Conference Excursion – Wednesday, October 7, 2015
Silves, Castelo de Silves (Silves Castle) and Monchique

The Town of Silves
Silves is an enchanting town filled with orange and lemon trees, sitting on the banks of the Arade River ("Rio Arade"). There is history everywhere you look in Silves, to remind you of its affluent and bold past as a Moorish capital ("Xelb"). The importance of Silves lay in the fact that it was the main access to the inland areas of the Algarve because of its river location, although the river is now too silted up for large vessels to use.

The castle once sheltered the old Moorish ‘alcáçova’ which was the residence of the lord of the city. Not much remains of the defensive walls and towers which protected Silves, but one of the four gates remains and is the ‘Torreão da Porta da Cidade’ (The turret of the City Gate). Inside the tower are two rooms and annexes which now house the Municipal Library.

Sé de Silves (Cathedral of Silves) one of the Algarve’s few remaining gothic monuments with ancient tombs, sits alongside the castle and a network of narrow, cobbled streets take you down into the town.

Another impressive sight is the 'Cruz de Portugal' (the Cross of Portugal), a 3 meter tall limestone cross dating from the 15th or 16th century. There is also a regional history museum Musueu Municipal de Arquelógia (Municipal Archaeological Museum).

Silves has a very pretty central square, Praça do Municipio, with palms and flowers, beautiful gardens, and a newly paved river front which leads to the swimming pool and beyond. The municipal market building is on the main street opposite the river, and along this same street are numerous cafés with outside seating offering lovely river views. Within the town, there are cobbled streets, cafés and shops, some beautiful buildings from the times when Silves was a rich merchant town and remnants of the old walls, including the tower which now houses the municipal library.

The Castle
Silves Castle (Castelo de Silves) was probably built on the site of late Roman or Visigoth fortifications from the 4th/5th centuries. Built by the Almoravid Arabs in the 11th century, the imposing Silves Castle is today a popular tourist destination, although it still serves as a distinct reminder of the grandeur of the art of the Muslims, reflecting the splendor attained by the Islamic civilization in the Algarve.

It is the ideal space for enjoying a trip into the Portuguese past and for appreciating the fabulous view over the city of Silves, the countryside and the River Arade below, from what is surely the most beautiful vantage point in southern Portugal. Classified as a national monument since 1910, Silves Castle is today the largest, most important and best conserved castle in the Algarve.

The enormous main gate, which can be reached through the Medina, is protected by two towers, and the guardhouse, which, although no longer used, seems to cast a wary eye over the visitors as they enter the fortress. Dug out of the wall to the north, a wicket gate known as the "traitors’ gate" draws attention visitors not only because of its name but because it provides direct access to the outside.

Among the various interesting features inside the walled enclosure are the relaxing garden and the underground food stores, old Arab silos which can be entered through small openings at ground level. The Moorish Cistern, roughly 10 meters high and with four vaulted ceilings supported on columns, and the Cistern of the Dogs, a well 60 meters deep, bring to mind many of the stories from a Thousand and One Nights. Legend has it that the attentive visitor can hear the wailing laments of the enchanted Moorish maiden, who is still crying over the death
of her beloved at the bottom of the well where he committed suicide.

Inside the castle nothing remains of the buildings that must have been there but partially excavated foundations. In 1722 and 1755 two heavy earthquakes also damaged the castle. In 1940 the castle was restored.

History
In the year of 1060, Fernando I, King of Leon and Castile seized this magnificent castle and held it for a short time. It was later retaken by the Moors. In 1189, with the help of foreign forces from England, Germany and a contingent of Flemish crusaders, Portuguese forces, attacked the town destroying everything outside of the town’s walls. It took the combined armies six weeks before the Moors surrendered, after an agreement was reached with the Portuguese King Sancho.

The Moors along with all their belongings were allowed to leave unharmed. After leaving the safety of Silves castle with the knowledge that their passage to safety was assured, a group of mercenary Crusaders violated the agreement struck with the King of Portugal and every last man was slaughtered. On top of this atrocity the town was ransacked.

In 1190, a Moorish force lead by Yacub Ben Yussuf tried in vain to retake the castle. His attempts were thwarted due to the town being stoutly defended by Christian forces with the help of Richard the Lionhearted. A more successful attempt was made a year later.

The rollercoaster ride for ownership of the castle at Silves was again brought to the fore when it was retaken by Sancho I, in 1198 with the help of German Crusaders. This time around Sancho was unable to keep the castle from falling into enemy hands and gave the order for it to be dismantled. In 1242, Silves was finally conquered by the Master of the Order of Santiago; Don Paio Peres Correia, during the reign of Alfonso III, who ordered it to be restored. It is his statue that can bee seen just outside the castles gate.

Monchique
Monchique is a typical village nestled in the scenic hillside of the Algarve. It is noted for its hot springs and interesting local handicrafts, especially pottery, baskets, soft leather slippers, gloves and wooden items. The town was one the Spa of King John II (15th century) who believed that these waters had healing properties.

The highest point of the Algarve is Foia – just a short drive from Monchique.