Notes from a small island...

São Miguel is one of nine volcanic islands that make up The Azores archipelago situated in the North Atlantic ocean and lying 850 miles off the west coast of Portugal. While riding around, Spinal Tap’s Nigel Tufnel and his all-the-way-to-11 amps came to mind. In places, this lush green island, with its abundance of tight lanes and lactate guzzling climbs, feels as if it could act as a stand-in for our own. Then it’ll throw in a curve ball that reveals it to be a landscape painted on a far grander canvas.

It may measure just 40 miles across and 10 miles in width but with a height of 1103m at the summit of Pico da Vara (only Ben Nevis and Carn Eige top it in the UK), São Miguel isn’t short on drama. Roads rise sharply from the coast, pass up through dense woodland and volcanic crater lakes before plunging straight back down again. Farmers’ fields are nurtured on steep inclines that threaten to fold in on themselves. Sulphur gas burps out from deep beneath the earth and the close proximity of the north and south coastlines disorients to the point where you’re not quite sure where you are. To go with Tufnel’s fuzzy logic, it’s an island where everything is one louder.

I’d actually hesitated about heading to São Miguel. As beautiful as it looked in photos, and while it had a reputation as a mountain biker’s paradise, there was next to nothing online about what its roads were like to ride. What little information I found was critical: too many cars, narrow, badly surfaced roads, nowhere to hire bikes...

You can’t take a few forum posts as gospel, and I was reassured by Andrew Straw, the founder of cycling holiday company Saddle Skedaddle, who’s just set up its first road tours on the island and who had set up our trip. I had two people for company, Nuno Cordeiro and Rosa Costa, the island guide and business manager respectively of Futurismo, an Azorian adventure company based in the capital, Ponta Delgada, who are assisting Saddle Skedaddle locally. São Miguel born and bred, each was fluent in the island’s history. Nuno, a walking Azores encyclopedia, was behind the wheel in the trailing van, and Rosa was Lycra-ed up and ready to jump out and ride. She knows every strip of tarmac on this island and was happy to choose her battles.

Saddle Skedaddle’s holiday itinerary averages around 45 miles over six days but I’d just one to see the island, and so asked Nuno to plot me a route that took in the best of it without me having to hitch a lift in the van. He knew it would be around 80 miles, but had no clue as to the elevation involved, though I only had to look up to know I was in for plenty of work.

“There’s flat and then there’s Azorian flat,” warned Nuno, with a smile, early on. Flat roads in São...
The climb out of Sete Cidades was typical of what I discovered – very direct, very steep.

Above: the island’s climate creates a very scenic and vibrant green backdrop to our ride.

Training ground
Most people would see the long, steep descent into Sete Cidades as payback for the climb, but I’ve always been one for going uphill rather than down, never more so than here. The gradients towards the bottom are horrific – always over 10% and up to 25% – and the surface was poor in places. Many roads in São Miguel were cobbled once upon a time and resurfacing was often a case of pouring tarmac over them. Vehicles plus time equals a sketchy descent. On the whole the roads are in pretty good nick and for Brits, given what we have to put up with on our own roads, there was nothing too awkward.

A quick freshen up before tackling more of the island’s climbs.

Bottom right
A common sight in Sete Cidades, nature’s started to reclaim. Built at great expense in the ’80s, it opened since 1990. It now lies abandoned and its architecture and surroundings bring to mind what Jurassic Park might look like 25 years after the dinosaurs ran riot. One of the complaints I’d read of São Miguel). And apart from the ubiquitous tractors, it seemed I was on remarkably empty roads (which chalks off another).

Ignorance is indeed bliss. A common sight in Sete Cidades, nature’s started to reclaim. Built at great expense in the ’80s, it opened since 1990. It now lies abandoned and its architecture and surroundings bring to mind what Jurassic Park might look like 25 years after the dinosaurs ran riot. One of the complaints I’d read of São Miguel). And apart from the ubiquitous tractors, it seemed I was on remarkably empty roads (which chalks off another).

