



AZORES  
MAY 24 - JUNE 2, 2019



# TRAVEL TO AZORES

On a sunny Friday afternoon that marked the beginning of the Memorial Day long weekend, Mike and I left home and made the slow crawl towards JFK. As we sat on the Belt Parkway, I watched hopelessly as a man in the bicycle lane passed us but my mood was buoyed by the fact that we don't plan to take any flights from JFK in the foreseeable future. That, and we were headed to the Azores, a set of nine volcanic islands set in the Atlantic off the coast of Portugal!

Once we arrived at JFK, the trip definitely started looking up. Mike and I travel so much that we are typically economy travelers all the way. When looking our direct flight from JFK to Ponta Delgada, however, Delta's highest class of service was only \$100 more per ticket, roundtrip. We splurged and those tickets got us many perks besides the comfy seats. When we arrived at the airport, we checked in at Delta's separate Priority section which had a much shorter line. Once in the terminal, we had access to their Sky Club lounge. I've only been to one other lounge in my life but this was was amazing and made me feel as if I was living in the Mad Men era of flying.



The Sky Club had a rooftop patio and bar that sat on top of Terminal 4 where you could watch the planes landing and taking off while sipping a free cocktail! While we spent the majority of our time outside enjoying the beautiful weather, inside there was tons of comfortable seating, bathrooms with showers, and food and drink. It was definitely an experience to remember!

Once on the plane, we sat back, relaxed, and toasted with sparkling wine while we waited to taxi on the runway. Once in the air, we enjoyed watching movies and had a good meal. Before we knew it, our five hours were up and we had landed in Ponta Delgada on the island of Sao Miguel.





DAY 1

# TERCEIRA ISLAND



# The Azores



The archipelago of the Azores sits at the junction of three of the world's largest tectonic plates.

They are still considered babies in the history of the world as the youngest island, Pico, was only formed 300,000 years ago. The islands are still off-the-beaten path for many American travelers, making this a great time to explore without crowds.



Our flight landed in Ponta Delgada early in the morning, around 7am. We had plenty of time to go through customs, pick-up our bags, and then check-in for our local intra-island flight with SATA Airlines. We would be departing Sao Miguel Island at 9am for Terceira Island. We would spend our seven-hour layover touring the island before departing for Pico Island, our final destination. We weren't originally planning on visiting three islands, but due a flight change before our departure, this was a pleasant, yet unexpected surprise.

Our flight to Terceira Island was only 30 minutes. We had barely gotten the wheels up and it seemed like we were touching down. We got a fantastic view of Sao Miguel Island and could see some of the areas we'd be exploring later in the week. Upon arrival, we were greeted by our guide for the day, Mara, and our tour began!

Terceira Island is the third largest of the Azores islands, by surface area. Of note, it is home to the historical capital of the islands and also houses a US Air Force base.



**View of Praia da Vitória (Beach of the Victory)**



**Our first glimpse of Terceira**



**Tile art depicting the 1581 attack on the Bay of Salga during which the Spanish tried, unsuccessfully, to conquer the island**



Mara regaled us with the history of the island and took us to so many places, I'm not sure we could have fit in anything else! Having barely had time to take a nap on the plane, I was glad to essentially be kept awake by hopping in and out of our van and learning interesting facts. Mara shared that because most international flights land on Sao Miguel, that island receives 80% of the tourism and the other eight islands divide up the remaining 20%. By the time 4pm rolled around, it was time for us to be dropped back at the airport for our 20-minute onward flight to Pico.



The Church of Sao Sebastiao was built in 1455 by the first settlers of the island and contains medieval frescos that are in the process of being restored. At some point, they were plastered over and so the work to restore them is painstaking but the results are magnificent.



Terceira has over 70 of these small, colorful chapels dedicated to the Holy Spirit. In fact, every town on the island has one.







Natural swimming pools are a big thing on the Azores! Ladders and ramps drop you right into these swimming areas made of lava which are fed directly from the sea.



