

10 Curious Facts About Cape St. Vincent

Fourth century AC: a pile of human remains drifts ashore in a far-flung, rocky outpost of the then Roman province of Lusitania. The gruesome cadaver belongs to Vincent of Saragossa, a martyr slaughtered by Emperor Diocletian. Protecting the flesh and bones from the vultures flying above was a band of vigilant ravens; the place where his sanctified bones landed ashore was later christened 'Cape St Vincent'. Even today, both vultures and ravens inhabit Cape St Vincent. But not St Vincent's relics: they were transferred to Lisbon in the 12th century, still accompanied by ten overflying ravens, the legend goes. That's why the shiny black birds are depicted in the Coat of Arms of Lisbon.

This rugged, forbidding Cape, being the most south-westerly point in mainland Europe, has long been considered sacred ground – ancient Greeks called it the 'Land of Serpents', the pugnacious Romans oddly preferred a meeker designation: Promontorium Sacrum ('Holy Promontory'), the Latin origin of the name 'Sagres' (from Sacrum). For them, terra firma-loving citizens of Rome, Cape St. Vincent was the 'Edge of the World', a supernatural vortex where the setting sun was dramatically submerged by the immense, unknown ocean (still today, the fading solar disk occasionally seems bigger and brighter at Cape St. Vincent). The myth persisted throughout the Middle Ages, until a man decided to end all that crazy nonsense and – in the process – put an end to the Age of Darkness: Prince Henry the Navigator (1394 – 1460).

The astronomically lucrative spice trade between Europe and the Far East was dominated by Arab merchants and their über-rich Venetian allies. "Why not bypass the infidel middlemen, locate Prester John, expand Christianity and humiliate the Muslim enemy?" Henry thought. The way to achieve those ambitious goals, he realized, was to send heavily armed flotillas into the perilous Atlantic in order to chart 'New Worlds', and new, oceanic routes to fabulous India. It was a giant leap of faith – nobody knew for sure whether Earth was round or flat, or even if there was a feasible sea lane into the mysterious Far East – that demanded new technologies, fortitude and brainpower. The far-sighted venture paid off in spades. In 1498, almost 40 years after Henry's death, Vasco da Gama finally landed in Calicut, India. The fates of East and West, India, China and Japan, Africa and Europe, started to diverge that same year. Portugal was to become the forerunner in the Age of Discovery. In its wake, scrambling for pepper and nutmeg, followed the Dutch, the Spanish, the British, the French...

As the supreme mastermind, Henry assembled the best astronomers-astrologers, mathematicians, naval architects and (the most intrepid or downright foolish) sailors he could find. Some say The Navigator founded a nautical school in Sagres – in fact, it was more like a scientific institute, the first of its kind in the World, and it allegedly functioned where Sagres

Fortress now stands. A giant compass rose within the Sagres stronghold seems to corroborate that assumption. However, nobody knows for certain. Why?

Because at 9:40 a.m. local time, the first day of November 1755, Earth's crust suddenly unleashed a colossal amount of energy, creating the strongest earthquake and the highest tsunamis ever witnessed in European history. The hugely destructive 1755 Lisbon Earthquake razed the algarvian cities to the ground – including Sagres – and annihilated cosmopolitan Lisbon, the capital of the Portuguese Empire, together with centuries of nautical charts, historical records, and technical documents. A part of Portuguese history was wiped out during an otherwise quite historic Saturday morning. The event aggravated political strains within the Kingdom of Portugal and utterly disrupted the country's colonial purposes. Portugal gradually lost its global influence. Despite its name, the epicentre of this massive quake was not in Lisbon. The real culprit?

Saint Vincent's Fault, about 180 km southwest of Cape St. Vincent – in the vicinity where all the glory started to take shape, all the aspirations started to crumble. Yet, effulgent grandeur and abrupt changes of fortune were nothing new to the Cape. A real 'Playground of Empires', between 1337 and 1833 the watery surface off St. Vincent witnessed no less than nine major naval combats. A staggering total by any account, this average number of almost two great military clashes per century accurately reflects the strategic importance of the Cape. Eight battles and a naval action bear the label 'Cape St. Vincent' be it to the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the Algerian, the French, the German (Brandenburg) or the British. These same British would produce the other great mastermind whose naval actions are forever linked to Cape St. Vincent.

During the French Revolutionary Wars, the Kingdom of Spain declared war on the opposing Anglo-Portuguese long-held alliance. Suddenly, the British position in southern Europe came under mortal threat: how to access the Mediterranean if the Spaniards and French were blocking its entrance with no less than 38 ships of the line? Just slightly worried about battling French and Foe with only 15 ships, Sir John Jervis (later, Earl St. Vincent) proceeded to broke enemy lines. It was the 14th day of February, 1797. Under his authority, there was a perennially seasick Commodore mastering a small 74-gun ship named HMS Captain.

Disobeying orders, the seasick, soon-to-be famous 39 years-old Horatio Nelson, decided to engage three much larger rival ships. One of them (the 130-gun Santísima Trinidad) was the heaviest-armed vessel in the World. After a protracted hour-long fight, Nelson captured two of the three larger enemy ships while inflicting heavy damage on the huge Santísima Trinidad. Looming in the horizon, the Cape witnessed as another rising star contributed decisively to yet one more brilliant outcome.

Nowadays, the most brilliant spot at Cape St Vincent is the Portuguese Navy's St. Vincent Lighthouse. Safeguarding one of the world's most hectic shipping lanes, it hurls a powerful white

beam 60 km into the dark expanse of the ocean. It is the second most powerful lighthouse in European territory after Phare du Creach, in Brittany. But you cannot visit the premises, unfortunately. But you might observe Roman awe-inducing sunsets, and the annual gatherings of Griffon and Egyptian vultures – we bet that there still are some vigilant ravens nearby.

Source: walkalgarve.com/attractions-and-things-to-do-in-algarve/cape-st-vincent