

Ageing as an expat in the Algarve: good practices among retired migrants

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Resumo A história de vida de uma reformada inglesa radicada no Algarve, envolvida em atividades associativas e de ocupação de tempos livres destinadas a migrantes britânicos fixados no Algarve mostra as estratégias de adaptação desses migrantes e práticas específicas de envelhecimento ativo.

Palavras-chave imigrantes reformados, associativismo, envelhecimento ativo, Algarve.

Abstract The life story of a retired Englishwoman established in Algarve and involved in associative and free-time occupation activities directed at British migrants in the Algarve shows the adaptation strategies of these migrants and specific practices for active ageing.

Keywords retired immigrants, associativism, active ageing, Algarve.

* CRIAR, Club for Retired International Algarve Residents.

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It hardly seems possible that almost thirty years have gone by since I arrived in Portugal as a single person, thinking I would be able to find a life here, meet someone to share my adventure and lead an uncomplicated existence in the sunshine.

It would have simplified things if I had learnt the language as it was difficult in those days to find the information you needed in order to comply with all the complicated rules and regulations.

The logistics of starting a new life in a foreign country were formidable. It was impossible even to arrange for a telephone to be installed and there was nobody to help you to find your way around all the many different local council offices.

I remember, after deciding to buy a half built house on a hectare of land, that the lawyer actually drove me to Lisbon to sort out the papers which I needed for achieving *residência* status.

I decided to come to Portugal for a new life after spending a holiday in Madeira where most of the hotel staff was Portuguese. They suggested that I would enjoy visiting Portugal for my next holiday. The following January I spent a week in Lagos and it was during that time that I fell in love with the people, their way of life, the climate, and the simple lifestyle. I arranged for my 15 year old daughter to attend the International School.

We set off in a fierce gale one September night, all our possessions crammed into a Renault 4, heading for the Plymouth ferry to Santander. The weather was so terrible we almost turned back. My daughter was not happy at all. We were both very sea sick and embarked on the long drive to the Algarve feeling very seedy. Not a good start and my daughter never spoke a word to me throughout the whole arduous journey.

We had arranged to head for the Motel in Lagoa and other than that we had no real plans. Looking back now it was complete madness on my part and we did have to do a U turn the following year so that Caroline could attend college in the UK. She had hated the International School and missed her friends. It was to be four years later that I returned to Portugal, this time alone.

For the next three or four years I tried to find a job, a home, a life and make friends. It seemed to me that unless you played golf, tennis or bridge there was no opportunity to make friends even though everyone was friendly.

I always felt there was a need for some kind of social group which could cater for all nationalities because unless you belonged to a church, there was no alternative but to use the bars. I can now see how so many people became alcohol dependent. It was sad. I toyed with the idea for years and then saw an advert in the English Resident Magazine for a new group which was called 'Mix and Mingle'. It was the initiative of one of the English reporters called Judy Sharpe. It seemed to be a great idea but before long she decided she could not cope with the workload and approached two or three of us who had joined her club and asked if we could take over.

I agreed but said it would have to be a different format as most of her events were too expensive for people living on fixed pensions.

And that is how the If Club came about – the International Friends.

I was offered a free space in the Resident magazine and published a small advert which read something like:

ATTENTION ANYONE OVER 50 WISHING TO MAKE
NEW FRIENDS AND IMPROVE THEIR SOCIAL LIFE.

You are invited to attend a Buffet Supper on Friday 12th September, 7.30 pm at the Sopa da Pedra Restaurant, Alvor, Drinks included for €10 with a view to forming a social club for singles and couples. Please come and voice your ideas for a programme of events. Booking essential. Etc.etc.

The response was overwhelming, almost 60 people turned up. The buffet supper was almost cancelled as the restaurant owner felt he could not cater for so many people. But in the end we held a really successful evening.

I designed a form entitled WELCOME and asked people to supply ideas and information. A second meeting was arranged where people could join for a fee of £20. Almost thirty people enrolled.

