

A Hiker's
Destination:

THE AZORES

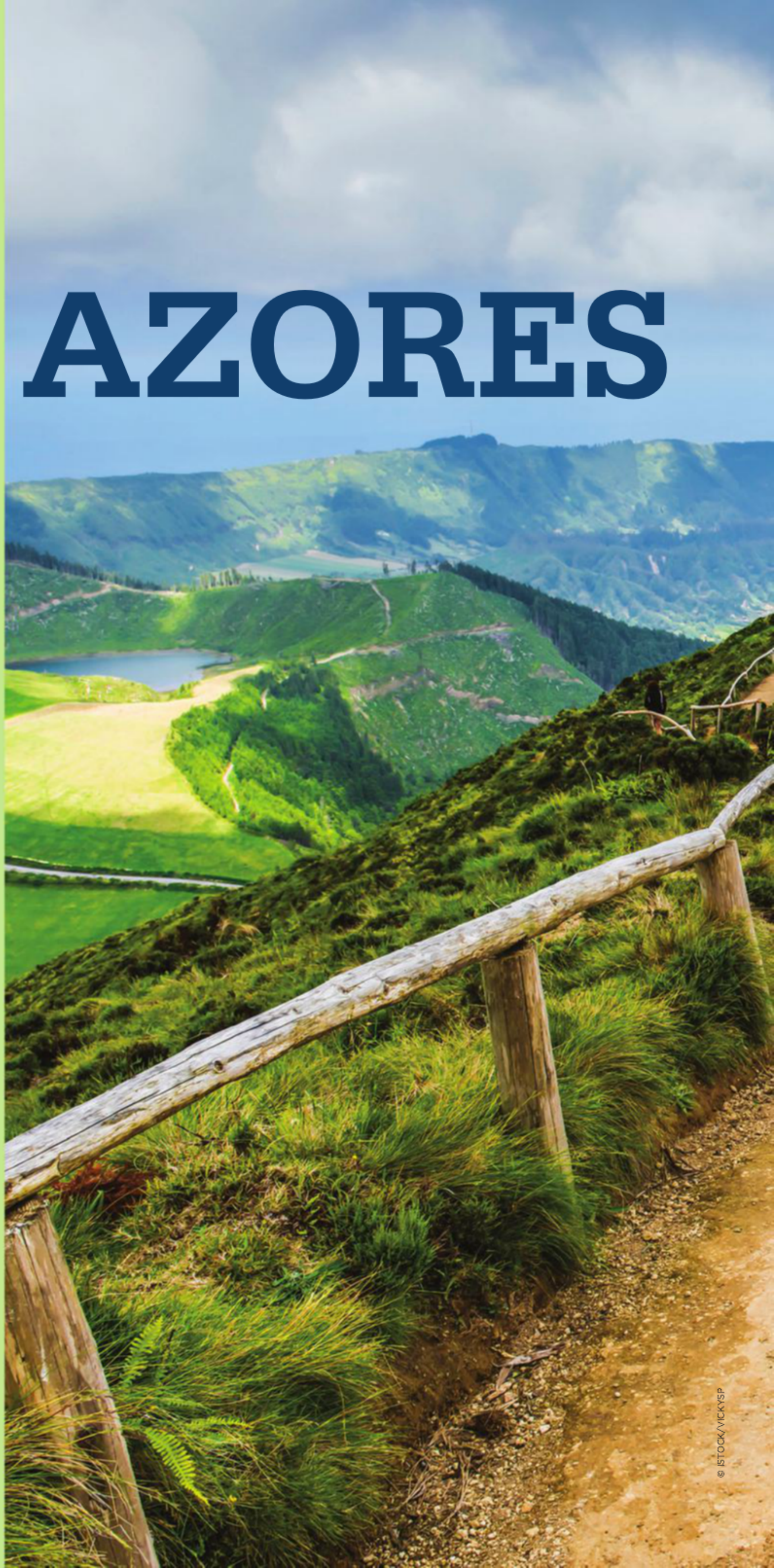
By Waheeda Harris

Found due west of mainland Portugal, the archipelago of the Azores is a tropical paradise of the Atlantic Ocean. Similar to Hawaii, these nine islands were created by underwater volcanoes, resulting in a myriad of landscapes on each island, such as black sand beaches, lush valleys and hot springs.

The best way to discover the distinctive offerings of the Azores is by two feet. With a wide variety of trails offered on each island ranging from easy to extreme, here's a hiking list for Pico, Faial, Terceira and Sao Miguel. Each option has easy to medium challenging walks to see the island's landscape and learn more about its volcanic history.

