

buceedores

POCKET

The magazine of reference

AZORES ISLANDS

An Oasis in the Atlantic

- ◆ Flores and Corvo
- ◆ Pico, Faial, San Jorge, Graciosa and Terceira
- ◆ San Miguel and Santa Maria



Underwater mountains - Vertical walls
Volcanic arches - Deep sea life

Welcome to Azores!



Dear diving lovers,
The Regional Tourist Association has been working, since its creation, on the promotion of those tourist products which best characterize the autonomous region of the Azores, as an ideal destination for the realization of active tourism and nature.

Of the different touristic products of the region, one of which has been best developed and strengthened by its very own natural characteristics is, without a doubt, diving. The evidence that the bet has paid off is illustrated by the return on investment received, with a great increase in the number of participants and visitors that come to dive in our region.

The Azores, as time goes on, has been a destination in demand, not only by the tourists, but also by professional photographers and specialized magazines. Furthermore, the Azores are not an saturated destination and can offer a personalized service, including during peak tourist periods.

Diving in the Azores has proven to be a unique experience for many, be it for its volcanic rock formation extending down the coast, for its richness of fauna and flower life, or for its archeological parks, a result of the wreckages that have been produced since man first arrived here in the 15th Century, such as the great underwater mountains brimming with life. The experience extends to the intense blue and crystal waters of the Azores, the unexpected meetings of marine life passing through while on their migration through the Atlantic Ocean, such as the great shoals of fish, Manta rays, sharks and other forms of life.

Diving with Blue Sharks (*Prionace glauca*) and the Manta rays (*Mobula tarapacana*) has been converted into a true attraction for the divers that visit the archipelago.

Due to the wide range of all types of diving, the Azores are a destination that can attract not only professional divers but also the less experienced diver. The Azores are also a good destination for accompanying visitors (non-divers), as it is possible to engage in many other activities, both on land and water, dolphin and whale watching, boat excursions, visits to the thematic museums and overabundant volcanic caves, jeep tours, and, among other activities, the realization of numerous hiking routes, either previously marked or accompanied by tourist organizations.

Hope to see you here soon, wishing you, all the readers of this magazine, good immersions and unforgettable experiences in the Azores.

Sandro Paim

President of the Regional Tourist Association



Buceadores Magazine Pocket

Magazine Buceadores

An oasis in the Atlantic

Cover photo: Jordi Chias

This is a free supplement to the magazine Buceadores and cannot be sold separately.

The magazine Buceadores is a publication of Geophyle.

Editor:

Xavier Descamps

Director:

Ingrid Riera

riera@revistabuceadores.com

Assistant to Management/

Publicity:

Mario Valente
publicidad@revistabuceadores.com

Photographs:

Jordi Chias unless otherwise mentioned

Graphic design:

Cristina León

Subscriptions:

Zendis

Apdo. de Correos 1051

28108 Alcobendas (Madrid)

Tel.: + 902 04 42 98

Printing:

Bigsa

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Geophyle Medias España, S.L.U.
Calle Fastenrath, nº12
08035 Barcellona

Tel.: +34 93 417 38 76

www.revistabuceadores.com
www.divetravelshow.com



An Oasis in the Atlantic

There are those who consider that the ocean, in the high seas, is like a blue desert. While this is not entirely true, the dispersion of living creatures in such a coarse space can lead to the feeling of being a on a vacant land. In such an ecosystem, any small space of land is converted into a meeting point for many animals, an area to protect oneself, to relax and find food. This is how the Azores are, an authentic oasis for a large number of living beings. Situated in a unique enclave, halfway between Europe and America, this archipelago is one of the most important and singular ecosystems of the old continent. And, much to the good fortune of all, it is well-conserved. Isolated from tourism for many years, the Azores secretly harbor a few unique landscapes and privileges. A few of these ecosystems are marine, which makes them an especially interesting destination for us, the divers. A must see!

Jordi Chias

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The cetaceans are one of the biggest protagonists of these waters.

Azores,

ATLANTIC OASIS

The etymology of the toponym is, quite often, uncertain. That of the Azores (Açores in Portuguese) is no exception. According to popular tradition the goshawk (açor) was an abundant bird of prey in the islands when they were discovered. Another plausible explanation is that goshawk, blue in ancient Portuguese, is the color in which it shows itself when the navigator catches sight of them from the distant horizon.

THE GULF OF MEXICO

Azores experiences one of the effects of the Gulf Stream, the most important oceanic phenomenon on this side of the planet. This current, originating in the Gulf of Mexico, transports nutrient-rich hot water, tempering the climate in a large part of the European coast. It is thanks to this that, in Azores, the average annual temperature is 17 °C with a maximum fluctuation of 8 °C between winter and summer. The average temperature of the seawater is 19 °C, reaching a maximum of 24-25 °C in summer.

Its geographical location ensures that, often, the archipelago is affected by the tail end of storms, for example, hurricanes that punish the American coasts, usually at the end of summer.

