# Berlengas Islands

## *The Enchanted Isles of Portugal*

Text by Peter Symes, with Arlindo Serrão
Photos by Peter Symes and Eurico Roseiro

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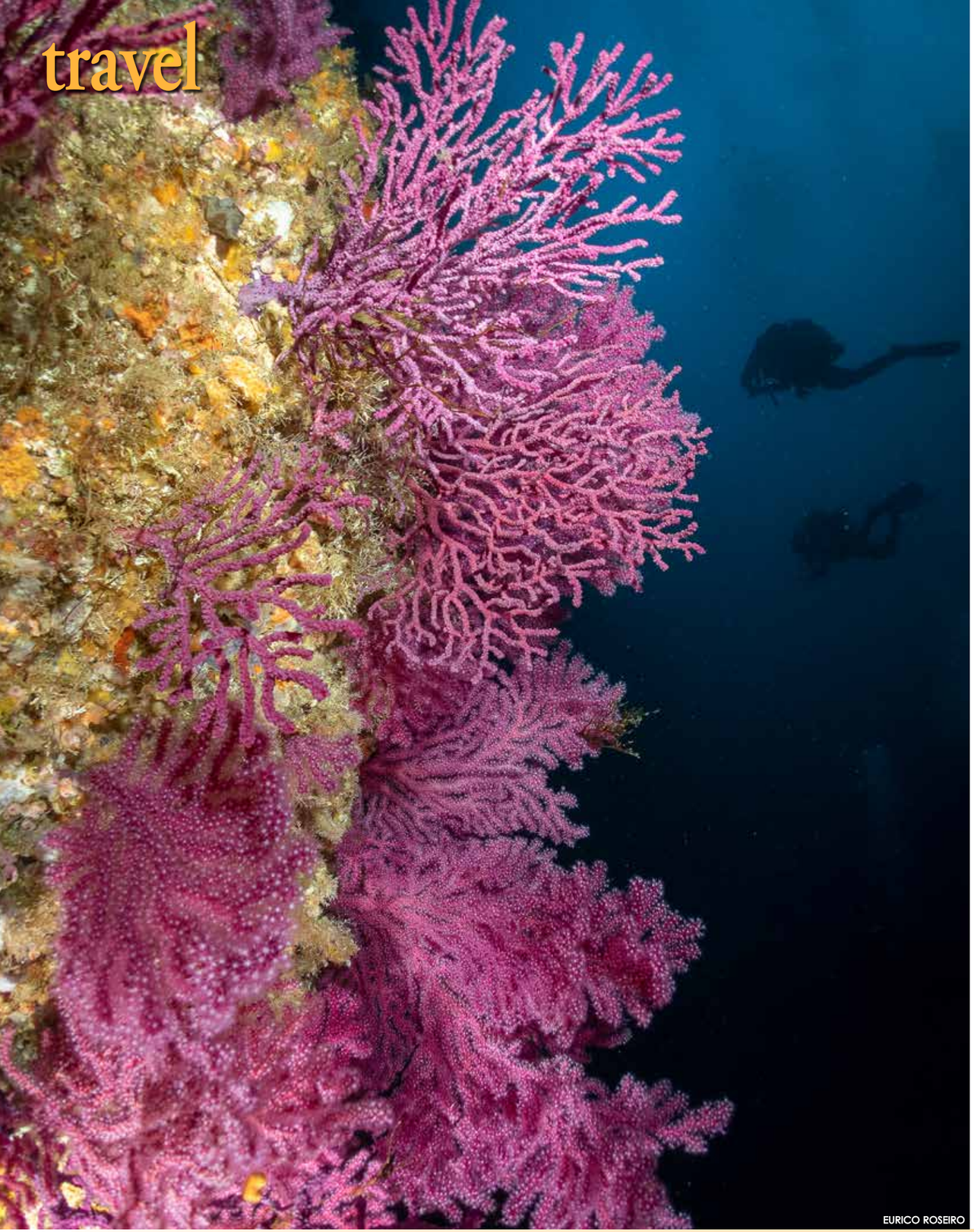

