

# THIS IS *Heaven*

One week on an island in the Azores

Coastal scenery while walking  
on the Fenais da Luz trail on  
the north shore of the Azores.





STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAN FEDUCK

BREATHE, read the larger-than-life letters painted on the Azores Airlines Airbus, and my husband and I held on to that message as we travelled a small but larger-than-life island in the Azores.

The Azores is way out there in the Atlantic Ocean. This group of nine Portuguese islands positioned 1,500 kilometres off the coast of Portugal are formed from the tips of long extinct volcanoes. Our package to the island of São Miguel included our flight and hotel for one week, but each day seemed to pack days’ worth of experiences.

We rebelled against adding a GPS feature to our rental car and instead used a paper map, choosing the thinnest road lines to take us to the secret corners of the island. Our goal was to hike the trails that connect villages, to eat authentic Azorean meals, and learn about island life way out in the ocean.

“Breathe” took on new meaning after our first day of driving on São Miguel.

The narrow roads drew us into the countryside, up mountains, down lakesides into the middle of old volcanoes, through wooded areas and around roads that hug deep coves. We had to remind ourselves to breathe not only because the scenery was spellbinding but also because the driving was at times hair-raising for those used to the flat, straight roads of

southern Ontario.

São Miguel is a mere 65 kilometres from end to end, and we wondered if we could fill our week with places to explore until we looked at our map and saw 25 highlighted hiking trails.

Our hotel on the north coast of the island was impressive in its simple modern design. The first morning we walked out the door and right onto the Vigia de São Pedro trail, following the coast for six kilometres.

The ocean surf crashed against the dark stone cliffs while colourful fishing boats rolled on the waves. Down the shore we could see small villages of white and brightly coloured houses with red-tiled roofs; they spread along cliffs, in coves and up hills.

The trail led through the village of Fenais da Luz where we met a shopkeeper who had lived in the United States for many years until the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. She and her family moved back to her peaceful paradise.

“This is heaven,” she promised us. “You will see.”

When asked about the wine produced on this island, she proudly pulled a bottle from under the counter.

We met only two others on the trail that day – a woman who was picking wild spinach and spent time telling us how she prepared this delicacy, and a man who was hunting on the volcanic beach rocks for shellfish known as limpets.

That evening we headed to the village of Calhetas to search for Restaurante O Pescador. We parked and walked up and down narrow streets asking for directions along the way. Women hanging out of

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**LEFT:** Tea bushes at the Cha Porto Formosa tea estate on Sao Miguel in the Azores.

**INSET:** From an overlook the town of Furnas, Logoa das Furnas and series of narrow roads can be seen below in the crater of an extinct volcano.





the windows were more than willing to help us find the eatery by waving their arms to the north, east, south and west, and carefully watching to ensure that we followed their directions.

Inside the small atmospheric restaurant the day's catch rested on ice. There was usually more variety, the owner explained, but the waters were rough this week, making it more difficult to fish. We were served a huge pot of stew containing several types of fish and many vegetables, a basket of bread and quality cheese made from the milk of cows that grazed on salt-sprayed grass.

With a bottle of local red wine this was rustic, authentic food at its best.

Heading west the next day, we drove tree-lined roads, never losing sight of the ocean on our way to our hiking

destination. In the village of Capelas, behind a nondescript entrance door, is M.J. Melo Oficina, an impressive museum created by a teacher. The museum consists of a collection of themed rooms, each portraying an aspect of the culture and history of São Miguel. Many islanders have added to the extensive collection of items.

The Bretanha trail on the western tip of the island wound around the green volcanic cone of Mafra, leading us on bamboo-lined paths across grassy farmland. Farmers made good use of the black, ragged volcanic rock to build walls to keep their cows from wandering. As if in a garden, we walked beside bushes of pink azaleas, clumps of calla lilies and the vividly coloured flowers of many cacti and succulents.

Following narrow trails down into coves, we climbed back up to cross the countryside on wooded paths and back to our car.



