

Enchanted by the Azores

Get lost in a world that once was

By Kristy Alpert



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Forlornly nestled among in the azure waters of the Atlantic Ocean, the Azores islands are all at once strangely familiar and entirely foreign. Powerful salty waves crash harshly against dark volcanic stone on one coastline, while hearty herds of cattle graze freely within the low stone-stacked walls of pristinely maintained green pastures.

This grouping of islands could be worlds away judging by the unpolluted landscape and rustic remnants of settlers past, but in reality, a trip to this Portuguese province only takes about four and a half hours via SATA Airlines from Frankfurt International Airport, making the islands the perfect place to escape for a few days without wasting precious vacation time in the air.

The Azores are made up of nine separate islands that were completely uninhabited up until the Portuguese discovered them in the early half of the 15th century. Not one person had previously stepped foot on the islands until those first sailors walked ashore from their boats, literally laying the path toward what would become one of the world's most underrated oceanfront retreats.

Although more than five centuries have passed since the first group of Portuguese pilgrims settled on the islands, the Azores have remained relatively un-influenced by mainstream Western culture, adding to its charm as a raw and unsoiled paradise. Temperatures fluctuate only slightly throughout the year between 14°C and 22°C, and one look

around the scenic landscapes proves exactly why the word "stress" isn't part of the local vocabulary. Sapphire blue and emerald green lakes dot the countryside between vibrant farmlands and volcanic

craters, while seamlessly trickling in to the quaint cobblestoned villages.

Ferryboats and regional flights charter visitors to and from these sparsely situated islands. No two islands in the Azores are alike in terms of ambience and environment, and, although there is a uniform sense of commonality and harmony throughout the archipelago, each of the nine islands plays its own unique role in the story of the Azores.

São Miguel

Also known as "The Green Island," São Miguel is by far the most popular island to start with when visiting the Azores. It is the largest in terms of land and has the greatest population in the archipelago, with most of the locals residing in the main city of Ponta Delgada. The island is a hub for all types of adventures, and one of the best tour operators in the Azores (Picos de Aventura) operates directly out of Ponta Delgada, offering whale-watching trips, dolphin encounters, hiking guides, canyoning tours, jeep excursions, and more. The only tea plantations in Europe are on this island, and there's a huge surfing scene over at Praia de Santa Barbara, where it's not uncommon to see pro surfers lapping up spoons full of ice cream with locals and tourists near the beach. The Hotel Talisman and the Hotel Do Colegio are both great spots to stay for experiencing Ponta Delgada's day markets (make sure to buy some pineapple at the Mercado da Graca), local lunch spots (Sardinha, a.k.a. Mane Cigano, is Anthony Bourdain's favorite place to munch on fresh fish with locals), and local nightlife scene (check out Cantinho dos Anjos).

Pico

Anyone looking to unwind with some wine will find solace on Pico. The second largest of the islands, Pico is a UNESCO World Heritage site and is home to the highest point of all the Azores, Ponta do Pico, a stratovolcano located 2,351 meters above sea level. It's the volcanic soil on the island that makes the wines produced here so unique among European blends. Light and mineral whites are sold all over the world, while visitors would do well to stock up on the island's full-bodied reds before others catch on to the phenomenal vintages that have been bottled

every year since 2011. These violet hued wines are underappreciated by locals and undiscovered by industry heads, and will age well over the next 8-10 years (READ: buy them now before they're discovered and the price goes up!).

Sao Jorge

This long and lanky island was created by a series of volcanic eruptions in a straight line, creating an almost vertical coastline of cliffs interrupted sporadically by flat areas along the coast called the fajãs. The island is great for exploring on foot, but tons of locals tend to take to the sea with sports fishing and scuba diving luring most people to the water. The other main draw to this island? Cheese. Sao Jorge cheese is famous around the world for its "Queijo de Sao Jorge," a cow's milk cheese, cured for months until the rind turns the color of honey and the cheese develops an almost peppery aroma that works as an appetizer or a dessert.

Santa Maria

The low altitude of this island sets it apart from its sister islands in the Azores in that it maintains a dry, more Mediterranean type of climate year round. The island has some of the best beaches in the archipelago and it's said that Christopher Columbus and his crew celebrated a mass to celebrate their discovery of the New World at the church of Nossa Senhora dos Anjos Chapel before returning home to Spain.

Terceira

Despite its size, Terceira is the second most populated island in the Azores, and is home to an American Air Force Base in the village of Lajes. The culture is incredibly vibrant on this island, with colorful chapels and ancient castle walls from a former royal prison acting as the backdrop for festivals like the Touradas da Corda (bullfighting on a rope), a Portuguese version of the Running of the Bulls that occurs weekly from May 1-Sept. 30.

Corvo

Ah, little Corvo. This petite stretch of seven square miles is the smallest in the



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Azorean archipelago, and daily life on the island is equally as simple. Wooden locks are the main handicraft on the island, and daily activities are centered around watching planes navigate through the peaks and cliffs toward the small airport or hiking down to the two lagoons set deep inside a volcanic crater.

Faial

Although it's referred to as the "Blue Island" due to the abundance of hydrangeas that bloom blue in the central slopes of the island each year, the main activity on Faial actually takes place on another azure part of the island. The tidal pools, black sand beaches, and busy harbor make the water the place to be in Faial. Swimming, sailing, fishing, windsurfing, etc.; you name it and you can do it on the water surrounding this island.

Flores

Named for the abundance of ... wait for it ... flowers freckling the countryside, the isle of Flores is a raw and rugged frontier, bursting with a sort of weathered beauty that's amplified by the waterfalls and lakes saturating the landscape. Hiking and canyoning through the diverse terrain on this island is insanely popular and it's worth the trip to explore the seven lagoas (lakes) in the center of the island.

Graciosa

The island of Graciosa is peppered with quaint fishing villages set among ancient streets and grand manor houses and long-standing windmills. The churches on the island date back to the 16th century, and Santo Cristo Church acts as the main landmark for the city of Santa Cruz da Graciosa. Definitely check out the Furna do Enxofre around noon when the sunlight dances around a vaulted cave towering over an underground lake. ■