

A Vacation on Sao Miguel Island by Abbie C. White

This trip was inspired mainly by this blog posting.  
<http://www.geekyexplorer.com/sao-miguel-island-in-4-days/>

As you can well imagine, going to an Azorean island with beautiful scenery, many therapeutic geothermal springs, and Portuguese culture was amazing! Here are some of the highlights from a weeklong stay on Sao Miguel Island at the end of January 2017. The direct flight on Azorean Airlines was great in terms of being non-stop, reasonably priced, and service oriented with large meals, generous pouring of wines, and other hot and cold liquid refreshments. The down side was the surround sound of coughing and sniffing passengers. My husband, Stan, fell ill with a cold three days later and I began to feel awful on departure day. I was able to revenge Boston bound passengers with my infectious state. We were very happy with our cheap rental Smartcar for 2. The luggage fit in snugly. Of course, we would never want to own one. Most of the body is plastic.



Stan loved driving this nimble and tight turning car up and down steep mountain roads and rugged dirt roads covered with cow poop. The car was very smelly and dirty when we returned it at the airport. Stan had fun taking pictures of the manure spatters on the paint. The photo below was taken the day before we left. At the airport I applied several perfume testers to make myself smell more presentable for the flight.



Stan loved the challenge of road obstacles with the car's agility and small footprint.



Dirt roads near the main city were exciting to explore, too.



This road was next to the brand new modern Pedras do Mar Resort & Spa, where we spent two nights.



Even better was assisting a farmer herd their cattle to another pasture.



More cattle in our driving path:



The weather on the island changes quickly from sunny to cloudy with rapid temperature fluctuations of 15F. Often dark clouds hover above the peaks while the coastal areas are sunny. We were rained on everyday and sometimes the fog made driving difficult. Scheduling mountain scenic view trips was very challenging. One lookout point had visibility for only a few seconds before a dense fog rolled in.

I managed to go swimming in a warm mineral rich geothermal pool while star gazing at 5 AM and 9:30 PM. The air temperature was in the 50s. I had an entire huge pool with a diameter of about 250 feet all to myself. Stan was too ill to take a photo of me in this pool. The pool is surrounded with Spanish oaks, yuccas, huge Norfolk Island Pines, and exotic blooming camellias bushes.



The famous Terra Nostra Garden Hotel has 120 year-old world famous gardens that I had the stamina and leg strength to explore in depth.



I left my Fitbit at home with the fear of submerging it in a pool. Stan let me know that my daily step and stair climbing numbers were 3 to 4 X more than at home and work. I felt good and took very little gabapentin and naproxen. My hour-long swims in this pool were better than all my medical treatments combined including physical therapy, deep tissue massage, acupuncture, pills, and a spinal epidural. I am very glad I came. Stan and I explored other geothermal pools around the island. This place had a series of pools that were great for people watching. All ages seek the therapeutic benefits of these warm and mineral rich waters.



This pool was like the a Jurassic Park movie scene.



The minerals included a high iron content that stained my body and an old bathing suit that I disposed of. In the shower, the drain water turned bright orange for a long time. After being in the pool, my hair felt like a rusty brillo pad and I needed multiple hotel shampoo bottles to feel normal again. A restaurant owner suggested that we sample all the water at the spigots originating from the volcanic rock. Some had an interesting sulfur taste and a lovely carbonation. Even reminds me that we were drinking diluted poisonous hydrogen sulfide. Well, it was delicious and I am glad that I filled up a water bottle to savor while driving to our next destination. I wished I had packed some water for the trip home.



We usually liked eating the catch of the day. One exception was forkbeard filet that did not taste good to us.



We had the popular local food octopus served as a salad, stew, and grilled. Some of the octopi are collected in rock crevices at low tide.



I insisted that we go to an oceanside area where the tide mixes with water from a geothermal hot spring. At low tide the water is very hot. The descent to the location was very steep and somewhat scary for me who does not like heights. As always, Stan was in full control of the car. I would have been timid and been afraid to drive down the long and winding road. I noticed that there were no other bathers in the pool and figured I had to give it a try. Stan did not change into his bathing suit and opted to take photos of me being crazy.



Little did I know that a recent large Atlantic storm resulted in this island and surrounding areas in a state of red alert where small boats remained anchored and people were warned to stay away from the crashing waves. I did happen note that the waves were large and noisy, but thought this was normal. As I was headed to the pool a huge wave crashed over my head. That was my note of caution to not go in the water. There is impressive black volcanic lava on this rugged southern shoreline.



In Portugal wine is much cheaper than beer. The VAT tax which is included in the price is 9% compared to a 18% VAT for beer, liqueur, and snack foods. Fruits like oranges have a 4% VAT. I wrote on my customs form the value of the wine and not the quantity. For \$6 I brought back almost 5 liters of wine (in boxes). This was 3 L over the allowable limit. However, no one at US customs appeared to express any concern and passed us through quickly. We enjoy being anti-snoobs with wine and will assess each boxed wine for quality with our friends. Evan grabbed some of our collection to share with his buddies.

There is a very famous postcard view of the island that we planned for clear weather. We were lucky!



I never sat in the driver's seat and was a horrible navigator. We did not want to accumulate pricey roaming charges and turned off the cellular data. I thought the GPS option for the rental was overpriced. Wireless internet was fast in most places we visited. I learned to write down destinations on our poorly detailed paper map. However, the street signage was often absent and I chose to enjoy the scenery with my camera instead of helping the driver. We discovered many interesting spots simply from being slightly "lost".



Calla lilies grow everywhere as weeds. The road crews cut the grass and spare the lilies. Churches and hotels have fresh cut calla lilies flowers as decorations. On our last day we visited a 100 year-old pineapple plantation. The fruits take about 2 years to mature and several days of a smoking leaf product is used to stimulate and synchronize ripening in the greenhouse. This appears to be a labor and resource intensive process for a fruit that has a wholesale value of about a dollar. The publicity mentioned that these would be the best pineapple that we had ever tasted. Honestly, I have had Dole pineapples that taste better.



Plants grow everywhere in this moist climate. Buildings decay evolves into interesting gardens.



Love, Stan and Abbie