**TOP:** One of the twin lakes at Sete Cidades. In bright sunlight the lakes show a vivid green and blue.

**ABOVE:** A group of Romeiros travels the roads of Sao Miguel Island in the Azores.

Our feet had taken us to corners of island landscape we could never have seen from the road.

We held our breath again as we drove the steep, one-lane switchback road down a cliff to Termas da Ferraria, a simple but modern thermal pool harnessing the waters on a dramatic volcanic beach. We soaked in the sulphuric, healing waters while giant waves crashed on the rocks.

An early evening drive further west led to Sete Cidades and a view of two lakes from the ledge of the volcanic cone. The lakes are famous for vibrant colours when seen from above in bright sunlight. One is an azure blue, as legend has it, from the tears of a princess; the other is a bright green, said to be from the tears of her lover.

A spectacular trail with a view of the lakes follows the high open land above but requires good weather conditions to hike.

Pointing our car toward the northeast tip of the island, the next day we explored the area around the town of Nordeste, until recently an isolated fishing community. A bridge of flowers and lampposts leads to a large white church in the main square where men gossip on the church stairs.

Just outside of town is the Lomba De Fazenda trail, which circles a deep cove. This walk winds through forests of lush vegetation, along cliff tops and inland. Vegetable gardens cultivated on steep hillsides showed the determination of the gardeners using each inch of land, however challenging, on such a small island.

Surprisingly, the Azores is the only place in Europe that grows tea.

The lush bushes of the Chá Porto Formoso tea estate grow on a hilly landscape.

Tea leaves are picked in April and processed using wooden machinery from the 1800s. After a tour, we enjoyed a cup of their tea, grown from plants of Chinese origin.



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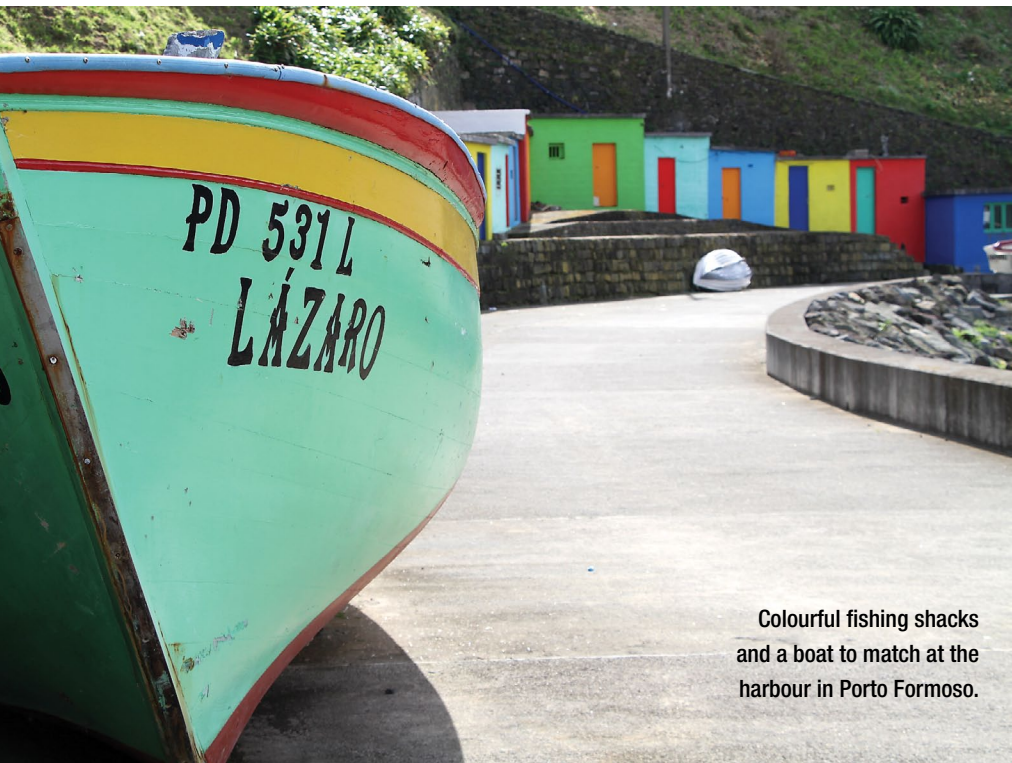


