

MONICA FRIM finds easygoing rhythms in the natural beauty and charming architecture of islands that entice with the simple pleasures of

THE hiking, kayaking, bicycling and whale-watching.

Azores

**AN ISLAND PARADISE
IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN**

BY MONICA FRIM

Vila Campo do Franca, a seaside town that was once the capital of the Azores. After a sixteenth century earthquake destroyed the town, the capital was transferred to Ponta Delgada.

A piscina naturale on Pico's rugged coast.

The words **'ISLAND PARADISE'** are not normally associated with the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. But if you combine the best of Hawaii, Iceland, New Zealand, and a few other far-flung countries, you'll likely land on a bundle of subtropical islands midway between the United States, Europe and Africa.

Born of fire and brimstone over millions of years, the nine volcanic islands that make up the Azores shoot straight out of the ocean at one of the planet's most turbulent locations—the collision point of the Eurasian, American and African tectonic plates. With sheer cliffs and sky-high headlands that totter over a hodgepodge of black basaltic rocks, and a persistent surf that pummels the coastlines into whimsical contours, the islands are among the world's youngest, wildest and most scenic. Just don't expect white sand



*Azores Islands image not to scale. Enlarged for better visibility. The Azores are 948 miles from Portugal; 2,398 miles from Boston. SATA has regular flights to the Azores from Boston.

beaches or swaying palm trees. These islands entice with fire breathing fumaroles, hot springs, lush green vegetation, glassy crater lakes, and skimpy black sand beaches squeezed between imposing cliffs and coastal rock pools.

Pico (The Black Island)

Each island is informally named after its most dominant color. As the youngest island, Pico is also the blackest and roughest, with lava rocks creating natural swimming pools called *piscinas naturais* along an erratic shoreline, or serving as building materials for *adegas* (winemakers' houses), or as dry stone fences to protect the grape vines from the salty sea winds. For centuries Pico's economy was driven by wine and whales before both industries plummeted and, in the case of the whaling industry, came to a halt in the mid-1980s. Now both industries are enjoying a revival—the wine with hardier grapes, and the whaling with whale-watching tours that fortuitously turn a better profit.

Until the 19th century Verdelho wine was the commercial backbone of Pico Island. But when disease decimated the vineyards, many people immigrated to North America. The industry struggled on with other wines and also produced fig and other brandies. The abandoned *adegas* were turned into vacation homes; and the old cellars, distilleries and warehouses into museums.



The Wine Museum on the outskirts of Madalena is one of the best places to see lava fields turned into fertile vineyards. *Corrais*—lava stone fences (corrals) protect the vines from the salty winds and retain the sun's heat at night.



The city of Horta and the Bay of Pim as seen from the Monte da Guia.

At Porto Cachorro, named for a rock whose shape resembles a puppy (*cachorro*), our guide, Vera, pointed out impressions—now permanently pressed into the hardened lava flows—of the wheels of the old oxcarts that carried the wine to the ports. “About 2,000 barrels crossed the channel between Pico and Faial each year,” said Vera. “The people on Faial owned the vineyards on Pico and exported the wine to Europe.”

We took the coastal road to the old whale processing plant at Cais do Pico where whale blubber was rendered

A dracaena or dragon tree. The dye from its sap (dragon’s blood) was used from the 15th to the 19th centuries.



The Ponta Rasa windmill at São João.

into oil, and bone and gristle ground into animal feed. But a more comprehensive picture emerged at the Whaler’s Museum at Lajes do Pico. Here the entire whaling industry was compressed into masterful displays of whaling tools, scrimshaw works, replicas of whaling boats and a film that drives home the dangers and gruesome nature of the hunt.

