

# Whale of a time, quite naturally

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mahogany furniture. There's an impressive view of Pico, home to Portugal's highest mountain.

The next morning Nathalie spots dolphins as we take the ferry to Pico. As well as being home to plenty of marine life, including whales, Pico is a major wine producer.

Its centuries-old system of viniculture, a vast, sloping, geometric network of rocky walls dividing tiny fields, is a Unesco World Heritage Site. Holes in the black basalt walls are perfect for our own impromptu treasure hunt. My husband Marc runs ahead, concealing toffees in the cracks and crevices.

The children walk miles, scouring for golden wrappers. We stand at the bottom, chewing sweets and watching pale turquoise waves crash against the lava coastline.

**T**HAT evening, back on Faial, a half-litre carafe of red Pico wine goes down nicely with the two-course prato do dia (menu of the day) at the unassuming Delta Café on Vasco da Gama street (yes, Vasco's everywhere).

The home-made chicken soup followed by pork chops with rice is not only tasty and plentiful but, at £4.20 per head, it's a steal.

We head back to São Miguel where tea (labelled cha) served at breakfast hails locally from the tiny mountain village of Gorreana. It's the only tea plantation in Europe and inside its working factory "hand-picked"

Picture: GERARD SOURY/Getty



TAILS OF THE UNEXPECTED: Witness the marine life at close quarters off the Azores

takes on a whole new meaning. We join nimble-fingered workers round a table sifting through mounds to discard rogue leaves before tasting fragrant black, green and orange brews.

The Azores offer a simple, back-to-basics holiday where nothing feels manufactured as most attractions are natural wonders and free to the public. Each island has something unique and the cozido rates as our most memorable meal ever.

While we might not have matched the 15th-century Portuguese explorers, we certainly had great fun trying.

● GETTING THERE

Sunvil (0208 758 4722/sunvil.co.uk) offers four nights at the Royal Garden Hotel (royalgardenhotelazores.com) and three nights at the Hotel do Canal (bensaude.pt) from £3,546 (family-of-four sharing), B&B. Price includes return flights with SATA International (0844 482 1678/sata.pt) from Gatwick to São Miguel, inter-island flights and seven days car hire. Portuguese tourism: 0207 201 6666/visitportugal.com

TRAVEL BULLETIN

★ Fly to Budapest on Ryanair's (0871 240 0000/ryanair.com) new London Stansted route. From March there will be flights four times a week to the Hungarian capital which is brimming with Baroque architecture. From £56 return.

★ Butlin's (0845 070 4730/butlins.com/hotels) continues to prove traditional family holiday resorts are still in demand. The company has announced a 10 per cent rise in bookings for 2012. The new Wave Hotel and Apartments in Bognor Regis, West Sussex, the third hotel at the Bognor resort, has contributed to this surge despite not opening until the end of May. A three-night weekend break from £689 (four sharing a Reef Apartment), self-catering or from £303 (four sharing an Octopus room in the hotel). For stays between June 25 and 29.

★ Whisk your other half away for a budget break. Travelodge (0871 984 8484/travelodge.co.uk) is offering a special "lovers" room rate at more than 80 of its hotels this Valentine's with a free bottle of wine. A one-night stay from £39.99 (two-sharing), room only. For stays between February 11 and 14.

★ Forgot to pack those linen trousers or handy black cardigan? Zara (0800 030 4238/zara.com) has opened an outlet at Heathrow's Terminal 3. The stylish Spanish high-street fashion brand sells both women's and menswear, plus great leather accessories including bags and shoes all at affordable prices.

CHARLOTTE CIVIL

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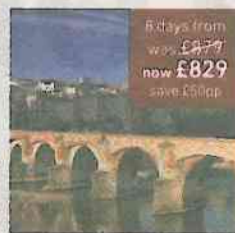
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