Explosive beauty

Kerry Christiani gets all fired up about Portugal’s hidden gem, the Azores

New Zealand stole the limelight as Middle Earth in The Lord of the Rings, but it could just as easily have been the Azores.

After all, these nine green specks of islands have all the makings of a setting for an epic Tolkien novel: mist-wreathed volcanoes, eerie lava tubes, jewel-coloured crater lakes and ferny laurel forests suspended against the crashing backdrop of the Atlantic.

Born from volcanic eruptions that began 10 million years ago and discovered by pioneering navigators in the 15th century, these Portuguese islands are scattered like mid-Atlantic stepping stones between Lisbon, 930 miles east, and New York, 2,400 miles west.

The islands cluster into three groups: Corvo and Flores in the west; Faial, Pico, São Jorge, Terceira and Graciosa in the centre; São Miguel and Santa Maria to the east. They feel fantastically remote, but London is under four hours away.

Sell: Ripe for the Discovery

Until recently most people would have had trouble pinning the Azores on the map, but they are now having something of a moment, thanks to steadily rising visitor numbers and a wave of recent press coverage.

This year, Fodor’s Go List ranks them as one of the best 25 places to visit, The Guardian rates Santa Maria as one of the 20 best bargain beach destinations, and the islands snapped up the Quality Cost Gold Award for their commitment to sustainable tourism. The Azores’ star is rising.

And you can believe the hype – these islands, known for their exceptional biodiversity, geotourism and subtropical microclimates that nurture pineapples, yams, tobacco, bananas and even tea plantations, have tremendous pulling power.

There is walking to rival that in Madeira, with trails leading from volcanic crater to coast, as well as myriad outdoor pursuits from diving to canyoning, kayaking, surfing, mountain biking and...
birdwatching. This is one of the best places on the planet for whale- and dolphin watching: 25 of the world’s 80 cetacean species are resident or migratory here.

For the less active, there are black-and-white lava stone hamlets where the rhythm of village life remains nostalgically laid-back, and harbour fronts full of character such as Ponta Delgada on São Miguel and Unesco-listed Angra do Heroísmo on Terceira to explore, as well as black-sand beaches and natural swimming pools.

Limpets, wreck fish, tuna and swordfish feature on many menus, as do brothy stews served with sweet bread, couves fritas (fried cabbage) and tangy cheeses. Prices are reasonable island-wide: a beer costs about £1, a coffee £60p, dinner and drinks about £20.

Temperatures hover around the mid-twenties in summer and the mercury rarely dips below 10C in winter, though days can be rainy. In spring the islands erupt with a profusion of hydrangeas and camellias, while April to September is prime whale-watching season.

Year round, SATA operates a direct flight every Saturday from Gatwick to Ponta Delgada, with frequent onward connections to all other islands. TAP operates daily flights to Lisbon from Heathrow, Manchester and Gatwick (except Sunday and Thursday for the latter), with connecting flights daily to Terceira, Faial and São Miguel.

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Few experiences are as exhilarating as bumping over the Atlantic in a semi-rigid dinghy, lashed with salty spray, in the hope of spotting a whale.

The odds are particularly good on Faial, where regulars include sperm whales, which surface like 20-metre-long torpedoes. Since the 1987 whaling ban, the Azores has made a spectacular U-turn, shifting its focus towards sustainable half-day tours to admire the cetacean stars that splash around in its waters.

In Horta’s marina, ahas reeled in sailors since 1918, with its just-caught seafood, spot-on G&Ts and fascinating scrimshaw museum.

From Horta, Pico’s volcanic cone feels close enough to touch. Absorbing the entire island with its scale and symmetry, at 2,351 metres Mount Pico is Portugal’s highest peak.

If the stiff four-hour hike to the summit doesn’t appeal, it can...
The Azores have some of the finest whale and dolphin watching to be had. With a dash of boutique charm and the best whale and dolphin watching to be had, this is the perfect holiday destination. VW