

CENTURION

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G R E A T E S C A P E

All About the Azores

Awe-inspiring natural wonders, warm hospitality and a burgeoning wine scene: the many charms of Portugal's under-the-radar islands are ripe for the picking. By Ann Abel



The mesmerising architecture of Cella Bar, on the island of Pico

While the Portuguese island of Madeira has been well known to international revellers for decades, the country's other islands have yet to be discovered. The Azores is a group of nine tiny islands in the middle of the Atlantic. Formed by different geological events, the islands are wildly different in appearance – from the incandescent green of São Miguel to the black lava fields of Pico to the brightly coloured chapels of Terceira – and also when it comes to culture and cuisine.

What they share is breathtaking nature, genuine hospitality and a curious absence of mass tourism – or even medium-scale tourism – apart from the most populous

island, São Miguel. There are more cows than people. (It's worth noting here that this is not the place to go for anyone looking for sandy beaches or constant sunshine – that old cliché about four seasons in one day gets bandied about frequently.)

"I've travelled around the world a lot. The Azores have a completely different energy and magic," says Terceira native Adriana Fournier, a co-owner of Chefs Agency, an international communications firm based in Lisbon. "Besides going for my work, I'm always trying to get back. It's not about the work; it's about the energy, passion, generosity and hospitality."

Benedita Branco, who has been visiting the Azores regularly since she was a

teenager and now owns one of the best hotels and restaurants in Pico, shares that opinion. "It's very welcoming," says the owner of Lava Homes and Magma. "It's like a trip back in time. People make their own fun, meeting at their friends' *adegas* [wineries], singing, dancing and playing instruments."

"It's an amazing destination," agrees Joana Damião Melo, who grew up in São Miguel and recently reopened her parents' hotel, Senhora da Rosa, on the island. "It's still unspoiled, but it's very easy to reach."

SÃO MIGUEL

"São Miguel is the biggest island, and it's very diverse," says Damião. "You need time >



The nature-ensconced guest quarters at Caparica Ecolodge on Terceira

largest gin bar, where the vivacious owner offers private tastings by appointment.

When his Solar Branco Estate guest house (solarbranco.com) is completed next year, it will be an excellent addition to São Miguel's accommodation scene. For now, the best places to stay include Damião's Senhora da Rosa (particularly the freestanding garden cottages; senhoradarosa.com); the newly renovated, design-forward White (whiteazores.com) and Furnas Boutique Hotel (furnasboutiquehotel.com), a heritage property beside the island's curative hot springs.

PICO

Pico means "peak" in Portuguese, and the island is so-named because it's dominated by a perfectly symmetrical volcano – like a child's drawing and the highest point in

Portugal. If you want to climb it, a relatively straightforward endeavour that can be done in a day, talk to Tripix (tripixazores.com). If you'd rather just look at it, Branco's new six-bedroom villa, Adega do Fogo (adegadofogo.com) has excellent views, as does the more rustic Adegas do Pico (adegasdopico.com).

The most glamorous place to stay is Branco's first project, the hillside Lava Homes (lavahomes.com), which includes the refined Magma restaurant. It has some new competition, though, in the form of the Azores Wine Company (antoniomacanita.com), a boutique winery with six bedrooms beside the vineyards and the island's only fine-dining restaurant, Pico.

The wines it produces – saline, mineral, delicious – are some of the most sought-after in Portugal, particularly since rock-star winemaker António Maçanita is one of the partners. It's part of a long tradition

to know the lagoons, the sea, the whales, the trekking and the hot springs." Nature is absolutely a highlight, with Sete Cidades, Lagoa do Fogo and Lagoa Azul among the must-see attractions. For those who don't want to explore alone, Fun Activities (funactivities.net) is the company to know for organising hikes, mountain-biking and canyoning. If water's more your thing, Futurismo (futurismo.pt) is the best whale-watching outfit on the island, and HáMar (hamar-azores.com) will take you out on a boat with local fishermen.