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Picturesque cove of Carreiro do Mosteiro, Berlenga Grande (above); Violescent sea-whip at Parede Rabo de Asno, or Donkey's Tail Wall, near Farilhões Islands, Berlengas Archipelago (left and previous page)

**Out on the edge of the horizon, islands rise out of the Atlantic Ocean, like some mystical scenery taken straight out of a medieval tale about King Arthur and his knights, or perhaps *Game of Thrones*. To the left, one could even make out what looked like a castle. That was where we were heading to go diving. Peter Symes and Arlindo Serrão report.**

I am referring to the Berlengas Islands, one of the more spectacular dive destinations off the Portuguese coast. Where I was now standing was the fishing town of Peniche, on Portugal's Atlantic coast, about 100km north of Lisbon.

Peniche is itself a picturesque old town, with narrow streets and some really good restaurants. It is also one of Portugal's great surfing destinations. I will get back to that, but first, we set sail across the water, heading for the Berlengas.

The archipelago lies roughly 10-15km offshore and consists of Berlenga Grande, the largest island, together with the smaller Estelas and Farilhões-Forcados islet groups and numerous rocks and reefs. The islands and surrounding waters form a protected marine environment, and the wider Berlengas area was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2011. The crossing from Peniche generally takes around 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the boat and, not least, conditions on the Atlantic Ocean.

## Out to the Islands

The weather was pleasantly mild. It was late October, and I was visiting the islands together with some of the speakers at Diving Talks, which had just concluded. We were enjoying

Small sandy cove of Berlenga Grande Beach (right); Enjoying a glass of cool, local white wine in the courtyard of the fort (below)

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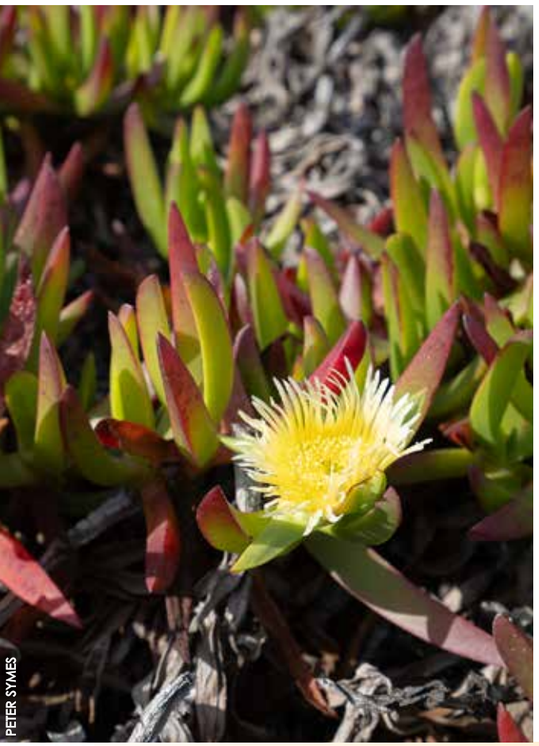

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the opportunity for some quality time and proper conversations, outside the often-frantic schedules at dive shows and other industry events.

As we got closer to our destination, Berlenga Grande rose higher before us as we approached the little jetty. It was taller and bigger than I had imagined.

The island was rugged rather than lush. Its exposed position in the Atlantic had produced a landscape dominated by low vegetation, rather than trees. We started our visit by walking up the steep path to the plateau on top of the island. This was quite a good aerobic workout.

There was a mild and pleasant scent in the air that I could not identify. It was autumn, so there were not many flowers blooming, but some of the plants appeared to be succulents. There were also assorted shrubs and herbs that I was unfamiliar with.

The isolation and exposed location that give the Berlengas their character are also important ecologically. The archipelago has been protected as a nature reserve since 1981, and its cliffs and rocky islands provide important habitat for seabirds, while the reserve extends well beyond the shoreline to encompass the surrounding marine environment.

## The fort

After traversing the plateau and reaching the other side of the island, we descended towards the fort that sat on a small rocky islet just off the coast. The path was quite steep in places and included long sections of stairs, so one of my companions, who had bad knees, found it somewhat challenging, but eventually also made it down.

