

## Ocean

### Vila Vita Parc, Algarve

Words: Harry McKinley

Portugal's Algarve was once seen as something of a mixed bag. Areas like Praia de Rocha, in the southern section of Portimao, garnered a reputation for hard partying, karaoke bars and cafs with plastic seats. But in recent years the region has undergone an image overhaul internationally, putting its best foot forward as the home to idyllic villages, world-class resorts and as the country's culinary heart. The Algarve now holds roughly half of Portugal's Michelin stars.

Vila Vita Parc is one resort appealing to an affluent and sophisticated demographic, with its eight restaurants, six bars and underground wine cellar. Comprised of 170 rooms and villas over a sprawling 22,000m<sup>2</sup> clifftop site, it embodies both old Portugal and new.

Its most prestigious restaurant, the two Michelin star Ocean – one of only three two star restaurants in the country – has recently undergone a complete refurbishment, with a slick new design intended to better reflect and showcase the work of executive chef Hans Neuner.

“Now was the time for a deep change,” says Vila Vita Parc's managing director Kurt Gillig. “In the past the restaurant didn't reflect the evolution and style of Hans. So when you have a contemporary style, the cutlery, tabletop, ornaments and



Photography: Vasco Celio



Photography: Paulo Barata

the overall aesthetic have to reflect that to create a full experience. It's a mirror of the work the team is doing." Having worked in three Michelin Star restaurants and having visited more than 50 around the world, Gillig understands the constant attention required to firstly obtain, and then retain, the accolade. Stars aren't simply a recognition of the quality and scope of the restaurant,

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they're an important asset in appealing to visitors and gaining exposure to a global audience. "Gaining a second star put us on the radar of an important culinary customer and that has an impact, not just on the restaurant, but on the property and the destination," he says. "It's important for the hotel business and for the region to have Ocean here. It's why it's fully booked everyday."

Of the resort's business, approximately 40% is derived from its F&B operations. So with such a large stake invested

in its ability to draw in guests, not just to sleep but to eat, it's understandable why a hefty dose of importance is levied upon the diamond in its dining crown. Ocean's refurbishment isn't simply a facelift but a complete reimagining of the space. There's talk that the aim is an ever-elusive third star. Mention that, however, and one gets the impression there's a fear of jinxing the whole thing if it's said aloud.

Regardless of intention, the new-look restaurant is a remarkable feat of design. Contemporary, assertive and imbued with a distinct personality, its impact is immediate and lasting. As much a part of the 'decoration' as the precious African coral that nestles in shelving along the main wall, the view isn't so much a backdrop as a focal point. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcase the ocean from which the restaurant derives its name: a captivating slice of horizon compelling guests to pull up a seat and stare. These can be fully opened to allow the sea breeze to billow in.

Despite the complexity and detail of the interior design, no agency was used and the refurbishment was an in-house endeavour.

A short gangway leads guests into the restaurant, hanging crystals from Murano lining either side. From



Photography: Vasco Celio

Italian glass specialist Barovier & Toso – one of the oldest family businesses in the world – they’re intended to reflect the omnipresent blue of the sea and sky, and the golden sands of the Algarve itself.

In the restaurant proper, seating is widely dispersed, with a 30-cover capacity. A 300-year old piece of solid oak forms

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the chef’s table, accommodating six guests and overlooking the kitchen.

The crafted wooden flooring and silk carpets are from Fashion for Floors; custom-designed tables, chairs and banquettes from Boffi Fratelli and Baxter and Maxalto; and large bronze circular ceiling lamps that hover just overhead from Henke.

The overall impression is dramatic but thoughtfully so. There’s little theatrics for theatrics’ sake. Each detail, from

the grandiose to the subtle, feels considered and purposeful – even if the purpose is simply to add an additional visual dimension.

This balance is ultimately a reflection of chef Hans Neuner’s culinary approach. His tasting menu features the now almost essential array of foams, broths, gels and artfully carved vegetables. But no element is the awkward guest at the party. Every component is there for a reason and fully at home. “My philosophy is to bring the product to the plate in the most genuine way possible,” says Neuner. Nonetheless in their presentation each dish provides the all-important Instagram moment.

The menu itself is a complex one. Seasonal and local, many of the ingredients come from the resort’s own farm. “We grow much of our produce on site so I have control over what is going into my dishes,” says Neuner. “This year we will add a few thousand square metres to our garden and increase the number and diversity of products.”

The emphasis is on a lighter, more modern interpretation of Portuguese cuisine. Langoustine is teamed with cabbage, and beef with grapefruit. Specially created serving dishes –



Photography: Vasco Celio

from JL Coquet and Fürstenberg – add an artful element. Sticks holding crispy morsels jut from white porcelain fashioned into coral shapes; bulbous spherical bowls hold precisely placed seafood; and intricately styled combinations of meat and veg sit in vast expanses of space on oversized plates. Cutlery from Sambonet is religiously whisked away and replaced between each course.

With the resort holding one of the largest private collections on the Iberian peninsula, wine is also a key element of the Ocean experience. A specially created wine room at the restaurant holds 560 carefully selected vintages. Handpicked and paired by sommelier Nelson Marreiros, they are available by the glass thanks to the revolutionary Coravin extraction method. Guests can enjoy rare vintages, such as the 2001 Château Mouton Rothschild (Bordeaux) or the Casa Ferreirinha Barca Velha (Douro), in glassware from Zalto and decanters from Riedel – should they decide that ‘by the glass’ just won’t cut it.

Thanks to its creativity, cuisine and reputation Ocean has ultimately

proved a pull for staying and non-staying guests alike, with a roughly 50 / 50 split. With the refurbishment complete and a bold stage to call his own, chef Hans Neuner admits that it takes a combination of factors to create a successful restaurant and deliver an experience that will impress. “It’s a perfect balance of good company, good produce, good products and setting. At Ocean we bring all of these together – the unique atmosphere of the dining room with the Atlantic Ocean as a backdrop, where the kitchen and dining area are seamlessly integrated. The good company, of course, is up to the customers,” he says with a laugh.

So what of that third star? Time will tell if the new look and menu will deliver but Gillig still, coyly, has his eye on the prize. “Design is fine, but it’s important that the restaurant delivers an experience. With Michelin Stars comes attention and with 1.6million visitors to the Algarve every year, I wouldn’t be doing my job if I wasn’t interested in tapping that potential.”

[www.restauranteocean.com](http://www.restauranteocean.com)

**IN A BITE** Covers: 30 • Operator: Vila Vita Hotels • Executive Chef: Hans Neuner • Tableware: JL Coquet, Fürstenberg • Glassware: Zalto, Riedel • Cutlery: Sambonet • Decorative Crystal: Barovier & Toso • Flooring and Carpets: Fashion for Floors • Tables and Chairs: Boffi Fratelli, Baxter and Maxalto • Lighting: Henke