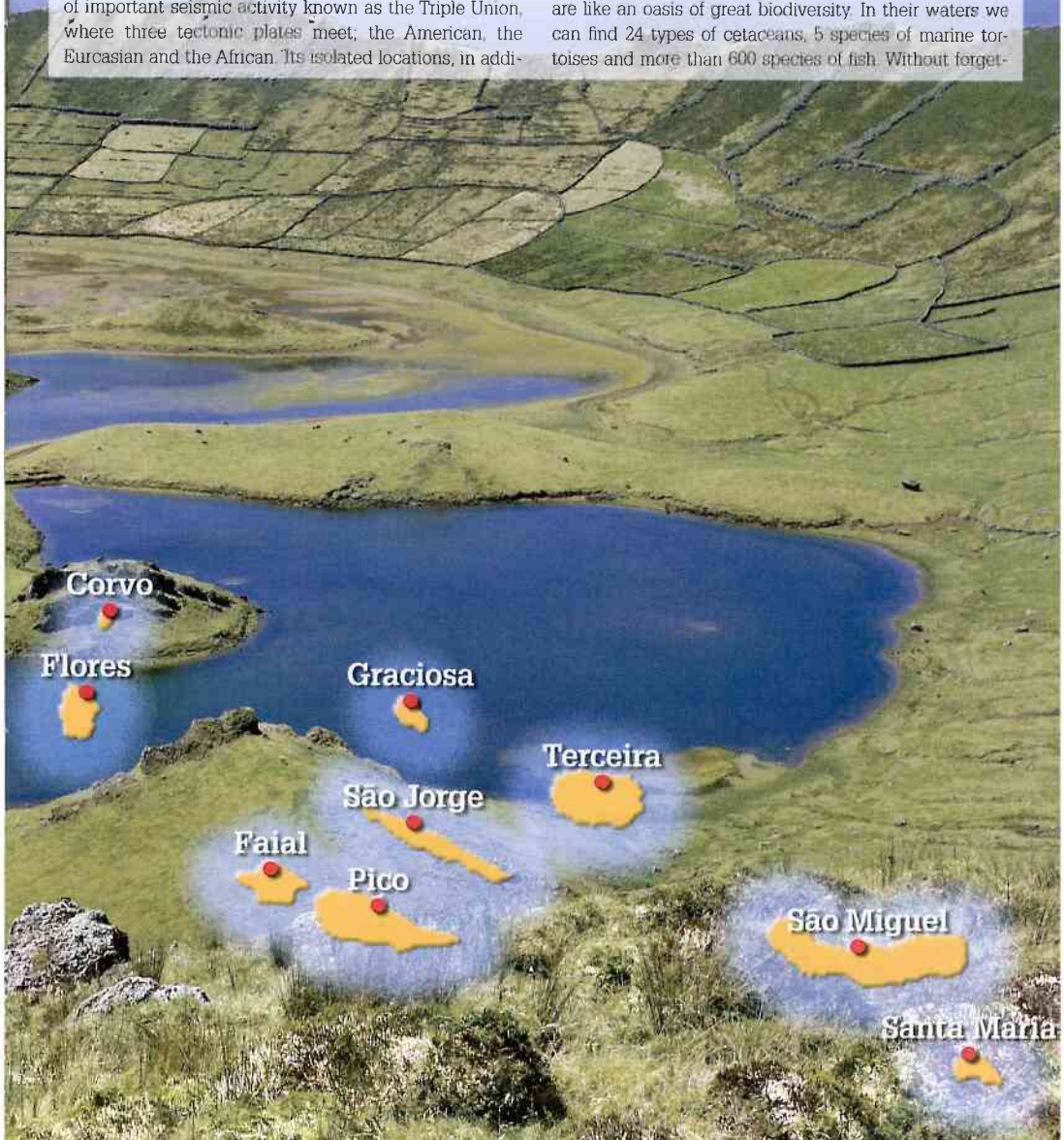
A

lthough these islands are characterized by a green covering, the adjective "blue" defines them perfectly. 600km separate the most northern (Corvo) from the most southern (Santa Maria); the nine islands that make up the archipelago are divided above an area of influence of more than 1,000,000 square kilometers in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean

A rough and rugged basaltic landscape reveals its volcanic origin. In fact, the archipelago is found in an enclave of important seismic activity known as the Triple Union, where three tectonic plates meet; the American, the Eurcasian and the African. Its isolated locations, in addi-

tion to its steep underwater morphology combined with mountains that ascend up from more than 2000m of depth, convert them into an area of extraordinary ecological value. On land, primitive forests of laurisilva are still found, and a few unique endemisms such as the *príolo*, a small bird from the family of the Galapagos finches that live in the most remote of mountains of the San Miguel Island. At the same time, islands such as Corvo and Flores are places of rest for migrating birds that cross the Atlantic each season.

In the ocean, the ecosystems surrounding the archipelago are like an oasis of great biodiversity. In their waters we can find 24 types of cetaceans, 5 species of marine tortoises and more than 600 species of fish. Without forget-



In its waters we can find 24 types of cetaceans, 5 species of marine tortoises and more than 600 species of fish.



J. Chias

The sperm-whale is the most emblematic whale of the Azores.

ting of course the abyssal ecosystems subjected to important study in recent years.

Submerging in the ocean

Of all the marine area that covers the zone of influence of the Azores, only 0.1% is suitable to dive. However, the characteristics of this small strip accessible to the divers, is so unique that this makes it especially attractive. Plunging walls, mountains that rise up from deep abysses until barely meters from the surface and great basaltic formations, make the diving in Azores a unique experience. The life under the water is varied, abundant, and often immeasurable. Immense shoals of deep-sea fish, great groups of mobulas and sharks are commonplace in the great banks of open water, while on the coast the king is the polluck. Many examples of this emblematic fish are common thanks to a strict regulation that protects and prohibits



J. Chias

A culture intimately connected to the sea.

ONE ISLAND, ONE CHARACTER

The history of the archipelago is intimately tied to navigation and the Atlantic commercial routes. The insularity and isolation has forged, in each island, its own character and personality. This ensures that the visit to each one of the nine islands of the archipelago offers a unique experience. This is most readily felt in the smallest and most remote islands such as Corvo, Flores and Santa Maria.



A few traditions shape the character of its people.



J. Chias

Tourism in Azores is very tied to nature.



J. Chias

WHALE CULTURE

The cetaceans have been key animals in the history of the archipelago. Long ago, the hunt of whales was the main industry in Azores, a practice since eradicated, with today seeing instead, thousands of tourists boarding boats in order to catch sight of these giants. A few approach the coast during their long migrations from North to South, such as the great whalebones: the humpback, the common finback, the sardine whale and the blue whale. Others, such as the sperm whales, have a resident population. Also, diverse species of dolphins inhabit the waters surrounding these islands.



J. Chias

them from being fished by underwater fishermen. It's distance from the overcrowding of other places, as well as good management of resources, has allowed the richness and diversity of this water to be preserved.

The nine islands that make up the Azores are divided in three groups: the Eastern group, the Central group and the Western group. The Eastern group corresponds to San Miguel, administrative capital, and the island of Santa Maria, the most southern. The Central group is that which joins the biggest number of islands: Pico, Faial, San Jorge, the Graciosa and Terceira. The Western group, with Flores and Corvo, is the most isolated and northern.



J. Chias

Capelinhos was the last volcanic eruption on land, in 1957.



J. Chias

The maritime communication between islands is essential.



J. Chias

The steadfast presence of flowers decorates the landscape.

CENTRAL GROUP

5 islands with their own personality

Faial, Pico, San Jorge, the Graciosa and Terceira are the five islands that form the central archipelago. Although being relatively close to each other, each one has its own character and deserves a visit. The landscape, both above and below the sea is full of examples that remind us of the volcanic origin of these islands. In fact, the last eruption occurred in the Faial Island, when the Capelinhos volcano formed the emergence of a new peninsula to the south of the island around the year 1957. Beneath the water the basaltic formations create rugged landscapes, sometimes unreal, full of crevices, arches, caves and walls that are lost in the abyss, a perfect landscape for marine life, and above all, deep-sea life.

Beneath the water the historical legacy can be reflected in the great number of shipwreck remains from distinct time periods past.

ALGAR DE CARVAO

In the center of the island the *Algar do Carvão* (carbon cave) is found, a strip of lava that descends to a depth of about 100m, which gives way to an ice-filled crystal water lake, rife with stalactites. An obligatory visit.

TERCEIRA

Historical capital

Angra do Heroísmo, the capital of this island, was the most important city of the entire archipelago in the 15th and 16th centuries. The importance of this town was such that it became an obligatory stop-off for the navigators on their round-trip from America to Europe. Angra was also named the capital of Portugal, playing an important role during the reestablishment of the Luso Imperial (19th century). In 1983, the historical center of Angra do Heroísmo was named World Heritage Site. Therefore, despite its stunning landscape, the main attraction of Terceira is, without a doubt, its splendid historical legacy.

Dive in History

This legacy can also be reflected beneath the water in the sheer abundance of remains from shipwrecks, ranging from distinctive historical time periods. In the bay of Angra, the "underwater archeological park" is found, an authentic underwater museum that has been open for visit since 2006. One of the most well-known diving points is the "Campo de Ancias". Here we can dive between anchors of great ships from different periods, a few dating back to the 16th century. In the same immersion there are remains of ship fragments that shipwrecked at the end of the 19th century.

