

GETAWAY

FAYE BROWN heads to the Azores, which is rapidly becoming a hot destination without attracting the crowds

MANY people may have heard of the Azores but might not know where they are, let alone considered them as a holiday destination.

After all, this string of volcanic islands may be an autonomous region of Portugal, but they're right in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. And, until recently, there were no direct flights from the UK.

A relaxation of airspace rules has allowed budget airlines to start offering once-a-week flights from London and, as of June, Manchester, for less than £90 return.

I spent a week on São Miguel, the largest of the nine islands that make up the archipelago.

This little-known paradise is as exotic as it sounds and boasts waterfalls, beaches, hot springs, nature trails, volcanoes and dramatic landscapes.

Capital Ponta Delgada is a striking city that is famous for its three-arched gates, Gothic churches and botanical gardens.

Spend the day here taking a whale and dolphin watching tour with Futurismo, stroll in the exotic Jardim António Borges park and grab a bite to eat at the Anfiteatro Lounge - a modern restaurant overlooking the marina.

We stayed a little way from the capital in the Caloura Hotel Resort. Built on a hillside offering panoramic views of the ocean, the Caloura features direct access to the sea, natural volcanic pools and a pristine black-sand beach.

The four-star hotel is one of the more expensive places to stay but, as prices on the island are generally cheap, (I got three coffees, a beer and a cake for less than five euros in one café) it's worth splashing out here to watch the sunset from your balcony.

The Caloura is close to several of São Miguel's main attractions, such as Agua D'alto - a walking trail that leads on to a secluded waterfall - and the southern town of Vila Franca do Campo, which is famous for a pastry known as a Queijada.

Watch it being made at the Queijadas da Vila do Morgado café. You'll have to buy one if you want a taste, though, because the recipe has been kept secret between two families for centuries.

For a more active holiday, Villa Franca is also famous for the Vila Franca do Campo Islet - a nature reserve formed by the crater of a submerged volcano where you can swim, dive or snorkel.

There's no shortage of scenery on this island which, owing in part to its remote location and in part to the government's efforts to create sustainable tourism, has some of the most unspoiled landscapes in the world.

Natural wonders, such as the crater lakes of Sete Cidades and Lago Do Fogo, boast crystal-clear turquoise water for as far as the eye can see.

The viewpoints from Ponta da Mararugada and Ponta Do Sosse in the municipality of Nordeste also offer great views of the ocean and are prime locations to see the sun rise.

Meanwhile, Furnas Lake has more than just beautiful views. Its naturally

Paradise islands



São Miguel is one of the best locations in Europe to go diving or snorkelling, but saying it's like Hawaii is Azores point with the locals



Marvel at the natural wonder of the Sete Cidades lakes, above, or relax on one of the many beaches, right



Have breakfast overlooking the ocean at the Caloura Resort Hotel

boiling water is used to cook a delicious Portuguese stew known as the Cozido. The packed cooking pot, buried in the early morning, is dug out of the ground at around 12pm each day and served up at the nearby Terra Nostra Garden Hotel.

Unlike any other European dish, it contains a meat spectacular of chicken, beef, various types of pork and smoked sausages, beans, potatoes, carrots, turnips, cabbage and rice. It comes highly recommended.

Seafood is the cuisine Azorians are most known for, however, with tuna steak a staple on every menu, as well as more exotic delicacies such as stingray, limpet, and wreckfish.

Luckily, there's plenty to get up to to work up an appetite, from hiking and climbing, to horse riding, mountain biking, surfing, paragliding and rappelling down cliffs at the Ribeira dos caldeirões natural park in Nordeste.

And if that's not your thing, tour companies like Greenzones will be more than happy to show you the island's best beauty spots from the comfort of an old-fashioned jeep.

The Azorian climate is warm all year round, with highs of 20-25 degrees through April to November. Those hotter days can be spent

chilling out on a beach - Praia de Santa Barbara has particularly amazing sunset views - while cooler days are perfect for a visit to one of the island's many natural hot springs.

It's tempting to describe the Azores as the Hawaii of Europe, but locals don't like that phrase.

"Hawaii is the Azores of the Pacific" one tour guy told me. "Here, it's better."

NEED TO KNOW

■ **FAYE BROWN** flew with Ryanair, which flies to Ponta Delgada from Manchester and London. She stayed at the Caloura Hotel Resort in São Miguel for seven nights. Prices start from £84 per night. Call **+351 296 960 900** or see **Calourahotel.com**

■ A half-day whale and dolphin watching tour from Ponta Delgada costs £47 with Futurismo. Greenzones travel agency offers Jeep sightseeing tours to Sete Cidades, Lagoa do Fogo, Furnas and Nordeste. See **greenzoneazores.com**.

Car hire is from as little as £8.60 per day.

■ For more information, see **azoresholidays.pt**