

sight for azores eyes

The misty Atlantic archipelago is fast on its way to becoming Portugal's most captivating new destination. **Mary Lussiana** explores the dramatic lodgings, artisanal wines and vibrant arts festivals setting the volcanic islands alight

The Azores High. It was a phrase that peppered the British broadsheets in the sultry days of June and July this year, as an explanation for the unusually warm weather. But there's a different kind of high surrounding the Atlantic Ocean archipelago itself right now, with a sea change afoot across its spectacular volcanic islands. Festivals dedicated to contemporary art and music – plus a literary one debuting this autumn – are driving a boom in arts tourism with both brains and heart.

In May, Delta launched a direct flight from New York to Ponta Delgada on São Miguel, the largest of the Azores, adding yet more access and further denuding the duopoly (following the 2015 launch of flights by Ryanair and – briefly – easyJet) that national carrier TAP and local airline SATA used to have. Intimate, original hotels are opening, with a sophisticated and discerning market in their sights. It's as yet in its infancy, relative to the mass and adventure tourism that has historically dominated here, but still robust enough to fill the best restaurant in town, Otaka,

night after night, and to have fuelled the delicious renaissance of wines from Pico Island: mineral-rich, salty, complex – the Azores themselves in a glass.

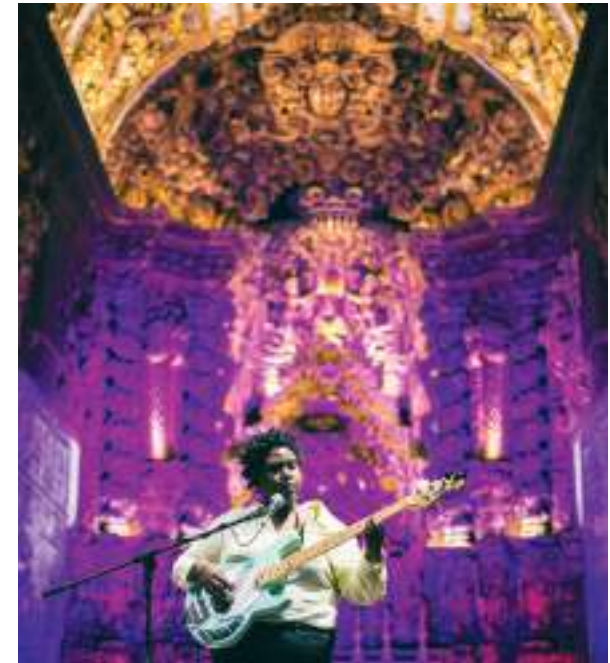
The Portuguese made landfall on this remote archipelago, scattered 1,300km west of their mainland in the swirling mists of the Atlantic Ocean, in the 15th century. They christened it the Açores, after the birds circling ceaselessly above. History relates far more quietly their mistake – those birds were kites (*milhafres*) and not goshawks (*açores*) – but the Açores it remained. It was a landscape of



Lagoa das Sete Cidades,
a volcanic lake on the
island of São Miguel



Clockwise from below:
Mal Devisa performing at Tremor, the Azores' annual music festival. White hotel opened on São Miguel last year. La Maison private villa, White's sister property, has a heated saltwater pool and a croquet lawn



blackish volcanoes, bubbling thermal waters, pockets of dense steam, turquoise-toned lagoons and bottle-green lakes – one that turned the population, wary of a place that seemed almost itself a living thing, to the Holy Spirit for protection.

The 21st century has not loosened those ties. Shrines and chapels are found in every village. Most contain a silver crown, a sceptre and a flag with the image of the dove of the Holy Spirit. Festivals are held on several Sundays after Easter, or for returnees who might organise one to celebrate being reunited with family and friends – killing a fattened cow, chunks of which, along with bread, go into a communal soup. Time and again I heard that this devotion to the Holy Spirit, which runs alongside, rather than within, the church, is a defining element of being Azorean. All over the world, emigrant Azoreans replicate these shrines, still seeking the protection of home.

Nuno Costa Santos, the award-winning author behind the Arquipélago de Escritores literary festival taking place this November in São Miguel, lives in Lisbon – having remained, like so many, after studying at university there – but he labels himself proudly an Azorean writer. “The centuries of isolation originated a will to create,” he says. “To create a cultural environment of our own, an identity.” The subject of return is one that is at the core of his work, and indeed will be one of the themes of the literary festival – an event that, he says, is a sign of the burgeoning confidence that Azoreans have in their cultural landscape. Among others in attendance will be Pulitzer Prize-winner Diana Marcum and Anthony Marra, one of *Granta* magazine’s “Best of Young American Novelists in 2017”, excited to convene at what Costa Santos describes as “a natural meeting point in the middle of the ocean between the United States and the United Kingdom”.