Terceira is perhaps the island that most offers the greatest variety of dives: we can dive among the fragments of shipwrecks, walls, caves, rocks and sites displaying an abundance of life. One of some such points is Fradinhos, a group of islets that surface at about five miles off the south



Nuno Sa

The crops in Terceira form a very characteristic landscape.

coast of Terceira. In this dive there are great shoals of deep sea-life, for example, swarms of *Anthias anthias*. Also worth highlighting are the immersions such as the cavern of the Anchovas or the islet of Mina, among many others.

Terceira is also the place closest to the Banco Joao Castro, a large volcanic crater which rises up to 12 meters of the surface, and is found 35 miles to the southeast of the island (see page 20)



Nuno Sa

The capital of Terceira, Angra do Heroísmo, is World Heritage Site.

GRACIOSA

Small island, big dives

Situated 22 miles to the north of San Jorge, Graciosa is the flattest island of the entire archipelago, reaching only 402 meters above sea level at the peak of *Caldeira*, an extinct volcano.

Measuring 60 square kilometers, it's a small and weakly populated island. Different than the other islands of the Central group, Graciosa boasts a variety of sandy beaches running along the length of its coast. Apart from diving, the island is known for its hot baths in Carapacho and for the "Fuma de Enxofre" (cave of the azufre), located in the volcano of *Caldeira*, a visit not to be missed.





J. Chias

The propeller of the Terceirense.

Events such as the Open Underwater Photography event have converted this island into the "Capital of Diving in Azores"

In the capital, Santa Cruz de Graciosa, we can visit an old town full of buildings with high historical value. In the northeast of the island we find Ponta da Barca, a foreland with a beautiful lighthouse located in the highest point of a spectacular cliff made of volcanic rock, calling to mind the silhouette of a great whale.

Capital of diving

Thanks to a few local clubs that are dedicated to the promotion of diving on the island, and of organizing a variety of events, most notably an open submarine photography event, this small island has earned the nickname of "Capital of Diving in Azores".

Due to its reduced perimeter, the majority of dives are accessible by departing from the main port of the capital Santa Cruz. The most emblematic of dives are those below the north coast and the shipwreck Terceirense. Among the most spectacular is that of the Pesqueiro Longo, being the most distinct. It's make-up is very rugged and is usually frequented by deep-sea life. During the summer months groups of mobulas are habitually seen.



J. Chias

Life is abundant in the majority of immersions.

The remains of the Terceirense rest above a bed of sand and rock at 21 m of depth, in front of the town of San Mateus. 40 m in length, the wreckage is found broken in various pieces, although it conserves a few very recognizable parts, like the stem. This dive is one of the most popular of the island as it contains a certain protection and there is a great quantity of life.

To the southeast of the island the islets of the Carapacho are found, a reserve which includes various spectacular immersions, brimming with life, among which an enormous cave is highlighted, found in the largest of the islets.

Thanks to a highly sustainable fishing activity, the sea beds of this island demonstrate excellent health, being especially abundant in groupers, dogfish and moray eels, among others.

QUEIJADAS

One of the most striking things about Graciosa is the quantity of cows. This is due, in part, to the fact that the island exhibits little steepness and these ruminants have good terrain on which to graze. As a result, Graciosa contains some tasty cheeses and the famous *Queijadas*, deserts made from milk, egg and cinnamon.



J. Chias

Santa Cruz of the Graciosa on a seasonal day.



The volcanic landscape of the Ponta da Barca.

SAN JORGE

A unique landscape

The morphology of this island makes it the most special of the archipelago, at 53km in length, only 8km at its widest point and one great mountainside (with 700m of altitude at its highest point) at each end of the island, San Jorge resembles an enormous boat when viewed from above, above all, when seen from its west coast.

This island is famous for its spectacular "fajas", a few flat plots of land close to the sea, joined with vertical mountainsides. Of these, one of the most emblematic is the Faja del Santo Cristo, which features a large lake opening into the sea with waterfalls decorating the background.

Great pelagic life between the basalt

The rugged and sharp landscape of San Jorge also extends below the water. Taking a look at the map of the island, one can infer that its east and west are transient rest-stops. To the west we find the Punta dos Rosais, a sharp cape filled with small islets with numerous mountains that emerge from the bottom extending out to sea. Various miles towards the west we find the Baja dos Rosais, one of the best immersions for pelagic life of the entire archipelago, together with the great ocean mountains of Azores (see page 18). This drop rises up from great depths and contains a very rugged morphology, with vertical walls that fall from the peak of the underwater rocks. The strong and normally punishing current of the zone ensures that tuna fish, wahoos, large shoals and the odd shark are the habitual inhabitants of this site. On the other extreme of the island, to the southeast, we find the islet of Topo, another excellent point for the sighting of pelagic life. With a surface area of about 20 hectares, this islet finds itself set inside a reserve offering various dives with a great quantity of life of all types, including a large amount of pelagic life. Here, the groupers, groups of codfish, moray eels, dogfish, barracudas

Nuno Sa



Submerged in the surrounding areas of Velas.

and many others are very abundant at moderate depth between 19 and 25 meters.

Along the south coast surrounding the capital, the town of Velas, we find various spectacular dives in which the basalt formations are the main protagonists. Caves such as the Gruta dos Corais with the ceiling and the wall covered with black coral, or the arches of Portinhos de Urzelina are, among many others, a must see.



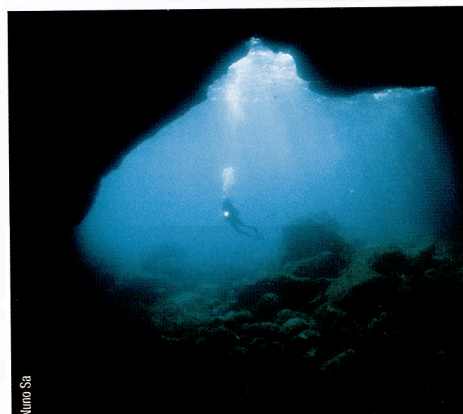
J. Chilas

The large pelagic life are the protagonists.