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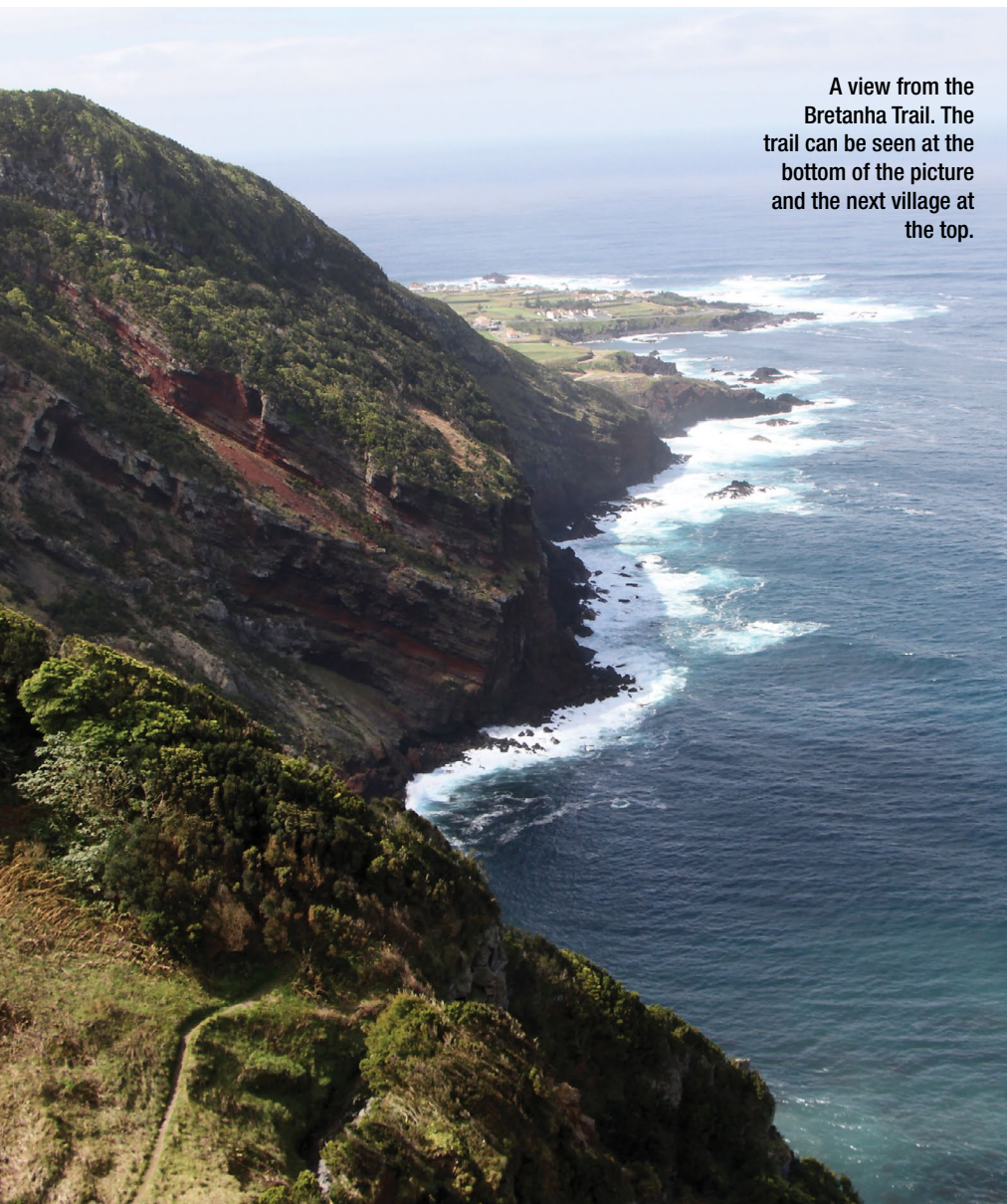
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A view from the  
Bretanha Trail. The  
trail can be seen at the  
bottom of the picture  
and the next village at  
the top.

