

VIANA DO CASTELO

Life's a beach at FeelViana
- Katie and her daughter
Mara on dawn patrol.



WORDS FINN MULLEN PHOTOS FEELVIANA HOTEL, KATIE MCANENA & FINN MULLEN.

Feel Viana

Finding a SUP 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!



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.

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. The range of water states available to paddle is 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 fitness work 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 fast, refined peaks which increase in size as you move down the bay. Just a few hundred metres down the beach from the hotel the waves are very consistent with little swell needed to bring the sandbars into action. An indication of just how good the surf here is can be found right next to the hotel in the form of the Portuguese Surfing Federation's High Performance Surf Centre – which hosts teams from Portugal and around Europe to train as well as being the base for many national and international surf contests. If downwinders are your thing, then in summer a strong thermal wind blows side-shore from late morning most days there is clear skies and a north breeze forecast. If you think all this sounds too good to be true then put 'Viana do Castelo surfing' 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 watersports area in front of the hotel is well patrolled by lifeguards who have a rescue boat from May to September.

I visited in July and we experienced the normal summer conditions of fun sized waves and easy paddling. It was surprisingly uncrowded and one solo evening session in fast and clean waist to shoulder peaks right in front of the hotel was a stand out memory from the trip. Early mornings were always quiet but really without too much effort we scored mellow sessions. There's plenty of waves in the area to spread crowds out and the locals we met were all super friendly. SUP also really helps you score uncrowded waves here as you can find smaller peaks that prone surfers ignore. Personally I'll happily take a reduction in wave size for reduction in crowd any day and the natural size of the bay helps to find your own space.

The main break in front of the hotel offers good beach break conditions with a fast left and longer right and in low swell conditions, down the beach about 500 metres is a break by some rocks which is the go-to spot in small swells. The enclosed harbour area inside the breakwater adjacent to the main break offers flat water and further up the river Lima, which flows out to the sea here, there is plenty of SUP cruising options through gorgeous waterways and the hotel offers guided SUP tours with drop off and pick up options available.

The main beach area 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.

The hotel's SUP rental kit is stored at a large centre at the main entrance to the beach which also doubles as the hotel's beach bar/café serving sandwiches, salads, soft drinks, wine, Somersby cider and beer at €1.50 / glass. 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.

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 an all-round waterman who after travelling the world and enjoying many of the best surf 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 wood-structure that sits seamlessly with its natural surroundings. In front, a paddler's paradise - 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 peering over 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.

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Finn gets on his bike!

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. 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 waterman 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 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. Just down the boardwalk from the hotel is a small beach on the inside of the breakwater which offers very sheltered waters for swimming or learning to SUP and is great for kids, with lifeguards also on patrol here. 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 say from my experience of



Katie catches a wave just down from the hotel.



The beautiful hotel FeelViana.

“ The sea air mixes with the essence of the rich greenery that surrounds for a healthy cocktail to inhale. ”



visiting the local A&E at 2 a.m. with a very sick baby that Viana do Castelo would 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.

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 watersports 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

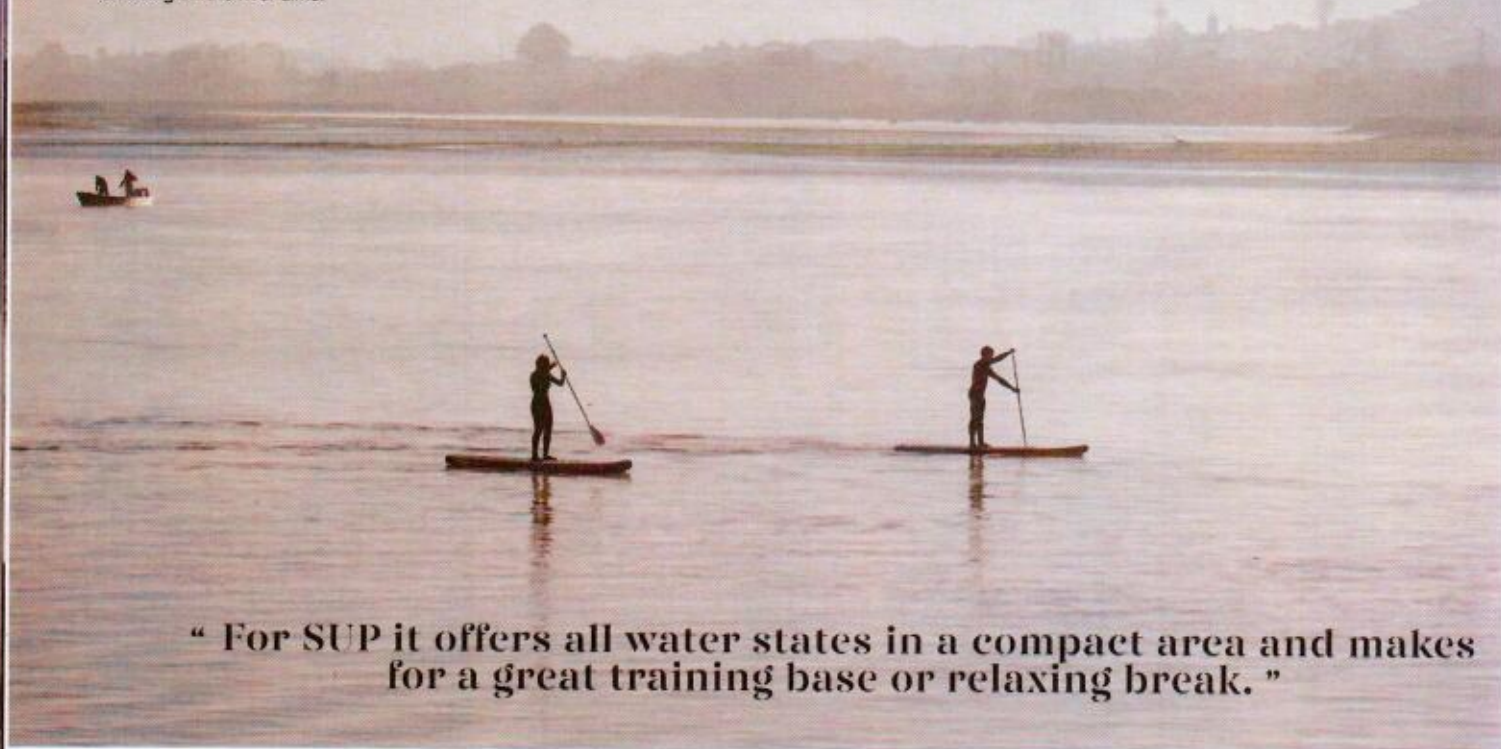
also boasts a gym that looks like a professional surfer's dream setup. As well as conventional gym equipment they have all the functional strength and dynamic balance gear that you normally only see at top sports physio's or Red Bull's famed training centre! The hotel also offers personal trainers to 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 a destination where 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!

