



Earthly Delights

Bask in the lush, dramatic vistas of Portugal's Azores.

BY CHADNER NAVARRO

"I ALWAYS SAY THAT WHEN YOU DRIVE through the highways of São Miguel, it's like driving through a garden," said Rui Medeiros, my guide from Sagres Vacations, a bespoke tour operator to Portugal. Rui was leading me through the São Miguel portion of my trip to the Azores. At this point of my Atlantic adventure, Rui drove our group to Sete Cidades, one of the island's truly otherworldly destinations. On our way, bouquets of hydrangeas (blues, pinks, purples) still blooming in the middle of November flanked the road. Even Rui was flummoxed by how vibrant they looked despite winter looming just weeks away. Apparently in the Azores, gardens flourish well after you expect.

The Azores archipelago comprises nine volcanic islands in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, about 900 miles from mainland Portugal, the country colonizing here in the 15th century. But if you've also been to the Continent (as the Azoreans refer to the mainland), the Azores will feel, look and smell as if there's much more than 900 miles separating them. Arriving at Sete Cidades makes this abundantly

clear. A three-mile-wide caldera, Sete Cidades is impossibly lush, exciting in its wildness and offering just the right amount of whimsy, courtesy of a legend that explains why its twin lakes glow with two different colors.

It's been said the waters of the lakes were formed by the tears of star-crossed lovers: An Azorean princess, whose father forbade her marriage to a young shepherd, formed the green lake because of her green eyes, while the shepherd's blue eyes were to thank for the blue lake. It's a lot of romance for a place that seems more rugged than romantic, but from a roadside viewing point at the top of the caldera — where I observed the two lakes surrounded by verdant cliffs and a smattering of hillside villages, with just enough fog hanging overhead to add a layer of mystery to the moment — I wanted to believe that fairy tale. The blue lake reflected the clouds while the green, farther from where I stood, appeared darker and more enigmatic. I wanted to believe because something so captivatingly beautiful should have a dramatic creation story to match.

But everywhere you go in the Azores you encounter drama. On São Miguel, known among the nine as the green island (and the collection's largest), the craggy, un-



THE GOOD EARTH:
 (Left to right) *Hydrangeas*
 bordering the volcanic crater lake
 road in *Sete Cidades*, São Miguel;
 the lakes in *Sete Cidades* viewed
 from *Vista do Rei*; and geothermal
 hot water hole in *Furnas*

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LODGING

OCEAN BREEZE

Modest but charming accommodations with fantastic ocean views, these vacation rentals, unveiled last December, feature stacked volcanic rocks, Pico's trademark architecture.

Cais de Mourato, Madalena, Pico
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SANTA BÁRBARA ECO-BEACH RESORT

Located on the north side of São Miguel near some of the island's best surfing, this stylish resort of 14 low-lying villas is rumored to expand later this summer.

Estrada Regional nº1, 1º Morro de Baixo, Ribeira Grande, São Miguel
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WHITE EXCLUSIVE SUITES AND VILLAS

Comprising nine suites and one villa, all inspired by Santorini's iconic minimalism, this brand-new cliffside property on São Miguel's southern coast makes the perfect retreat for traveling couples.

Rua Rocha Quebrada 10, Lagoa, São Miguel
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expected landscape provides a lot of surprises, and looking at it from afar isn't enough to truly understand just how special it is. In Furnas, known for its sulfuric hot springs, the top of Pico do Ferro provides another gorgeous vista. Rui gave me the option of a comfortable drive down to the village, where we could find a local restaurant for lunch. I opted to hike down and work for my meal instead. It rained that morning, so the mile or so walk, not exceptionally difficult, was muddy. Under a canopy of all sorts of flora (from fern to cheese-wood), the hike was humid but thankfully downhill. While the views were stunning — the lake from various angles and small farms grazed by black-and-white cows — the best part of the hike was feeling the earth under my feet and being enveloped by the foliage.

