

MACARONESIA

Azores, Madeira & Canary Islands

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in the Azores, Portugal

Arrival in Ponta Delgada, Azores (PDL), located on San Miguel Island, the largest in the archipelago.*

Welcome to Macaronesia, a collection of four archipelagos in the North Atlantic Ocean belonging to three countries: Portugal, Spain, and Cape Verde. Apart from the Azores and Madeira, which are considered mainly as part of Europe, the other islands of Macaronesia are closer to Africa. The name is derived from the Greek words for "islands of the fortunate," a term used by Ancient Greek geographers for islands to the west of the Straits of Gibraltar. Macaronesia is occasionally misspelled "Macronesia" in false analogy with Micronesia, an unrelated Pacific archipelago.

Ponta Delgada is a graceful centre with cobbled streets meandering down to a marina lined with restaurants. As most flights from North America land in the morning, we recommend that you spend some time exploring its historical centre where you will discover the squares, well-tended gardens, and handsome monuments built when Ponta Delgada was an important trading port in the 18th and early 19th centuries. For a pleasant overview of Ponta Delgada, stroll along the town's harbourfront promenade.

This evening we assemble for our welcome dinner and trip orientation.

Overnight in Ponta Delgada.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Sao Miguel: Whale Watching & West Island Exploration

Today we enjoy an exciting whale watching excursion from the port of Ponta Delgada. Our vessel is large and stable and well-appointed, but still nimble enough to respond quickly to the whale spotters positioned on the hills around us; many of these same spotters used to alert hunters back in the day when whaling was a major industry. Our tour is preceded by a briefing in which a biologist explains how the Azoreans have converted whale hunting to whale watching. The briefing also includes information about safety, rules of observation, and respect for the animals, and an overview of what may be sighted during the tour. The excursion is led by nature guides who provide detailed explanations and collect scientific data during the tour. The Azores are a permanent home or point of passage for more than a third of the world's whale and dolphin species; sperm whales, common dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, and Risso's dolphins are present around the Azores archipelago throughout the year. We'll also be here at the right time for blue and fin whales, the largest and second largest of the cetaceans.

This afternoon we have an excursion through the heart of the island and out to the western end of it. As we leave Ponta Delgada we will stop at Ponta de Ferraria and Ponta do Escalvado. At Miradouro do Escalvado we will have a superb view over the fishing village of Mosteiros, with its beautiful summer homes, beaches, and natural pools.

The westernmost part of the island is where the mountains and lakes of Sete Cidades ('Seven Cities') are situated. The southwest road takes us along the coast through green pastures, and we will stop at the Vista do Rei (King's View), one of the most stunning panorama spots of the island. From here the blue and green crater lakes can be seen. The volcanic caldera lake of Lagoa das Sete Cidades is one of the great natural wonders of the Azores archipelago, and absolutely mesmerizing in its beauty. Nearly five km long and 2 km wide, this is the largest freshwater lake in the Azores and, in fact, consists of two lagoons -- the Green Lagoon and the Blue Lagoon. An emerald mantle of rolling hills and lush vegetation frames both, and in some places the cliffs drop 500 metres into the mirror-like waters. We will enjoy a short walk to the viewpoint of Boca do Inferno, where we admire the view over the crater of Sete Cidades. Later we will visit the farming village of Sete Cidades, situated right on the crater floor.

Overnight in Ponta Delgada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Sao Miguel: Furnas & East Island Touring

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This morning we'll make stop at Pico do Carvao, where the north and south coasts of the island can be seen. From here we head to the north coast and along to the town of Ribeira Grande where we will see the historical centre and some of the islands most beautiful cliffs. We rise to the Fogo Lake, the most isolated and untouched lake of Sao Miguel. Driving down from the north coast our next stop is at Caldeira Velha where we discover a waterfall located on the north slope of the Fogo Volcano.

Our next stop is at the Lake of Fire, another breathtaking caldera with a lake at the bottom. Its remote setting, more or less in the middle of Sao Miguel Island, makes this impressive volcanic crater especially appealing. There are no settlements here as the entire area is a protected nature reserve, and the crater's walls are studded with a number of endemic plant species. Our last views of the day will be from the top of the volcano of Pico da Barrosa (947 metres).

The Parish of Furnas is located in the middle of a huge volcano, and the "Caldeiras of Furnas" is a place of hot water springs and medicinal mud where visitors come to bathe in the hot pools! While in Furnas, we will spend some time in the centre of the village with its gushing geysers, burping mud, and hot bubbling springs. Also included is a cozido lunch, which is the special means of cooking food underground in the thermal vents.

