

MADEIRA - FLOWER PARADISE

Thanks to a Trade Wind influenced climate, the volcanic island of Madeira, set in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, enjoys a lush sub tropical climate, rich volcanic soil, unique flora and fauna, and in parts a super abundance of water.

A sophisticated system of 2,200 kilometres of narrow and shallow canals (known as Levadas) carry water from the heavy rainfall areas in the north of the island to the drier but extremely fertile soil of the south. Under irrigation bananas, sugarcane, vegetables fruit and grapes are grown in abundance and thrive.

Madeira fortified wine is justly famous whilst table wines are growing in importance. (see below for more information)

The Atlantic provides an abundance of seafood - particularly sea bream, scabbard fish, tuna, blue marlin and sea bass.

SOME GEOGRAPHY

Madeira is, in fact, an archipelago 4 islands of which Madeira itself is far and away the largest - comprising over 85% of the total land area of a mere 796 square kilometres. The main island is located at 32 degrees North Latitude, 700 km west of Morocco and 1400 km south west of Lisbon. (Port Macquarie in NSW is about 32 Degrees South) The other islands are Porto Santo, Ilas Desertas and Savage Islands.

Madeira is an autonomous region of Portugal with an estimated population of 300,000 of which 260,000, live on Madeira island itself. The main island is 741 sq. km, with a length of 57 km and only 23 km at its widest. The capital - Funchal has population of approx 130,000.

The island is particularly mountainous, with numerous deep valleys and virtually no flat land at all. There are numerous small villages at the foot of the mountains and hugging the steep mountain sides.

The Funchal airport is built on concrete pylons over the Atlantic and is regarded by some as one of the 10 most dangerous in the world! (Go to You Tube and enter Funchal Airport! for the ride of your life)

There are 7 mountain peaks of over 1650 metres and the island rises 6 km from the Atlantic Ocean floor.

SOME HISTORY

The island sits at the top of a massive shield volcano and was formed perhaps 5 million years ago. There were volcanic eruptions until about 6,500 years ago.

The island group was known to the Portuguese from early in the 15th century. The group was discovered in 1418 (**74 years before Columbus discovered the New World**) by two sailors, under the service of Prince Henry the Navigator, who were blown off course. In 1419 the island of Porto Santo was settled and subsequently Madeira itself about 2 years later.

How did this come about all those years before Columbus? Portugal faces the Atlantic and no other body of water. It naturally looked west. Under the direction of Prince Henry the Navigator great advances were made in ship building and navigation. The Caravelle was a small but sturdy ship and led the world for years, as did Portuguese sailing technology. By the end of the 15th Century Vasco da Gama had reached India, and Brazil was discovered by 1500 (and settled by 1532.)

The fertile soil, warm climate and abundant water of Madeira lends itself to an array of crops. Earliest crops were the subtropical sugarcane and later bananas which thrived because of the sweetness and proximity to Europe. In the early years African slaves were introduced and soon reached about 10% of the population. Portugal was in fact an early leader in the growth of the Slave Trade. The rise of the Brazilian sugar cane industry saw a decline in sugar production and the rise of cash crops. Sugar is still grown in Madeira but is now used solely for the production of rum.

During the nineteenth century overpopulation became a problem and there was a significant emigration to South Africa, Venezuela (!) and USA. Some of this has been reversed in recent years.

MADEIRA TODAY

Tourism has become of increasing importance to the economy, with a rapid growth of a “hotel enclave” several kilometres west of Funchal itself. The UK and Germany are the principal source of tourists. There is a steady stream of cruise liners at Funchal whilst whale watching is a popular pastime. (There is the story of a tourist who was late to rejoin her cruise ship, having boosted the retail economy to the extreme, got to the wharf to see the ship departing ,so she jumped in to swim after it!. The locals love this story)

The island is dominated by agriculture with many small holdings many of less than half a hectare. There are terraces on every hillside. As noted above water is brought from the heavy rainfall areas of the north via "levadas" to the fertile south. Levadas are narrow water channels and have been progressively constructed over the last 350 years or so. A smallholder can purchase half an hours watering once a fortnight for one year for 70 Euros. The local water Bailiff is all powerful! Main crops are bananas, vegetables, mango, custard apple, figs and of course grapes.

The introduced Blue Gum is now regarded as a pest akin to rabbits, cane toads camels and foxes in Australia. Madeira is prone to savage forest fires, and the Blue Gum regenerates quickly overwhelming the native trees. There are still some Blue Gum plantations (as there is in Portugal itself).

Madeira has a strong local culture with a range of handcrafts - linen embroidery, wicker baskets, guitars, caps and capes. A feature of the countryside are triangular thatched roofed houses painted in bright colours.

Madeira's most famous citizen is CR7 - do you know who he is? He has a Museum in Funchal where a postcard costs 5 Euros, as against the standard cost of 50 cents for an ordinary postcard elsewhere!

THE WINE OF MADEIRA

Grapes were grown on Madeira as early as 1450 and are grown principally in the south. Madeira is a fortified wine (not unlike Port) of between 18 and 22 proof. There are 4 varieties

- * Sercial - dry and drunk chilled as an aperitif
- * Verdelho - semi dry and dark, best drunk with soup
- * Boal - Semi sweet and drunk as a dessert wine
- * Malmsey - Sweet and taken with coffee.

As with Port, Madeira has lost some popularity, so the island is now starting to produce table wines.

Thanks to Michael Flanders and Donald Swann Madeira wine has earned an unjustified reputation if not drunk in moderation:

" She was young, she was pure
She was new, she was nice
She was fair, she was sweet seventeen

He was old, he was vile
And no stranger to vice

He was base, he was bad, He was mean

He had slyly inveigled her up to his flat
To view his collection of stamps
And he said as he hastened to put out the cat
The wine, his cigar and the lamps

Have some Madeira, m'dear
You really have nothing to fear

LAURASSILVA

The Laurassilva forests of Madeira are a unique botanical relic and may date back as much as 20 million years. At that time this type of forest covered vast areas of southern Europe and the Mediterranean, until the last glaciation.

Classified by UNESCO as a Natural Heritage, the forest on Madeira is the largest bay forest in the world.

The forests grow at between 300 and 1300 metres of altitude and initially covered about 80% of the island. Due to fires, agriculture and human endeavours this area is now about 20% or approx 15,000 hectares. Temperature and humidity are crucial factors in forest development - 1,500 mm of rain per annum is essential (Melbourne averages 650mm per annum) The forest grows best in deep moist ravines and fog and humidity is frequent.

There is, as we have noted, an abundance of water for irrigation as well as hydro. Whilst the bay tree is the predominant species on the island there is still a wide range of trees and shrubs. The forest floor is covered in ferns, lichens and mosses

The Trocaz pigeon is endemic and found only in the forest. Other birds include the Madeiran Firecrest and Chaffinch

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EVORA - HISTORIC CIVIC CENTRE

COIMBRA - UNIVERSITY

PORTO - DOM LUIS 1 BRIDGE, CIVIC CENTRE/ RIBERIA AND MONASTERY OF SERVA

GUIAMRAES - HISTORIC CITY CENTRE

DOURO WINE REGION