Along the road, we saw many groups of Romeiros (pilgrims) on their eight-day pilgrimages to the many religious sites of the island. In a custom that dates back to the 16th century, male pilgrims walk in groups clockwise around the island, chanting, carrying staffs, and wearing rosaries and colourful cloaks. The continuing importance of the Catholic faith to this culture is demonstrated by the commitment of the Romeiros. Drivers slow down with reverence when they encounter the Romeiros, some of whom come from abroad to join in this tradition.

In the village of Porto Formoso, the harbour was like a living work of art with colourful fishing huts painted against high black cliffs. The ornate white church perched above the harbour seemed to reassure fishermen that faith would protect them. On the streets, two men delivered their metal milk cans on horseback, clinging to the age-old customs with pride.

Café Canto do Cais, in the town of Capelas, was our chosen eatery at the end of the day. Meals were served at tables with benches and the brightly painted walls were decorated with old whaling and fishing relics. Locals stood at the bar, catching up on their day.

The owner sat down to discuss our options using a book he put together to describe the types of fish. He told us there are 50 kinds of fish caught around the islands. His day begins at 4 a.m. as he fishes to make the meals that will be served that evening.

Our order of tuna and sardines was presented on a large platter for two with fresh vegetables and fruit.

We thought of the fishermen, farmers and cooks that brought that meal to the table and wondered why those thoughts don't occur to us at home.

On the south side of the island, we visited Lagoa das Furnas, a lake inside the cone of an extinct volcano. An overlook offers a clear view of the town of Furnas and the lake, where smoke from the centre of the Earth breaks through the ground creating boiling pools in the lakeside sand.

In the town of Furnas, several restaurants continue the age-old tradition of cooking pots of meats and vegetables for eight hours in the hot sands. The pots are taken from the lakeside to be served to diners eager to taste a culinary tradition cooked by the heat of the Earth.

Ponta Delgada is the main town on São Miguel with a population of 35,000. The sidewalks are made of small mosaic white and grey stones put together in mesmerizing patterns. The city gates and buildings behind porticos mark the spot of the original harbour, now land.

On our guidebook walking tour, we learned about the unique architectural styles in Ponta Delgada. The island once exported oranges and we found one large old home with a small wooden room on the roof where men would watch for the ships and alert farmers to quickly pick and carefully pack oranges for the journey to Europe. Pineapples were also once an export crop and can still be seen growing under glass just outside town.


Our Lady of Hope Convent, completed in 1541, is known for stories of pirate attacks and the strength of the nuns who protected their artifacts. The Museu Carlos Machado, housed in an old convent, captures a strong sense of the life of a nun in the past, as well as a look at art from past to present.

The nuns of São Miguel were known for the pastries they sold to support the convents. “Mother-in-law’s eyes,” “Nuns sighs” and “Nuns bellies” are some of

the names of pastries baked by the nuns. Bakeries all over the island sell the delicious pastries and breads of the Azores. (I arrived home to learn that the Azores Cambridge Bakery continues the baking traditions of the Azores.)

At the Adega Regional restaurant in Ponta Delgada, we chatted with the cook and owner who has family in Canada. Meeting Azoreans all over São Miguel led to talk of their families who had left the islands to live in North America. But those who stayed behind were happy with their lives far out in the Atlantic Ocean in the Azores. They loved to have the ocean nearby and to let their children play safely in the streets.

And the shopkeeper was right. It is “heaven.”

Climbing onto the plane, I reflected on how it would take a lifetime to discover all the corners of this small island and took one last opportunity to just BREATHE. 

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