We stopped for lunch at a small snack bar in the island's main town, Angra do Heroísmo. It is the only place in the Azores designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site. It was an obligatory port-of-call for fleets from Africa and the Indies from the 15th through the 19th centuries.





We ended the day with a visit to Algar do Carvao which is one of only three places in the world where you can walk to the bottom of a dormant volcano. The drive to the volcano itself was past lush pastures filled with grazing cows. Once inside, we walked down a long tunnel and into the chamber itself which is a 300-foot volcanic chimney formed 3,200 years ago. We took a long staircase down into the magma chamber which was filled with the most colorful walls and stalactites and stalagmites. Further down the staircase, we reached a lagoon. This is definitely a place that pictures do not do justice.

**Cathedral area**



**View from the bottom of Algar do Carvao**



**Lagoon**







On our way back to the airport, we stopped in town to view a stunning church and botanical garden. We also made a quick stop at a viewpoint, high above the island, to get one last view of the famous patchwork landscape. It was windy and a bit cloudy, but they parted long enough for us to get some final views.





Although we were ready for our marathon day to be over, after the flight we had to pick up our rental car on Pico Island and make the 45-minute drive to the home we had rented along the coast in Santo Amaro. Since it's Europe, all of the cars were small and had manual transmission. Let's just say I wasn't thrilled about trying to remember how to shift while on hilly and windy roads. We safely arrived at a beautifully restored lava home and were greeted by our hosts, Ana and Luis. The house had everything we could dream of, including our very own pool! Our hosts had kindly left us a gift basket filled with local bread, cheese, jam, and fruit.





To set the stage for the next drama, as a reminder, we had been traveling and awake for 24 hours at this point, but we were also hungry and so we decided to set out in search of a snack bar <5 minutes from the house. Despite Google telling us it was open, it was definitely not open when we arrived, so we decided to head back to the house and devour our gift basket instead.

The lava home was situated on a hill and the driveways consisted of gravel, with two concrete strips running its length. As I pulled into the driveway and went up the hill, I stalled the car and then got it stuck. Really stuck. As in, I spun the wheels so much there was gravel halfway up the tires. And the car was now sideways in the driveway, perilously close to the lava wall.

We made the decision to call the home owners and explain the situation. They could not have been nicer and said they were sending their friend, Rui, who lived 5 minutes away to our rescue. Enter Rui, a 60-year old man who spoke no English, but who became our lifesaver as he spent the next hour and a half with us toiling to get the car free. We used lava rocks and boards to gain traction, and spent a fair amount of time moving around the gravel, when at last the car was freed. Through hand gestures, I asked Rui to drive the car to the bottom of the driveway for me, explaining I was never driving up there again. He happily complied and I happily never had to drive up there again! As our hosts said, “It’s just another story for you to tell back home, all part of the adventure”.



**Whoops!**

**The dreaded driveway**





DAY 2

PICO ISLAND



Pico Island is the second largest of the Azores and its landscape is dominated by the prominent cone of Mount Pico. This is a volcano which at a height of 7,713 feet happens to be the highest mountain in Portugal. The most recent eruption was some time ago, in 1720.

Our first stop of the day was whale watching with a company called Espaço Talassa. For many decades, whale hunting was a primary source of income in the Azores. In fact, the last sperm whale was hunted just off Pico in 1987. Two years later, a sailor decided to switch gears and open this company focused on the education and protection of the marine life in the area. We chose this company because they employ marine biologists and use small semi-rigid-type boats whose size and engines assure a minimum impact on the well-being of the animals. In the Azores, it is common to use experienced lookouts based on land who then radio the position of any animals to the boats. Although we didn't see any whales on our trip, we encountered sea turtles and many pods of dolphins. It was a beautiful day to be out on the water!





Upon return to land, we were given a welcome drink and a certificate showing the different species we had encountered. We headed next door to Bistro Whale'come for a delicious fish lunch and then went a few doors down to visit the Whaler's Museum which is housed in three original nineteenth-century boat houses. Although small, the museum provided a fantastic history of the whaling industry and contained displays of the tools used and of scrimshaw and other art. We finished our visit by watching a 1970s movie depicting the hunt for a sperm whale. Although sobering, the whaling industry was such an integral part of the island's history that I'm glad this museum was created and we stopped by to learn more.