It was pouring rain when our next guide, José, took us on a tour of the interior. Mount Pico, the mountain for which the island is named (*pico* means peak) disappeared into the clouds, and the forested lava fields of the *misterios* threw feathery splotches

of green across a misty grey canvas. *Misterios* translates as “mysteries”, the name given to the lava fields by the early islanders who were baffled by the volcanic eruptions that had created them. The misterios were rife with ferns, grey lichens, vines, Australian cheesewood and a variety of pine trees. Here and there clumps of pink belladonna, a leafless decorative flower, poked through the brothy fog. Cactus-like euphorbias sprouted in the cracks of the ubiquitous basalt fences and thick patches of moss grew in the ruins of abandoned houses. There was a sad beauty in the collapse of the properties and in the earth itself—historical tributes to the force of nature and its effect upon the locals.

More uplifting was the sight of acres of vineyards hemmed into stony corrals so unique they’ve been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. The most expansive fields are near Madalena, where the old Carmelite Conventual House houses a museum complete with wine cellar and distillery.

From Madalena our next island stop was a mere 30 minutes away by ferry.

Faial (The Blue Island)

For many years Horta, on the Island of Faial, has been a primary port of call for yachts crossing the Atlantic. Local boats stopped here too—whaling boats and vessels laden with wine from Pico, which used Horta’s harbor because Pico’s unyielding coast could not accommodate the large ships destined for international markets. On the surface it seemed a fair trade—Pico wine for Faial port facilities—had Pico’s vineyards not also been owned by Faial’s elite but



A section of the pier at Horta Harbor with murals painted by sailors.

worked by Pico’s people. Fortunately, the historical grudges are fading slowly as the two islands now share an interdependent tourist trade.

A lot of Azores’ firsts took place in Horta: the first trans-Atlantic communications cable to be laid across the ocean floor, the first support station for ships in World War I, and the first refueling station for airplanes flying from Europe to America. All the while the harbor teemed with whalers unloading their oil; now it’s crammed with whale-touring boats and the yachts of wealthy globetrotters. Azorean superstition holds that sailors must paint a picture on the docks of Horta in order to assure safe passage. As a result every square inch of Horta’s pier and breakwater is covered in colorful murals with new pictures continuously being painted over old. Then, as now, “Peter’s Café Sport” was the most popular bar among those who dropped anchor. Memorabilia left by international sailors hang from walls and ceiling: flags and pennants, plaques and stickers, maps and pictures that go back to the café’s opening in 1918. But the greatest drawing card is the upstairs scrimshaw museum begun in the 1980s by José Azevedo, nicknamed Peter by a homesick British World War II officer. This is arguably one of the best private collections of scrimshaw in the world.

Lava arches at Lajinha.





Capelinhos was formed by a volcanic eruption that lasted from September 1957 to October 1958. It enlarged the island of Faial by one square mile.

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Another must-see restaurant for the décor is
Restaurante Genuíno. The owner, Genuíno Madruga,
sailed solo around the world twice and displays mementos
from every port of call under glass table tops and along
the walls. It's also a good place to savor limpets, a local
delicacy of grilled aquatic snails.

Faial is named the Blue Island for its ubiquitous blue
hydrangeas that divide the fields and pasturelands. Not
that Faial lacks lava for fence material. Still tectonically
active, Faial's most recent volcanic eruption occurred
offshore in the 1950s and lasted for 13 months. It added
almost one square mile to the island and created the
westernmost point of Capelinhos, a barren mound of ash
and lava behind a lighthouse that is now too far from shore
for its intended purpose. Instead it houses an underground
museum with exhibits that tell not only the story of
Capelinhos, but volcanic eruptions all over the world. As we
exit the lighthouse, our guide Susana points to crumbling
roofs poking through the ground—remnants of houses
buried under the lava flows.