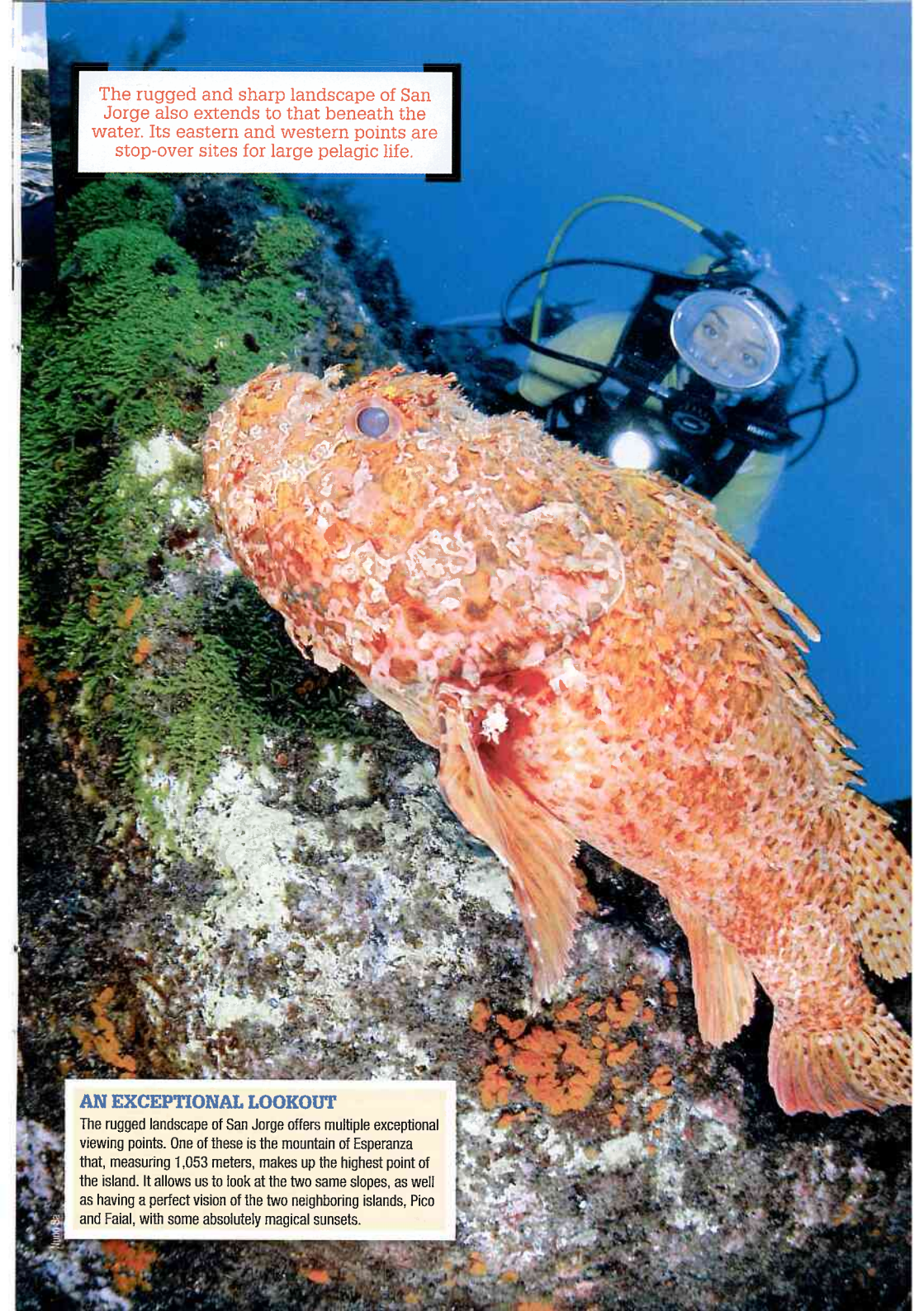
Nuno Sa

The capital, Velas, with the Monte Pico in the background.



Nuno Sa

Large volcanic caves are very characteristic of the island.

A diver in a black wetsuit and mask is looking at a large, orange, mottled fish resting on a rocky reef. The fish has a rough, scaly texture and is surrounded by green algae and coral. The background is a clear blue ocean.

The rugged and sharp landscape of San Jorge also extends to that beneath the water. Its eastern and western points are stop-over sites for large pelagic life.

AN EXCEPTIONAL LOOKOUT

The rugged landscape of San Jorge offers multiple exceptional viewing points. One of these is the mountain of Esperanza that, measuring 1,053 meters, makes up the highest point of the island. It allows us to look at the two same slopes, as well as having a perfect vision of the two neighboring islands, Pico and Faial, with some absolutely magical sunsets.



At 2,351 meters above sea-level, the Pico mountain is the highest point in Portugal.

PICO

The depth

This is possibly the most emblematic island of the central group, due, in large part to the Monte Pico, a volcano that rises to 2,351 meters above sea level. Aside from being the highest mountain in Portugal, it is responsible for such a characteristic shape of the island. The scenery of Pico is striking with some vertical slopes that flatten out as they approach the ocean. This lower zone has been taken advantage of for centuries for the cultivation of, above all, grapes.

The south coast of Pico descends very sharply towards great depths. At scarcely miles in front of the town of Lajes, we find deep sea-beds where the resident population of sperm whales search for their food. The hunt of whales was an important industry during the first half of the 20th century. Since being abolished, in 1987, the population of sperm-whales has considerably recuperated its previous size and there are many tourists that specifically travel here to see these giants of the sea up close.

Pelagic life and basalt

The proximity to Faial ensures that many of the best dives are shared with the neighboring island, such as the underwater rocks of the channel. The majority of the known dives of the island are usually carried out in the



The devilfish are very abundant in many dives.

coast surrounding the port of the Madalena, the main town of the island. A few of the most emblematic points are the islets of the Madalena, a place known for the large quantity of rayas, or the arches of Pocinho, a number of colossal basaltic formations. Apart from the dazzling sight provided by gigantic arches in this dive, we can see a great variety of fish: from shoals of jureles and barracudas, to the dogfish, viejas and peacock fish.

The most well-known underwater rocks are the Baja Barca, the Baja del North and of the South, in the middle of the channel between Pico and Faial. The first two are mountains whose peak stops just above 20 meters



Hugo SA

The arches of Pocinho are an incredible sight.

The orography, from the underwater rocks of the channel, along with the currents, supply this site with an excellent enclave from which all types of pelagic life can be seen.

depth, which reduces the time of the dive quite a bit. The last, the Baja del Sur, reaches 6 meters of depth and contains a few truly spectacular formations. The orography, along with the currents, supply this site with an excellent enclave from which all types of pelagic life can be seen: tuna fish, large scorpion fish, water hyacinth, bonitos, molas and, including mobulas in summer months, all in

shallow depths. If we descend a little more we can see groupers, codfish and large dogfish.

A few boats depart from Pico that offer trips to the Banco Princesa Alice, considered one of the best dives of the archipelago. In addition, trips are organized to underwater mountains such as Banco C ndor, in order to dive with sharks (see page 19).

WINE FROM LAVA

If there is one distinguishing aspect to this island, apart from its volcano, it is its vineyards. Planted in a species of corals formed from volcanic rock, their function is protection from the wind, while providing a very characteristic aspect to the island. This method of cultivation goes back various centuries and recently has been classified as World Heritage Site by Unesco. The wines of Pico enjoy a very good reputation.



J. Chilas

The presence of certain species rarely seen in other sites, demonstrate the good state of these sea-beds.

FAIAL

Land of sailors

Without a doubt, Faial is an island open to the sea. Its capital, Horta, is a mythical town, and an obliged stop-off for the navigators crossing the ocean (see box) on their journey towards the old continent. Furthermore, the Headquarters of the University of Azores is located in Horta, where there are diverse research groups. It is here that scientists come from all over the world in order to study the great deep thermal springs and the migrating ocean species, for example tuna fish and cetaceans.

Faial boasts an abundance of points of interest: aside from its enormous crater Fayal Caldera with a diameter greater than 2,000 meters, one of the most visited sites is Capelinhos. This zone is situated on the extreme west of the island, and is the result of the last land eruption registered in the entire archipelago, in 1958.

Monte da Guia

Diving in Faial is closely connected to its neighbor Pico, and a few of the best immersions that the island offers are in the channel that separates the two. It is there that various interesting underwater rocks are found. Another of the most frequented zones by divers is that which surrounds the Monte da Guia, a small headland in the south point of Horta. It is an ancient volcano that was declared a reserve a few years ago. In this zone we find a diversity of immersions such as the cavern of the black

The majority of dives in Faial are very close to its capital or in the channel that separates it from the neighboring island of Pico.