We then head to Pico dos Milhos for an overview (mists permitting!) of Furnas valley. Finally we will exit the volcano and head up to a spectacular panorama of the village of Vila Franca and the famous lagoon -- the crater of a submarine volcano about 5,000 years old. We will stop in the historical centre of Vila Franca do Campo, the former capital of the island.

As we cross towards the north side of the island, one of our stops will be at Miradouro de Santa Iria, from where we have a dramatic view over the north coast. Weather-permitting we will be able to spot the volcano of Sete Cidades as well as Pico da Vara, the highest point of the island (1105 metres). We will also make a stop at the Gorreana tea plantation, one of the only tea plantations in Europe!

We will visit Parque Natural da Ribeira dos Caldeiros where waterfalls and gardens give a special touch to the park. At the Vista dos Barcos viewpoint we will see "Farol do Arnel", the oldest lighthouse of the Azores dating back to 1876.

Ponta do Sossego is a beautiful garden and scenic lookout surrounded by mountains. At the view point of "Pico Longo" we can see the village of Povoacao, where the first settlement was established back in 1432.

Overnight in Ponta Delgada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 4 Ponta Delgada - Fly to Faial Island: Capelinhos Volcano

This morning we fly to Faial Island (+/- 30 minutes). Immediately upon arrival, we'll begin our sightseeing program, starting in the main town of Horta.

Faial is the third most populous island of the Archipelago with a population of 15,000 (2011 data). The island is part of the Central Group and is the westernmost corner of the so-called "Triangle Islands," which also include São Jorge and Pico, the latter of which we will visit tomorrow. One delightful aspect of the Azores, is the differences (some subtle, some not so much) between them -- from vegetation and climate, topography and history, to matters economic and political, mythology, sports affiliations, accent, and cuisines.

In the 18th century the development of whale hunting brought the early whaling fleets to Horta. By 19th century, Horta had become an important sea port, and a stopping point for a large number of yachts crossing the Atlantic. The island is located on the edge of the tectonic divide between the North American Plate and the European Plate, making it one of the most western points of Europe (the farthest is the tiny Azorean island of Corvo, located to the northwest). The island's scenery offers sandy beaches, green hills, and crystal blue ocean views. The volcanic origin of Faial can be easily observed on the island due to numerous calderas, craters, cones, lava fields, and natural boiling water springs.

Our first stop on Faial is the Capelinhos Volcano Interpretation Centre, dedicated to the underwater volcano that erupted in spectacular fashion off the island of Faial in 1957. This event afforded scientists a unique opportunity to study a rare geological phenomenon from the moment of its birth to the day it fell dormant. The centre's displays and exhibits tell the story not just of this volcano, whose 13-month-long eruption prompted half of the island's population to emigrate to North America, but also of the tectonic forces shaping the Azores' extraordinary landscape.

We continue with a visit to the Scrimshaw Museum (while baggage is delivered at the hotel), located above one of the waterfront's best-known restaurants and watering holes. The museum contains a magnificent set of pieces carved from the teeth of sperm whales, engraved with beautiful sailing boats, mermaids, images of whale-hunting, among many others. This is a private collection belonging to the owners of the Peter Sports Café next door, a famous meeting place for seafarers from all over the world.

Overnight in Horta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Faial & Pico Islands

This morning we take the local ferry the short crossing to Pico Island (+/- 30 minutes) for a full day tour of this unique and beautiful island.

Our first stop is Furnas Frei Matias, a hidden gem that offers an intimate underground adventure away from the crowds. This lesser-known lava tube provides a unique spelunking experience where we'll don helmets and grab flashlights to explore stunning geological formations created by ancient volcanic activity. The cave features impressive stalactites, intricate lava formations, and chambers that showcase Pico's volcanic heritage. This private expedition offers our group exclusive access to witness the island's underground wonders in a more personal setting, with fascinating insights into the volcanic processes that shaped the Azores archipelago.

Then we will visit the Whalers' Museum in Lajes do Pico, known as the Whaler's village, to learn about the story of whaling activity in the Azores. Dedicated to the socio-economic influence of the whaling industry in the region, the museum was established in the abandoned whaling factory used for many years in the processing of whale blubber into oil. Whaling in the Azores ended in the 1980's, but pride in whaling tradition and history is still very much alive, just like the whales that these days are worth far more alive, comprising an important aspect of local tourism.

