for partners just wishing to catch some rays and the decking area also offers shade for drinks and food 'al fresco'. Whether it's breakfast, lunch, dinner or just a refreshing thirst quencher, sitting outside being served by attentive but not obtrusive staff while staring at the sea is one of those true holiday moments where the only thought in your head is how such a state of relaxation can be legal!

If you want to remain connected to the world, there is a dedicated business centre for conferences and fast and reliable internet throughout the hotel. The ambiance but is very much a natural, calming environment and perfect for a digital detox!

The lounge area is spacious with huge sofas and seats, subtle mood lighting and a library of eclectic books that cover all tastes with some very interesting reading on both the local area and the style and architecture that have obviously influenced the hotel's design. The décor feels like a millionaire has given a Zen guru unlimited access to his bank account. Natural hues adorn throughout and the cool corridors that access the rooms are sanctuaries of silence with well thought out quiet areas throughout.

The wood construction creates a wonderfully tranquil environment. José told me that he chose it not just to respect the exceptional habitat and vast pinewood forest where the hotel is located but also because it is said humans sleep better in wooden environments. Sleeping so well in our room, I couldn't disagree.

The rooms themselves also mix luxury with nature and José picked some of the best mattresses he could find. As a windsurfer he understood the need to have a good night's rest to recover from hard days on the water.

Our room had a sea view and balcony that overlooked the forest; watching starry nights and trees bend in the wind added to the atmosphere and a passing evening shower one evening was a transfixing sight to watch as the raindrops fell gently on the pine needles. If you like watching weather, I can imagine even a winter visit to the hotel being special, viewing Atlantic storms from the comfort of your room.

FAMILY FRIENDLY

Family accommodation is well catered for with larger rooms or bungalows available for 2 adults and 2 children and the hotel and staff is very family friendly and offer an adventure club for 8-12 year olds. The whole area feels very safe and the amenities of a city such as supermarkets and hospitals are nearby. Portuguese people love children so be prepared for free treats and your dearest to be the centre of attention and affection. They say a measure of society is how you treat your young, old and sick. I can only say from my experience of visiting the local A&E at 2 a.m. with a very sick baby that Viana do Castelo should get an 11/10. From the hotel to hospital staff, everyone could not have been more helpful or caring. We had to visit the 24 hour pharmacy to get medication after our hospital visit and waited quite a while whilst the prescription was prepared – for the whole duration the taxi driver came with us and turned off his meter, such was his concern for baby.

There's not many places in the world that would happen and I was reminded of when José waved his hand across the city and its environs to explain FeelViana he added it was just not the place or lifestyle but the people that make it so special, he was right.

// Mornings are great for teaching kids.



VIANA DO CASTELO



// The Basilica of Santa Luzia dominates the city's skyline and has captivating views over the stunning coast. PHOTO Arménio Belo.

HOTEL HEALTH

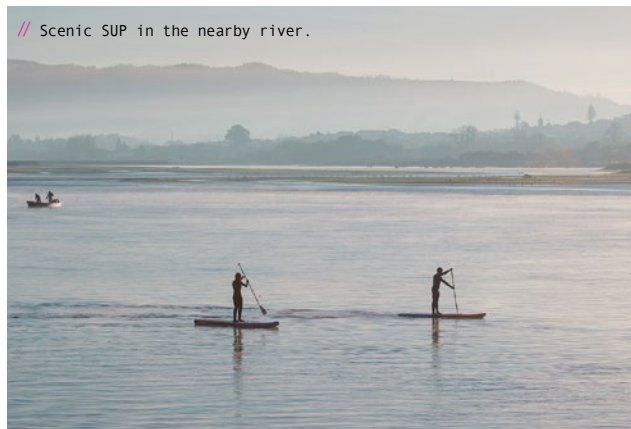
There is a very holistic approach to your well-being at FeelViana. This isn't just a great hotel, it isn't just a windsurfing centre, it's a one-stop 'feel better' shop. If you weren't relaxed enough by the people and the place then they have a wellness & spa area, where you can enjoy massages and various treatments using the acclaimed Voya organic products from Ireland as well as a sauna, a Turkish bath and heated indoor swimming pool. There's also a bespoke yoga studio with wood features, streams of natural light and classes for all levels, even catering for group yoga retreats while we were there. Outdoor yoga sessions, family yoga, SUP yoga, pilates and stretching sessions can all be organised to have you in perfect form for your stay and the hotel also boasts a gym that looks like a professional windsurfer's dream setup. As well as conventional gym equipment they have all the functional strength and dynamic balance gear that you normally only see at top sports physio's or Red Bull's famed training centre! The hotel also offers personal trainers to really whip you into shape.

