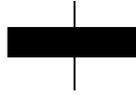


Escape to São Miguel in the Azores, the Portuguese archipelago on the Atlantic Ocean known for its

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verdant landscapes, geothermal springs, craters, and picturesque lakes

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THE GREEN ISLAND

Waves rise and crash against the jagged black cliffs in Lagoa in the south of the island, also known as Ilha Verde – the Green Island – and located 150 kilometres from the mainland, a two-hour-and-twenty-minute flight from Lisbon. São Miguel is famous for its lush vegetation, and when the 15th-century Portuguese explorers came upon the uninhabited islands (there are nine in total that comprise the Azorean archipelago), they found it covered in verdurous, dense evergreen forests. Over coffee, I watch the early morning fog as it rises and swirls around White, a 10-roomed hotel, once a beach house, constructed in the typical Azorean style with large volcanic stones and whitewashed walls. Characterised by mild sub-tropical weather, the Azores in spring offers mist and fog rolling over the ocean, hills and volcanic craters one minute, and clear skies and pleasant rays the next. A raincoat is a good idea, I learn on my first day, accompanied by guide João Almeida. “I am Azorean at heart, Azorean first, then Portuguese,” he shares. Joining us is White’s chef, Manuel Dias, a keen surfer and photographer who was seduced into leaving his restaurant on the mainland in his father’s care, to serve refined plates with bold Azorean flavours at Cardume restaurant.

At breakfast, Dias introduces me to fluffy massa sovada, a sweet bread shaped like an English muffin; raw-milk cheeses from São Jorge; and what he calls: “the best butter in the world” – buttercup yellow from Flores, in the western island cluster. I find myself making three trips to a deli in capital city Ponta Delgada called O Rei Dos Queijos (The King of Cheeses) to procure a stash of tubs to take back to friends in Lisbon. Located on the mid-Atlantic fault line that runs along the ocean floor between Europe and Africa on one side, and America on the other, the grass that grows in this volcanic soil has proven to be especially nutritious, and Azorean cows are known for their rich milk, and consequently, the islands produce some of Portugal’s most sought-after cheeses. You will often hear locals speak about the presence of three cows to every person, particularly on Terceira in the central group of islands as bovines dot the hilly terrain.

HOT SPRINGS AND TEA WITH A STORY

Almeida, Dias, and I make our way to the hot volcanic ground, Caldeiras das Furnas at Lake Furnas, surrounded by elevated forest slopes where locals leave huge pots of offal, sausage, and cabbage stew called cozido to cook underground. For a few euro, a national-park attendant will monitor the pots simmering under the belching sulphur-rich mud for a number of hours. Tony’s is perennially popular, but Almeida takes me to the restaurant in the Parque Terra Nostra, where a more refined version of cozido is served. The weather is pleasant and warm now, a drastic change from the morning.

The next day, I return to the geothermal pool at the park, muddy and mineral-rich; it’s an average of 30 to 40 degrees Celsius all year round. Equally popular with visitors are the thermal waterfalls and warm springs of Caldeira Velha in the centre of the island. Fern fronds that seem right out of Jurassic Park dip close to the reddish mud and moss-covered boulders.

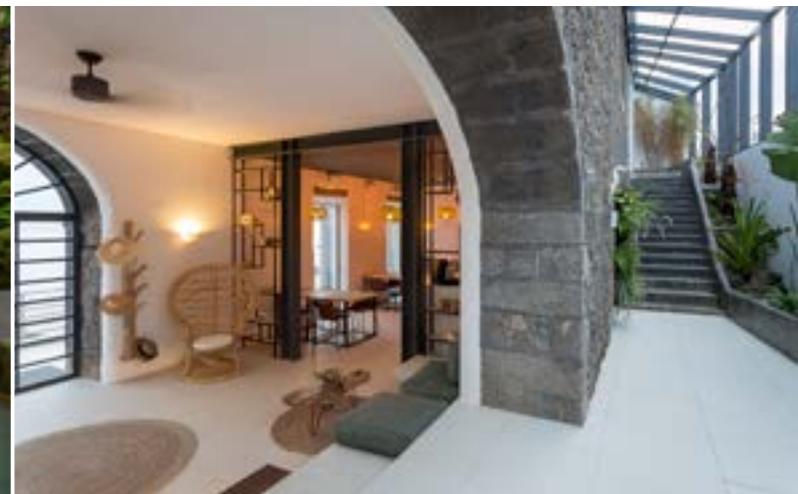
Close by is Lake Fogo, known as

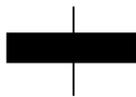


Previous page: aerial views of São Miguel, also known as the Green Island; **opposite, from top, clockwise:** Azores is known for its pineapples, introduced after a blight wiped out oranges around 1860; the Sete Cidades offers endless picturesque views and is known for the twin blue and green lakes; a beautiful blue-and-yellow chaffinch; interior of White, a former beach house, reveals volcanic rock; pickers working on the plantation at Chá Gorreana; a humpback whale; Caldeira Velha warm springs; the ten-roomed White resort in Lagoa offers tranquil views, especially at sunset



