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A DIFFERENT SIDE OF PORTUGAL: WELCOME TO THE AZORES

TRAVELHotNews.com discovers a wealth of experiences in the Azores
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It's been about a month since my visit to the Azores, but I can remember the breathtaking beauty of the Island as if it were yesterday.

I arrived in Ponta Delgada late afternoon in the middle of May. This city, located on the island of São Miguel, is one of the main destinations in the Azores for Canadian tourists, whether they are golfers, eco-tourists, adventure seekers – or those simply looking to relax while exploring a beautiful destination.

The Azores is an archipelago of nine islands, with a total area of 2,333 kilometres squared. A mere 244,000 people inhabit the destination, which is considered a part of Portugal.

Approximately 10,000 Canadians visited the Azores in 2010, which is ranked second in the world for sustainable tourism.

"I would say 60 per cent of (incoming) Canadian visitors travel solely to the Azores, taking advantage of the existing direct connections with the remainder combining it with some other part of Portugal or Europe," said Rui Cabral, promotion, Azores Tourism Association.

SATA International flies into Ponta Delgada directly from two Canadians gateway - Toronto and Montreal, a great link for tourists visiting the destination or Portugese-Canadians returning home to visit their families. Direct nonstop flights between Canada and the Azores are approximately five and a half hours in length, according to the Azores Tourism Association.

São Miguel is the biggest island of the Azores, boasting stunning landscapes and plenty of opportunities for various types of travellers.
“The Azores product attracts people by its beauty, calm spirit, natural looks and gastronomy,” explained Cabral. “(Those factors) can make a very nice package to look for on your holidays.”

As a bus took our group for a tour of the area, we couldn’t help but notice the endless sea of green that is this island. Looking out the window, I felt that it was like a painted picture because the landscape was so crisp and beautiful.

We made our way to a viewpoint that overlooks the “Sete Cidades,” or in English, “the Lake of the Seven Cities.” This is the point where the twin lakes meet - the Green and the Blue – which were formed in the crater of the Sete Cidades Massif volcano. The Sete Cidades is one of the most popular attractions in São Miguel and, according to one local who I spoke with, “the most beautiful place in the world.”

Because of the landscape, there is plenty of opportunity for a number of activities. For example, São Miguel is a golf destination but can also appeal to those looking for soft adventure such as hiking, biking or horseback riding.

A unique perspective of the island can be had on the water. In fact, São Miguel is one of the few places in the world where canoeing can be done inside the craters of extinguished volcanoes.

Another main attraction of São Miguel is its geothermal springs. The natural hot water pools can be seen in various forms – from brown water to crystal clear – and in different surroundings. There are a number located throughout the island.

Because of these hot springs, the Azores can offer a very unique dining experience called Cozido das Furnas. In Furnas, the pots containing meat and vegetables for this boiled or steamed dish are put into a sac and buried in the geothermal soil, where it cooks for five to seven hours. The natural heat of the earth cooks the food, just as a crockpot. We were able to witness the removal of the pot from the earth and enjoyed the earth-cooked meal at a lovely hotel restaurant not far from where it all happened.

For travellers more interested in the urban areas of Ponta Delgada, we had some time to walk around the area. It is quaint and quiet, with beautiful architecture. The city is also well known for its large number of churches.

Various tours are available for those who appreciate handicrafts and art, as the “industries of ceramics and clay works have an ancestral tradition,” according to the Azores website.

A very unique experience we were able to take in was a visit to a tea plantation, where we watched workers fill tea bags and did a tour of the factory to see how the leaves are processed before being packaged, before enjoying the tea end product.

In addition, on São Miguel Island there is also a tradition for cultivating exotic fruits such as pineapple, guavas and passion fruit. The pineapple green houses, spreading through Fajã de Baixo, Lagoa and Vila Franca do Campo are open for visitors.
To make the wealth and beauty of the Azores more readily available to Canadian travellers looking for a new, spectacular destination to discover, Total Vacations is planning on adding it to their product line in the near future, with SATA International as their official airline partner.

In the meantime, visit sata.pt for flight information and information about the airline.

A few FAM participants offered words of advice as to why they would recommend the Azores to clients:

**Dolly:** The Azores is a beautiful and very scenic place. It would be suitable for clients who like to experience the European lifestyle and Portuguese culture and food. There is a lot to see and a lot to do around the island for everyone.

**Jennifer:** I loved the Azores. It's a beautiful country with friendly people; what more could you want?! The Azores will appeal to my long stay clients as well as the adventurous (hiking) client.

**Laurraine:** Ponta Delgada is a great place for those seeking an abundance of activities and for nature lovers. Long hikes through the hills can be done in one day or over several days. The Terra Nostra is a beautiful botanical park that should not be overlooked. Another activity that is also a must is the Cozido Furnas (where you have your food cooked in the ground by the geothermal heat)!

**Melissa:** We come from such a concrete jungle living in North America and coming to the Azores – the lush greenery on such a small island took my breath away.. it was such a nice change. Everything in Canada is all about big stores and highways – it opened my eyes about the difference in quality of life. I would recommend the Azores to people who are looking for adventure and want to explore what no other country can offer.

**Sara:** The Azores are a beautiful “off the beaten path destination” unspoiled by mass tourism. A nature lovers’ delight!

**Terry Lynne:** The Azores is a beautiful country; very lush and exciting with very friendly people. I would recommend the Azores to clients that are looking for something different.
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