Speaking of fish, the island's cuisine is simple but always fresh, local and prepared with care. Cais 20 (restaurantecais20.pt) is an oceanside seafood hall where locals gather in groups to share plates of garlicky limpets, fresh clams, garlic bread and island lobsters. A Tasca (+351 296 288 880), in the centre of the capital city of Ponta Delgada, brings the same concept to other Azorean classics like *alheira* sausage with sweet potatoes and local cheese – an important delicacy in its own right. For something a bit more elevated, Ōtaka (otaka-restaurant.negocio.site) offers excellent sushi. Or if cocktails are more your speed, The Gin Library (gin-library.com) is Europe's



PHOTOS FROM TOP: CAPARICA ECOLOGDE, © WHITE AZORES

of winemaking on the island. Pico wines were once found in noble cellars around the world, and now the island's vineyards are a Unesco World Heritage Site. It's a tradition that's been upheld for years by the local cooperative, Pico Wines (picowines.com), and one that's being reinvented by a new generation of boutique winemakers, including Adega do Vulcão (adegadovulcao.com) and Entre Pedras (simplesmentevinho.com).

The most unusual wine on the island is called Czar (a reference to the island's onetime wine clientele; czarwinery.com), a strong, dry wine that tastes like it's fortified, but it's not. The personable owner will cook a fish stew for you when you book a tasting. Or you can sample a number of the island's vintages at the seaside Cella Bar ([facebook.com/cellabar](https://www.facebook.com/cellabar)), one of the best-looking bars anywhere.



Pico's food is "not very elaborate", says Branco, "but it's genuine and local." That means going for fish fillets with tomato *açorda* (garlic-bread soup) at Ancoradouro ([fb.com/ancoradouropico](https://www.facebook.com/ancoradouropico)), sharable snacks like grilled limpets and fresh cheese with local chilli at O Petisca ([facebook.com/tascapetisca](https://www.facebook.com/tascapetisca)), or the island's famous grass-fed beef at Clube Naval São Roque do Pico ([fb.com/clubenavalsrp.bar](https://www.facebook.com/clubenavalsrp.bar)).

TERCEIRA

When I bring up the joke about the Azores being eight islands and an amusement park, Adriana Fournier nods in agreement. "Terceira is about sharing," she says, and the island has a reputation for its parties, held nearly every day between May and October. Bands play in the streets and people set up tables outside their homes and serve food to anyone who wants to join >



From top: an old Azorean farmhouse is being transformed into cosy guest accommodations on São Miguel; the island's beloved Gin Library; left: a view of the spectacular Lagoa de Fogo on São Miguel



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Abade de Priscos pudding with pineapple sauce at Oficina da Esquina; top: the clifftop White resort on São Miguel

them. There's also an especially nonviolent form of bullfighting, in which spectators watch a bull promenade around the centre of the capital, Angra do Heroísmo, and then get something to eat.

Development here has been slower than in São Miguel or Pico, but Terceira is catching up with new projects like Oficina da Esquina ([facebook.com/oficinadaesquinaacores](https://www.facebook.com/oficinadaesquinaacores)), from the well-regarded Lisbon chef Vitor Sobral and the first place to serve classically (mainland) Portuguese dishes like seafood rice, and the new hotel that it's part of, The Shipyard ([theshipyardangra.com](https://www.theshipyardangra.com)). It instantly became one of the island's top restaurants, along with the rustic Ti Choa ([facebook.com/ti.choa](https://www.facebook.com/ti.choa)) and the seaside seafood hall Beira Mar ([beiramarazores.com](https://www.beiramarazores.com)).

For a more classic stay, there's Pousada de Angra do Heroísmo ([pousadas.pt](https://www.pousadas.pt)), part of the Pousadas de Portugal collection of

heritage hotels. Or for something more tied into nature, there's Caparica Ecolodge ([caparica-ecolodge.com](https://www.caparica-ecolodge.com)), where climbing up to the cabins on a rainy night can be a bit of an adventure but where the views more than make up for it.

Speaking of things to see, Terceira has many. Some are related to the volcano, including Gruta do Natal (lava tube) and Algar do Carvão (open cave). Others are manmade and whimsical: the colourful chapels called *impérios*, built to honour the Holy Spirit at a time when people didn't fully understand the earthquakes and eruptions of their island, add bursts of colour in many villages and towns. And there's a wine culture here, too, with the Museu do Vinho ([freguesiabiscoitos.com](https://www.freguesiabiscoitos.com)) offering the best introduction – and a welcome slice of traditional life, which like so much of these islands feels almost untouched across the centuries. –