What, from a distance, looked like a castle was actually the Forte de São João Baptista, or Fort of São

View of the Fort of São João Baptista das Berlengas on Berlenga Grande (above). The hottentot-fig, *Carpobrotus edulis*, is a creeping, mat-forming succulent species (left)

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View from a promontory at Peniche of the Belengas Islands on the horizon in the distance (left); Dive boat anchored off Berlenga Grande (below); Delicious fish dish for lunch (far lower left)

# Berlengas

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João Baptista. Its current form dates to the 17th century, when Portugal strengthened the defences of this vulnerable stretch of coast.

Its location could hardly be more dramatic. The fort occupies a rocky islet, separated from Berlenga Grande by a narrow channel and connected to the main island by a stone bridge. Seen against the cliffs and blue Atlantic, it was not difficult to understand why my first impression from Peniche was of something from a medieval tale.

Here, we were served another splendid meal in the courtyard. One soup dish, I understand, was a speciality made right here. It certainly was delicious and went well with the local wine.

After the meal, and some time to digest the food, we went for a swim in the clear waters around the fort. For me, however, swimming would be as close as I got to diving on this particular visit. Conditions did not allow us to make the dives we had hoped for. So, for what lies beneath the surface, I have to hand over the story to my co-author, Arlindo Serrão, the organiser of Diving Talks and principal of PortugalDive.com who knows these waters far better than I do.

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View of the Fort of São João Baptista das Berlengas (above left); Diving Talks participants relax in the fort's courtyard before lunch (above right)

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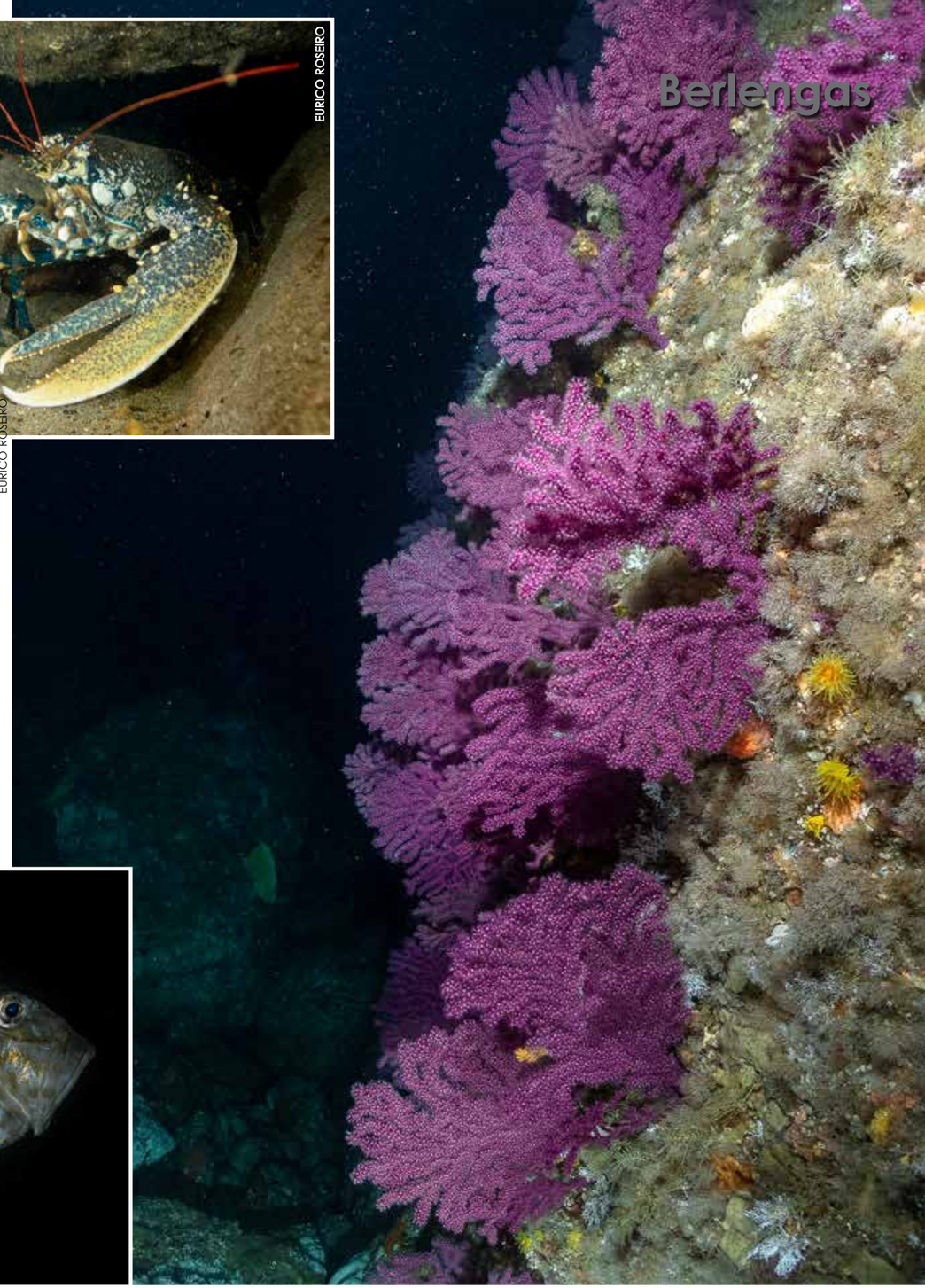