FOODIE DELIGHTS

If the thought of all that exercise is making you hungry then rest assured the hotel has that covered too. José's dream was to have somewhere that not only could you relax and play to your heart's content but also refuel with the best food possible. Breakfasts were a delicious buffet ranging from fresh fruit, fresh juices, seeds, nuts and cereals to freshly baked breads and pastries and good old bacon and eggs. With such an extensive fare you were easily setup for a morning of exercise before lunch, which again catered for all tastes, healthy to hearty, with vibrant salads, fresh smoothies and amazing burgers just some of the highlights. Evening meals were a tribute to the quality of the local produce and skill of the hotel's chef, with dishes leaving you feeling as if you've found a culinary paradise by the sea. Try the local Douro valley area wines, which offer incredible taste and value for money. Kids are well catered for with their own menu and enjoy friendly service from the staff who offer the fine dining experience with an authentic warmth and service well able for the odd tossed tomato from baby!



// The hotel's covered pump track - great fun!



// Scenic SUP in the nearby river.

ALL SPORTS

If you want to work off all that fine fare or just want other ways to get your sweat on then the hotel also has a full cycle centre offering rental of every sort of bike from full suspension to electric bikes, hybrids, road bikes and fat bikes. For the little ones, cycle seats and child trailers are also available. Every type of terrain is well catered for and the hotel even has a covered pump track to tear up on bike or skateboard. They also offer sales and service and you can even courier your own bike to the hotel if you wish. The staff can point you to local trails or organize group cycles and GPS units are available for hire to aid distant ventures. We opted for exploring the boardwalked trails around the beach, which made for a great start or end to the day. Cycling the 'fat bikes' on the beach is a unique experience I'd thoroughly recommend and the area also offers superb terrain for trail running or trekking in the hills. If you want to keep it on the water there is a full range of surfboards, bodyboards and SUPs to hire and plenty of waves within walking distance to accompany them as well as flat water SUP on the river through gorgeous waterways. A great family option is the monster SUPs that can carry everyone on one board. The area is famed for kitesurfing, with hire and instruction also available and they even offer sailboat and dinghy hire and instruction as well as cruises and yacht charter on the river through their parent company - www.FeelDouro.com.

CITY CULTURE

The city of Viana do Castelo is just a few kms away and a great option is exploring it using the hotel's electric bikes or the hotel has a water taxi that can bring you into town - they will even carry the electric bikes onboard if you're feeling extra lazy! The old narrow streets beg to be discovered and in an innovative move the local council offers incentives for people to live in the city so ensuring there's life in the centre rather than deserted streets in the evenings. The range of architecture - Manueline, Renaissance, Baroque or Art Deco - is a rich visual feast but to really appreciate the beauty of the area take the funicular railway to the top of the hill that overlooks the city where you will be rewarded with amazing views and get to explore the ornate 20th-century Basilica of Santa Luzia, the Temple of the Sacred Heart of Jesus built on the western spur of the Santa Luzia mountain that dominates the city's skyline.



// Hot locals! - Model + traditional dress + sail = the fun Viana way!
PHOTO Bruno Abreu.



// Room with a view.



// Happy man on holiday - Finn Mullen.


MARITIME CONNECTIONS

Viana do Castelo's long connection to the sea runs all the way from the Portuguese discoveries to its importance as home port to a large cod fishing fleet and shipbuilding industry. With the fishing and shipping industries in decline in recent times the local council again took another bold move and sought to keep the maritime connection by making sure that the local schools have water sports as part of their program and are keen to promote marine based tourism.

In the middle of August the city marks its connection with the sea formally with a celebration of Nossa Senhora da Agonia, the patron saint of fishermen. For three days the streets are filled with parades of floats, towering puppets and colourful local costumes, as well as traditional music and food in what locals call "The biggest party in Portugal!"

