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Your Guide to the Azores, Europe's Next Hot Island Escape



Salva López

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Once overlooked and underdeveloped, the Azores have quietly come into their own.

By Julia Cooke on February 15, 2018

The Azores are decidedly neither here nor there, a series of mid-Atlantic volcanic nodes where the tectonic plates of Eurasia, North America, and Africa collide. Europe is nearby. So is the Sahara. The latitude is northern (parallel with Delaware), yet the nine-island archipelago, an autonomous region of Portugal, has been called the Hawaii of the Atlantic, in part because of its teeming biodiversity.

São Miguel, the largest island, promised lake-filled calderas, beaches, and hot springs, punctuated by the food and wine of Portugal. It wasn't until I got there that I learned how much more there is. In the past three years, just as flight options to the Azores from the U.S. have expanded, São Miguel has sprouted an award-winning art museum and a handful of boutique hotels, as well as new restaurants, shops, and music venues.

As with the rest of Portugal, a dictatorship ruled the Azores from 1932 until 1974, slowing development and sending generations of Azoreans abroad, a process hastened by a series of natural disasters, including the 1957 eruption of Capelinhos, a currently dormant volcano on the island of Faial. So lackluster was the economy that until recently Ponta Delgada, São Miguel's (and the archipelago's) largest city, lay all but deserted.

That is changing. Encouraged by European Union initiatives, an increasing number of Azoreans have been pulled home to open restaurants, shops, and galleries, joining transplants from mainland Portugal. The change happened slowly, then very quickly, starting seven years ago with Walk & Talk, a contemporary arts festival in Ponta Delgada, and continuing with the founding of a one-day experimental-music festival. By 2015, new routes from Europe had opened connections from Lisbon and London. Now, Tremor, the music festival, lasts five days.



A loft at Pico do Refúgio, a 17th-century estate converted into an artists' retreat and B&B; a card game in Ponta Delgada. *Salva López*

On a recent Saturday night on Rua do Aljube, where two bar-restaurants face each other across a cobblestoned street (on a warm evening, a destination in itself), little trace of sleepy old Ponta Delgada remained. Diners emerged from A Tasca sated by a straight-from-the-ocean tuna steak studded with sesame, or a plate of meaty octopus accompanied by a sour, creamy cheese from the island of Terceira.

Across the street at Canto do Aljube, they ordered the signature cocktail—a frothy mix of Azorean green tea, mint, pineapple, and white rum—and headed right back outside.

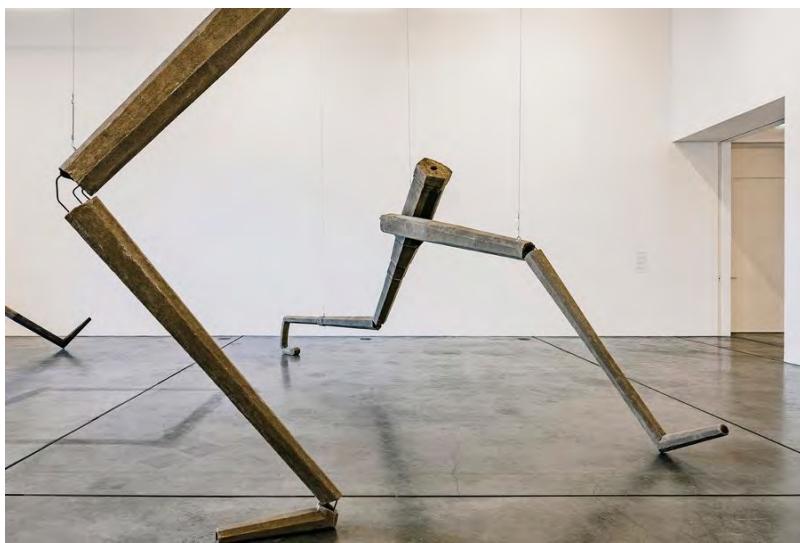
All around the imperious stone buildings, lightly throbbing bass and milling crowds turned each crooked alley into a party. Music gusted in from a neighboring plaza where a local pop band crooned in front of the Baroque church of St. Sebastian. Girls in tutus sprinted to a birthday party. Tourists weren't the focus but rather an accompaniment to the vibrant hum of locals cascading from bar to bar, restaurant to restaurant.



