

Portuguese Islands Travel Journal – Volume 1

Tuesday, July 7, 2026 — Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, Azores

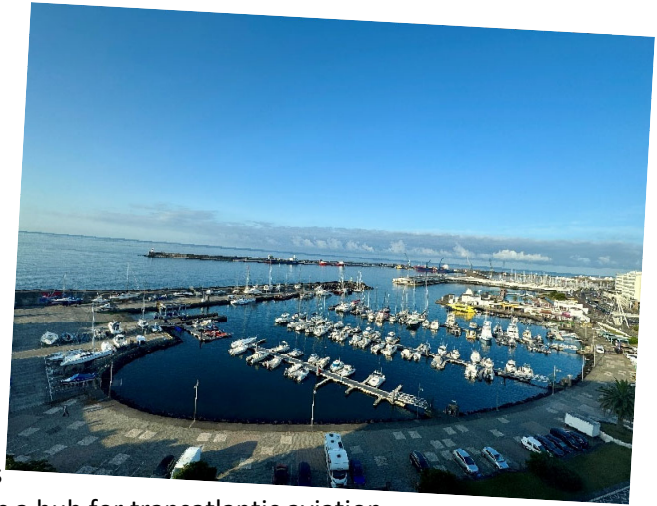
With one trip in the rearview mirror, we're off once again, this time to the Azores, a remote Portuguese archipelago. Friends have stopped asking us, "Where are you going next?" Now they ask, "Are you home this week?"

We arrived this morning in Ponta Delgada on São Miguel, the largest island in the Azores. We're somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, roughly halfway between North America and Europe. These volcanic islands were uninhabited until Portuguese explorers arrived in the 15th century, proving once again that getting lost at sea occasionally works out quite well.

Portugal quickly recognized that these specks of land were far more than picturesque islands. During the Age of Discovery, the Azores became an essential stop for ships sailing to and from Africa, India, and the Americas, providing fresh water, food, livestock, and safe harbors for repairs. The Portuguese also introduced crops and cattle, transforming the islands into productive farming communities. The Azores later became a stop for ships involved in the Atlantic slave trade, and enslaved Africans were brought here to work on farms and in households.

Today, the Azores are known for their dramatic volcanic scenery, crater lakes, hot springs, whale watching, dairy farming, and lush green landscapes. Although nearly 900 miles from mainland Portugal, they remain strategically important as a hub for transatlantic aviation, weather monitoring, scientific research, and NATO operations.

São Miguel is nicknamed "The Green Island" for its rolling pastures, crater lakes, and enough hydrangeas to excite anyone with a flower vase. There are more cows here than people, and supposedly the weather changes every fifteen minutes. We brought umbrellas.



After checking into our hotel this morning, we quickly headed out for a walking tour of Ponta Delgada's city center. We started at the Portas da Cidade, the city's iconic gates, and walked past Forte de São Brás, a 16th-century fortress that once defended the island from pirates. We saw São José Church, an architectural gem, before visiting the Santo Cristo dos Milagres Sanctuary, an important pilgrimage site, and Matriz de São Sebastião Church, known for its striking facade and rich history. We also wandered through parks, passed monuments to saints and other religious figures, and admired plenty of historic buildings. Still, churches seemed to appear on every corner. Hey, it's Portugal!

For dinner we went to A Tasca, one of Ponta Delgada's classic Azorean restaurants, where we tried local specialties such as limpets (lapas), local cheeses, and Azorean wine and beer. Yes, it was touristy, but worth doing once.

Wednesday, July 8, 2026 — Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, Azores

After breakfast we wandered around the city center before climbing the tower of the historic city hall for some great views. We then did a food tour, in case we hadn't eaten enough at breakfast, sampling São Miguel's local specialties and learning about Azorean food culture while stopping at local markets and eateries. Ironically, one of our stops was at the same restaurant where we had dinner last night. I guess if it was worth doing once, it was worth doing twice.