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Cruising on the river Lima.



“ For SUP it offers all water states in a compact area and makes for a great training base or relaxing break. ”

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 also. If you want to keep it on the water there is a full range of surfboards and bodyboards to hire and the centre offers JP hard and inflatable SUP's to rent as well as carbon and glass paddles. A great family / group option is the centre's monster SUP's that can carry everyone on one board with guaranteed hilarity. The area is famed for windsurfing and kite-surfing, 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.

Maritime connections

Viana do Castelo's long connection to the sea runs all the way from Portuguese discoveries to its importance as home port to a large cod fish fleet and shipbuilding industry. With the fishing and shipping industry in decline in recent times the local council again took another bold step and sought to keep the maritime connection by making sure that the 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, patron saint of fishermen. For three days the streets are filled with parades, towering puppets and colourful local costumes, as well as traditional music and food in what locals call "The biggest party in Portugal!"

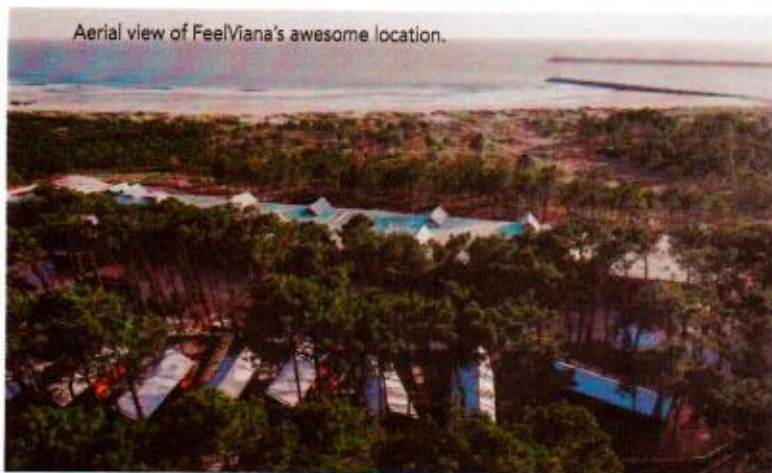
Hidden gem

As a destination, Viana do Castelo has so many attractions and great views 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 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 visitors make the trip. The city provides great facilities for visiting surfers in motorhomes and many of foreign number plates were visible with many making the area a base for extended surf vacations.

Hotel FeelViana is a unique SUP and watersports 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. For SUP it offers all water states in a compact area and makes for a great training base or relaxing break. A holiday here leaves you rested and healthy; my only complaint was that we only had one week because you FeelViana you just want more!

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Aerial view of FeelViana's awesome location.



Beach break delight for Katie.



FACT BOX

Getting there

FeelViana is located at Cabedelo Beach, in Viana do Castelo. 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.

Sup 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 kit with boards ranging from inflatable kid and adult all-rounders to hard boards from the JP Fusion and Surf Wide range. 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 100/day. 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

For SUP surfing here, just your normal all-round beach break board is fine. Wetsuit wise I just used boardshorts and a rash vest when I was there in July 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 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!

Best time

September through to May is the main wave season but you can still score in summer, just expect it to be on the smaller side and the thermal side-shore winds to be more prevalent. In winter, storm fronts can bring heavy onshore conditions.

Camping

There's a very good campsite just behind the beach further down from the hotel run by www.orbitur.pt, lots of surfers 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 in summer 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

Prices

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.

Hotel Contacts

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FeelViana's room with a view.

FeelViana's beach cafe and kit centre.