Lagoa de Sete Cidades, twin lakes inside a dormant volcano. *Salva López*

Ponta Delgada is most alive during festivals. Even under the dictatorship, holy feasts drew former residents home; today, music and art inspire a more contemporary brand of pilgrimage. "For a few days or weeks, São Miguel is the center of the world," says architect and hotelier Luís Bernardo Brito e Abreu. During Tremor, performances proliferate throughout the island: on a dark soccer field, in a church, or in front of a swimming pool as steam rises and the sound of splashing mixes with music.

Between festivals, São Miguel's sleepier side draws artists seeking solitude, many of whom proceed directly to Brito e Abreu's Pico do Refúgio, a 17th-century hilltop estate with a mansion that epitomizes Portuguese colonial architecture, with its low-slung exterior and terra-cotta roof. Over the years it's served as military fortress, orange farm, and tea plantation. These days it hosts vacationers in summertime and the artists (who've included musician Thurston Moore and documentarian Cláudia Varejão) during the quieter times.



Richard Hughes sculptures at Archipelago Contemporary Arts Center. *Salva López*

All across the island, interspersed among hiking trails, hot springs, swimming spots, and grazing cows, I stumbled into this sort of new-meets-old, art-meets-tourism, nature-meets-culture energy. To the north, an abandoned tobacco factory underwent an expansion that added cantilevered concrete volumes to the original volcanic-stone structure to become the government-run Archipelago Contemporary Arts Center. Up in the hot-springs resort town Furnas, the firm M-Arquitectos renovated the Poça da Dona Beija springs facility, creating five tanks of hot, sulfuric water that flow like infinity pools into a bucolic stream below.

Most visitors come for the landscape, still. Vistas from ridges that crown the volcanoes are painterly, the blues and greens of caldera lakes so vivid they seem to defy nature. Water is never far off. The coastline ranges from rocky access points to broad, sandy beaches in the shadows of sweeping cliffs. And the ocean is fierce—in places where hot springs run into the ocean, warm and cold mix around swimmers' limbs amid frothy waves and huge volcanic rocks.

There are now a few stylish hotels from which to take in the island's staggering beauty, including the White Exclusive Suites & Villas, whose eight luxurious rooms look out over a cliff; Casa das Palmeiras, a restored 1901 villa; and the 123-room, Design Hotels–affiliated Azor. These hotels have "given people a new way to inhabit" Ponta Delgada, says Tremor cofounder António Pedro Lopes.

They've also given local entrepreneurs a new way to collaborate, stitching together a feeling of exuberance across the island. "We try to join efforts. Our drive is common," Brito e Abreu told me. "We can make a faraway place into a central one."



The café and market Louvre Michaelense. *Salva López*

Azores Itinerary

EAT

For simple, Portuguese-style seafood in Ponta Delgada, head to **Mané Cigano** for lunch (*1 Rua Engenheiro Jose Cordeiro*) and wash down crunchy fried mackerel with a lager from local brewer Melo Abreu. For more upscale fare, try Colégio 27 (<http://colegio27.com>) for local ingredients with an international flair. In Furnas, call a day ahead to order the traditional cozido à portuguesa at Caldeiras & Vulcões (<http://caldeirasevulcoes.com>), a meat-and-tuber stew cooked in the steam of the volcano.

STAY

Located on a seaside clifftop, the eight-suite White Exclusive Suites & Villas (<http://whiteazores.com>) (*rooms from \$170*), with its whitewashed walls and driftwood furnishings, wouldn't feel out of place in Santorini. A 15-minute drive west is the Azor Hotel (<http://azorhotel.com/home>) (*rooms from \$145*), a design-focused resort with 123 rooms, a restaurant, a spa, and a casino. Farther west along the coast, Casa das Palmeiras (<http://casapalmeiras.com/>) (*rooms from \$115*) offers 10 rooms within a traditional villa.

SHOP

Pick up tea from one of the only two plantations in Europe, on São Miguel, and locally made porcelain housewares while nibbling on airy Azorean pastries at Louvre Michaelense (<https://www.facebook.com/louvremichaelense>), a café and market in a restored 1904 millinery shop.

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