Our journey across the island takes us back down to sea level and a break for lunch, included today. Our meal features local dishes made from locally-sourced ingredients; you will also have a chance to sample the wines for which Pico is famous.

Criação Velha UNESCO Heritage vineyards involves an easy walk through a good example of the vineyards for which Pico is renowned. The wine, salt spray, and rocky volcanic landscape have combined to create a unique way of growing grape vines, sheltered by complex volcanic stone walls that keep heat in and winds at bay. This unique cultivation method and attendant wine cultural tradition has earned Pico's vineyards Unesco World Patrimony since 2004.

Our (roughly) circular route takes us along the coast where we can stop to enjoy coastal views and to admire the attractive and striking local construction from lava stone and colourful trim.

Overnight in Horta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 6 Faial - Fly to Ponta Delgada: Azorean Pineapple & Wine

This morning we fly back to Sao Miguel (+/- 30 minutes). Upon arrival, we visit a private pineapple plantation where we explore the traditional greenhouses where the Azorean pineapple has been cultivated for more than 150 years. We'll see the fruit, each one of them in different stages of the cycle, and get to know all the secrets and peculiarities of this extraordinary crop. The Azorean pineapple is considered among the world's finest, grown slowly in heated greenhouses using traditional methods passed down through generations. Each pineapple takes approximately two years to mature, making them a true delicacy.

Following our plantation tour, we enjoy a cheese and pineapple wine tasting, sampling local Azorean cheeses paired with the unique pineapple wine made from these greenhouse-grown fruits. This sweet, aromatic wine is a local specialty that perfectly captures the essence of the islands' most famous fruit.

Time-permitting back in the city, you may be able to explore the historical center of Ponta Delgada, including the iconic Portas da Cidade (City Gates), a trio of 18th-century arches that have become the symbol of the city. Visit the Igreja Matriz (Mother Church) with its beautiful baroque interior, and stroll through the cobblestoned streets with their distinctive black and white Portuguese pavement patterns. You can also see the elegant town squares, historic buildings, and the picturesque marina area.

Overnight in Ponta Delgada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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Day 7 Ponta Delgada, Azores - Fly to Madeira Island

Early this morning we transfer to the airport to fly to the island of Madeira, also part of Portugal.

With a subtropical climate warmed by the Gulf Stream, this volcanic outcrop off the coast of Africa is Portugal's own floating garden. The rich volcanic soil promotes an astonishingly verdant array of flowers, plants, and trees, both in the wild and in some beautifully-cultivated gardens. Here we discover a lush and vertical landscape with a wild terraced terrain. This 36 mile by 14 mile island (70% is national park) packs more into its chaotic terrain than most areas 5 times its size.

Funchal, the capital of the Madeira archipelago, was declared a city in the 1500s and became an important point between the old and new worlds. The laid-back city owes much of its historical prominence to the white gold, the Madeiran sugar.

Today we will tour the city of Funchal, including the 'Old Town', one of the most attractive areas of the city. Portuguese settlers colonized the coast in the early 1400's, and over the years the population grew as international trade attracted the attention of much of Europe. Today we discover a modern city with over 110,000 inhabitants. Located right in the center of Funchal is a busy and colourful covered market (Mercado dos Lavradores). Here we discover a great variety of fresh fish, tropical fruits, spices, colourful flowers and some local crafts. This is also the place to find local delicacies such as Madeira wine or honey cake.

The narrow and cobbled Rua de Santa Maria is the oldest street in Funchal, dating back to the 15th century. When the heavy storms of 2010 severely damaged the old town, the municipality launched the project 'Art Open Doors' in order to revitalize the area. They invited local artists to paint the doors in the street and the result is a vibrant, colourful, artistic street, full of energy. For the best view of Funchal we will take the cable car (Teleferico do Funchal) to the Monte Village. The 15-minute journey takes us 560 meters above the city, with a 360° panoramic view of Funchal, the dramatic mountain landscape, and the shimmering Atlantic Ocean. Nearby is the Madeira Story Centre, an excellent museum that charts the history and culture of the Madeira archipelago.

Monte Village was built in 1565 as a summer refuge for Funchal's aristocracy. Constructed in 1741, the Church of Our Lady of the Monte is the resting place of Charles I, the last ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Those who climb to the bell tower terrace are rewarded with a spectacular view.