PHOTO

Walking path to the lakes of Sete Cidades, Azores, Portugal



Getting there

With daily flights in the summer from Lisbon, as well as a 5 1/2 hour direct flight from Toronto, Sao Miguel Island is the perfect entry point to the Azores. All nine islands can be accessed by plane from Sao Miguel, and during the summer season, ferry service operates between all islands offering another way to island hop.





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FAIAL

Six kilometres across the sea from Pico, Faial's dramatic landscape of hills and valleys has been shaped by centuries past and a notable volcanic eruption in the middle of the 20th century.

Get the bird's eye view of the island from the *Caldeira*, a circular hike along the rim of an extinct volcano and spot sailboats and popular beach areas. During the 2 1/2 hour walk, hikers can appreciate the view of its neighbour, Pico Island, as well as the variety of endemic flora, such as juniper, heather and blueberry. There are also great spots here for taking photos or having a picnic.

Walk back into history with the *Capelo-Capelinhos* hike, a five-kilometre excursion that in less than two hours takes visitors uphill and downhill past lava cones and caves, through laurel tree groves and to the base of the Capelinhos volcano, which dramatically changed the island.

Erupting for 13 months between September 1957 and October 1958, this volcano buried a village, created a new peninsula and left one man-made marker untouched: the area's lighthouse. As the only surviving building, the lighthouse is home to the Interpretation Centre of Capelinhos Volcano, offering video, photography and exhibits on the geological history of the Azores and detailed information on the volcano's eruption.



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TERCEIRA

This island's interior features rolling hills, forests and streams, all of which can be experienced on the *Rocha do Chambre*, a circular trail of almost 10 kilometres that takes walkers who like hills through different elevations to see the Vale do Azinhal and the Pico Alter crater. During the 3 1/2 hours, hikers can also see local plant species like green heather, fire trees, laurel and cedars.

Colourful Angro do Heroismo is the main town of the island, and became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983 because of the wide range of architectural styles in the historic zone. The eight-kilometre *Monte Brasil* trail starts in a popular downtown park and takes walkers up to Pico de Facho, a former signal station and the highest point overlooking the city. The trail then heads downhill, but make sure to stop at the nearby whale lookout before returning.

Well worth the numerous steep staircases is a visit to Algar do Carvao, an extinct volcano, and the only one in Europe that allows visitors within its interior. Descending past lush vegetation at the top, colourful silicate stalactites provide a rarely-seen inner world of a volcano.



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SAO MIGUEL

The largest island of the Azores and the first entry point for visitors, this island's diverse landscape includes tea plantations, several valleys from extinct volcanoes and numerous hot springs.

The *Caldeiras da Ribeira Grande* is an easy circular trail of 7 1/2 kilometres that offers a mix of nature and industry, as the trail goes past a deactivated hydroelectric plant and a waterfall. Bring a swimsuit to enjoy the hot springs post-trek.

For a trail that covers farmland, unbeatable views of the sea and valleys and even an abandoned hotel with the best view of the island's lakes, *Setes Cidades* is a 12-kilometre trek, perfect for a morning to get the heart pumping. The hike can be extended to continue along the rim of the extinct volcano, or can be made shorter by starting at the area's highest point and lookout, and then descending into the valley. At the end, plan to enjoy a meal in the village of Sete Cidades.

And for a unique and easy walk, the *Chá Gorreana* trail is a six-kilometre trail that cuts through the Chá Gorreana tea plantation, which first opened in 1883. Wander through pastures and then down past farmhouses to the plantation's main building, where visitors can learn about Europe's only tea producing region and enjoy afternoon tea.



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PICO

The second largest island of the Azores features eye-catching Mount Pico, at 2,350 metres, the highest peak in Portugal. Taking the *Misterios do Sul do Pico* trail along the south coast, visitors can learn about the misterios (mysteries), the moniker given by early settlers who did not know how the lava fields were formed. A three-hour, eight-kilometre flat hike along the rugged coastline offers several places to picnic, snap photos of Mt. Pico and swim in nearby tidal pools. A bonus at the end of the trail: a chapel built in 1723, called the Capela do Espirito Santo.

With one of the smallest island populations of a little more than 15,000 locals, Pico Island is the main producer of vintages from the Azores, a result of vineyards planted in the 15th century. Rectangular plots of vines protected from the ocean winds and salty effects by currais (stone walls made from black lava rock) were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004.

The *Vinhas da Criação Velha*, a two-hour, seven-kilometre scenic walk that meanders past a historic windmill, includes views of off-shore islets while passing through the centuries-old vineyards. This easy trail ends on the northwest coast in a village with a popular beach area for locals.