J. Chias

A sea bass of good size.



J. Chias

The large codfish are abundant in Faial.

islet, the cavern of the prawn, the *Furnas do Monte Guia*, etc. Also of interest is the dive in the Cañones among the mountains, an immersion where, apart from seeing a lot of typical fauna of the zone, we can pass between remains of the cannons that protected the city in ancient times. These cannons were placed there as cover during the expansion of the port of Horta.

WHALE HUNTERS

Until the beginnings of the 70's, the hunting of large cetaceans was one of the main industries of Azores. Today, with the factories now reconverted to museums, whale-watching tourism is an important enticement. It is also worth ones who visit one of these museums or the collection of sperm whale teeth in the museum of *Peter's Café* (Horta, Faial)



View of Horta with the Monte da Guia in the background.



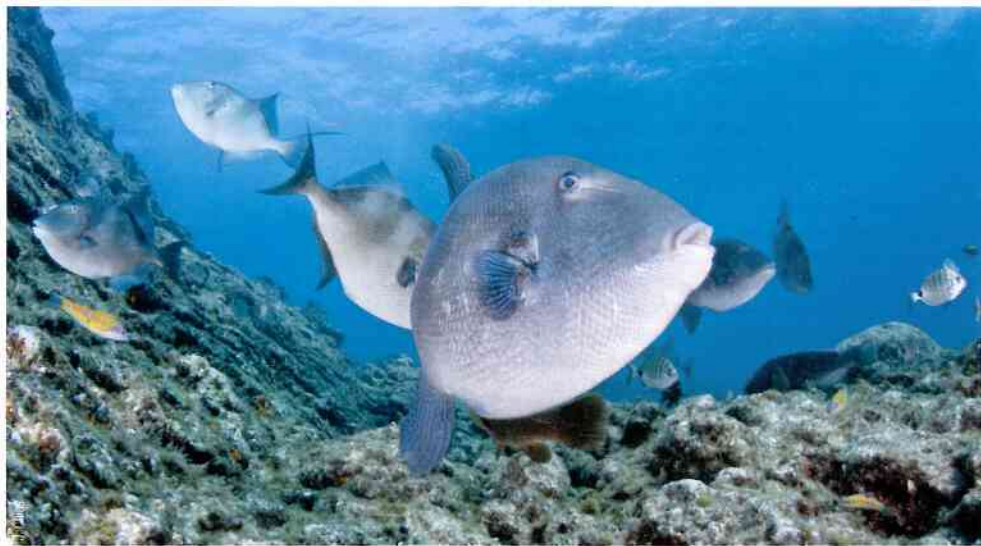
J. Chies

The spectacular coast of Capelinhos seen from the sea.

Faial is also a place of departure for the boats that offer dives in the Banco Princesa Alice, considered one of the best dives of the archipelago. In addition, trips are organized to other underwater mountains such as the Banco Cóndor in order to dive with sharks (see page 19).

OPEN AIR MUSEUM

The port of Horta is a fantastic stop-off for the navigators crossing the Atlantic. Among the diverse rituals that are enacted, one such ritual involves enjoying a gin and tonic in Peter Café Sport, leaving a bandana hanging and painting a commemorative picture on the floor of one of the docks. This tradition has made the Port of Horta into a kind of open air museum.



The fauna, which are a protected species, is very abundant in the dives surrounding the Monte da Guia.



J. Chios

The great shoals of mobulas are protagonists in the underwater mountains.

Diving in the high sea



The shoals of pelagic life achieve size otherwise impossible in other places.

In the immensity of the Atlantic

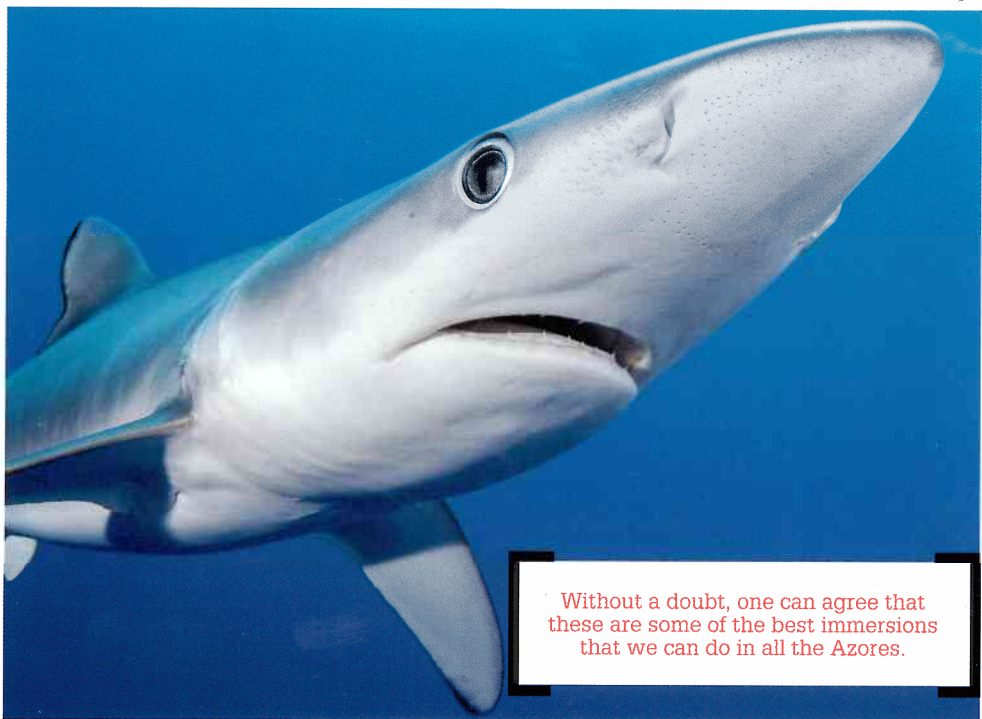
The 9 islands that make up the archipelago and that break the surface are no more than a small outcrop of the peaks of an immense chain of underwater mountains. The morphology of the oceanic bed of the Azores is the result of the collision of three big tectonic plates, combined with an intense volcanic activity. In fact, this rugged and abrupt underwater relieve, along with a very special location, convert this part of the Atlantic into an authentic oasis of life.

Practically all of these underwater mountains are out of our reach as divers. However, there is a tiny part of them, almost infinitesimal, in which we can dive. Without a doubt it is certain that these are some of the best immersions that we can do in all the Azores, so much so that some of these could occupy any top international ranking. Such an exposed position in regards to the wind and tide, with no protection, results in a difficult access to these places. It is necessary to plan various days in advance in order to find one in which the ocean concedes passage to us and allows us to approach our destination.

BANCO PRINCESA ALICE An underwater island

The Princesa Alice is the largest underwater rock in the entire Azores, in fact it is a massive mountain range with diameter of 55 km, which barely falls short of breaking the surface. Its origins are volcanic, as in the case of the rest of the archipelago, and it is found in a zone of high activity. Its location, in the middle of the Atlantic ocean, along with its rugged morphology, convert this sea bank into a special place of great biological interest, which has in turn led the government to protect it, granting the right to fish only to local boats.