I smelled the end of the hike before I actually reached it, as the base of this small mountain is packed with hot spring action. Many of the tourists crowd around the thermal activity not just to see the ground bubbling with scalding water but also to watch locals pull that day's lunch out of the ground. *Cozido das furnas* is one of the Azores' culinary icons: Locals pack a stew of meats and veggies in a pot and stuff it in the ground, where volcanic heat cooks it for hours. Throughout the day, many of the nearby restaurants return to collect their

dishes. If you're keen on trying it, almost every eatery in the area serves a *cozido*. It's a fortifying meal (with beef, chicken, pork, blood sausage and potatoes) — one I certainly deserved after my 45-minute hike.

If São Miguel is the green island, Pico, the archipelago's second-largest, is the black island, thanks to the volcanic rock that characterizes its coasts and architecture. The island is known for the mountain (also called Pico) at its center, the tallest peak in all of Portugal and a popular hike to conquer. The 3,700-foot-high trek usually requires a full day to complete, and most thrill seekers start their hike in the middle of the night (around 2 a.m.) in order to reach the summit in time for sunrise. Others time their hike in the evening for sunset, camp out on the mountain and descend in the morning. Unfortunately, during the two days I spent on Pico, rainy, foggy weather made hiking unsafe. But there's still plenty to do on the island.

Decades ago, Pico was home to a massive whaling community, and Museu dos Baleeiros in Lajes does a thorough job showcasing this history. The exhibit includes a typical Azorean whaling boat, pictures of the men who played major roles in the industry (my guide, Evelina Garcia, also with Sagres Vacations, grew up in Pico and recognizes many of



WINE AND DINE:

Vineyard stone corrals on Pico, built to protect the grapes from wind and sea salt, earned UNESCO World Heritage status (top); and cozido das furnas, a local Azorean meal, is cooked underground by volcanic heat on São Miguel.

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DINING

CALÇADA DO CAIS

A menu of Portuguese dishes (garlicky poultry sausages, crusted cod with herb butter sauce) and more familiar plates (tomahawk steak, mushroom risotto) ensures there's something for everyone at this proven crowd pleaser.

Rua dos Mercadores 27 31,
Ponta Delgada, São Miguel
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O ANCORADOURO

A *cataplana* of local seafood (including *lapas*) paired with a crisp white wine from the volcanic vineyards of Pico ranks among the most delicious meals you can enjoy on the island.

Estrada Longitudinal, Areia
Larga, Madalena, Pico
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TASQUINHA VIEIRA

This new restaurant in downtown Ponta Delgada boasts design-forward interiors and chef-owner Joel Vieira's elegant and globally inspired preparations of Azorean ingredients.

Rua António Joaquim Nunes
da Silva 21, Ponta Delgada,
São Miguel
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INFO TO GO

Travel to the Azores from the United States directly from Boston (BOS) with Azores Airlines, which gets you to the island of São Miguel in about four hours. The airline recently introduced new planes outfitted with upgraded business-class cabins and WiFi. At the end of May 2018, Delta Air Lines will offer direct service to São Miguel from New York (JFK). Once in the Azores, access to the other islands (by plane) is easy. Or fly through mainland Portugal from cities like Lisbon (LIS) and Porto (OPO) on TAP Air Portugal. From the airport in Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, a taxi to many of the area's hotels starts at just €10 (about \$12) but can go up depending on the time of day.

them from her childhood) and decorative artwork fashioned out of carved whale bone. Winemaking also thrives on Pico, with a 2,440-acre UNESCO World Heritage vineyard landscape, thanks to its unique terroir of volcanic rocks. Winemakers created their vineyards with semicircle enclosures of stark, black rocks to protect the grapes from the elements. You can walk through these vineyards, which I did, to get a feel for the unusual topography. It's unlike any wine country you'll ever visit.

If you want to visit a winery and taste some of the island's prized grapes, make an appointment at Adegas A Buraca, a family-owned production. The site also acts as a museum, packed with some of the artisan tools used all over Pico, whether in winemaking, agriculture or home life. The family also makes schnapps-like liqueurs out of the fruits and vegetables grown on the island, but I was there for wine. The fortified Verdelho, comparative to Port, is a must-try, but my favorite is a fabulous white wine called Cacarita, refreshing but flavorful. It was just the right souvenir for family and friends and also a perfect reminder of my trip to the Azores.