We had dinner at Restaurante Associação Agrícola, which literally translates into Agricultural Association's Restaurant. Run by São Miguel's farmers' association, it's famous for showcasing the island's exceptional grass-fed beef. From the outside it looked more like the venue for a livestock committee meeting than one of the island's most celebrated restaurants, but the steak left no doubt about its reputation. Never judge a restaurant by its parking lot.

Thursday, July 9, 2026 — São Miguel, Azores

Today we headed to the west side of São Miguel Island, known for its scenic viewpoints formed by volcanic activity. Our first stop was Pico do Carvão, a viewpoint offering wide panoramic views over São Miguel's central area. From there it was possible to see both the north and south coasts of the island, as well as surrounding volcanic formations. Next up was Lagoa do Canario, a small and peaceful crater lake surrounded by dense vegetation. At this point the clouds were starting to roll in and cover the entire region with dense fog. We then visited some beautiful viewpoints, according to images online, but all we saw was fog. Really thick fog. We drove over the bridge separating the blue and green lakes of Sete Cidades, one of the most photographed locations on the island, and didn't even stop the van because the fog was so thick.



From there we headed to the north coast of the island and did stop at Miradouro do Escalvado to admire dramatic coastal cliffs and open views over the Atlantic Ocean. We visited the town of Mosteiros, a charming fishing village with black sand beaches known for its impressive lava rock pools and volcanic formations where we took a short walk along the coastline while taking in views of the Atlantic Ocean. Next up was Miradouro das Pedras Negras (viewpoint of Black Stones), a viewpoint offering more beautiful ocean views, and then we drove through Ribeira Grande, the island's second-largest town and one of the most picturesque in the Azores.

The highlight of the tour was supposed to be Lagoa do Fogo, one of São Miguel's most iconic crater lakes, located in the island's central highlands. All we saw was fog. Oh well, can't control the weather!



Lagoa do Fogo, ideally.



Lagoa do Fogo, the way we saw it.



Friday, July 10, 2026 — São Miguel, Azores

This morning we visited Gorreana. Founded in 1883, it is the oldest surviving tea plantation in Europe and one of only two still operating in the Azores. We walked through the tea fields, saw the century-old machinery used to process the leaves, but the real highlights were the free tea samples and the gift shop.

Next we visited Salto do Cabrito and took a



short hike to a waterfall. From there we headed to Caldeira Velha, a geothermal area, where we did another very short hike to another very small waterfall. We also saw a naturally boiling geothermal pool, a reminder that the volcano beneath us is still very much alive. Unfortunately, the warm pools where visitors normally soak were closed for maintenance, so all we got was the steam and the smell without the spa. From all our travels we've learned that the length of the hike is usually directly proportional to the size of the waterfall. Today's hikes confirmed the theory.

We leave São Miguel tomorrow and head to Madeira, another Portuguese island. If the people there are as friendly as the people here, we're going to enjoy it just as much.

Love, Lori and Stephen

Saturday, July 11, 2026 — Funchal, Madeira

This morning we flew to Funchal, the capital of Madeira, another Portuguese island rising dramatically from the Atlantic Ocean about 600 miles southwest of mainland Portugal and much closer to Africa than Europe. Like the Azores, Madeira was uninhabited when Portuguese explorers arrived in the early 15th century. Fortunately for Portugal, they kept getting lost in all the right places.

The Portuguese quickly realized Madeira's volcanic soil and mild climate were perfect for agriculture. The island was covered in dense forest, giving it the name *Madeira*, meaning "wood" or "timber" in Portuguese. To clear land for farming, they set much of it on fire. Parts of the forest burned for years, an interesting land development strategy that probably wouldn't survive today's environmental review process.