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## Diving the Berlengas

As per Arlindo, one dive site in particular encapsulates what makes the Berlengas special: Parede Rabo de Asno. "Some dives are enjoyable. Others become unforgettable," he said. "My last dive at Parede Rabo de Asno was definitely one of the latter."

The day began in Peniche, where the divers prepared their equipment before heading out across the Atlantic. Halfway to the islands, the skipper suddenly reduced speed. A sunfish (*Mola mola*) had been spotted resting at the surface. For a few moments, the boat drifted quietly while everyone admired this remarkable fish, before continuing towards the dive site. It was a promising start.

Once the boat was moored, Arlindo entered the water first, with a small group of rebreather divers. They descended to the bottom and waited for the rest of the group.

"The visibility was astonishing," said Arlindo. "Looking upwards from more than 30 metres below, we could clearly see the divers entering the water from the boat, their silhouettes perfectly outlined against the sunlight. It was one of those moments that instantly tells you this is going to be a special dive."

There are fascinating wreck sites to explore in the Berlengas Islands, stemming from the 16th to the 20th centuries, as the archipelago is situated along medieval and modern shipping routes (top left). European spiny lobster (top centre). Violescent sea-whip at Parede Rabo de Asno (above). This curious-looking predator, the John dory, makes for one of the most distinctive encounters in Portuguese Atlantic waters (bottom centre).

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Marine life, various fishes, corals and sponges colonise wrecks in the Berlengas Islands (top left and top right). Dream cave at Berlenga Grande Island (above). Anchor at Vapor do Trigo (left).

As the group gathered, the divers began following the wall that gives Parede Rabo de Asno much of its character. The vertical rock face was densely covered with bright gorgonians, swaying gently in the current, creating a surprisingly colourful Atlantic landscape, said Arlindo.

The current brought life. Seabream cruised along the rocky edges, while shoals of fish hovered above the wall, and every glance into the blue carried the possibility that something larger might materialise out of the distance. But, Arlindo added, it also paid to look closely at the rock itself. Among the gorgonians and crevices were nudibranchs, octopuses, conger and moray eels, crustaceans and smaller reef fish, while larger schools congregated where the current carried nutrients along the wall.

## Rabo de Asno

One of the highlights, according to Arlindo, is the cave from which Rabo de Asno (literally, "Donkey Tail") takes its name. Entered at around 25m, it forms a natural underwater passage through the rock. Although it is not a technical cave dive, swimming through it provides a dramatic change of scenery. Daylight penetrates from both openings, illuminating walls covered with red gorgonians, while schools of pouting drift through the passage.