That right turn was the cue for the steep descent into Sete Cidades as payback for the climb, but I’ve always been one for going uphill rather than down, never more so than here. The gradients towards the bottom are horrific – always over 10% and up to 25% – and the surface was poor in places. Many roads in São Miguel were cobbled once upon a time and resurfacing was often a case of pouring tarmac over them. Vehicles plus time equals a sketchy descent. On the whole the roads are in pretty good nick and for Brits, given what we have to put up with on our own roads, there was nothing too awkward.

Plenty of extended sections of cobbled roads remain on São Miguel, most notably the road round the Lagoa das Furnas crater at the end of our ride. Add to this its steep climbs and you wonder why more pro teams don’t come here ahead of classics season. Perhaps it’s the unpredictable weather or because the island’s road networks, with major roads continuing to be opened as recently as 2011. This one perhaps isn’t the best example, but towards the north east of São Miguel, traffic has been diverted away from the smaller roads and the result is a road cyclist’ dream. For a long time Rosa had doubts about the suitability of the roads for a cycling holiday, but no longer. Investment has brought out more roadies and motorists have become increasingly aware of how they must drive past cyclists.

I returned to the point where I took the right turn up to Sete Cidades, but instead took another right to traverse the centre of the island and an idyllic lunch by the sea at Ribeira Grande.

From there it’s the biggest climb of the day, six miles and a smidgen under 2000ft, to the highest point accessible by road above the Lagoa do Fogo crater. Fortunately (I think) I left my Garmin at home. I used my iPhone to map the ride so had no idea about gradients or climbing until I finished. All I knew was that this was among the hardest sustained spells of climbing I’d
done. It’s got aspects of all the famous terrain in Europe – the rolling hills of the Ardennes, the medium length climbs of the Lake District, the longer climbs of the Pyrenees, even the cobbles of Flanders. But it’s the sustained steepness that makes it unique. Skedaddle had hosted its first road tour the week before my arrival and that was the feedback, for better and worse.

The summit revealed darker clouds shrouding the south side of the island, compared with the sunny north, and is a common occurrence here. At the end of the descent we were back onto the southern main road, a leg-sapping stretch that took us through the towns of Vila Franca Do Campo and Agua De Pau. A hopeless drag inland towards the spa town of Furnas finished my ride and with Nuno and his van hovering in eyeshot just up the road it was so tempting to throw in the towel it had been that hard. In some ways I’d had enough, in others I felt like I was just getting started with the island. A quick Strava processing at the end revealed I’d climbed a staggering 10,194ft in 80 miles. Little wonder I was on the brink of collapse.

It’s not a bad idea to base yourself in Furnas if climbing’s your bag. It’s situated in a volcano, which means it’s banked on all sides by steep climbs. I wasn’t in any state to ride any of them at this point but out of curiosity I asked Nuno to show me the worst (best?). Honestly, it made the Lake District’s Hardknott Pass look like a molehill.

Plenty to go round
From initial hesitation São Miguel proved to be an absolute revelation, quite simply a mind-blowing road cycling experience. For a pure riding experience – strip away, say, the history involved in riding the Tourmalet for the first time – I

**LOCAL KNOWLEDGE**

**GETTING THERE**
Direct: Ryanair from London Stansted (prices start at £65 return in January); SATA from Gatwick.
Via Lisbon: TAP Portugal and SATA from Gatwick and Manchester

**FOOD AND DRINK**
We ate lunch at Tuk Tuk in Ribeira Grande and dinner at Cais 20 in Ponta Delgada (restauranteecais20.pt/pt)

**CYCLING TOURS**
Many of the roads in this article are found in guided and self-guided road tours from Saddle Skedaddle (tinyurl.com/cp-smselfguided, tinyurl.com/cp-smguided).

**WHERE TO STAY**
Ponta Delgada: Hotel do Colégio (hoteldocolegio.com); São Miguel Park Hotel (bensaude.pt/blog/sao-miguel-park-hotel)
Furnas: Terra Nostra Garden Hotel (bensaude.pt)

**WHAT TO DO**
Whale watching is very popular in the Azores and Futurismo Azores Adventures (futurismo.pt) do boat trips (€55 for three hours)

**TOURIST INFO**
visitazores.com
Every corner of this island makes for prime road cycling and I’d only scratched the surface with what I did.