There was obviously a demand for something of this nature and so it was that many lives were to take a different direction. Loneliness, even for couples, can be a real problem.

I remember one person telling me that after her husband died, she simply grieved for five years but on seeing my advert decided she needed to move on. That person met one of her friends at the meeting who had lost his wife, and they got together and spent many happy years together up until his death last year.

She, in turn, brought people together and that was how the ripples just kept bringing people together.

It saddened me that although Portuguese people occasionally attended our events, only one or two actually joined and did not really participate the way I had hoped. Perhaps it was the language problem. And inevitably we had one or two men looking for fun on the side but they were soon told to go elsewhere.

We had a very varied programme with a view to finding something of interest for everyone. I tried to give everyone a sheet for their diary and on reflection it was a bit too ambitious. There was nobody close by to help but at the actual events everyone rallied around and people enjoyed themselves.

One of the most successful regular meetings was at a local restaurant on Sunday afternoons where we had a Brazilian guitarist who sang to each lady and made her feel special. There was always a lovely buffet and space for dancing. Those fortnightly events were very well attended and people still talk about those days.

The biggest problem was that we had no base. So I advertised different venues every week courtesy of the Resident Magazine who gave us free space in their 'What's On' column.

Sometimes, people offered their homes for social evenings and they were always very enjoyable. People would bring a dish and everyone helped. That was a nice way for people to get acquainted and many friendships have survived to this day.

The local charities often arranged fund raising events and we supported them. It worked well for everyone, such things as barn dances, Valentine's Night parties, Casino games, quiz nights, etc. They kept me informed of their functions and I advertised them in our column.

Bill, an American gentleman who had been an *empresário* in New York, was in his seventies and still played tennis. He organised matches between players who lived in his area.

Another member, Bob, had a boat and he also arranged sailing days with members in his area.

The secret of the success of the If Club was the contact list. I published a list of all the members who were happy to be included. This just gave their names, location, interests, phone number/email address and whether they were single, married or divorced. We also published birthdays but not their ages. There was space also to list people's particular interests and hobbies. Hence there was a network of people, some of whom never attended a function at all.

It would have been ideal to find sponsors and publish a newsletter with advertising but this was outside of my expertise. I was just a good typist and able to use a computer.

I was always on the end of the phone for anyone who wanted to talk to me. This was time consuming but I felt I was providing a useful service and also able to help people with general information. I think many members were really grateful for that kind of help. Nowadays they have professional organisations such as AFPOP.

We had a few keen walkers in the club who organised lovely scenic hikes, usually ending in a restaurant for lunch.

On two occasions we spent a whole weekend together. The trip to Granada was wonderful, despite the torrential rain and we did have one or two minor mishaps on that occasion. One person's luggage had been left behind and she had to borrow clothes from other members. It was quite amusing. We had one elderly lady who fell from a bar stool and caused a bit of scene but thankfully she was not too badly injured. And another lady was left behind after everyone had shared a taxi back to the hotel and ended up being driven home by the local police. All these things have become 'shared memories' which are important as you grow older.

I have suffered health problems over the last two years and have been unable to keep up with the work but now other people are following on. One person in particular has started a newsletter with events the choice of various classes and get together. None of them are free however. He has been able to find advertisers to cover the cost of printing a very attractive newsletter, and although it's in its early stages, looks very promising.

That initiative is called 'Tomorrow'.

I changed the name of my club to CRIAR, Club for Retired International Algarve Residents, when I thought I had found someone to take over the If Club. The person never actually managed to get started because of her domestic situation and now I am receiving communications from people who have returned to the Algarve and want to re connect with old friends. It seems the ripples will keep going. One of our members is planning to arrange affordable excursions; we already had one lovely river trip from Portimão to Silves so several of us can keep in touch. Many members have now gone back to UK mostly for health reasons, a few have died, and others moved away. But I think the If Club made its mark and will be remembered.