"There is something particularly special about the contrast between the cave and the open wall," Arlindo said. "One moment, you are surrounded by rock and

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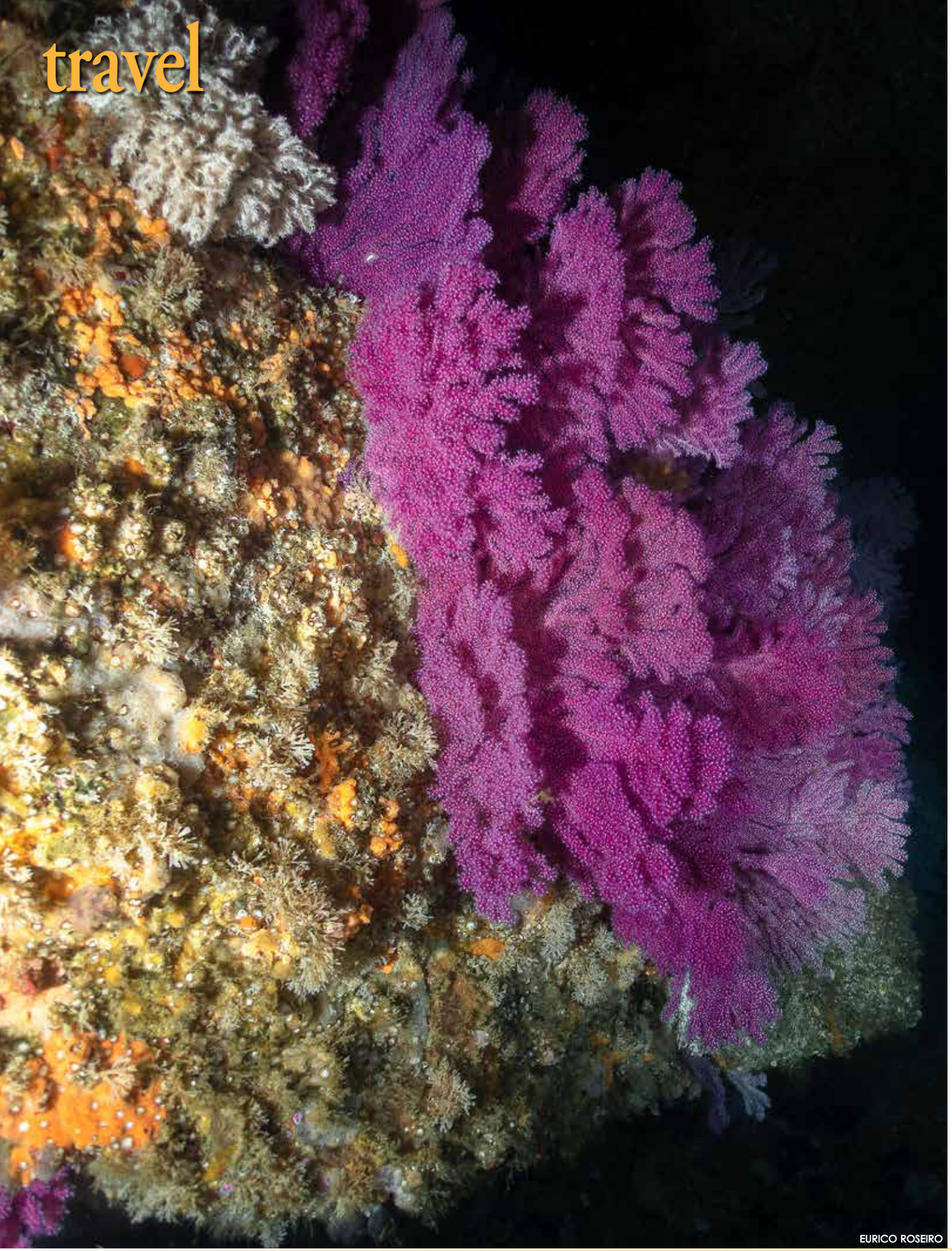
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Diver at the wreck site of Vapor do Trigo (above). Spectacular wall of colourful gorgonians in the Berlengas Archipelago (left). Fed by the nutrient-rich waters of the Atlantic, these delicate colonies transform the rocky reef into a vibrant underwater garden—one of the defining sights of diving in Berlengas.

red gorgonians, with fish silhouetted against the light coming through the exit. Moments later, you emerge again into the blue Atlantic, with the wall disappearing beneath you."