Overnight in Funchal.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Madeira: West Island Touring

Today we explore the west, crossing mountain passes and traversing Madeira's highest plateau. Prepare for some spectacular panoramas! We first pass through the traditional fishing village of Camara de Lobos, and make a stop at the Pico da Torre viewpoint. Here the port is really just a small creek, with a beach, a harbour and houses heaped up around the bay. We will continue up to the lofty sea cliffs of Cabo Girao, the highest sea cliffs in Europe (580m) / the second highest sea cliffs in the world. From here you can enjoy some beautiful views.

A glass bottomed skywalk hangs out over the top of the cliff! Sea erosion has led to the formation of caves and terraces along the coastline, and the local population have created small plots for crops, forming an incredible watercolour landscape.

In Ribeira Brava we will see the 16th century mother church. Along the promenade we will pass by the town's landmark, the fort of São Bento. We then visit what many consider to be the most beautiful village on the island, Ponta do Sol (point of the sun). The town, with its old restored buildings, was once described as a 'quiet and pretty little village shoe-horned into the folds of a steep valley'. We continue to make our way up through the Laurissilva forest, and reach the plateau of Paul da Serra, which translated roughly is "mountain plain". This is Madeira's biggest and highest plateau, situated at 1400m (4,593 ft), and here we can enjoy another 'Levada walk'. Our next stop is the village of Porto Moniz on the north coast, which is famous for its natural volcanic rock pools. This is Madeira's most north-western valley, and the dramatic village is situated at the foot of the mountain.

Our next stop is at the picturesque village of Seixal where local vegetable gardens and vineyards are surrounded by heather broom. We will see the famous "Brides Vale" falls which plummets directly into the sea. Our scenic coastal route then brings us to the charming fishing village of São Vicente.

Overnight in Funchal.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 East Madeira Exploration

Today we explore the eastern side of the island with its dramatic mountain, forest and coastal views. Just a short distance from the capital is the cultural village of Camacha, known as 'the village of basket makers', and the centre of Madeira's willow craft industry.

Our journey then takes us up to Pico do Arieiro (1818 meters/5,965 ft), one of the island's highest peaks with spectacular views. After visiting the highest (drivable) peak in Madeira, we will head towards Ribeiro Frio, a popular starting point for 'levada' walks. Madeira was once completely covered by laurel 'Laurissilva' forest, a relic from prehistoric times. Laurel forest, also called laurisilva or laurissilva, is a type of subtropical forest found in areas with high humidity and relatively stable, mild temperatures. This region still has much of its original vegetation, and here we will enjoy an easy walk. As UNESCO put it... "an outstanding relic of a previously widespread laurel forest type. It is the largest surviving area of laurel forest and is believed to be 90% primary forest.". This is one of the best places to really appreciate Madeira's natural heritage.

We then visit Santana, which is famous for its typical A-framed cottages with thatched roofs. We then make our way to Porto da Cruz, Caniçal, and Ponta de São Lourenço - with some of the best views you can get on the island. From here you can see both coasts as well as Porto Santo and the Desertas Islands. We also stop in Curral das Freiras ('Nuns Valley'), a small village nestled between almost perpendicular mountains in the heart of the island.

Overnight in Funchal.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Madeira, Portugal - Fly to Tenerife, Spain

Today we fly from Madeira to Tenerife (North) in the Canary Islands.

The Canary Islands (Islas Canarias), also known as the Canaries (Canarias), are an archipelago and autonomous community of Spain located 100 kilometres (62 miles) west of Morocco. The Canaries are among the outermost regions of the European Union proper; it is also one of the eight regions with special consideration of historical nationality recognized as such by the Spanish Government. The Canary Islands are the most southerly region of Spain and the largest and most populated archipelago of the Macaronesia region.

We land on the largest island and begin (flight time-permitting) a sightseeing program in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, a city and capital (jointly with Las Palmas) of the Canary Islands. This good looking and wholly Spanish city is home to evocative, brightly-painted buildings, sophisticated and quirky shops, excellent museums, and a tropical oasis of birdsong, fountains, and greenery in the city park. Our last stop will be the small town of Cristobal de la Laguna (likely a quick stop only), widely considered to be the most beautiful in Tenerife. The historic town centre is a gem, with narrow poker-straight streets flanked by pastel-hued historic mansions, inviting bars, and idiosyncratic small shops. Its layout provided the model for many colonial towns in the Americas and, in 1999, La Laguna was added to the Unesco list of World Heritage sites.