THE AZORES IS KNOWN FOR ITS RICH BIRDLIFE





Above: walking down the path along the rim of the crater in Sete Cidades is one of the highlights of a visit to the island, and an unmissable stop if you are hiking in the area

the “fire lake”, that pools at the bottom of an ancient caldera. Thick with vegetation, I spot a number of birdwatchers peering through binoculars – in fact, the Azores is known for its rich birdlife where you can view the goldcrest, the smallest bird in Europe, grey wagtails, Atlantic canaries, and common buzzards, which early settlers confused for hawks – hence the island’s name “Açôres”, in Portuguese.

From the terraced slopes of Chá Gorreana, the largest and longest-running tea plantation in Europe, you can see the ocean, a dull rumble in the distance. It’s cold and drizzly when we visit. Maddalena Motta, whose family has owned the business that still runs on sturdy, energy-efficient machinery from the 19th century, is the public face of this, the last plantation to survive. Neighbouring farms once also grew green and black tea, but unlike fruit, tea requires painstaking effort to pick, dehydrate, oxidise, ferment, dry, and roll before it can be sold.

In 1883, Motta’s great-great grandmother Ermelinda Gago

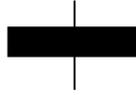
da Câmara and her son José Honorato founded the plantation. A farmer affected by the orange blight that wiped the Azores’ economy, Da Câmara turned to tea. At this time, bananas, passion fruit, and later, pineapples, a fruit with a notoriously lengthy growth time (two years from flower to fruit), were introduced to help boost the economy.

Motta and her family understand how tenuous a business like this is. “But my great grandfather was a very clever man, and introduced hydro-energy. We were one of the first on the island to have electricity, and the first to have tourists in what was a very isolated place once,” she says to me over a cup of orange pekoe tea.

CRATERS AND OCEAN LIFE

One of the drawbacks of the Azores is the possibility of hiking in relative peace, surrounded by astounding landscapes – dormant craters, black sand beaches, lakes, hills, and luxuriant vegetation. I also discover that you can cover a lot of ground

THE ISLANDS PRODUCE SOME OF PORTUGAL’S MOST SOUGHT-AFTER CHEESES



in a few days by hiring a car, and doing shorter walks around the island. For longer hikes for first-timers who aren't comfortable with navigating unmarked paths, an organised half- or full-day tour is probably the way to go. Some of the most iconic views of São Miguel are found in the Sete Cidades or Seven Cities area on the western end of the island. Patience is key, as you may have to wait up to 30 minutes for the fog to roll over the Sete Cidades to capture that shot of the blue and green lakes that appear never to merge, as if by folklore and miracle.

A short drive away, Vista do Rei gives you an idyllic view of the lakes, the rim of the crater created by a prehistoric volcanic eruption, the hamlet below, and an expanse of postcard-perfect flora. When it comes to miradores or viewing points, São Miguel has plenty, especially on the eastern end of the island – look out for Ponto da Madrugada, Ponto da Marquesa, and Ponto do Arnela. Stray cats live like royalty here, and you'll spot bowls of fresh food and water placed for

them in little shelters at many of these lookouts.

Adventurous vacationers come to the Azores for diving, canyoning, fishing, kayaking, and island-hopping in summer (the ferries don't operate in the colder months). In season, whale watching is a relatively new activity in the Azores, and is highly regulated. Some companies work with marine biologists and nature guides only, but ultimately you'll need to determine if it's ethical or not, as boats are permitted to get as close as 50 metres to the beautiful creatures. Spotting schools of dolphins on these trips is almost guaranteed.

Three hours after the start of our whale-watching adventure, we make our way to A Tasca in Ponta Delgada for the famed Azorean tuna and garlicky grilled lapas (limpets). Nearby at Louvre Michaelense, a restored old café that serves local cakes and tea from Gorreana, I spot a row of hand-stitched soft whale toys for sale. The toy whale and tea in my kitchen serve as a daily reminder of that near-idyllic island in the Atlantic that I long to return to.

CHÁ GORREANA IS THE LARGEST AND LONGEST-RUNNING TEA PLANTATION IN EUROPE

S T A Y

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V I S A S

South Africans require a visa to visit Portugal – a Schengen multi-entry visa will grant you access to all European states covered by the Schengen rules.

T O U R S

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GETTING THERE

- **FLY** SAA flies to Frankfurt, London and Munich daily from Johannesburg. From there, catch a connecting flight to Lisbon and connect to Ponta Delgada with SAA codeshare partner and fellow Star Alliance member TAP Air Portugal. Visit flysaa.com