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Where and what are the Azores?

GUEST COLUMN BY MARY SCHONBORG



Mary Schonborg (pictured far left, with her friends) is pictured at a stop overlooking the beach and marina at Praia da Vitória on Terceira. SUBMITTED PHOTO

I bet if you ask a lot of people in America this question they would not know the answer. The Azores, a group of 9 amazing volcanic islands that has been populated for 5 centuries, is located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean between the United States and Portugal. The archipelago is the most western territory of Europe.

An oasis that has amazing scenery, quaint towns and cities with cobblestone streets, wonderfully warm hospitable people and a unique European culture, the Azores are less than five hours by plane from Boston.

Having just spent a week exploring four of the islands I would urge anyone who yearns to explore new places, especially those with a distinct European ambiance to consider visiting this paradise that is virtually undiscovered by the majority of American travelers.

I travelled with a group of seven travel agents, all women, from Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania, none of us had met before.

Our first stop was the Island of Terceira and the city of Angra, where the 17th century architecture is evident in many structures. Iron balconies overlook the cobblestone streets. An earthquake in 1980 damaged much of the city but it has been lovingly restored. In fact a large portion of Angra's historical centre has been designated as a UNESCO World heritage site.

For a great view overlooking the city visit the São João Baptista do Monte Brasil Fort.

A stop in Biscoitos at the Wine Museum illustrates the process of wine making and provides a chance to purchase some local "vinho". The city of Praia da Vitória offers one of the most inviting beaches of the Azores, dark sand of course due to the volcanic nature of the island.

The countryside is dotted with lush fields in a patchwork of various shades of green divided by dry stone walls made of volcanic rock. The cows whose milk is used to make the wonderful cheese of Terceira are everywhere, sometimes stopping traffic when they are led from one pasture to another. We acquired our first wheel of cheese, to bring back home on Terceira.

We hopped a small plane for the short flight to our next stop, the blue island of Faial. Our hotel overlooked the harbor of the city of Horta where the marina is filled with yachts in peak season, which stop here enroute across the Atlantic. Faial is called the Blue Island because of the hydrangeas that literally cover the island, they were not in season when we were there but

I think it would be worth a trip back just to see them in full bloom.

A stark contrast to the green fields is Ponta dos Capelinhos, a deserted end of the island that was the site of the most recent volcanic eruption in the Azores in 1957 and 1958. Of course we all felt compelled to purchase a wedge of the Blue Island cheese. Our bags were starting to get a bit heavier!

We started the next day with a short ferry ride across the canal to the island of Pico, which has at 7,713 feet, the highest mountain in Portugal.

Designated as a Natural Reserve, it soars over the island that has a varied landscape. The vineyards of Pico are different. Stone walls made of volcanic rock form corrals in which the grapevines are planted. The rocks form shelter from the wind and retain the heat of the day. Pico is well known for its wine. We loved both the white and red and

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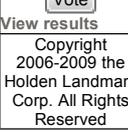
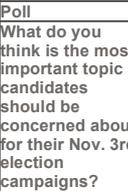
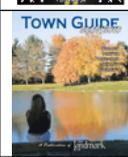
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found it necessary to purchase one of each along with the delicious cheese of São Joao. The intense smell made it necessary to double bag this one. At this point some of us were unzipping the expansion zipper on our bags and others were debating if there were some items of clothing we may want to leave behind!

The volcanic soil and sunny dry climate make Pico the orchard of the Azores. Fig, apple, peach, orange, and pear trees flourish here and the fruit are taken by boats to the town of Horta to be sold. Pico was once the whaling capitol of the Azores and there is a very interesting whaling museum.

Our last stop was the largest island in the Azores, Sao Miguel and the city of Ponta Delgada. Ponta Delgada is a beautiful city, easy to get around by foot and it felt very safe even at night. The harbor area has a modern marina that is a stop for many of the large cruise ships on their way between the USA and Europe. There are great restaurants serving anything from gourmet to traditional Portuguese fare. You will find sidewalk cafes, nightclubs and shopping, amidst century old churches and monuments.

The countryside of San Miguel is breathtaking, I mean really breathtaking!

Winding mountain roads lead to views of volcanic lakes nestled in green valleys, the water reflects the blue sky. The scenery is so beautiful that a photograph can not do it justice. A great stop is at one of the Cha (tea) plantations, the green tea bushes look like hedges along the hillside, you can taste the tea and it's a great, inexpensive and finally a light souvenir to bring home.

Another great side trip is to Furnas, an area where steam rises from the ground and hot springs bubble. An unusual lunch awaited us here, the local stew called cozida das furnas. A pot containing meat and vegetables is buried in the soil wrapped in a cloth bag and cooked by the volcanic heat for several hours. Terra Nostra Park is also here, home to beautiful gardens with winding paths, streams, flowers, and trees. There is a pond of warm thermal water that is used as a swimming pool.

According to The National Geographic Society for Sustainable Destinations the Azores are the world's second most appealing island destination.

These islands are described as being "Authentic, unspoiled and likely to remain so." I agree and can't wait to return and explore some of the other islands and of course to sample more of their wine and cheese.

Mary Schonborg is a resident of Wesminster and has worked at Whitcomb Travel Agency on Main Street in Leominster for 33 years.