Overnight in Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Santa Cruz de Tenerife: City Touring

Today we'll have a city tour of Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

Santa Cruz de Tenerife is a beautiful port situated on Tenerife, the largest of the western islands in the Canary archipelago. Around its important port are wide avenues, squares and exotic landscaped areas, and some beautiful examples of modernist architecture. We start at the Museum of Nature and Man (MNH), located in the Old Civil Hospital, an emblematic building in the island's capital and a fine example of the islands' typical neoclassical architecture. The museum offers the chance to learn more about the natural riches of the Canary Islands, and also to discover the most important collection existing on the culture of the "guanches", a native people who inhabited the island of Tenerife before the arrival of the first European settlers.

We'll walk to the parish mother church of Nuestra Señora de La Concepción, the main Catholic church in the city, built where a chapel used to stand that was erected by the conquerors of Santa Cruz. The tower was raised in 1786 and is one of the most easily recognizable landmarks

in the old quarter. Because of the extension work carried out over the years, it is the only church with five naves on the entire archipelago and a fine example of Canarian Baroque architecture.

We'll also visit the interior the impressive and unique Auditorio de Tenerife. A marvel of the architectural avant-garde, created by Santiago Calatrava, which has become the cultural, social, and symbolic engine for the Canary Islands.

We the head to the Palmetum, a 12-hectare botanical garden that specializes in palm trees and a project unique in the world. It has transformed a municipal rubbish dump into a recreational space for plant lovers, bursting with spectacular plant life brought here through partnerships with institutions from all over the world. The gardens are home to the greatest collection of palms in Europe, thought to be the largest botanical collection of tropical island palms in the world.

Overnight in Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Tenerife Island Touring

Today we take a panoramic route along Monte Esperanza towards the Teide National Park, including photo stops.*

Teide National Park, located in the centre of the island of Tenerife, is the largest and oldest of the four national parks on the Canary Islands. From its surface area of 190 km² (18,990 hectares), Mount Teide rises up to a height of 3718 m, which makes it the highest peak in Spain. There are many services organized for visitors so that they can discover and enjoy this area: a convenient road network across the entire park, two visitor centres that reveal some of the park's secrets, a bar and restaurant area for refreshment, and abundant vantage points to gain a panoramic view of the whole park. Our program today is informal and weather-dependent, but will concentrate on the unique flora, fauna, and landscape of this special place.

We continue to the spectacular Barranco de Masca with a brief stay in the picturesque village before returning to Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

* Please note that we do not include the cable car on our trip, as it is often closed due to weather and takes quite a chunk of time out of our day. Past travellers have also noted that time could be better spent down in the park, rather than removed far above it.

Overnight in Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Tenerife & La Laguna - Ferry to Gran Canaria: Island Touring

This morning we board the ferry to Gran Canaria (approx 3 hours).

Crowning an island of tall cliffs to the north and extensive beaches to the south, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria is a city which offers sun, sea and an exceptional historic legacy. The combination of the aboriginal Guanche culture, its colonial past, and the fact that it is only 90 miles from the coast of Africa create a distinctive character resulting from the mix of Europe, America, and Africa.

We'll head to the center of the Island: Tejeda is the home of the Nublo rock, the symbol of Gran Canary. The Tejeda depression arose from a volcanic crater, standing over which is a mountain crowned by several rocky promontories, such as the Nublo rock, an enormous chunk of basalt which is the symbol of Gran Canary, and the Bentayga rock, where you will find the Caves of the King, a sacred site in pre-Hispanic times which contains cave paintings. The landscape of the area features forests of Canary Islands pine and almond trees.

Then we'll head to Artenara. Almost the entire municipality of Artenara forms part of the Tamadaba Nature Reserve. In this setting framed by the massifs of Altavista and Tamada stands the Tejeda Crater, the biggest volcanic basin on the island. Outstanding in the town is the hermitage of the Virgen de La Cueva and the surrounding area, in which there are major archaeological sites. The inhabitants still make ceramics, which means the local handicrafts are another of the area's tourist attractions.

After a break for lunch, we'll visit Teror, an important centre of religion and pilgrimage. The faithful from the entire Canary Islands archipelago come to this place to worship the patron of the diocese, the Virgen del Pino. The festival in her honour is held every September with a traditional pilgrimage and popular dances. A tour of the historic quarter of the town lets you see religious buildings and ancestral homes which have sprung up around the sanctuary of the Virgin.

Overnight in Las Palmas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Depart

Departure from Las Palmas.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast