

## Destination of the week: Azores

Step back in time and enjoy the scenery on these Portuguese islands.

By Josh Lew      Mon, Jan 10 2011 at 7:04 AM EST      [3 Comments](#)



WHAT A VIEW: Parish church, Areal Grande Beach near Sao Roque, Sao Miguel Island, Azores, Portugal. (Photo: ZUMA Press)

You can find the Azores on any globe. They are the collection of nine small dots in the Atlantic Ocean. The archipelago, which belongs to Portugal, is one of the world's more remote places. Of course, "remote" is one of the most prized adjectives in the vocabulary of hard-core eco-tourists, and these islands don't disappoint.

<b>Earn Points</b> <a href="#">What's this?</a>
<a href="#">Comments (4)</a>
<a href="#">Email</a>
<a href="#">Facebook</a>
<a href="#">Twitter</a>
<a href="#">Stumble</a>
<a href="#">Digg</a>
<a href="#">Share</a>

There are plenty of trekking opportunities and a topography that is lush, exotic and rugged. The relative isolation of the Azores has preserved the kind of Old World, European atmosphere that is fast disappearing from the mainland. This suspended-in-time quality makes the islands an attractive destination for travelers who are looking for something out of the ordinary but don't necessarily fit into the hiking-boots-and-rucksack demographic.

Visitors will readily admit that they are seduced by this

glimpse into seemingly-pre-EU Europe. But the windswept landscapes, dominance of the color green and isolated feeling also make this a perfect destination for eco-tourists who are tired of the jungle, snorkel and sea turtle circuit.

### Sleep green

One of the most attractive aspects of the Azores, for eco-travelers and travelers in general, is the lack of large resorts and multi-story hotels. Family-run guesthouses with a dozen rooms, at most, make up a bulk of the islands' sleeping choices. Even full-fledged resorts are smaller than you might expect. That's good news for high-end travelers, who can head to places like the 28-room [Pousada de Angra do Heroismo](#) in Sao Sebastiao for some small-scale luxury. Even a splurge like this does not put visitors more than a few steps from charmingly rugged landscapes that characterize the Azores.

Culture enthusiasts may like the history-centered approach of the [Quinta do Martelo](#) on Terceira Island. This venue is a farm that offers guests a glimpse of the history and culture of the island through the décor of the rooms and a menu of home-grown, rural Portuguese food.

### Eat green

There is no cosmopolitan, cutting-edge restaurant scene on the Azores. Most eateries serve local specialties and, aside from a handful of places in major towns, there is little evidence of "international" or "fusion" food. In every eatery, everything on the table will be remarkably fresh and almost certainly locally grown, raised or caught. Vegetarians may find themselves struggling to find meatless dishes — fish, pork or beef are a part of virtually every meal — but centrally located places like Ponta Delgada (the largest town on the largest island of Sao Miguel) have cafes and restaurants with organic and vegetarian options. Cheeses, greens, potatoes and fish are prevalent ingredients, though the cuisine of each island is unique and there are plenty of local specialties.

### Go green

It is possible to rely on [public transportation](#), in the form of buses, mini-buses and ocean-going ferries, to get around. Bus service is infrequent on most islands, but if you can adopt a laid-back Azorean attitude ("I'll get there when I get there. There is no hurry"), these are the most Earth-friendly transit options. Walking, biking and horseback riding are popular activities, but the always-rugged terrain makes them impractical for getting from point A to point B.

For travelers with the financial means, chartering a sailboat is probably the greenest transit option. Wind-powered boats can be hired on the main islands of Sao Miguel or Faial and used to sail between the ports of each island. Budget travelers will be able to utilize public ferries to get between the islands by water.

#### **See green**

For many tourists, the best part of a visit to the Azores is simply being on the islands and soaking in the scenery. Trekking is a popular activity: on foot or by horse (on Sao Miguel). The archipelago also draws [bird-watchers](#) trying to catch site of endemic species and the odd sea bird that has ventured far from the mainland. For those in search of a more dramatic encounter with nature, [whale watching](#) is a popular option. There are regular cruises and even some spots from the land where it is possible to view marine life like sperm whales and dolphins. The large marine mammals are protected from whalers in Azorean waters and often spend time there because of the ideal conditions.

Volcanoes and geothermal spots are a major part of the Azorean landscape. Though eruptions are rare, they have occurred several times in recent history. Steam vents and boiling ponds are a constant reminder of the hot earth below the islands. [Furnas](#), an area on Sao Miguel, has the most impressive and accessible geothermal features. Its boiling ponds, steam and bubbling mud create an otherworldly scene. Locals sometimes use the heat from the steam vents to cook.

#### **Trek green**

The best way to see the Azores is to simply [set out on foot](#) and go wherever the local footpaths take you. The islands are each relatively small, so lengthy hikes through different biospheres are entirely possible for day-trekkers. However, the topography is quite rugged. Walkers will see volcanoes, hot springs, waterfalls, mountains and lush landscapes, but they will have to put in some uphill work on the trails in order to reach these sights.

[Guided tours](#) are available through local travel companies. It is possible to hike alone, though up-to-date maps and information are necessary. Each island has its own unique attractions. Santa Maria, one of the less visited island, is known for its mountain hikes, while Sao Miguel, one of the more popular islands, has less taxing hikes past tea plantations, thermal lakes and waterfalls.

The Azores are filled with natural wonders. The whales, [birds](#), and geothermal hotspots are major sightseeing draws, but the biggest attractions of the Azores are the lush and rugged landscapes and the laid-back, slow-paced way in which life takes place on this unique archipelago.

**Related on MNN:** [Visit our other destinations of the week.](#)

*MNN homepage photo: [chamary/Flickr](#)*