

## Why the Algarve is a safe place to visit

When we formed as an Associação Safe Communities Algarve in 2012, (subsequently Safe Communities Portugal) I chose the name carefully, as “Safe Communities” is fundamental in enjoying a high quality of life, including all the economic and social benefits that it brings.

Safety of course is depended on many factors, such as the crime level, rural fires and now as we have seen, Covid-19.

One of the reasons that people have traditionally chosen to live and visit the Algarve, is because it is a Safe place.

### Safety and Tourism

The recent travel advice to Portugal from some countries, resulting from Covid-19, although aimed at protecting travellers themselves, as well as their own residents upon return, does inevitably send a signal that Portugal, including the Algarve, has somehow become less safe.



PSP FALCO welcoming tourists at Faro airport before Covid 19

Whereas we are not in a position to question the rationale adopted by these countries, it does beg the question of whether there should be a more standardized approach, in other words a common criteria which more uniformly identifies the risk. As it stands each country applies its own criteria – but the disease is the same.

### What makes the Algarve safe?

Firstly it is important to acknowledge that according to many surveys “safety and security” is one of the main reasons where people chose a holiday. The World Tourism Organisation stated this 24 years ago and it is still very true today.

The Algarve has long been seen as a safe destination and a tremendous amount of work goes into trying to keep it that way. This is certainly the case with crime, which despite a nominal increase in 2019 has decreased by over 20% in the last 10 years – violent crime even more so.

In terms of fires there is an inherent risk in many hot and dry countries, but the fact is that last year the number of fires decreased by over 40%. There is also a greater acknowledgement of the importance of sound and effective communication for tourists concerning rural fire awareness and prevention in languages they can understand. Portugal is better prepared for this than ever before.

Also important has been the more recent involvement of the tourism authorities in safety and security. As we have always said at Safe Communities if these messages can be got across in a positive way, it will not deter tourism, but conversely encourage it - because people will feel safe. A safe country sends the right signals overseas and encourages tourism.

Dealing with people's perception of the risk and prevalence of Covid-19 is not dissimilar to that of crime or indeed rural fires. Often perception can cause more social alarm than the actual situation itself. Indeed when there is much negativity, say on social media because people are unaware of the facts, people become more disillusioned and negativity spreads.

This is why it is important in a crisis to deal with this objectively, avoid speculation, ascertain the full picture and then make decisions.

In the case of Covid-19, Portugal has done a great job in my opinion. The laws and strategies that the Portuguese government put into place at the early stages have served the country well. There was clarity and the introduction of the State of Emergency, which included laws to ensure compliance. This has not been the same in some other countries with frequently changing guidelines that people have ignored, leading to a total disrespect concerning social distancing, wearing of masks etc.

The outbreak in the Lagos area due to an illegal party coupled with the problems in certain parts of Lisbon are certainly not typical of the country indeed the regions as a whole. The fact that to date after 4 months in the Algarve around 800 have contracted the disease, nearly 70% recovered and only around 10 in hospital, gives me the impression that the Algarve is a safe place.

Like unreported crime there is much about Covid-19 that is unknown and the extent of the disease in all countries is probably higher than the recorded figures. This is why in my personal opinion that in assessing risk it is important to take into account other factors as well such as the initiatives a country takes in reducing the risk of contract the disease in the first place.

For instance Portugal gained an international travel award for its Clean and Safe Seal, the involvement of national youth associations in helping people, the tremendous work of the ABC centre in their testing programs, which certainly have gone a long way in controlling these outbreaks. Also the transparency which Portugal has adopted in its testing program by using the asymptomatic approach, thereby identifying cases which may not have been identified in other countries, who do not use this strategy to the extent of Portugal.

So the question to ask in choosing a safe holiday as far as Covid-19 is concerned, is simply this – “What are the chances of me and my family catching the disease whilst on holiday in Portugal?” Similar to “What are the chances of being robbed or burned in a rural fires?”

Concerning Covid-19 my conclusion is that the Algarve is safe. The reasons for this being that the numbers are low, compliance is high, people are wearing their facemasks, hygiene is well practiced in accordance with long standing government guidelines and social distancing is widely practiced. **To keep it that way when tourists do arrive in larger numbers PLEASE respect our rules and do not undue what has taken a lot of sacrifice for us to achieve.** So despite the restrictions imposed by various corridors and traffic lights (which blink from time to time), people should chose a holiday here in the Algarve; that is if they want safety and security, plus of course the welcoming nature of the Portuguese, great food and wine and its great weather to name but a few.