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Our last stop of the day was to hike the Calheta do Nesquim trail. As we walked along this 5.5 mile “trail”, we quickly learned that most of the “hikes” on Pico were really more cultural in nature. We spent a lot of time walking on paved roads, which in the late afternoon sun was brutal! The trail system all over the Azores is very well-marked, however, and we quickly got used to spotting the red and yellow trail signs wherever we went. This trail took us through the village, past natural swimming pools, vineyards, a whale spotting observation point, and a windmill!





Although the actual temperature was only 70 degrees, the sun is very intense on the islands and we felt completely wiped when we arrived back at our house. We had originally planned to hike Mount Pico the following day, but given weather conditions looked good the rest of the week and that we were still dragging, we decided to delay our hike until Tuesday.

With that decision made, we relaxed by the pool with beers in hand before heading up the road to the restaurant, Magma. The food was delicious and we got to watch an epic sunset from our table!





DAY 3

# PICO ISLAND





Today would be a day of regrouping and feeling more settled on the island. We woke and drove to the western side of Pico to a town called Madalena. We began our day at a lovely bakery where we sipped on cappuccinos and had the most mouthwatering ham and cheese sandwiches on sweet coconut bread! I still dream of this bread!



We then drove along the coast to the start of the Vinhas da Criacao Velha trail, or wine hike. This 4-mile trail would take us past the vineyards on Pico in which the grapes grow right out of the lava rock. It is quite amazing to see! We could also see tracks in the rocks left by ox carts carrying wine barrels and then the slopes where the barrels themselves were rolled down to ships waiting in the sea.





After a quick lunch of burgers in town, we headed to Gruta das Torres, a nearby lava tube. A little more adventurous than the last cave we went to, here we were with a guided group that donned helmets and held flashlights. We descended into the underground area and spent the next hour and a half exploring three of the main tunnels which were formed about 1,500 years ago during a volcanic eruption. Towards the end of the tour, everyone dimmed their lights and we stood in total darkness for nearly five minutes which was a cool experience!



We ended our time in Madalena by visiting the very architecturally-cool (it is designed to look like a cross between a whale and a wine barrel) Cella Bar for a drink on their rooftop deck.



Next up, we visited the Pico Wine Cooperative which is where different winemakers on the island bottle and sell their wine. We did a tasting of the various white, red, and rose wines on offer which were surprisingly really good. So good in fact, we left with two bottles! One to enjoy our last night on the island and one as a gift for Rui for the help with our car.





Dinner tonight was at Casa Ancora which, according to TripAdvisor, is the #1 restaurant on the island. We were delighted with our meal! We had delicious wine along with stone crab pate, fish with rice and hummus, and the most succulent octopus we've ever had. After this meal, we were relaxed and ready to tackle the mountain tomorrow.







DAY 4

PICO ISLAND



When we learned that Mount Pico was the highest mountain in Portugal, it quickly made it to the top of our Azores to-do list. We were visiting during the shoulder season before the crowds arrive in earnest during the summer, so in late May the Mount Pico visitor's center does not open until 8am during the week (it is open 24-hours a day during the summer). We got up early and made the steep drive to the center, arriving around 7:20am. The government only allows 150 people to be on the mountain at any given time, for which I am grateful, but we didn't want to take any chances and miss our opportunity to get in for the day (guides taking groups up the mountain first priority). Shortly before 8am, the center opened and we filled out the necessary paperwork and paid our fee. We were each given a GPS to track our movements which would double as a phone if we got into trouble as our own mobile phones would have no service. And with that, we were off shortly after 8am!