Conditions can make the dive demanding. Currents are part of the environment here and help sustain the abundance of life along the wall. Water can also be cooler than divers accustomed to warmer destinations might expect, and Atlantic conditions can change relatively quickly. Good buoyancy control, comfort at depth and experience with boat diving are therefore useful, particularly at a site such as Parede Rabo de Asno.

But depth and current are only part of the attraction. There is plenty to see at different depths, and concentrating solely on going deep or reaching the cave can mean overlooking much of what makes the Berlengas interesting. As Arlindo put it, "Sometimes, the best decision is simply to slow down and look around."

## A day at sea

Diving the Berlengas is more of a day at sea than a quick morning boat dive. A typical two-dive outing leaves Peniche in the morning, with the surface interval spent aboard, before making the second dive and returning to the mainland later in the afternoon.

That also means coming prepared. Water, sun protection, something warm to put on between dives and enough food for the day are worth bringing along. Anyone susceptible to seasickness would also be wise to take the usual precautions before heading out into the open Atlantic.

For divers unfamiliar with Atlantic conditions, the Berlengas should not be intimidating, but they should be treated with respect, said Arlindo. Conditions vary. Currents may be present, and plans

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Parts of the old fortifications and city wall of Peniche (above). Impressions from a promenade through town (top right). Some buildings had intricate tiling (right). Ornate interior of a chapel in Peniche (right).

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View from a promontory at Peniche of the Belengas Islands on the horizon

sometimes have to change. Listening to the briefing and adapting the dive accordingly matters more than ticking off a particular depth or feature.

## Back in Peniche

Back on the mainland, we enjoyed a walk through the small streets of Peniche. The town and the sea were inseparable. Peniche occupied a rocky peninsula jutting into the Atlantic and had long been associated with fishing. Its maritime heritage remained evident around the harbour and, rather pleasantly, in its restaurants, where fish and seafood naturally feature prominently.

Its position on the Atlantic also gave Peniche considerable strategic importance. The imposing fortress beside the harbour formed part of the coastal defences, but it acquired a very different and much darker role during the 20th century. Under Portugal's authoritarian Estado Novo regime, it was used as a political prison and held prominent opponents of the dictatorship. Today, the fortress serves as a museum commemorating resistance and freedom.

## Surfing

The ocean has given modern Peniche another identity altogether. It is one of Europe's best-known surfing destinations, with a remarkable selection of breaks around the peninsula.

The most famous one is Supertubos, named for the powerful tubular waves that form there. It is internationally known as a venue for top-level surfing. Depending on the direction of wind and swell, surfers can often find suitable waves somewhere around Peniche.

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Delicious seabream baked with diced potatoes and tomatoes

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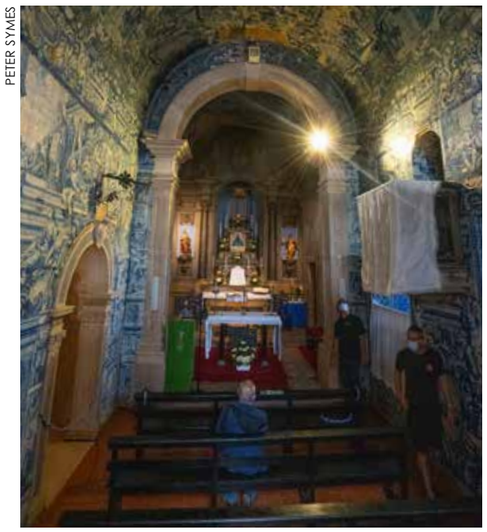

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Dive boat heading out to the Berlengas Islands from Peniche (above)

