

The Magic of MADEIRA

*A mysterious and magical island overflowing
with old-world charms.*

BY DAVID J. WHYTE

Destination Focus

The first thing you notice about Madeira is how steep-sided this little island is. Homes hang like bird-boxes and roads drape loosely around its vertiginous slopes. As the plane flew closer, a structure came into view, a series of massive pillars rising out of the sea.

Was it a dam? Was it the gateway to a subterranean power station? An Atlantean artefact perhaps? Was it the airport? No, it couldn't be! Then the plane banked right and I decided it was! Madeira International Airport is built on stilts above a rocky beach to support a substantial section of the runway. Madeira, it seems, doesn't do flat.

The island's upright nature was further underlined as I steered my hire-car towards Funchal, the island's capital. Madeira is cut through like a massive Swiss Cheese with a network of tunnels and sweeping flyovers that allow traffic to traverse this relatively small island in less than an hour whereas it used to take five.

You can still go exploring on the old roads; twisty, mountainous tracks that are a whole lot of fun to drive on especially in a nice little soft-top, hire-car.

MYSTERY ISLANDS

I'd come to the Madeiran archipelago principally to play golf. During the winter months, destinations like the Canaries, Turkey, Spain and the Algarve get the lion's share of sun-seeking swingers but I was in a mood for something different! Madeira appeals to a more mature, wealthier clientele who appreciate its old-world charm and cultured sophistication coupled with the innate friendliness of Madeirans.

Funchal was a surprise! It's an elegant little European city full character and excellent amenities with a nice balance between everyday Madeiran life and tourism. Down by the harbour, there are boat trips to see whales and dolphins or you can take a trip on the 'Santa Maria', a replica of Christopher Columbus's galleon which he sailed to these islands in 1492 on his way to discover that little place they now call America.

Beyond that, Madeira's Old Town is a great place to wander at leisure, poking around narrow streets, soaking up the vibrant atmosphere or stopping for lunch at one of the dozens of delightful pavement restaurants.

PREVIOUS PAGE - OPENING PICTURE:
Palheiro Golf Club offers the most stunning views of Funchal and is the closest course to the city.

THIS PAGE - CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
A stroll through the Old Town's fascinating architecture; Afternoon Tea at Reid's is a must; The Farmer's Market in Funchal is rich in colour; The City of Funchal catches the evening light; Vintage Cars arrive at Fort of São Tiago; Praça do Município is the main square in Funchal.



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BELMOND REID'S PALACE

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A touch I particularly liked was having UK electrical points alongside standard European fittings. How very thoughtful! Reid's has been keeping the UK & Europe's crème de la crème happy since it opened its doors in the late 1800s.

The Guest Book Who's Who is impressive; Sir Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, David Lloyd George, Roger Moore (when he wasn't filming James Bond), Gregory Peck (when he was filming Moby Dick) and dramatist George Bernard Shaw.

The place still has an air of genteel tranquillity and restive retreat with age-old traditions such as taking Afternoon Tea on the balcony with panoramic views of Funchal and the harbour.

VINTAGE MADEIRA

Our Madeira itinerary was as much about the culture, cuisine and history of this little archipelago as its golf. To kick off, we were heading downtown in a classic car.

Madeira has some 800 vintage motors, mostly of a British marque and the likes of an early Morris Cowley or Rolls-Royce can be summoned via 'Old Timer Tours' to pick you up and parade you through the Old Town and on to Forte de São Tiago where pre-dinner cocktails await on the terrace to the sound of traditional Portuguese guitar.

As the city bathes in the last light of the day, Funchal, it seemed to me is built like an amphitheatre to give each house and apartment a front row seat for sunset.



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AND SO TO GOLF!

Madeira has three 18-hole golf courses including one on the neighbouring island of Porto Santo. We started with Palheiro, set in the hills just above the city. The first thing you notice about Palheiro is its incredible views.

The prospects of the city beneath your feet are remarkable! From a playing point of view, Palheiro is the shorter of the three courses and routinely tight so you might want to leave the driver where it lies.

It's a course that benefits from a bit of 'insider knowledge' so plan to play here twice for best effect. It's also worth noting that Palheiro's clubhouse serves superb food with surely one of the best clubhouse views in Europe so plan to stay for lunch or even book for dinner!

The course is part of a verdant estate which includes the magnificent Quinta do Palheiro Gardens and Hotel Casa Velha do Palheiro. The gardens are famous for the

variety of plants that grow but Madeira has long been referred to as the 'Garden Isle' and it seems almost anything will grow in its fertile soil.

SANTO DA SERRA

The Serras 9 at Santo da Serra, although it doesn't have the jaw-dropping views of the other two, is the best playing section.

Santo da Serra Golf Club is close to the mountains in the east part of the island, above the main International Airport. It also has amazing views, taking in the deserted Desertas Island across the Bay of Machico.

Santo da Serra's three nines were redesigned by Robert Trent Jones Snr in the early 2000s and it has hosted the Madeira Open several times since. I enjoyed the Serras section, particularly for its playability.

The Machico section offers a catalogue of challenging holes from the second to the sixth while the Desertas nine is more uphill especially coming home. Santo da Serra regularly gets voted as one of the best championship courses in Portugal.

If you like to combine history, nature, culture and food with a modest amount of golf, I'd say Madeira is the perfect destination! It is especially even if there are non-golfers in the party, simply because there's so many other things to do.

One of the highlights of our itinerary was a sailing trip on the 'Pilar de Banger', an elegant Turkish schooner accompanied by dolphins and whales as we sailed to Fajã dos Padres, an exclusive hideaway at the foot of a cliff only accessible by cable car or boat where you can relax for an afternoon, enjoying an amazing lunch then sunbathe or swim in the sea.

Then there is a four-wheel drive Jeep Safari trip to the north of the island courtesy of the True Spirit adventure company to do some off-road exploring. It was raining when we set off and it seemed like the day would be a disaster but after a delightfully rustic lunch, we were encouraged to take a trek through the rain-soaked forest.

The resulting 'awe' and sense of nature was one of the highlights of the trip; it was stunningly beautiful and though soaked through, our spirits were never higher.

The story of Madeira Wine is interesting as we found out during a tour of Blandy's Wine Lodge in downtown Funchal. Legend has it that sailors, keen to take a few barrels of table wine with them on their Atlantic voyages found it prone to spoiling.

Brandy was added to try and stop it going off and somehow casks of this blend found their way to the Caribbean and back in again, unopened! On sampling, it was discovered that the heat of the ship's hold coupled with the constant rolling motion had vastly improved the wine's flavour.

Madeira's fortified wine industry was born! The tippie became a firm favourite with the Founding Fathers of the fledgeling American nation, so much so that Thomas Jefferson used 'Malmsey' Madeira to toast the Declaration of Independence!

There are many events throughout the year in Madeira, some of the more interesting being New Year when the fireworks around the Bay are quite jaw-dropping. There's Carnival in February, then Madeira Flower Festival closely followed by the Madeira Film Festival in May.

If you enjoy independent filmmaking, there is a special week of golf, gastronomy and culture with the chance to meet the filmmakers and actors who mingle in Madeira at this time of year.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The view of Funchal from Belmond Reid's Hotel; The 4th green at Santo da Serra Golf overlooks the Bay of Machico; The gardens at Quinta do Palheiro are famous for their varieties of plants; Sampling Madeira Wine with Blandy's winemaker, Francisco Albuquerque; Madeira Wine ageing in traditional wicker baskets.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Seve Ballesteros designed the course on the island of Porto Santo; The sun sets as we played the closing holes; Porto Santo has unique 'healing' sands have proven benefits.



WHEN TO COME

With its springtime temperatures between 20 and 25 degrees most of the year round, you can comfortably play golf on Madeira anytime. February and March do see some stormy weather. The best months are September through January then mid-March onwards but note; the island of Porto Santo is very busy through the summer months and it's difficult to book accommodation then.

GETTING AROUND

If you're on a tour, transport will be organised for your group. Driving yourself around Madeira is great fun and Madeira Rent seems to offer the best deals on top-quality marques. We had a Mercedes-Benz A Class for the first week then switched to a snazzy little Mini Convertible to do some sightseeing. Tell Rafael Dave Whyte sent you. www.madeirarent.pt

PORTO SANTO GOLF CLUB

For our final rounds, we took a small voyage to the island of Porto Santo. It's only a couple of hours on the ferry and you can enjoy either breakfast or dinner depending on your sailing time. Porto Santo is where Madeirans and mainland Portuguese take their summer holidays especially to enjoy the shimmering sands, famous for their health-giving properties.

It's also where Christopher Columbus landed and married Filipa de Moniz, daughter of the first governor of Porto Santo before he carried on to discover the Americas. You can still see part of his house and a dedicated museum.

Laid out on the fairly open slopes surrounding Pico Ana Ferreira, Porto Santo's golf course catches the wind but the variety of holes is what catches your attention. The front nine has some excellent tests, long and open or, as at the fifth, tight and testy across tricky little ponds, one of the hardest Par 3s certainly on your nerves.

You think you've got the measure of the place until you arrive at the 13th where the following three holes cling to the edge of the cliffs and you enter into a whole new ball game. Wind is a major factor here especially on the two remarkable Par 3s, the 13th and 15th.

Porto Santo is a player's track where you need a strong long game and a deft touch to reach the short hole greens. There is also has a great driving range and a testing little Par 3 course so if you spend a couple of days here as we did, there's plenty golf to keep you amused.

The club also offers one of the best clubhouse catering services we found, worth booking lunch or an evening meal. Chef Daniel Rodriguez Mendez, otherwise known as 'Gato' (which means 'cat' due to his unusually pale blue eyes) is from Uruguay and has "a real passion for cooking," according to his boss Paulina.

So, what did I make of Madeira as a golf destination? To be honest, I would hesitate to recommend it to groups of guys wanting to tick off five rounds or more in a week. Madeira is more for sophisticated golfing couples or smaller groups who will appreciate the island's culture and cuisine alongside the myriad of things there are to do away from the golf course.

You should definitely plan on playing each of the courses at least once then spend the rest of your time soaking up one of the finest island destinations in Europe. ☺

David flew Jet 2 from Scotland to Madeira - www.jet2.com



To view more of David's stories, photography and video visit www.linksland.com