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IN FOCUS

For verdant landscapes, adventurous itineraries and a long-standing focus on eco-tourism, a trip to the volcanic Portuguese island of Madeira should be top of your list, writes Nick Savage

[MADEIRA, PORTUGAL]



WHAT'S THE SCORE?

For centuries, Madeira has magnetised Brits looking for a welcoming year-round climate and excellent fortified wine, and in recent years has become synonymous with one of the world's most accomplished footballers as the birthplace of Cristiano Ronaldo (who lends his name to the airport).

Yet there's so much more to the island. Situated 600 miles west of Lisbon off the coast of north Africa, the dormant volcanic island is only 34 miles long and 14 miles at its widest point, but packs a serious punch with abyssal canyons and soaring summits worthy of Jurassic Park. It rises to a zenith of 6,106 feet at Ruivo Peak - its volcanic magnificence earning it the moniker amongst some locals of being 'the Hawaii of Europe'.

Verdant temperate rainforest, amazing year-round produce and the azure Atlantic make it one of the finest short-haul destinations for catching up with nature, which in turn has led many chefs, hoteliers, entrepreneurs and operators to prioritise sustainability above all else. So, buckle up and clutch your armrests - the airport's especially short runway belies a break made for chilling, eating, exploring and adventuring.

WHERE TO STAY

SOCALCO NATURE HOTEL

Unless you're on a plateau, Madeira is intensely steep, and as such, space to grow crops comes at a premium. Since being settled by Portuguese sailors in 1420, generations of islanders practising agriculture became adept at using terraces - or socalcos - to farm the grapes, sugarcane, bananas, sweet potatoes and avocados that flourish on Madeira's volcanic soul.

Socalco Nature Hotel, perched above Calheta, one of the island's few sandy beaches, follows suit. The hotel's sundry buildings are gathered across an amphitheatre of rough stone terraces with a laid back vibe that immediately makes one feel at home in the sky, whilst paying homage to Madeira's rich natural history. The hotel features 20 separate rooms huddled across the property's unique multi-layered layout, with eight standalone houses and ten standard rooms. To reach mine, I walked beyond herb gardens and grapevines to reach a long stone bungalow with uninterrupted views of the ocean. Some rooms even include water features coursing through them, crafted from the levada irrigation system. There's a freshwater pool, solarium, wine cellars and a very impressive hotel restaurant, making it an idyllic bolthole to sample local delicacies and an ideal homebase for adventuring.

Caminho do Lombo do Salão N° 13, 9370-174 Estreito da Calheta; socalconature.com

QUINTA DA SERRA

For anyone who wants to get away from the crowded coast and enjoy verdant mountainscapes, Quinta Da

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Serra bio hotel is perched 820 metres above sea level in the rarefied air of Câmara de Lobos. And while it boasts plenty of creature comforts like a heated sweetwater pool, jacuzzi, sauna, massage room and gym, the most fascinating aspects of the property are likely its extensive gardens and upland locale. Originally planted by English consul Henry Weitch, the garden features an abundance of exotic species in addition to native endemic trees, and also home to the tallest eucalyptus tree on the island, which stands sentinel at 64 metres. The hotel is within striking distance of an amazing array of hiking trails, threading their way through crags and valleys. The hotel has been awarded with several plaudits in the fields of sustainability and environmental responsibility, including Certplanet and Green Key accolades.

R. da Serra 2400, 4445-030 Alfena;
hotelquintadaserra.com



WHAT TO DO

TRAIL RUNNING

Madeira is one of trail and mountain running's world capitals, attracting the criminally fit to its peaks and canyons at all times of the year (the climate is amenable in every season). Most famously, it holds the Madeira Island Ultra-Trail race every April, its longest iteration spanning a heroic 115 kilometres and 7200 metres of vertical over the island's viciously steep hogsback ridge.

For those looking for something a little less Herculean, though, there are plenty of easier, more accessible routes. My favourite was a 14km loop from Quinta do Serra over the hump of Chão dos Terreiros toward Pico do Jorge. The scenery was chasmic and exposed with vertigo-inducing 500-metre drops on either side. I ran a narrow track twisting amongst basalt spires festooned with yellow-flowering broom and gorse.

