

Small Wonder

Off the coast of Portugal lies Madeira, an uncrowded, unhurried and largely unknown destination that feels like a Caribbean island with a European flair.

By Cassandra Brooklyn



WALKING TRAIL IN MADEIRA

© JOÃO FÁRIA

As I walk along the cliff-side trail, the magnificent Atlantic Ocean spreads itself out before me. To the left, I pass Australian eucalyptus, Himalayan passion fruit, American pine trees and African floral trees, then ginger to my right. My guide, Fabio, describes the scene as a botanical version of a United Colors of Benetton commercial. I see unique and colourful plants from every corner of the Earth.

My love of hiking and an inability to choose between a Caribbean island getaway and a European vacation has brought me here to Madeira, a little-known Portuguese island. It's closer to Morocco than it is to mainland Portugal and its location means it not only shares many botanical species with North Africa, but also food, architecture and language.



ECHIUM CANDICANS, COMMONLY KNOWN AS PRIDE OF MADEIRA

Fabio takes me along eight of the island's 3,500 kilometres of *levada* trails, which take their name from the *levada* irrigation canals they follow. I go on to solo hike several 15-kilometre routes that take me up extremely steep mountain trails, through long pitch-black tunnels, past waterfalls and rivers, then down to black-sand beaches and basalt formations – reminders of the island's volcanic past.

For easy access to lesser-travelled trails, I rent a small, oceanfront apartment in the small village of São Vicente on the northern shore of the island. I spend mornings watching my neighbours hang clothing to dry in their backyards while locals surf the crashing waves in the distance. Though the capital city of Funchal is only 35 kilometres from where I'm staying, it feels like it's a world away. I see no sightseeing buses and no other tourists. Other than the sounds of the warm breeze and thundering ocean waves, it is blissfully quiet with virtually no outside noise.

While a few of the more popular trails can get fairly crowded at sunrise and sunset, I usually have the trails to myself, encountering other hikers only every now and then. Thanks to the GPS and route tracking app on my phone, I know exactly where I am, but the rugged and winding trails, the density of the forests and the absence of other people almost make me feel like I'm lost. I breathe in the damp morning air and reach down to feel cold water rushing through the narrow canal. I feel energized, alive and grateful. Silence and serenity are hard to come by these days and I've found both of them in Madeira. I relish the moment and don't want it to end.

Though hiking is my main motivation for coming to Madeira, and São Vicente is as close to paradise as I can imagine, I can't miss out on spending a few days in Funchal, the island's largest city. As an adventure-inclined traveller, I join a wildlife-watching boat tour. I board a small boat early



BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS CAN BE SEEN YEAR ROUND IN MADEIRA

© VISITMADEIRA



SÃO VICENTE



TERRA CHÃ VIEWPOINT IN PORTO SANTO

in the morning in hopes of catching a glimpse of the sperm whales and fin whales that swim in the waters near Madeira.

For nearly two hours, I breathe in the crisp, salty scent of the waves while the wind whips through my hair. The view of Madeira from a distance is breathtaking with its sandy beaches, palm trees, vineyards and rocky cliffs. But despite all this beauty, I'm a little disappointed I haven't yet seen any wildlife.

Just when I'm about to give up, there's a dolphin in the distance. Then two. Then three. Then more than I can count. The captain steers the boat closer and a large pod of dolphins swims next to us. I count at least a dozen bottlenose dolphins dancing along the side of the boat, including a baby. They're so close I can almost feel them splashing water onto my sun-soaked skin. As I step off the boat back in Funchal, I'm grinning ear to ear and ready to eat.

Like mainland Portugal, Madeira is well known for its baked goods, especially its iconic *bolo do caco*, a soft and crusty bread resembling a large, toasted English muffin, which has been drenched with a generous smear of garlic butter. During my two-week trip, I eat dozens of them - from bakeries, restaurants and cafés. I already know how much I'll miss them once I go home so when it's time to leave, I head to the airport with a bag of *bolo do caco* from a local bakery.

During my visit to Fábrica Santo António, a bakery that dates back to 1894, I sample the famous honey cake and several other confections. Ultimately, I decide to buy a tin

of ginger cookies - perfectly thin, light, crispy and delicately sweet. Back in Wisconsin, I ration them for months, snacking on them while sipping black tea from one of Madeira's most historic hotels, Reid's Palace, known for its elegant afternoon tea experience.

These days, I'm back to hiking trails in the state where it feels like winter lasts half the year. I can't help thinking about and missing the tranquillity and warmth of Madeira. The island felt like a magical garden paradise and I can't wait to return.



BOLO DE MEL IN A CAFE OVERLOOKING FUNCHAL