Sugar cane soon became the island's first great source of wealth. The Portuguese brought enslaved Africans to work the plantations, making Madeira one of the earliest places where Portugal developed the plantation system that would later expand to Brazil and the Caribbean. As sugar declined, vineyards took over, and Madeira wine became famous throughout Europe and the American colonies. Legend has it that the toast to the signing of the Declaration of Independence was made with Madeira wine.



Today, Madeira is famous for its dramatic sea cliffs, towering mountains, lush forests, colorful gardens, and year-round spring-like climate. Tourism now drives the economy, while the island continues to produce its renowned fortified wine. It's also the birthplace of Cristiano Ronaldo, whose local statue has become famous for its rather enthusiastic proportions, proving that sculptors occasionally exercise a little artistic optimism.



Funchal is a charming city of steep streets, tiled plazas, and subtropical gardens. We wandered through the city center and old town to the cable car that climbs from Funchal to Monte, but the famous wicker toboggans, which race downhill at speeds that would make most insurance companies very uncomfortable, had already closed for the day. We'll be back later this week to see whether they're as thrilling as everyone claims or just a very creative form of public transportation.

Sunday, July 12, 2026 — Funchal, Madeira

This morning we toured Funchal by tuk tuk, which turned out to be a fun and efficient way to navigate the city's steep, narrow streets without wearing out our knees. We wound through the 600-year-old Zona Velha (Old Town), passed the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption, and, thankfully, didn't stop to tour yet another church. We've reached our limit for touring churches relatively early this trip.

Our next stop was São Tiago Fort, the oldest fort in Madeira, for a quick look before heading up to Miradouro do Pináculo, perched 283 meters above the city, where we enjoyed sweeping views of Funchal backed by its dramatic



Monday, July 13, 2026 — Madeira

Today we left Funchal to explore the west and north sides of Madeira. Our first stop was Ponta do Sol, which enjoys more hours of sunshine than anywhere else on the island. That makes it the perfect place to grow two of Madeira's most important crops: bananas and sugar cane. Sunshine, it turns out, is just as valuable here as real estate.

From there we crossed the mountains to Posto Florestal do Fanal, a mystical landscape filled with centuries-old trees. Their twisted trunks and branches made them unsuitable for harvesting, which is probably the best thing that ever happened to them. While this area is usually covered in fog and mist, we had perfectly clear skies during our visit.



Our next stop was Seixal to see the Véu da Noiva (Bride's Veil) Waterfall. This spectacular waterfall tumbles directly down the side of a lush mountainside beside the road, completely disproving my earlier theory that the size of a waterfall is directly proportional to the length of the hike required to reach it. Apparently, every rule has its exceptions.

mountains. Apparently one spectacular viewpoint wasn't enough, so we continued to Fortaleza de São João Baptista do Pico for another panoramic view of the city from a different angle. The island appears to have an unlimited supply of both hills and viewpoints.

After the tour, we headed back to the cable car station, hoping to ride up to Monte and then race back down on the wicker toboggans. Unfortunately, the toboggans don't operate on Sundays, making us zero for two. Nevertheless, we're determined to take a ride, so we'll try again later in the week.



Next we stopped at Miradouro da Ribeira da Janela, where steep mountains and lush green slopes plunge dramatically toward the Atlantic. We then reached Porto Moniz in time for lunch and a visit to its famous natural volcanic pools. Lounging in crystal-clear seawater surrounded by black lava rock is a pretty good way to relax. Relax? We're still working on that.





We then visited Cabo Girão and walked onto its glass-floored skywalk, suspended 580 meters above the ocean. Cabo Girão is the second-highest sea cliff in Europe and the seventh highest in the world. The views over Câmara de Lobos, Funchal, and the Atlantic were spectacular, and looking straight down through the glass didn't seem to bother anyone. At least no one admitted it.