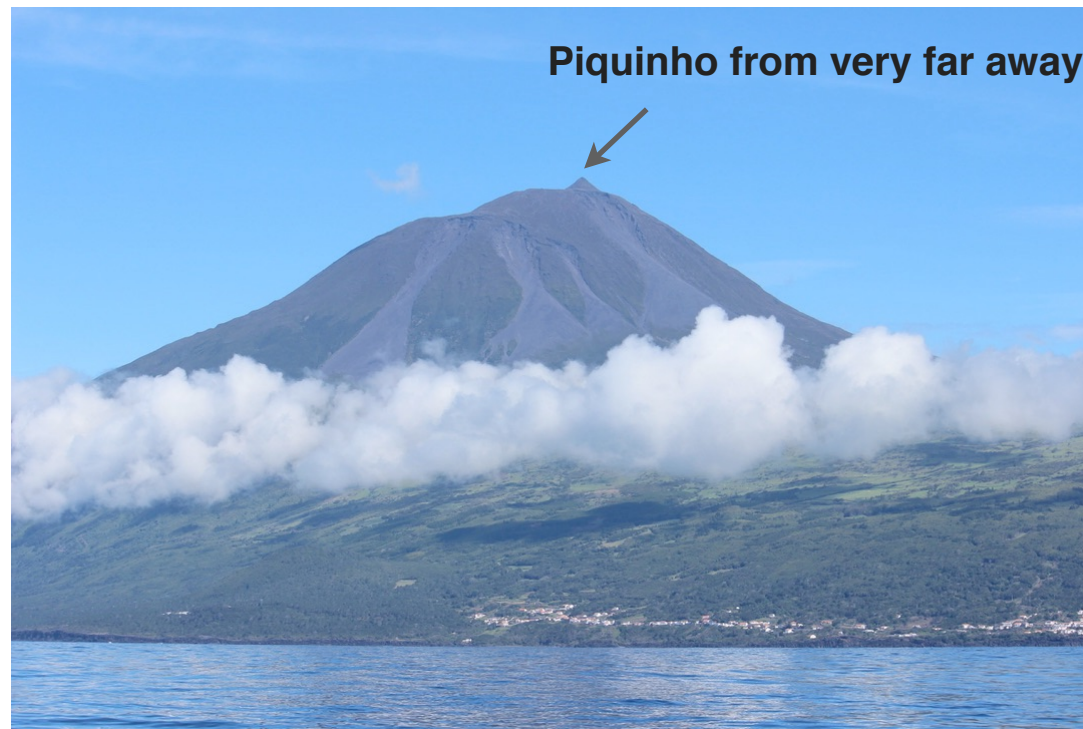


The way up the mountain is marked by a series of 47 red and white banded poles. Between the poles, however, there is no defined path. You simply make your way up the rocks and stones how you best see fit. This is why it is imperative to have clear weather on the day you climb, otherwise there would be no way to find your way. The ascent was absolutely relentless, but doable. We would be gaining 3,675 feet of elevation in just three miles! We met a handful of other people along the trail, but we mostly hiked in solitude which I enjoy. At this point, the sun was largely still hidden behind the mountain, making the route shady and cool.





At last we reached Mount Pico's crater from which we could see the last bit we had to tackle - Piquinho (Little Pico) which looks like a pointy hat. At this point, we had to ditch our trekking poles because the route involved scrambling STRAIGHT UP.



**Piquinho from very far away**

**Piquinho up close**



**Pictures while going up  
Piquinho - Mike looking  
down at me and me looking  
up at Mike!**





As tiring as it was going up Mount Pico in two and a half hours, the three-hour descent was much worse. It was hell. Finding a path down was much more difficult and with all the loose rocks and scree we both fell multiple times. As I sit here and write this almost two weeks later, I still have scrapes and bruises on my legs. We both couldn't ever remember wanting a hike to be over more than this one. All that being said, we're still so glad we summited and got down safely. The entire hike took us about six hours. We toyed with the idea of going with a guide because many write-ups about the hike sounded scary, but we're so glad we didn't because on average those groups take 9 hours!

Once down from Mount Pico, we refueled with an ice cream cone and enjoyed our last night on the island cooking at home. We savored local sausages and the bottle of Pico white wine before watching one last sunset.