The highest part of this mountain is located 50 miles from the Faial island and emerges from a depth of -35 meter rising from great depths with heights superior than 2,500 meters. As we approach this point, the presence of pelagic species is more and more evident. Dolphins, tuna fish and sharks are often spotted from the boats. The main attraction during the summer months are the great shoals



J. Chiss

Without a doubt, one can agree that these are some of the best immersions that we can do in all the Azores.

For the last few years the blue shark has become one of the big attractions for the divers.

of mobulas (*Mobula tarapacana*) above the peak. Though the dive in the high areas of the underwater rock doesn't differ too much from the coastal dive in Azores, the water is usually clearer, along with an almost guaranteed meeting with great shoals of pelagic life (tuna fish, bonitos, wahoos, shoals of large sized scorpionfish).

BANCO CÓNDROR

Oceanic sharks

This mountain is one of the great discoveries of the last few years. Investigators consider it a site of enormous richness and of great interest to study. This, together with the proximity to the island of Faial, has converted it into the first protected underwater mountain. The regional government of Azores has prohibited any kind of fishing for two years, and is currently considering the possibility of extending the moratoria.

The peak of the Banco Cóndror is found at around 180 meters of depth, a depth far from our reach. However, for us the interest in this site resides close to the surface, given that in the last few seasons, it has become one of the best places for the sighting of oceanic sharks, and above all, blue sharks and white shark. These species approach these zones during summer months and in a short time this type of dive has become very popular. Recently, the centers of the zone have even created a code of good practice in order to ensure that we avoid interfering with the behavior of these animals.



J. Chiss

Migration from great depths are produced during the night, like these capros aper.

The dive consists of submerging oneself while attached to a rope, a few meters under the boat, while it drifts along.



J. Chilas

The blue shark is a threatened species due to overfishing.

The sharks are attracted to the boat by means of "chumming", which consists of mixing sea water with the remains of pieces of fish thus forming a type of broth, which attracts the sharks while avoiding feeding them, constantly maintaining their interest in staying close to the boat.

The centers of the zone have now created a code of good practices in order to avoid interfering too much in the sharks' behavior.

BANCO DOM IOAO CASTRO

Underwater volcano

Discovered in 1941 this underwater mountain is the crater of a large volcano, which is said to have, one day, broken the surface, but, due to erosion, inhabited its former underwater position. Situated 35 miles southeast of Terceira, the Banco Dom Joao Castro is one of the least visited sites by divers, in the entire archipelago. The highest peaks extend to a depth of 12 meters, emerging from bottoms close to 1000 meters.

Aside from an impressive landscape, extremely clear waters and an abundant pelagic life, what makes this place special is the volcanic activity still present in the form of gases that are emitted from a few cracks, forming authentic curtains of bubbles. A unique and unusual image.

In terms of the fauna, the pelagic life is the protagonist: wahoos, bonitos, tuna fish, shoals of scorpionfish, triggerfish, and large shoals of sea breams are the usual protagonists. In the hottest months we can also observe small groups of mobulas close to the most superficial points.



J. Chilas

On the way to these places the sighting of cetaceans is habitual.



Mundo SA

The volcanic activity is very present in the Banco J. Castro.



J. Chias

THE FORMIGAS AND DOLLABARAT

In the midst of the west we find what is considered by many as the best dive of Azores. At about 25 miles to the north of Santa Maria (or close to 45 miles to the south of San Miguel), a little group of small islets, known as the Formigas, is found. In the biggest of the islets, a bit more than a hundred of meters, we find a small lighthouse indicating its position to the navigators. Surrounding these islands there are a great number of rocks and interesting underwater rocks. On the island there are walls that form types of terraces, from which a large amount of pelagic life can be seen passing by: scorpion fish of great sizes, devilfish, mobulas, tuna fish etc. In the walls we see large groupers, codfish, moray eels, while the more superficial zones are covered by great brushes of black coral. Positioned on these balconies of basalt rock we can see many examples of striped posadas on the sea-bed. About 3 miles to the southeast of the Formigas we find Dollabarat, an underwater mountain, whose most superficial part rises up to about 3 meters of the surface and measures the length of a football field. This dive is exceptional, highlighting the presence of small groups of hammer sharks on the surface and groups of mobulas during the summer months. A good day in Dollabarat is unforgettable with enormous shoals of scorpion fish, triggerfish, and jureles that surround us while we observe groupers of great sizes, showing themselves to be very trusting of the diver.

We find a lot of black coral on the walls of the Formigas.



J. Chias

On the biggest of the islets, we find a small lighthouse that indicates its position to the navigators.



J. Chias

The moray eels reach impressive sizes



The Lago do Fogo is one of the many attractions that hide in the island of San Miguel.

EASTERN GROUP

San Miguel and Santa María

To the southeast of the archipelago, the eastern group made up of San Miguel and Santa María is found. Separated by only 54 miles, the two islands are very distinct. San Miguel is big, contains the largest surface area, is very populated and offers an enormous variety of landscapes and possibilities for the visitor. Santa María is small and very quiet; however, the ocean emerges in all its splendor supplying some of the best dives in all the Azores.

SAN MIGUEL

A lot to see

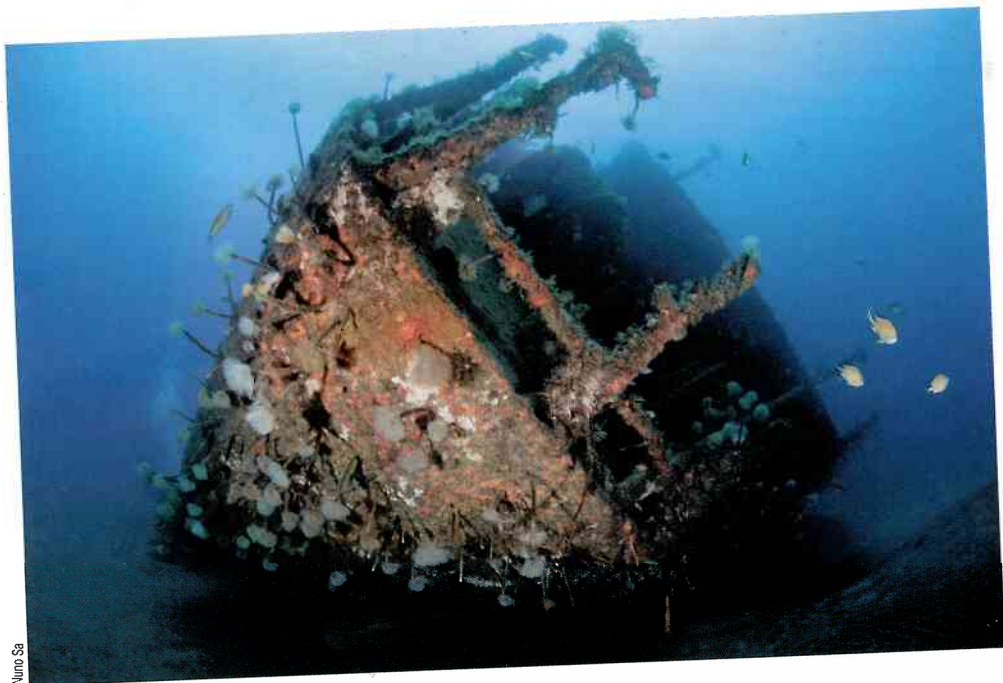
This is the biggest island (760 square kilometers) ; administrative capital of the archipelago, with the great number of inhabitants. Due to its size, this island contains an enormous variety of landscapes, although it is large known for its beautiful lakes, the majority formed in volcanic cones. The Lagoon of Seven Cities (one of seven wonders of Portugal) on the occidental part of island is one of the most famous, widely known as blue green lagoon, as one part of the lake reflects the blue of sky while the other reflects the green of the mountains. In addition, the Laguna do Fogo, named one of the seven wonders of Portugal, is a must see. Finally, the Laguna Furnas, with its well-known craters of hot water, testament to the volcanic activity of these islands. The main town of the island is Ponta Delgada, situated on the south coast. The port and airport of the island are both in the same city.