This increasing emphasis on culture is born of a need among such locals to show the world there is more to the Azores than mythical landscape. You can sense the pride here – at surviving their isolation, their severe economic ups and downs and the tragedies of volcanic eruptions that, as recently as 1958, drove some 12,000 Azoreans to emigrate to the United States and Canada (followed by 150,000 more over the next two decades). Walk&Talk was a pioneer in creative tourism, launching



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its annual arts festival in São Miguel in 2011 and last year extending it to a new island, Terceira. It has been instrumental in encouraging dialogue with the territory, culture and Azorean community, and this year drew a significant number of international visitors to enjoy its mix of visual and performing arts. Tremor (pictured top right), a music festival launched four years ago, is another highlight on the calendar. These non-profit organisations are all about making the islands culturally accessible to outsiders. A permanent platform, which promotes the local artistic and cultural identity, is Arquipélago, a rugged stone former alcohol and tobacco factory converted by Porto-based architects Menos é Mais and João Mendes

Ribeiro. Its cavernous interiors are currently displaying the results of its maiden artistic residency.

But the art of the past, found everywhere among the cobbled streets of Ponta Delgada, the Azorean capital, is as alluring. Its wealthy days, when the port was a crucial staging post between Europe and the New World, are still tangible in the imposing whitewashed and basalt façades. The restored Museu Carlos Machado holds the islands’ most important examples of 18th-century Portuguese art, including a carved cedarwood altarpiece left partially gilded in 1760 when the Jesuits were banished, and 5m-high tiled panels framed by baroque ornamentation.

Now, 2018 seems like a pivotal moment. Graduates of universities in Lisbon and Porto are returning – young people such as Sofia Carolina Botelho, the co-director of Walk&Talk, who says the attraction of the Azores lies in the fact that it’s “still a territory with so much to do”. There are entrepreneurs like Miguel Pombo, who returned from Brussels to set up Ignae, a results-driven anti-ageing

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Eco-resort Lava Homes will have 14 sea-facing cottages made from local basalt

skincare line that draws on the untapped mineral-rich thermal waters of Parque Terra Nostra in Furnas – and on the rich colostrum of the cattle that outnumber the people on São Miguel by two to one. Look to the food scene, and you find chef José Pereira, an Azorean who has returned, with his Brazilian wife Anne, from manning kitchens at the Four Seasons Hotel des Bergues in Geneva, and in January opened Otaka, the Nikkei-cuisine restaurant that has taken Ponta Delgada by storm.

And there are the wines of neighbouring Pico Island. In the mid-19th century there were 6,000 hectares of vineyards here, but by the early-20th phylloxera had decimated them and the industry literally withered. Step up the Azores Wine Company, three men with Azorean blood in their veins who are single-handedly reviving Pico's wine culture. António Maçanita rescued the indigenous Terrantez do Pico grape when there were just 100 plants left growing within the volcanic walls that shelter them; he co-founded the company with a vision to recover more vineyards. It now has 100 hectares under cultivation, producing quality red, white and rosé wines, and they are continuing to grow. For oenophiles seeking a place to stay, next year a small but swank eco-resort will open on the island. Lava Homes (pictured top) will have 14 sea-facing cottages made from local basalt, with ceilings of the island's unique cryptomeria wood, along with a yoga hut and pool.

The buzziest hotel in the Azores right now is São Miguel's White (pictured on previous page), opened last year. It's an old summer retreat perched on the edge of a cliff, with a lick of a pool running alongside its 10 rooms and one villa with a private Jacuzzi and sea views – all shutters, sigh-producing panoramas and white on white against an azure sky. Almost guaranteed to be as popular is La Maison (pictured on previous page), White's sister property, a four-bedroom private villa opened in July and located a stone's throw away, with a heated saltwater pool and a croquet lawn. La Maison provides more privacy than White, though its decor – clean and



From top: Lava Homes, a 14-cottage eco-resort, will open on Pico Island next year. A snorkellers' paradise lies just off the town of Vila Franca do Campo. Rugged Santa Maria Island is nine million years old

spare, with beautiful bespoke macramé wall hangings inspired by the island's colours – echoes White's elegance; and the hotel's chef delivers breakfast to La Maison's private dining room to start the day off on the right note.

In a first for the archipelago, both White and La Maison have access to a gleaming 9m Beneteau yacht, which motors guests in luxury out to a tiny islet just off the town of Vila Franca do Campo (pictured above) for snorkelling among startlingly red parrot fish, before heading to nearby Santa Maria (pictured below left) – nine million years old, and the only island in the Azores with white-sand beaches – in all likelihood encountering bottlenose dolphins and sperm whales along the way.

Back on land on São Miguel, nature is writ large at every turn – as at Lagoa das Sete Cidades (Lagoon of the Seven Cities, pictured on opening pages), for instance, a lake riven into two by a narrow strait, one side turquoise, the other deep green, filling a crater at the bottom of a dormant volcano. A steep, mossy path leads down from a blissfully solitary highway through lush forest to tranquil, otherworldly Lagoa do Congro. Further down that same road can be found Europe's only tea plantation: Gorreana, in business since 1883. A bit further still, and one encounters steaming geysers and bubbling springs, in an empty landscape dappled by shadow from the fleeting mists of an Atlantic sky. It feels – is – memorably remote, but it reverberates with soul: a holy spirit, if you will, that's uniquely Azorean. ♦ Mary Lussiana travelled as a guest of Sunvil (020-8568 4499; sunvil.co.uk) and La Maison (whiteazores.com), from €400 per night for the whole villa.

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