We continue our circumnavigation of the island past
empty shells of churches and lighthouses, victims of
Faial's other force of nature: earthquakes. The most recent
occurred in 1998 and left many places, like Ribeirinha,
virtual ghost towns. But if the abandoned buildings

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Genuíno Madruga, who twice sailed solo around the world and now owns the
Restaurante Genuíno on the Bay of Pim, wrote a book about his experiences. He
displays T-shirts and other souvenirs from each port of call on the walls and tables
of his restaurant.

are depressing, the landscape is pure joy. Windblown
headlands and crater rims offer shimmering views of
terraced fields, fissured rocks and whimsical coastal caves
and arches. Above Horta two scenic lookouts—Espalamaca
with its nearly 100-foot cross and statue of Our Lady of the
Conception; and across the harbor, Monte da Guia with its
chapel to Our Lady of Guidance—provide unparalleled views
of Horta's white-washed buildings curling up into the green

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The Cathedral of Angra do Heroísmo towers over the orange clay-tiled roofs of the surrounding houses.



Terceira's wild and lushly vegetated interior is best traversed by a four-wheel drive.



A caldera provides fertile pastureland for a cattle ranches.

pasturelands of the surrounding hills. Stand anywhere on the island and you can trick yourself into thinking you might be in Iceland or Hawaii. But here on the south side, you might also be reminded of Japan: looking seaward, Pico's perfectly conical mountain appears a carbon copy of Mount Fuji.

Terceira (The Lilac Island)

Terceira is arguably the Azores' most colorful island, known for soft-hued sunsets and showy festivals. It's also the object of some friendly ribbing: "On Terceira there is always something happening," said our guide, Nuno. "We say there are eight islands in the Azores and one big party."

That certainly seemed the case the night we arrived in the capital city of Angra do Heroísmo. It was the opening night of Angrajazz, an international festival of world-class musicians held in an old-bull-fighting arena turned Cultural and Conference Center. Here the likes of jazz greats like American Lee Konitz and Norwegian Tord Gustavsen, along with their attendant musicians, and the island-based Orquestra Angrajazz provided a dash of sophistication that was likely absent from the venue's former function.

Nevertheless, we did get an impromptu taste of Terceira's taurine fervor in the seaside village of Biscoitos—known more for its natural lava pools and traditional vineyards. Each day from May to October, one or more

villages hosts a *tourada a corda* (bullfighting on a rope) so named because the bulls run through the streets controlled by a rope held by a team of *pastores*, bull handlers in white shirts and black hats. These events have none of the blood and gore of Pamplona's more famous run (the bull is never killed or harmed), unless you count the boisterous carousing that takes place in the makeshift bars after the bulls have been returned to their pens. Still, the bulls' horns are padded for the run, just in case an overconfident village tease gets a little too close.

First colonized in the 1400s by Flemish settlers, Terceira soon found itself on the wish list of Portuguese, Spanish, French and English invaders. In the end the Portuguese won out but evidence of marauders' interests remain in the form of hundreds of sunken ships and in the Spanish-built 16th century fortifications on Monte Brasil. The Monte is actually an old volcano connected by a small isthmus to Angra on the mainland.

Elsewhere on Terceira, pastel colored houses, brightly trimmed spiritual

chapels known as *Impérios*, volcanic caves and chimneys, verdant craters turned into cattle pastures, and densely forested hiking trails attest to an island life that's almost overpowering in its simplicity. Wild and ruggedly beautiful, the landscape boasts ferns the size of small barns, giant araucaria trees, eucalyptus woods, and sulfur-breathing fumaroles reminiscent of Iceland or New Zealand.

It's a hiker's paradise but with just the right amount of sophistication to keep city slickers enthralled. A UNESCO heritage site, Angra do Heroísmo was almost completely rebuilt after the earthquake of 1980, its 19th century palaces, City Hall, church museums and parks lovingly restored.

São Miguel (The Green Island)

São Miguel's roads twist up, down, and along crater rims with panoramic lookouts to more craters within craters. Forests of laurel, chestnut, heather and holly tumble into valleys that steam and burble with mud pools and natural springs hot enough to cook in. Dry stone fences and boxy hedgerows of trimmed azalea bushes line the roadsides, and purple and blue



Known for a variety of religious festivals, Terceira boasts numerous *Imperios*, colorful spiritual chapels dedicated to the devotion of the Holy Spirit. This one is in the city of Angra do Heroísmo

One of many trails that offer panoramic views of the craters and lakes in the area of Sete Cidades.

Hamming it up on the Blue Lake.



At a village *tourada a corda* (bull fighting on a rope), five bull handlers in white shirts and black hats stand rope in hand, ready to intervene should a street runner require assistance.

A village bullfighter teases a bull with his umbrella.



View from Memory Hill the to the city of Angra do Heroísmo, the harbor and Monte Brasil.



AD

The eighteenth century City Gates at Ponta Delgada were moved from the old quay to their present location on the Gonçalo Velho Cabral Square during the construction of the seaside Prince Henry Avenue.



The Gorreana Tea Plantation near Ribeira Grande produces both green and black varieties of tea. The Azores are the only place in Europe with a climate suitable for growing tea.



hydrangeas, big as beach balls, divide verdant fields and pasturelands just as they do on the other islands.

Hiking paths slice through pumice and jungle-covered terrain to spectacular viewpoints that stretch clear across the island or deep into the blue or green eyes of crater lakes that take on the colors of their surroundings. Of course the locals offer up more intriguing explanations for the different hues—such as the story of the green-eyed princess and blue-eyed shepherd boy whose tears at not being allowed to marry formed the two lakes of Sete Cidades.

Eduardo, our guide, regaled us with a gold-mine of facts and folktales that had me convinced that Sao Miguel packs the best of all the Azores’ islands into one impressive bundle. At Sete Cidades we kayaked from one fabled lake to the other, the two lakes being connected by a narrow strait spanned by a multi-arched bridge. At the eastern end of the island we bicycled around Lagoa das Furnas, another crater lake famous for the nearby underground ovens that slow-cook a *cozido* of meats and vegetables for local restaurants. In the spa town of Furnas, leafy woodlands and berms of flowering bushes flank streets, canals and riversides that lead to hot pools and fountains of turmeric-colored waters that taste as disgusting as they look. Supposedly they’re good for your health.

The town’s Terra Nostra Botanical Garden is the epitome of English, Azorean and international gardening delights. Thousands of flowers, shrubs and trees are set among canals, grottoes and a thermal mineral bath that

turns toenails and bathing suits a ferrous orange. It’s worth packing an old bathing suit for the experience.

More crater lakes dot the landscape between Furnas and Sete Cidades. At Caldeira Velha on the northern slope of Lagoa do Fogo, thermal springs and fumaroles are set within a natural area that includes Australian tree ferns, cheesewood and Kahili ginger as well as native Azorean plants.

When the lush surroundings become too overwhelming, São Miguel’s administrative center of Ponta Delgado provides quaint urban relief. Eduardo leads us along cobbled streets and a seafront promenade through 18th century city gates into the historical canter. Churches and convents, many converted into museums, and warehouses turned into shops and banks, co-exist alongside houses trimmed with tiny wrought-iron balconies and basalt windowsills. Alleys with hostels and small hotels contrast with modern office complexes or lead to pretty parks and public squares adorned with statuary, trees and flowers.

Across the street from the imposing Fortress of São Bras, three life-sized bronze figures point with hope towards America. This is the Monument to the Azorean Emigrants, erected in 1999 in memory of the many islanders who left the Azores. Today they return as tourists to rediscover their motherland. Or, possibly, like other international visitors, they’re finding pieces of Ireland, Iceland, Hawaii, New Zealand....

Bathers relax in a pool of warm mineral water at the Caldeira Velha near Lagoa do Fogo (Fire Lake).



The Blue and Green crater lakes at Sete Cidades.



The cozido consists of various meats and vegetables steamed together underground. After six hours the pot is unearthed and transported to a restaurant in Furnas, a town famous for its fumaroles, mudpools and geysers.