Historic dives

An aged population signifies a large pressure on the marine environment, which results in the coastal dives containing less life. However, very close to the port of Ponta Delgada one of the most well-known immersions in the Azores archipelago is found. This is Dori, a shipwreck constructed



The freddy, *Thalassoma pavo*, displays its exterior layer.



The Don is the most well-known shipwreck and emblematic of San Miguel.

in the United States in 1943. Originally chartered as Edwin Drake, this vessel participated in World War II, specifically in "Operation Overlord" in Normandy. Twenty-one years later, the vessel shipwrecked off the coast of San Miguel. Today, this ruin of 130 meters in length is visited by hundreds of divers each year. Situated above a sandy bed at only 16 meters of depth, it is very accessible. The wreck is found in very good state and is home to a great quantity of life. In

front of the town of Vila Franca, located a few hundred meters off the coast, an islet which forms part of a marine reserve is found, offering an extraordinary dive filled with an abundance of life.

DAILY FLIGHTS

San Miguel receives daily flights not only from Lisbon but also from other European capitals. This allows for the easy organization of short stays. From this island we can get to others with short domestic flights.



A small scorpion fish (*Scorpaena maderensis*) is very abundant.



The murion is quite common.



Nudibranchi *Glossodoris edmundsi*.

SANTA MARÍA

The tropical

Santa María is considered the most "tropical" islands of the archipelago. Its most southern position ensures a more temperate and dry climate while the sea water reaches the greatest temperatures in the hottest months. This provides for the presence of "mega fauna" on its coast, which has become one of the most solicited destinations in the last few years.

During the summer months it is possible to dive with great shoals of mobulas and with the largest ocean fish, the whale shark. At only 3 miles from the coast, a bay known as Ambrosio is found. In this spot, from July until the 22nd of September, there are usually a resident group of more than 25 examples of mobulas. Although the peak of the underwater rock is at a depth of 44 meters, the immersions occur barely meters from the surface; after anchoring, we see a spectacular runway in which the mobulas pass in front of us over and over again. A spectacle!

THE DIFFERENT ISLAND

The landscape of Santa María is distinctive to that of the other islands. Being more to the south, its climate is dryer with 30% less rain than the average of the archipelago. In its time, geologically speaking, it is the oldest island, the first to emerge and, with that, it is also that which reveals a highest grade of erosion. Because of all this, we find a few oddities such as flat and arid landscapes on the west coast, for example large sandy beaches, something unheard of on other islands.



The beaches of San Lorenzo.



The lighthouse of Gonçalo Velho, to the southeast of island



The mobulas of the underwater rock of Ambrosio, a unique spectacle.

Its most southern position determines the presence of "mega fauna", which has become one of the most solicited destinations in the last few years.



Iluro Sa



During the summer months, the arrival of tuna fish is accompanied by the sightings of numerous whale sharks.

Also in the hot months, the arrival of great shoals of "chicharro" (horse mackerel), is followed by tuna fish and whale sharks. All this occurs at a small distance from the coast. The fishermen of tuna fish know that the presence of the "spotted" (whale shark), the biggest fish on the planet, is a good omen, as this usually drags great shoals of tuna fish.

The fishermen of Santa María are conscious of the necessity to preserve this richness and adhere to strict quotas, while collaborating with the local diving centers, informing them when the giant sharks arrive. It is a sight to see how the tuna fish try to hunt the horse mackerel while they take refuge around the whale shark.



J. Chias

The grouper is a protected species.



J. Chias

The Azores are in midst of the migratory route of the large tortoise.



J. Chias

A shoal of jureles on the north coast.

WESTERN GROUP

Flores and Corvo

250 km to the west of the central group, we find Flores and Corvo. Their slightly more southern location largely affects its climate, while, though being temperate, is rainier and windier than the rest of those in the archipelago. This has an enormous influence on, above all, the landscape of both islands, both much greener than the rest. The two were recently declared biospheric reserves for their sustainable development. Corvo (2007) and Flores (2009).



Nuno Sa

Spectacular entry in the Gruta do Galo.

FLORES

The most western

The name of this island could not be more graphic nor descriptive. The green countryside full of flowers, woodland forests, craters converted into lakes and waterfalls surrounded by lively vegetation have led to a deserving classification as "The Hawaii of the Atlantic". Perhaps the most impressive scenery of the island is that of the Laguna de las Patas, which is reached by means of a short walk through a thick forest whose end point leads to an amazing lake, nourished by dozens of tiny waterfalls falling from vertical mountainsides surrounding it.



J. Chias

A female dogfish exhibits her beautiful exterior layer.

On the west coast, close to the Fajá Grande, we find a zone for bathing, with naturally formed swimming pools filled with crystal water. This small village is found immersed in a natural scenery full of small waterfalls, among which we find the highly touted Poza del Bacalhau, where we can bathe ourselves in waters descending from hundreds of meters above. Also not to be missed is the visit to the Rocha dos Bordoos, an enormous formation of basalt columns.

Lava caves and pelagic life

Diving in Flores is a constant discovery. The small influx of divers allows us to experience the feeling of exploring new routes in each dive. The island offers a great variety of sites ranging from headlands, protected bays, to underwater mountains. Beneath the water the scene is amazing, highlighting, above all, the basalt formations filled with caves, arches and crevices. Specifically, one of the most popular dives of the island is the Gruta do Galo, a cave with two exits whose entries of light exhibit stunning images. The dive usually finishes in one of these exits where there is a waterfall of sweet water, which drizzles into the sea. Other sites of popular dives include the underwater mountains such as the Cabeço Escolar and Cabeço Garajau with an abundant pelagic life, shoals of servias, bonitas and jureles.



Nuno Sa

A pair of octopus appears in front of the diver.



Impressive image of "Caldeirao", the central crater of the island of Corvo.

CORVO Small and savage

With a surface area of only 17 square kilometers, Corvo is the smallest island of the archipelago. Situated thirteen nautical miles to the north of Flores, this island is literally the cone of an extinct volcano, named "Caodeirao", 300 meters deep and whose corona reaches 700 meters above sea level (Morro dos Homens), at its highest point. In the interior of the crater there are small lakes and its lively mountainsides come to an abrupt end. In Spring, the hortensias in bloom create a unique landscape in the enclave. Corvo is a stop-off point for numerous birds migrating from the North of America.

There is a single town, the Vila de Cono, where reside the entire 400 inhabitants that reside on the island.

Corvo can be reached by plane, combining cor flights linking Terceira, Faial and Flores. There is also a ferry that joins Corvo with its neighbor Flores, which is a half journey.