DAY 5

SAO MIGUEL ISLAND



Happy to be rid of our car on Pico Island, we took an early morning flight to Sao Miguel Island where we would spend the remainder of our time in the Azores. Nicknamed “The Green Island” Sao Miguel is the largest and most populous of the islands. We got a taste of this when, after departing the airport, much to my delight there was an actual highway! We had another small, manual transmission car here too, but it was of a substantially higher quality.

First stop? Food of course! In Ponta Delgada, I had found a food cart located in the middle of a local market. We made a beeline for it, indulging in fresh-squeezed juices and sharing sandwiches on sweet bread. One with pork pate, pickled onions, and chives and another with fresh cheese, red pepper sauce, and chives.

Continuing with our food theme, we visited the Arruda Pineapple Plantation located just outside the city. Here, they grow small Azores pineapples in greenhouses and we were able to do a self-guided tour of the growing process. It takes almost two years to grow these little gems, but boy are they worth it. We purchased a pineapple later on in our trip and it was the juiciest, most delicious pineapple I’ve ever tasted. It handily beat Hawaii! The real star at the plantation was the piece of pineapple cake we shared for dessert!





The first hike we did on Sao Miguel ended up being one of our favorites of the entire trip! The five-mile trail was called the Rota da Água - Janela do Inferno. It was a true trail that led us to viewpoints with beautiful views of Ponta Delgada and then turned back into the forest where we hiked by old, moss-covered aqueducts. Janela do Inferno was a vertical wall with a cavity made by water erosion from which water was spilling over into a pool below. It was beautiful and we had the whole trail to ourselves! While hiking, we had to pass through several long, dark tunnels which required us to use our headlamps and crouch down at times. This hike definitely won for scenery and interesting features!

**Tunnel entrance**



**Janela do Inferno**



**Trail next to the aqueducts**





We drove to our home for the next four nights and met our host, Florbela. Situated in Vila Franca Do Campo, our home here was close to the coast and was also recently beautifully restored. The highlight for us was the back patio where we spent all our free time!



We had dinner close to home, at Praia Cafe. It had begun to rain, but the view from the restaurant along the sea was still magnificent. We had fresh fish again and got to try the local delicacy of limpets, a sea snail grilled with garlic, lemon, and butter.







DAY 6

SAO MIGUEL ISLAND





Today, we embarked on our second whale watching session of the trip. This time, we went with a company called Sea Colors who departed from the marina in Ponta Delgada. Similar to Pico, we went



with a small outfit that only used small boats and we were guided by two awesome female marine biologists who do research while out on the water. Seemingly within minutes of hitting the open ocean, we learned there were sperm whales in the area! Sure enough, there was a mother and juvenile resting on the top of the water together. We observed them until they did their deep dives in search of squid. We were in luck, however, because over the next hour we had four more sperm whale sightings. Before the end of our time in that area, we even saw the mother and juvenile one last time. It was breathtaking to watch these huge animals in silence. We ended our morning by boating past several pods of curious dolphins



**Portuguese man o' war with its "sail" up**

who enjoyed bow surfing with our boat and showed off doing great flips in the air!







Lunch was at a local restaurant, A Tasca, where we dined on small plates of local food with tourists and natives alike. Another delicious meal whose menu was presented inside a newspaper! We had octopus salad, fried octopus with chutney, tuna tartar, pineapple with blood sausage, and phyllo with cheese and walnuts.



In the afternoon, we made the drive towards the interior of the island to the town of Furnas. The entire area is volcanic in nature and one of the calderas is filled by a crater lake. We parked in town and hiked up to the lake area to do a walk around its perimeter. Along the way, we passed several hot springs and fumaroles where local restaurants actually cook a stew in the ground called Cozido das Furnas.



**Cooking chamber**







Along the way, we intended to circle the lake and head immediately back to town, but we took a wrong turn and ended up climbing an insanely steep path in the wrong direction. It did, however, lead us to a beautiful viewpoint over Furnas Lake and the surrounding area.

