

An Herbal Journey in the Azores by Abbie White November 25, 2018

At our last meeting Sharyn asked me to continue my writing herbal related articles for the HCOCM website and I replied with an enthusiastic yes. Immediately, I began to write about an endangered plant. However, my recent travel convinced me to keep this article in draft form. I seek out herbs while away from home. This is both out of medical necessity and fulfillment of the travel experience.

What is profound in my mind is how my most recent international trip came to happen. I planned for several weeks a 35th wedding anniversary vacation celebration for the week of Thanksgiving. In September I purchased airline tickets to go to Costa Rica. A snowstorm and a multiple truck accident on the Mass Pike involving tons of onion cargo destroyed this itinerary. Cutting one onion in your kitchen can make you cry. You can imagine how upset I became knowing that hundreds of spilled onions was the main cause of the highway closure at 3 AM. Two skid steers transported by flatbed trucks from the Palmer entrance cleared the mess at the crash site in Brimfield. Four massive tow trucks went to the accident site, too. My husband and I watched the action helplessly for four hours while parked in traffic. We arrived too late for a Copa Airlines flight leaving Logan. Missing boarding our flight happened despite us our careful planning. We drove a 4-wheel drive truck in the middle of the snowstorm. We left our home at 2:30 AM on Friday November 16th for the 8:21 AM flight.



Despite my politeness, pleas, and explanations, Copa Airlines was truly awful with helping us arrange an alternate plan to get to Costa Rica. After several hours of frustrating conversations, we were about to return home as miserable travellers. I contemplated the depressing thought of returning to work and doing the normal

everyday routine for the next week. Then, I had an inspiration and went on my laptop to check out flights for Sao Miguel Island in the Azores and Amazingly, I found two remaining tickets on Azores Airlines. I bought the tickets immediately and we began our vacation as scheduled. I explained my sad travel saga to a kind woman at the ticket counter. She gave me a big smile and said that everything works out in the end for the better. In addition, she gave us passes for the Air France lounge. Then, I felt so sure that we headed off for an even better vacation than planned beforehand. We took full advantage of the free buffet and beverage choices in the Air France lounge. We boarded our flight with full stomachs.

Our suitcases were packed with the intention of going to a tropical climate with mosquitos. We had enough time to unpack these items in our truck parked in a lot in Chelsea. We repacked with a few winter items. In the Azores, we were underdressed for the cool and rainy climate. However, we managed by wearing many layers. We certainly did not need the SPF 50 sunblock, DEET, or the insect shield netting headgear. There are no snakes in the Azores. The water is safe and the air is clean. Natural beauty surrounds you.



As far as background on the Azores, I first became interested in visiting after talking to a neighbor at the Hardwick Farmers Market. She grew up spending time in the Azores in the home of her grandmother. My neighbor had strong admiration for the focus on local food before the concept became mainstream. There is a way of life that makes sea and farm to table eating an everyday event. Cozida is a traditional stew that is cooked in a geothermal volcanic vent for several hours. Tourists like us

like to watch the pots removed from the cooking vents and placed in vans for delivery to local restaurants.



Grilled freshly caught sardines are popular and delicious. Local pineapples are highlighted in many dishes including appetizers and pork entrees. Lush backyard gardens with fruits, vegetables, and herbs are common. Everywhere you see bananas, guava trees, squash vines, taro, and collards.

My first trip to Sao Miguel Island was in February 2017 when I was seeking relief from painful sciatica. I stayed at the Terra Nostra Garden Hostel and spent many hours in the large geothermal mineral rich thermal pool. I managed to wean my body off of Gabapentin and Naproxen completely. I really enjoyed walks around the villages. In Furnas there are many faucets along the sidewalks that offer spring water for drinking in Furnas. It is interesting comparing the taste of the different waters. Some are carbonated and others are heavy with sulfur odor.



There are a few faucets that dispense boiling hot water. One of these volcanic water sources is the foundation of a teahouse, Chalet da Tia Mercês, which opened a few weeks before our first trip. I felt like I could have spent my entire vacation with the owner, Paula Aguiar. Paula is very knowledgeable about local foods and herbs. She has a PhD in Environmental Science and spent part of her career in Portland, Oregon. Paula explained the fascinating history of the teahouse building, the sourcing of local and organic foods, and her various herbal tea mixtures. She is passionate about sustainability, natural health, and promoting local agriculture. She and her partner gather and dry the herbs themselves from surrounding fields. I observed many jars that included nettles, sage, mint, and guava leaves.



The restaurant specializes with serving tea and coffee brewed with the volcano's mineral rich hot water. The minerals react with the tea and change the color and flavor. Green tea sourced from a local plantation becomes bright purple in volcanic water. The menu had several pages of hot and cold beverages. Here is a sample of what was available. My husband and I liked the unique coffee made with thermal water. The coffee beans are sourced from illy, which is an Italian company dedicated to sustainability. Paula mentioned that authentic local coffee from Sao Jorge Island is very limited in supply and unaffordable for everyday drinking. She gifted us each a dark roasted coffee bean from Sao Jorge to nibble on. Her tea made with guava fruits and leaves was sweet and delicate in flavor. Local milk served warm with sage was nourishing and calming for my travel weary body.

BLACK DRIP COFFEE (<i>TINTO</i>) (cup)
BLACK DRIP COFFEE w/ SPICES (cup)
THERMAL COFFEE* (cup)
THERMAL COFFEE* (for two)
<i>CAFFÈ LATTÉ</i>
"MEIA DE LEITE" - Half cup w/ steamed milk
<i>CAPUCHINO</i>
<i>CAFÉ MOCA</i>
<i>MACHIATTI picante</i>
Milk infused with Sage (cup)
Daily infusion (cup)
BLACK TEA w/ MILK and TRADITIONAL TEA
BISCUIT (cup)
TRADITIONAL "ÁGUA SANTA" (cup)*
TRADITIONAL "ÁGUA SANTA" (for two)*

Overall, the Azores is an unknown tourist destination for Americans. Much of the time spent on the island was noticing the absence of English speakers. I heard mostly Portuguese, German, and French conversations. Azores Airlines flies direct from Boston to Sao Miguel Island at a reasonable cost. Travel time in the air is about five hours. Prices for accommodations are low in consideration of quality and amenities provided. I hope that I have encouraged you to continue your herbal journey with contemplating a trip to the Azores. I follow the writings of Herbalist Stephen Brown from Great Cape Herbs in Brewster. I purchase his products including his excellent and effective Hack Attack Herbal Syrup. He is renovating a place on Terceira Island and plans to welcome visitors soon.

I plan to return to the Azores for a third time soon. This time my itinerary will be done with care and far in advance. I will reconnect with Paula at her teahouse in Furnas and drink hot and cold herbal beverages. I want to return to the Terra Nostra

Garden Park and explore again the hundred-year old paths. Soaking in warm mineral rich geothermal pool will be a daily event while I am on the island.



I hope to hike up to the hill summits and delight in the sight rainbows again.