Our final stop was Câmara de Lobos, a traditional fishing village made famous by one of Sir Winston Churchill's paintings. There we sampled our first Poncha à Pescador, Madeira's signature drink made with sugar cane brandy, lemon, and sugar. We also tried a Nikita, a surprisingly tasty combination of pineapple ice cream and beer. Neither drink sounded particularly

promising when described, but both turned out to be excellent. I have a feeling we'll be having more of those before we leave Madeira.

More to follow.

Love, Lori and Stephen



Tuesday, July 14, 2026 — Funchal, Madeira

Still in Madeira, today's outing was a food and wine tour in Funchal. We skipped breakfast in preparation for the tour, which was a smart move because we ate and drank our way through eight different stops while learning about Madeira's rich gastronomic history. The tour started with two glasses of Madeira wine at Blandy's Wine Lodge, which has been the heart of the family's wine business for seven generations. After another glass of wine at the next stop, Lori was falling asleep at the table by the fifth stop. We also had a walk through the Mercado dos Lavradores, Madeira's farmers and fish market, where we sampled some local fruits we've never seen before in Publix. Everything was good, and we met some nice people on the tour.

After the food tour we took the cable car from Funchal up to Monte and walked around the Monte Palace Tropical Garden, a botanical garden overlooking Funchal. Originally the grounds of a grand estate and later a



luxury hotel, it is now home to thousands of exotic plants, koi ponds, waterfalls, Asian-inspired gardens, and sculptures. It's situated on the side of a hill, so after enjoying a leisurely downhill stroll through the gardens, we had to climb back to the top. That was the extent of our exercise for the day.



steep, paved streets of Monte in a traditional wicker basket sled on wheels. These originated in the early 19th century when they were used as a means

We then *finally* rode the Monte Toboggan Sledges (Carreiros do Monte), which involves riding down the steep, paved streets of Monte in a traditional wicker basket sled on wheels. These originated in the early 19th century when they were used as a means of "downhill" public transportation by the local residents who wanted to travel quickly from the village of Monte to the city of Funchal. It's guided by two drivers who use their thick, rubber-soled boots to steer and brake. The 2-km journey reaches speeds of up to 20 miles per hour, but in the end it was a bit underwhelming. Then again, my idea of "fast" may be slightly skewed after driving around a racetrack at 150 mph. Nevertheless, we still bought the photo at the



end of the ride. We're such suckers!

Wednesday, July 15, 2026 — Funchal, Madeira

We had nothing planned for today, intending to spend a quiet day enjoying the amenities at our hotel, which we hadn't yet taken advantage of. We mostly stuck to that plan, relaxing around the pool and working on our tans for a couple of hours. In the afternoon we added



a Pastel de Nata cooking class to learn how to make these iconic Portuguese pastries. It was fun, but we'll probably never make them at home since there's a Brazilian bakery five minutes from our house that sells excellent ones. So much for a day of doing nothing!

Thursday, July 16, 2026 — Angra do Heroísmo, Terceira, Azores

After waking up at 3:00 a.m. for an early flight, we left Madeira today and flew back to Portugal's Azores, this time to Terceira, one of the nine islands in the archipelago. Although only the third-largest island, it has played an outsized role in Portuguese history for more than five centuries.

Its capital, Angra do Heroísmo, became one of the Atlantic's most important ports during the Age of Discovery. Treasure fleets returning from Africa, Asia, and the Americas stopped here to resupply, make repairs, and wait for favorable winds before continuing to mainland Portugal. Because so much of Portugal's overseas wealth passed through this harbor, Angra became both prosperous and heavily fortified. Today, its beautifully preserved historic center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Terceira has remained strategically important ever since. During World War II and the Cold War, its location made it an invaluable military outpost in the middle of the Atlantic. Today, nearby Lajes Air Base continues to serve as an important refueling and logistics hub for Portugal, the United States, and NATO, proving that real estate in the middle of nowhere can sometimes be the most valuable of all.



Lori with Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer whose voyage around the Cape of Good Hope opened the first direct sea route between Europe and India, ushering in a new era of global exploration.