Having hiked more than we intended, we decided to have a low key evening and cook a dinner of pasta at home and enjoy it on the patio!





A hiker wearing a red shirt, a hat, and a backpack is walking away from the camera on a dirt path. The path leads through a grassy, hilly landscape. In the distance, a valley is visible, partially obscured by a thick layer of white clouds or mist. The sky is filled with large, dramatic clouds, suggesting an approaching storm. The overall scene is one of a scenic hike in a rugged, natural environment.

DAY 7

# SAO MIGUEL ISLAND



Today was spent exploring an area on the western side of Sao Miguel known as the Sete Cidades. The main attraction of this area is the blue and green lakes dominating the landscape. Legend has it that a beautiful, blue-eyed princess was wandering in her kingdom and came across a green-eyed shepherd boy. They fell in love but the king forced his daughter to marry a prince instead. When she was allowed to see the shepherd one last time and tell him of their fate, they both cried so much that their tears formed these different colored lakes.



We spent the morning stopping at view-points from above and then after descending into the village by car, we rented bikes to cycle along the lakes.

As the smallest town on the island, there really wasn't much going on. But this is not surprising for a place that only got electricity in 1981!

We stopped at a local tea house for a lunch of sandwiches and cake (carrot cake with chocolate icing for me and a pineapple tart for Mike) to fortify ourselves for the afternoon.





We headed out of the village and up to the rim of the caldera to do a hike 3-mile hike along the Serra Devassa trail. It was quite cloudy by this point but we enjoyed walking along the volcanic cones and small lakes.

One of the most famous viewpoints in the area, the Boca do Inferno, is one you see in almost every travel brochure for the Azores. A path that looks straight out of a fairy tale leading to a view of the lakes. Well, I've done a side by side here. Our view was a bit disappointing! Clouds only. This is real life, folks!





Dinner on our second to last night in the Azores deserves its own page. We had reservations at Quinta Dos Sabores, the #1-rated restaurant on the island. They only have 12 tables and do one prix-fixe seating per night. We arrived and approached the door which was locked. You need to ring the bell! What did I do? Pulled on the door until someone took pity on me and opened it. We picked our seats and began a two-hour culinary adventure of local, farm-sourced food. The entire operation is run by a family who lives on the farm on which the restaurant is situated. Even the wine we had to choose from was sourced from a family vineyard! We truly enjoyed every bite of our meal and speaking with the owner about his family and food.

Homemade breadsticks with dips, fried polenta and sausage, tuna tartar, vegetable soup, fish with local vegetables, roast beef, and a drunken pear with ice cream. Perfection!







DAY 8

# SAO MIGUEL ISLAND



We spent our last day on the island exploring the eastern and northern coasts. We began with a hike, Sanguinho, that took us from the town of Faial to the stunning Salto do Prego waterfall. Along the way back, we passed through the town of Sanguinho which is an old village that has since been abandoned. 20 houses were built here but emigration and the difficulties children faced in getting to school led to its depopulation in the late 20th century. It was eerie to walk past so many abandoned buildings. The descent to town was along a cobblestone road that felt straight out of the Wizard of Oz!

**Nature has reclaimed the village**



**Windy path down**







After stopping for lunch in the coastal town of Nordeste, we headed to our last hike of the trip, Padrão das Alminhas - Salto da Farinha. We descended from a village into an area teeming with small waterfalls and foliage. Further along the trail, we hiked past Poco Azul, a popular swimming area with the locals in a pool of turquoise water. We pressed on to the Salto da Farinha waterfall which also ended up being a huge disappointment! I've done another side-by-side here. It must have been a dry spring!





On our drive back home, we stopped at Gorreana tea factory, one of only a handful left on the Azores. We walked through the plant to see the tea being made and stopped to admire the fields of tea leaves.



Closer to home, we stopped for queijadas at a local bakery. These sweets are made of cheese, eggs, milk, and sugar and go down way too easy.



Our last night was spent at home, snacking on an Azorean pineapple and enjoying a dinner of wine, pasta, and bread with cheese. We toasted to a fantastic trip in the Azores!