SAILING

For a less landlubber experience, take to the high seas on the deck of a sailboat. Waiting on a ramshackle jetty at the bottom of a 500 metre seacliff in an agricultural



THE SCENERY IS CHASMIC AND EXPOSED, WITH VERTIGO-INDUCING, 500-METRE DROPS ON EITHER SIDE

hamlet named Faja dos Padres, which is reachable only by cable car and boat, I watched the white sail of our vessel, Happy Hour, hove into view around an immense promontory. Once on board, captains Luis and Francisco, both in their twenties, wasted no time before pouring flutes of sparkling alvarinho.

Cerulean blue Atlantic waters offer an intense sense of space and there are plenty of secluded coves along the way for a bracing dip. Madeira has a long history of whaling and you still see spotters with telescopes along the island's many outlooks (these days they'll report the coordinates for whale-watching excursions) – sperm whales and pilot whales hang about throughout the year, whilst migratory cetaceans include sei whale, humpbacks, fin whales, Bryde's whales, minke, and even orca.

LEVADA WALKS

By the time you leave you'll associate most of your time spent outside with Madeira's unique, complex, hydraulic irrigation system, which dates back to the 15th century. There are about 3,000 kilometres of *levadas* – man-made irrigation channels spiralling their way down the mountains – providing much-needed hydration to the island's many terraces, and footpaths skirting the running water. I was particularly pleased with a walk named the Vereda Das 25 Fontes, which connected with the Levada do Risco. From a broad ridge above a eucalyptus treeline I descended from 1290 metres through gorse and primordially enormous dandelion and heather trees to a 120-metre multi-storey cataract – the waterfall descending vertically to form a scratch or *risco* in the rock. The walk back threaded Laurissilva forest, a verdant garden of rare species such as mountain Mocano, Madeira orchid, Canary laurel and barbusano, >

WALK THIS WAY:
 [clockwise from left]
 A levada walk offers the best views on the island; the Socalco Nature Hotel is the perfect anchor for exploration; vistas from the Monte Palace garden

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> before following a kilometre-long tunnel dug through a muscular shoulder of basalt. You'll encounter wildlife, too: rainbow trout are the canary in the coalmine, employed to determine whether the water is too acidic.

BEACH YOGA

The comparison to Hawaii felt especially poignant at the beach below Seixal village on the northern coast. The spume-misted stretch of black sand is the perfect place to gawp at mind-bendingly tall cliffs clad in dense rainforest and the multiple ivory-white waterfalls tumbling down them. Surfing is on the menu but I opted instead for a few laps in a secluded lagoon with a grotto that could have been lifted from *Robinson Crusoe*, and then stretched it out with a vinyasa yoga instruction on the breakwater.

WHERE TO EAT

SOCALCO NATURE HOTEL RESTAURANT

In some ways, Socalco Nature Hotel almost feels like it was conceptualised and constructed with one final goal in mind – running an excellent locavore restaurant. The open-plan kitchen adjoins a similarly airy dining room with breathtaking views of the island and the Atlantic, and is helmed by hotel-founder and chef patron Octavio Freitas, who has created a veritable paradise for the produce-obsessed cook. He assembles an improvised five-course tasting menu every evening, drawing from the organic vegetable and herb gardens spread across the hotel's many terraces (or, er, *socalcos*) prioritising seasonality and sustainability above all else. This braids together perfectly with fresh seafood caught days if not hours before as well as fiercely local meat and poultry. Easily the best meal on the island.

THE TASTING MENU DRAWS FROM THE VEGETABLE AND HERB GARDENS SPREAD ACROSS THE HOTEL'S SOCALCO TERRACES

FAJÁ DOS PADRES

Unless you have access to a seacraft, you'll need to descend to Fajá dos Padres by a cable car, which is not for the acrophobic or faint of heart. Once on terra firma, you'll find yourself in a bucolic seaside farm and restaurant that could have been lifted from an episode of *Portlandia*. Avail yourself of produce such as avocados, mangoes, sweet potatoes and bananas harvested hours before, which beds down beautifully with tuna and scabbardfish so fresh from the sea that it's still stricken with rigor mortis. Of everything sampled, it was the limpets grilled in garlic and lemon that made the deepest impression. The filter-feeding shellfish are a well-loved delicacy in Madeira, with a distinct tidepool taste.

fajadospadres.com ♦



MARKET VALUE:
 [from top] The Mercado dos Lavradores is bursting with local produce; the beach at Fajá dos Padres