The king; grouper

Corvo is known for its large and numerous grouper, all, in a now famous dive; Caneiro dos Meros. It is the creation of a very special reserve (see box), it is possible to dive surrounded by large groupers, a few meters deep, more than 30 kg, at only dozens of meters from the Port.



Mundo SA

Image of the north face of the island.

the entire immersion it is possible to dive accompanied by various groupers that, accustomed to the presence of divers, allow us to get very close to them.

VOLUNTARY RESERVE
Corvo is probably the most special island in the entire archipelago. Its isolation has shaped the character of its people. The people are known to be very welcoming and for their unique accent. Conscious of the fact that their oldest heritage is the nature, the fishermen of the island enacted a previously unprecedented initiative: a reserve in the Vila da Corvo where the groupers are the main protagonists.



Mundo SA

The grouper here is an authentic king; his "protected" status converts him into an abundant and emblematic species.

Diving Centers



Faial

DIVE AZORES

T. +351 967 882 214
www.diveazores.net - info@diveazores.net

NORBERTO DIVER - Maritime Activities, Lda
T. +351 962 824 028 - +351 969 197 077
www.norbertodiver.com
norbertodiver@mail.telepac.pt

Graciosa

DIVE CENTER ATLANTIDA

T. +351 295 732 718 - +351 919 891 164
+351 910 507 483
rentacaratlantida@hotmail.com
www.turismo-graciosa.com

DIVING GRACIOSA - NautiGraciosa
T. +351 966 060 969 - +351 917 062 029
divinggraciosa@gmail.com
www.divinggraciosa.com

GRACIPESCAS - Maritime Activities Lda
T. +351 295 732 530 - +351 916 053 023
www.gracipescas.com
casadasfaias@sapo.pt



Pico

BRIZACORES - JOSÉ MEDEIROS ÁVILA SOUSA
T. +351 916 778 823 - brizacores@gmail.com

COWFISH DIVE CENTER, LDA

T. +351 919 020 508 - +351 914 587 121
pedves@gmail.com - paulo.terra.alta@gmail.com
http://pedves.wix.com/cowfish-divecenter

CW AZORES

T. +351 292 622 622 - +351 911 133 658
www.cwazores.com - info@cwazores.com

PICO SPORT

T. +351 292 622 980 - +351 914 373 611
www.whales-dolphins.net
scubaazores.com
www.barcorecife@yahoo.com



Terceira

ANFIBIUS

 - Center of Diving

T. +351 912 595 541
info@anfibus.com
www.anfibus.com

DIVER OPUS

T. +351 962 975 289
diveropus@hotmail.com

OCTOPUS

 - Diving center

T. +351 965 431 985 - +351 912 513 906
geral@octopusportugal.com
www.octopusportugal.com

Santa Maria

DOLLABARATSUB

 - HENRIQUE BOTELHO

T. +351 916 497 176
geral@dollaratsub.com - www.dollaratsub.com
geral@maritimoturistica.com
www.maritimoturistica.com



MANTAMARIA DIVE CENTER

T. +351 918 685 447 - +351 917 287 286
info@mantamaria.com - www.mantamaria.com

PARALELO 37 - Maritime-tourist Activities

T. +351 966 305 838 - +351 91 420 1281
paralelo37@sapo.pt - www.paralelo37.pt

WAHOO DIVING

T. +351 296 884 005 - www.wahoo-diving.de
mail@wahoo-diving.de

São Miguel AÇORDIVING

T. +351 966 182 758
www.azoresdiving.com - acordiving@sapo.pt

AZORES SUB DIVE CENTER

T. +351 918 755 853 - +351 919 250 507
www.azoressub.com
geral@azoressub.com
divecenter@azoressub.com



ESPIRITO AZUL DIVE CENTER

T. +351 914 898 253 - +351 914 898 352
www.espiritoazul.com - info@espiritoazul.com

NERUS DIVING CENTER

T. +351 918 270 186 - +351 917 943 788
www.nerusazores.com - nerusazores@gmail.com

SCUBAFISH

T. +351 962 896 132 - +351 910 407 440 - +351 296 707 615
geral@scubafish.pt - www.scubafish.pt

Flores

EXTREMOCIDENTE

T. +351292 590 100 - +351 918 390 189
www.hotelocidental.com - extremocidente@yahoo.com

FLORES DIVE CENTER

T. +351 964 794 943 - +351 963 696 990
reservas@azoresferias.com - geral@floresdivecenter.com
rui@azoresferias.com
www.azoresferias.com - www.floresdivecenter.com

ART AÇORES ASSOCIAÇÃO REGIONAL DE TURISMO

T. +351 295 216 480 - info@artazores.com
www.artazores.com

Travel notebook

CLIMATE

The islands of Azores are influenced by the warm current from the Gulf of Mexico, which tempers the climate. The average annual temperature is 19.5 °C and the hottest months are July, August and September, reaching a maximum of 26 °C in August. The average annual rainfall is high (109cm), although this fluctuates quite a bit between the winter and summer months. During the months of high summer the average rainfall fluctuates between 3.5 and 5.5cm. The rainfall varies a lot from island to island; the western group is rainiest, while Santa Maria, the most southern, is the driest. A few islands such as the Graciosa, being less mountainous, also register a lower precipitation level. In addition the summer months are those with the greatest incidence of anticyclones,

being the less windy. From time to time, the end of summer can give way to the occurrence of tropical storms, often violent in nature, although this is unforeseeable. Given all this, the best months to visit the islands are the ends of June to the 22nd of September.

THE SEA

The temperature of the sea water is quite constant, with a very small fluctuation that ranges from 17 °C in winter up to 22 °C in summer. In a few islands such as Santa Maria, the maximum can reach 24 °C in August. The visibility is usually good although it oscillates depending on the time of year and place. In spring and the beginning of summer, it can be reduced due to the blooming of plankton. In summer and September it is usually very nice, and in a few areas, near the

underwater mountains removed from the coast, very nice (34.40m).

TIME ZONE

In the archipelago the time zone used is Coordinated Universal Time(CMT) – 1 hour in winter and CUT in summer, which means, in relation to the hour in Spain, 2 hours less in winter and one hour less in summer.

CUSTOMS

The celebrations usually take place in between May and October, namely, the months of June, July and August when there is most activity, and these celebrations are linked to religious celebrations. They represent important moments for these islands and the inhabitants organize cultural festivals and very well-attended musicals.

HOW TO GET THERE

There are regular flights daily from Lisbon to Ponta Delgada and Terceira. One can also fly to Faial from Lisbon, but with less regularity. In a few months of the year there are also direct flights from Madrid and Barcelona.

+info:

www.sata.pt - www.tap.pt
www.airberlin.com

TRANSPORT IN BETWEEN ISLANDS

The best and fastest way of moving between islands is by plane. The 9 islands have their own airport and there are regular flights year round, with greatest frequency in summer. A few lines interlace various islands with different stop-offs. Sea transport: in summer there are routes by boat between all the islands, being most regular among those of the central group. For example, between Pico and Faial, the most common step is to catch a small ferry which joins Horta and the Madalena various times a day. There are maritime-tourist companies that offer trips between islands with small pneumatic vessels. These are trips that often offer the possibility of sighting dolphins and other cetaceans.

+info:

www.transmacor.pt und www.atlanticoline.pt