HIDDEN GEM

As a destination, Viana do Castelo has so many attractions and great wind stats, it's a wonder that it is not better known. Perhaps the clue was divulged by a local who confided in me that she knew European windsurfing families that have been visiting for years but often tell their friends they go elsewhere so they can keep this Portuguese haven free from crowds! Being so close to the Spanish border, a good day here will see many Spanish sailors make the trip south. The city provides great facilities for visiting windsurfers in motorhomes and plenty of foreign number plates were visible with many making the area their base for the summer, such is the consistency of the wind.

Hotel FeelViana is a unique windsurf destination offering an exciting range of activities and laid back luxury. It has something for everyone and for families it's easy to have that mix of sports, culture and R&R. A holiday here leaves you rested and healthy; my only complaint was that we only had one week because once you FeelViana you just want more! 

FACT BOX

Getting there

FeelViana is located at Cabedelo Beach, in Viana do Castelo, which is the main windsurfing spot in the area. Closest airport is Porto, which is well served for UK and international connections with EasyJet and Ryanair amongst the numerous carriers operating routes to it. Transfer to the hotel takes around 45 minutes and is an easy trip on a large motorway for most of the journey. The airport has all the major car hire operators, but really the beauty of the hotel is that you don't actually need a car unless you really want to explore. The hotel has a large Ford transit minibus with roof rack to take gear and offers transfers for 90 euro each way, which is regardless of the party size, so works out good value for a group or family.

The airport itself is Portugal's second busiest, modern and well equipped with lots of shops, restaurants and kid's play areas for stress free travel.

Windsurf centre

The hotel's centre offers sales, tuition and hire, with a stock of essential spares as well as surf clothing and wetsuits, sunblock etc. The rental fleet is brand new JP/Pryde kit with boards ranging from small freestyle wave through to freeride and beginner and sails ranging from small Combat wave sails to large freeride. The centre also offers fully equipped shower rooms, ventilated lockers with padlocks to store and dry suits, boards and other equipment should you choose to bring your own gear and these lockers can be hired for 10€/day.

Lessons run from beginner through to advanced and the centre's team are all fluent English speakers and will go out of their way to help you choose the right kit for the day and advise on conditions.

Kit

Locals mostly use a medium sized (85 litre) wave board and 4.7 sails with 4.0 / 4.2 for the rarer, really windy days and then 5.3 and 6.0 with a bigger freestyle wave (100 litre) for the lighter days. It's a 5 minute walk to the beach from the car parks and some locals used beach trolleys to aid transport of their gear but for anyone used to carrying their gear won't find it an issue, especially when the path to the beach is so beautiful!

Wetsuit wise I just used boardshorts and a rash vest but there was people on the beach in 4/3's and 3/2 full suits - it really depends on your tolerance - a good summer suit and shortie will be fine for most. A local explained to me that Portugal's reputation for colder water helped keep some of the mainland Europe crowds away! For anyone from the UK I think the term 'cold water' will be extremely relative and not a problem! By the way the locals are very friendly so don't be afraid to ask for any tips or help!

Best time

The main windsurf season runs from the start of April to the end of September, though locals say some seasons the thermal winds have started as early as February! José mentioned May as one of his favourite months with good waves and wind and low crowds.

In winter, south based winds from fronts do offer port tack cross on conditions, though can be accompanied by heavy swells. In this instance, locals will often launch from within the harbour to avoid the shorebreak and then sail out the back of the waves breaking onto the beach.

Camping

There's a very good campsite just behind the beach further down from the hotel run by www.orbitur.pt, lots of windsurfers in motorhomes were staying there but there are also dedicated sites provided by the council near the northern end of the beach with water and slush out facilities available.

Other info.

The hotel staff speak fluent English (and quite a few other languages!) and English is spoken widely enough in the city also. Evenings are warm but a jacket or hoodie is probably wise to pack if you feel the cold.

For more info. on Viana do Castelo, check out - www.cm-viana-castelo.pt

Hotel Contacts

Prices depend on time of year but start at €115 for a double room, breakfast included. There is a half-board option for €18.50 per person (drinks not included); children 4-12 pay 50% and children 0-3 are free.

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