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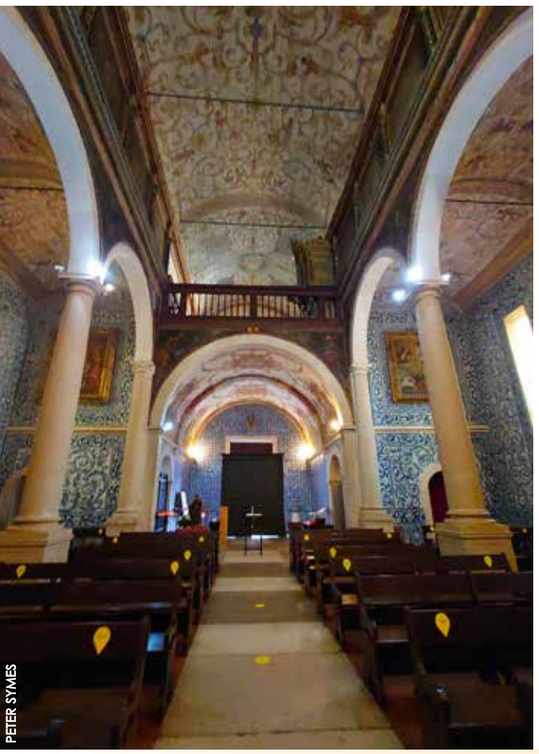
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Picturesque alley typical of Óbidos (top left). The Castle of Óbidos is a well-preserved medieval castle (top centre). Visitor enjoying the view over the town from the castle (above). Flowers adorn the cobblestoned pedestrian streets and white houses of Óbidos (left). Intricately decorated interior of a local church (bottom far left).

What delights surfers, however, is not necessarily what divers are looking for. This is an exposed Atlantic coastline, where swell and breaking waves can make conditions challenging. Offshore, the Berlengas offer something quite different: rocky islands, reefs, walls and potentially clear waters away from the immediate mainland coast. So, while surfers come to Peniche precisely because of its waves, divers tend to look towards those islands that sit out on the horizon.

## Óbidos

There was still more to see in the area. About 25km from Peniche, we found the very picturesque little town of Óbidos, which seemed to attract a fair number of tourists—and for good reason.

Approaching it, the first thing that struck me was how completely it still resembled the fortified medieval settlement it once was. Whitewashed houses clustered on the hillside beneath a castle, all enclosed within an almost complete circuit of old walls.

Óbidos has a history stretching back well before Portugal itself. The settlement predates the Romans and was later under Moorish rule before being captured in 1148 by Afonso Henriques, Portugal's first king.

A particularly interesting chapter began when King Dinis gave Óbidos to his wife, Queen Isabel, in the 13th century. It subsequently became associated with successive Portuguese queens as part of the Casa das Rainhas, or Queens' Estate.

Inside the walls was a maze of narrow, cobbled streets, whitewashed houses edged with blue and yellow,

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Lush bougainvillea flowers in Óbidos (above); Small shots of ginja, a Portuguese liqueur made from sour cherries, served in thimble-sized, edible, chocolate cups (left)

small squares, churches, flower boxes and little shops. The castle dominated the upper part of the town, and the fortifications remained remarkably intact.

It was undeniably touristy in places, but not so much that the medieval character disappeared beneath it all. There was still considerable pleasure simply in wandering around without any particular destination.

And there were other treats to enjoy. One of the local specialities was *ginjinha*, also called *ginja*, a sweet liqueur made from sour cherries. We got to sample it in the particularly enjoyable Óbidos fashion, with the liqueur served in tiny, thimble-sized cups made from thin chocolate. You drink the ginja, and then eat the glass. It seems a rather good way to end the day. ■

*Dive travel arrangements to the Berlengas Islands can be booked through* ***PortugalDive.com****.*

BERLENGAS ISLANDS: PRACTICAL INFORMATION

GETTING THERE: Boats for Berlenga Grande depart from Peniche. The crossing typically takes 30-45 minutes and is dependent on Atlantic weather and sea conditions.

ACCESS: Visitor numbers on Berlenga Grande are restricted. A BerlengasPass is required for visitors going ashore.

WHEN TO GO: Boat services and visitor facilities are most readily available during the main season, broadly from spring through early autumn.

AT SEA: Bring drinking water, sun protection, something warm for the crossing or surface interval, and sufficient food or snacks for the day.

CONDITIONS: The archipelago is exposed to the Atlantic. Wind, swell and currents can alter plans or lead to cancelled crossings and dives. ■

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