Today, dairy farming is a cornerstone of the local economy, producing some of Portugal's finest cheeses and butter. We'll try to resist buying more cheese and other things we don't need. We've already had to buy a duffle bag for all the stuff we've accumulated, and it's getting too heavy for Lori to carry.

After checking into our hotel, we walked to the historic district for lunch, struggling to stay awake. We enjoyed some local cheeses, much-needed coffee, and a leisurely meal before admitting defeat and calling it a day.



We're here for a few more days, so more to follow.
Love, Lori and Stephen

Friday, July 17, 2026 — Angra do Heroísmo, Terceira, Azores, Portugal

We began the day with a walking tour of Angra do Heroísmo to learn why this small island has managed to punch well above its weight for centuries. Perched in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Terceira occupied a strategic position on the sea routes between Europe, Africa, and the Americas during the Age of Discovery. That prosperity is still evident today in the city's elegant streets, colonial architecture, and beautifully preserved historic center, which earned it UNESCO World Heritage status following its meticulous restoration after the devastating January 1, 1980, earthquake.

We started at the top of the Duke of Terceira Botanical Garden and worked our way downhill through the city, passing the



Angra Cathedral and visiting the Museum of Angra do Heroísmo, housed in a former Franciscan convent. Along the way, our guide brought the city's history to life, explaining how this remote outpost became one of Portugal's most important Atlantic crossroads.



Unfortunately, we also discovered Dona Amélias, Terceira's signature pastry. These small, dense cakes, made with molasses, cinnamon, and eggs, then finished with a dusting of powdered sugar, are sold almost everywhere pastéis de nata are found. As if resisting one irresistible Portuguese pastry isn't difficult enough, we now have two to worry about. Our diets never really stood a chance.

After the tour, our guide dropped us off at Quinta dos Açores, where we stocked up on local specialties, including canned tuna, jams, liqueurs, and, naturally, more Dona Amélias. By this point, we've accumulated enough Portuguese products that, with a cash register and a storefront, we could open our own shop.

In the afternoon, we lounged by the pool, surrounded by mountains while the Atlantic crashed against the volcanic rocks below. That doesn't suck.

After only two days on Terceira, it's already starting to feel like a small town. Instead of Uber, they use Bolt here, and there are literally four Bolt drivers. We've ridden with all of them at least once and some multiple times. Tonight, Lori left her water bottle in the car when we got to the restaurant. Twenty minutes later, Miguel, our Bolt driver, showed up at the restaurant with the water bottle. Only in Terceira!



Last night, we went to a Tex-Mex restaurant for dinner (because nothing says "welcome to Terceira" like a big burrito) and struck up a conversation with a couple from North Carolina. When we were seated for

dinner tonight, the same couple was at the table next to us. Even more coincidentally, they're on the same flights back to New York as we are on Sunday. It really is a small town.

Saturday, July 18, 2026 — Terceira, Azores

Today we explored the island of Terceira in a 4x4 vehicle, enabling us to get to some remote viewpoints. From Miradouro da Serra do Cume we had sweeping views of the collapsed center of one of the three volcanoes that formed Terceira, as well as the city of Praia da Vitória. We returned to Angra for lunch, where we had the signature dish of the island, Alcatra, a slow-cooked beef stew. It was worth the wait.

We leave tomorrow and plan to spend a few days in New York celebrating Lori's birthday before heading home. We've really enjoyed our time on these Portuguese islands. Once you



Cows have the right-of-way in Terceira.

reach the Azores, the flights between the islands are short, making it easy to explore more than one. The people are incredibly friendly and genuinely proud of their home, the weather is pleasant year-round, and the history, scenery, and culture make for a wonderful combination. If you're looking for a European vacation that also leaves time to relax by the pool, without flying all the way to mainland Europe, put the Azores and Madeira on your list.

Or at least come by and help us eat some of the food we brought back!

Love, Lori and Stephen

