

A Different Island Getaway

The Azores and Madeira are easy to overlook but hard to forget.

BY DAVID J. WHYTE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID J WHYTE, LINKSLAND.COM

I could scarcely believe my eyes: There I was, on the road from Ponta Delgada's João Paulo II Airport to my first round of golf on the São Miguel Island in the Azores, in the midst of a landscape eerily reminiscent of my native Scotland – the Southern Uplands in particular, Dumfries & Galloway to be precise. The cows were even the same color, black & white Belted Galloways munching merrily on the lushest green pastures.

What were they doing there, on a volcanic island in the Atlantic, part of a chain of islands comprising an autonomous region of Portugal that stretches more than 350 miles, nearly 900 miles west of Lisbon and almost halfway to Newfoundland? And what was I doing there, a travel writer who has photographed every single golf course in the Home of Golf for VisitScotland? As you can see on these pages, I was there for the beauty and for the golf. As for the cows, they were no doubt brought there by some of my predecessors among the many Europeans who sojourned on these surprisingly temperate shores.

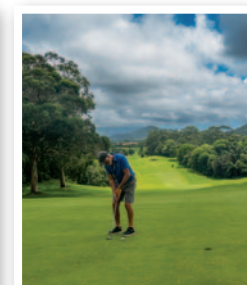
The Azores are part of what's known as Macaronesia, a lustrous string of islands beginning here and ranging southeast to Madeira and then south to the Canary Islands and Cape Verde off the West African coast. The Azores consist of nine islands in roughly the center of the Atlantic Ocean's northern half, sharing a band of latitude bounded in the U.S. by Philadelphia to the north and Norfolk to the south. Their mid-ocean location and the conjunction of the

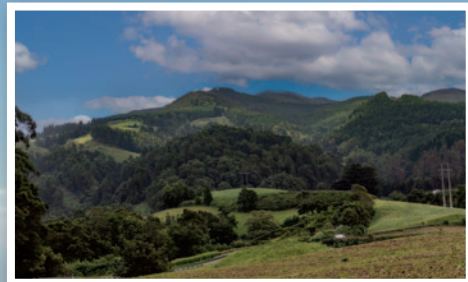
southerly Gulf Stream and the northerly Labrador Current mean temperatures in the ideal range for year-round golf: comfortable even in winter, not too hot in summer. They're only a five-hour flight from New York or Boston, so it's simple to take an overnight direct flight and land with plenty of time for breakfast and a morning tee time.

Tourism is a vital part of the economy of the islands, which are quintessentially about nature. Besides simply enjoying the breathtaking landscapes, popular outdoor activities include surfing, whale-watching, and hiking expeditions. The food is particularly notable, too! The cheese is supreme and there are some fabulous local wines, especially those from the island of Pico – home to the highest elevation in all of Portugal, Mount Pico (7,713'). Seafood, as you would expect on such natural atolls, is as fresh as it can be, and the local meat from those Belted Galloways is also excellent.

Look forward to some great dining experiences, particularly at Cais 20 on the east side of the town of Ponta Delgada, famous for seafood, and Restaurante Alcides in the center, known for its succulent steaks. Probably the most popular non-golf activity on The Azores is "soaking." There are at least a dozen thermal pools on the main island of São Miguel; they can get pretty busy at times, but hotels such as Octant Furnas and Terra Nostra Hotel provide their guests unlimited access, while public opening hours are from 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. There are three golf clubs on these islands, and the 27-hole Batalha Golf Club (pronounced *Bataya*, which means "battle") is just 15 minutes from the international airport and city of Ponta Delgada on São Miguel. All three of Batalha's nine-hole loops are heavily tree-lined, so if your driving is off this will indeed be a battle! You're confronted with numerous doglegs

MAIN IMAGE: COURTESY SANTO DA SERRA GOLF CLUB





MAIN IMAGE: COURTESY PALHEIRO GOLF CLUB

fringed with thick forest and frequent elevation changes, so it's never easy but is always scenic. Batalha is a great golfing experience and worth a couple of visits during your stay to capture the full scope of the course and play all three sections.

São Miguel's other course is in the town of Furnas, stylishly tucked away in a secluded valley on the northeast corner of this whale-shaped province. Furnas Golf Club sits above the town, its original nine-hole section completed in 1936 by MacKenzie Ross who was responsible for Turnberry's postwar restoration and Southernness in southwest Scotland. (The course was expanded to 18 holes in 1990.) Furnas is one of his lesser-known examples, yet if it was in a more trafficked area, it would be a lot busier; when we played, we had the place practically to ourselves.

The greens and their unusual elliptical bunkers are the course's main defense, the

wild contours of the putting surfaces dismissing any aspirations for straightforward putts. I was delighted with the variety of holes here and the constant challenge to your short game. The newer section is sympathetic to Ross's original design. All in all, Furnas is probably the best and most entertaining outing on these islands, worthy of its inclusion on some Top 100 in Europe lists.

The Azores' third course is on the island of Terceira, a short plane ride away. I haven't had the pleasure of playing Terceira Island Golf Club but, having dipped my toes into the Azores' other courses, I would eagerly come back and explore all of these islands in much greater detail. The flight time from San Miguel to Terceira is less than an hour.

And then there's Madeira, a place I unabashedly love—so much so that I moved there in 2017 and it's now my permanent home. Like the Azores, Madeira is an archipelago, with two main islands and many

smaller ones; the largest by far is also called Madeira. Being on the same latitude as Casablanca in Morocco, Madeira's climate is perfect almost all year.

Like the Azores, the islands have three golf courses, each offering a distinct experience. Palheiro Golf has one of the best panoramic views from the clubhouse anywhere on the planet. The course is hilly in parts and it's all about fun, a sort of golf-pinball where you can play off the slopes and gain advantage. The grass may take on a browner aspect in the summer but the playing conditions remain sound, and it greens up nicely in winter.

Santo da Serra Golf Club is higher and greener as it attracts wetter weather so the course conditions are more consistent throughout the year, the only downside being it can occasionally be misty or wet during the winter. There are three loops of 9 here with astounding views across the

Center: Palheiro Golf Club. Clockwise from top right: Soakers at a thermal pool in São Miguel; fresh seafood at Taberna Ruel, in Funchal; par-3 course at Porto Santo Golf Club; Furnas, tucked into a valley on São Miguel, Azores; André Medeiros, pro at Batalha Golf Club, with the club's car; São Miguel's hilly topography.

Atlantic Ocean and to the uninhabited islands of Desertas, Madeira's third-largest island group.

There's a third course on Madeira's neighboring island of Porto Santo, the region's second-largest, and I strongly recommend taking time to visit. Seve Ballesteros set up a links-like challenge at Porto Santo Golf Club that is completely different from the other two courses. The 13th to 15th are the most impressive holes, set next to cliffs. In addition to the primary 18, there is also a par-3 course with similar charm and character. The island also has one of the best beaches imaginable, with more than six miles of golden sand that has been scientifically proven to have significant health benefits.

So that's my brief round-up of the golf on these Elysian islands, but I have to note that it's Madeira itself that's the main attraction here – and especially the city of Funchal, a vibrant European municipality with all the culture, cuisine, and character you could ever wish for.

Taken together, the Azores and Madeira offer an alluring and very different kind of island vacation spot. They are serviced by SATA Azores Airline, which offers a free stopover in the Azores en route to destinations farther east; stay in the Azores for three or four days, then continue on with the two-hour hop southward to the sunny straits of Madeira. You'll see why it drew me, and you'll never want to leave either. ■

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