

An aerial photograph of a volcanic landscape in the Azores. The scene features a large, dark blue lake in the foreground, surrounded by green, grassy hills. In the middle ground, there is a smaller, irregularly shaped lake with a sandy beach. To the right, a bay with clear, turquoise water is visible, bordered by a sandy beach. The background consists of rugged, dark volcanic mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The text "Azores high" is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Azores

*high*



Where on earth are the Azores? Peter Sargent heads out into the Atlantic to find out more about these charming islands.

It is the greenery – familiar, yet so unfamiliar – that strikes you about the Azores. Verdant hills, colourful flowers and largely traffic-free, tree-lined roads create a contrast with rugged landscape highlighted by sea views, towering hills and volcanic lakes.

One minute you feel as if you are in Wales, with contented looking cattle chewing the cud on lush fields, the next minute it is clear you are seeing things not witnessed in the British Isles, and it takes on a near tropical hue.

The Azores is an archipelago of nine tiny, remote islands in the northern Atlantic Ocean. They are 1,500km west of Lisbon and 3,900km east of New York. Settled by intrepid explorers, traders and farmers from the mid-15th Century, they now comprise a self-governing province of Portugal.

The islands lie north-west of Madeira, that botanical paradise which is also part of Portugal. If you've been there you will feel at home in the Azores, from the colonial architecture to Portuguese cuisine. They are a geological and horticultural marvel, with something breathtaking around every corner. My guidebook describes them as "anchored to the ocean as if they were basaltic ships".

The islands' northern location means they can be cool in winter. I visited during the second week of October. Early rain and wind gave way to settled sunshine and perfect, shirt-sleeve temperatures during the second part of the week. It is a changeable climate, so go prepared. The Azores is not a beach destination. It will appeal to walkers, nature lovers, birdwatchers, history buffs and watersports fans rather than families.

Sao Miguel is the largest island, home to the thriving capital, Ponta Delgada. It is a friendly, ►

### Azorean appetisers

Black pudding and pineapple, anyone? Followed by a blackberry liquor? Sounds like madness. But these were two of the Azorean delicacies on offer in Sao Miguel. They tasted wonderful. The blackberry drink is like a fortified wine; if you enjoy sherry or Madeira you'll love it. The best wines of the islands are said to come from Pico – the Tsar of Russia was once a fan.

This is not a great destination for vegetarians; Portuguese pork, beef and chicken dishes dominate menus, while locally caught seafood abounds.



The steep caldera walls of Lagoa do Fogo – the 'fire lake' in Portuguese.



From left, Sete Cidades is an inspiring sight; Ribiera dos Caldeiros waterfall in the picturesque valley near Achada; colonial Portuguese architecture makes Ponta Delgada an attractive place for a walking tour; bars in Ponta Delgada tend towards the small and traditional.

civilised place where English is widely spoken. This is the tourist hub for the islands, home to the international airport. Its rapidly growing marina has companies offering whale and dolphin watching trips, big game fishing, sunset cruises, scuba diving and more. Cruise liners moor at its harbour, and in the summer ferries to other islands leave from its modern terminal.

There are many restaurants serving local cuisine. Bars are low key and safe. During our visit there was nightly live music from excellent singers switching seamlessly from Portuguese to familiar English songs at an outdoor cafe near the town hall, enjoyed by an appreciative audience of mainly local people. This being a university town, it gets lively in harbour bars at the weekend. Join in the fun.

The island has many highlights. Chief among them are its spectacular lakes. At its western edge Sete Cidades are two lakes – one blue, one green, set in a prehistoric volcanic crater. In local legend it is said the lakes – actually the result of volcanic eruptions thousands of years ago – were formed by the tears of two thwarted lovers, a kind of Azorean

Time constraints limited us to Sao Miguel. The other islands invite exploration. Sao Miguel and Santa Maria are in the east. Some 85 nautical miles to the west is the central group of Terceira, Pico, Sao Jorge, Graciosa and Faial, while 100 miles west are tiny Corvo and Flores. The latter is the point where Europe officially ends.

Romeo and Juliet. Whatever the truth, the first sight of them is awe-inspiring, as is that of mighty Lagoa (Lake) de Fogo, which comes at the culmination of an Alpine-like drive to the top of the island, from which you can see the sea on two sides.

The bubbling, boiling water spewed out of the earth at sulphuric pits near Lake Furnas proved a popular attraction, while a driving tour around the island was memorable for awesome views of ocean and cliffs, with brightly painted houses clinging to steep slopes in small villages clustered in valley and harbour. Europe's only tea plantations can be visited at Gorreana and Porto Formosa, while the spectacular waterfall and gardens at Ribiera dos Caldeiros are a must.

Britons represent a small proportion of tourists. You are more likely to encounter Canadians, largely a result of historic emigration of Azoreans to Canada. More of us may visit now weekly budget flights leave from Stansted. Give it a go. Experience an 'Azores high'.

■ Ryanair fly from Stansted to Ponta Delgada, each Saturday, April to October. [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)

■ Hotel Vila Nova is excellent for all Ponta Delgada sights, [www.hotelpdl.com](http://www.hotelpdl.com)

■ Moby Dick tours run whale and dolphin watching trips twice daily from Ponta Delgada. [www.mobydick-tours.com](http://www.mobydick-tours.com)

## A whale of a tale

9am. Monday morning. We boarded the good ship Moby Dick, a former inter-island ferry, along with about 20 other people for a morning whale and dolphin watching. Captained by owner Jose Costa, we sailed from Ponta Delgada into a fairly choppy Atlantic. The Azores are hotspots for spotting whales



and dolphins of many varieties. Whale hunting ceased in the 1970s; harpoons have been replaced by the

sounds of camera clicking as tourists thrill to the sight of these fascinating creatures. On our trip whales proved somewhat elusive – but we saw scores of dolphins in seas six miles off Sao Miguel. A number of operators offer tours. There are strict rules on not chasing the whales or causing stress to these sensitive and intelligent creatures.