Looking back over the life I have lived here in Portugal, I can see that it is difficult to actually integrate with the Portuguese people. I know many ex Pats who have never been invited into a Portuguese home as I have. I realised that the Portuguese are a

very proud and somehow aristocratic people. Even the market traders eat together and serve food as good as any restaurant, with tureens, and wine on the table. Their children are happy and are trained to help from an early age. Those children are rarely seen crying and they play together without any sophisticated computerised games.

Families are important here and maybe that is why they do not include '*estrangeiros*' in their lives.

The respect which is shown for older people is a credit to the way the Portuguese bring up their families. I have never felt intimidated by groups of teenagers as I would in UK. They are polite and helpful.

I have learned a great deal. Meals are very important and are never rushed. It used to irritate me that shops would close for three hours but it's great to be able to go to the shops in the evening when the weather is cooler.

You can almost set your watches by the smell of grilled sardines around 12.30. And even though it is a very simple meal, the salad is so fresh, the bread is so perfect and the boiled potatoes with their herb dressing have a special quality which is so typical of this region.

The youngsters do not appear to be slaves to fashion and they are healthy and athletic. Many of the girls on the beaches are far more attractive than the magazine fashion models with their pouting faces. The Portuguese are a smiling people and appear to enjoy life no matter what their circumstances.

The old men who congregate to play cards and dominos in the street epitomise the contentment and acceptance of old age. I have never seen any ex Pats joining them. I feel sure it's only the language.

The younger generation might be different. They have had their eyes opened to the outside world with travel and communication technology – they mostly speak good English.

But I think growing old in this environment has got to be better than anywhere else.

Unfortunately, the cost of living seems to be going out of control and many exPats are now leaving to take advantage of the Social Security and support which is available in UK.

There does not appear to be much support, no Pension Credit, no free travel, no free medicines, no health visitors to call on the old people who are alone. It is a big problem and will get worse as people live longer.

For myself I have to make the decision as to whether I stay here, living alone with insufficient income, but enjoying the way of life and the wonderful climate, or go back to UK where I would find organisations like Help the Aged, Age Concern, etc (I believe they are now called Age UK), who will always find ways of helping people like myself.

I have put roots down here and spent a third of my life trying to adapt to the lifestyle and to comply with all the many rules and regulations. Yes, I seem to be forever chasing bits of paper for one thing or another.

For years I have been playing the organ for the Catholic Mass and there is nobody to take my place if I leave. And the old boy in Burgau who is 90 depends on me. I also have four animals whose owners are all deceased and they are very important to me. They are my closest friends.

I live in a house which is too big for me, which I cannot afford to maintain and which I cannot sell. I am not alone. Many people who arrived here as couples to enjoy their retirement are now living without the deceased partner, often living in rural areas and some unable to drive. It's a problem which will get worse as people are living longer.

I attach a picture of one of the happiest couples I know. Margaret will soon be 90 and says she has had a wonderful life here, writing regular articles for the local magazine called Country Matters. They have been here for 26 years and are not planning to go back. But one of them will one day be on their own. Thank God for the Internet!!

They complimented the medical care they have both received here – said it was 150% and they too have appreciated the kindness and generosity of their Portuguese neighbours.

To summarise, growing old in Portugal is wonderful if you have sufficient financial resources, and enjoy reasonably good health. The Internet has made a big difference to isolated people's lives but I believe that much could be done to provide computers and a bit of training for the ones who think they are too old to learn anything new. Maybe that day will come.

I didn't realise that I looked old until quite recently. I was waiting for my granddaughter outside her school and her five year old friend Megan was looking very intently at me. 'What is it Megan?' I asked her and she said 'Are you very, very old?'. I was taken aback and replied, 'Well, I suppose I am old, but not very, very old'. She then asked 'Will my mummy be like you when she is old?'.


On returning home I looked in the mirror and I realised that, yes, I have grown old and I had not even noticed.