
Graciosa, the white island

ABOUT



Photo: DRT, Maurício de Abreu

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The Island of Graciosa, classified by UNESCO as a World Biosphere Reserve, is the northernmost of the five that make up the central group of the Azores archipelago. It is known as the White Island, a designation inspired by the island's geomorphological characteristics and place names, in particular those given to places like Pedras Brancas (White Stones), Serra Branca (White Hills) and Barro Branco (White Clay).

The island has just one municipality, Santa Cruz da Graciosa, comprising four parishes: **Vila de Santa Cruz**, Vila da Praia, Guadalupe and Luz. Santa Cruz is notable for its typical houses and its narrow cobbled streets, which branch out from the large central square where you can see the bandstand, some water tanks and candelabra trees. It is worth visiting the Parish Church of Santa Cruz da Graciosa, the Church of Santo Cristo, the Cruz da Barra and the Ethnographic Museum, which houses exhibits linked to wine culture, with traditions on the island, and to whaling. In **Vila da Praia**, the highlight is the Church of São Mateus, which has a pipe organ dating to 1793, one of the finest of the Azores, and in Guadalupe, the church of the same name, dating from the 17th century.

There's a wonderful panoramic view of Santa Cruz, the northern part of the island, from the **Mount of Nossa Senhora da Ajuda**. In this area you can also visit three shrines dedicated to S. João, S. Salvador and Nossa Senhora da Ajuda. The latter is one of the best examples of "fortified religious architecture" in the Azores. Attached to it is the "pilgrim home" designed to accommodate those who went there on pilgrimage.

The architectural heritage of the island is preserved in various types of buildings, particularly churches, chapels, cottages, and a curious "water course architecture" associated with a centuries-old network of reservoirs and drinking water supply systems. Another interesting feature of the island's landscape is the windmills with red cupolas, of Flemish influence, that testify to the abundant production of cereals in former times.

The **Caldeira da Graciosa** is the **most emblematic element of the island's landscape**. Classified as a **Regional Natural Monument**, this large, beautiful crater also contains the **Furna da Maria Encantada** (Cave of Enchanted Mary) and the **Furna do Enxofre** (Sulphur Cave), veritable shrines to Mother Nature.

The climb to the **Furna da Maria Encantada** allows you to enjoy the surrounding landscape and the lush vegetation planted by man: Japanese cedars, acacias, pines and incense cedars cover almost all the walls of the caldera and contrast with the vegetation of other areas of the island. Inside the caldera is an imposing volcanic cavity, the **Furna do Enxofre**. Communicating with the outside through two large cracks, it is about 40m high at its centre. Access is via a tower built in the early 20th century, with a 183-step spiral staircase. It is one of the most imposing grottoes in the Azores, and has a cold water lake and a fumarole with mud, which accounts for the smell of sulphur, which gave it

its name and recalls its volcanic origin.

The **Timão Peak, the highest point on the island (398m)**, and the **Facho Peak (375m)**, are conducive to relaxing walks through the primitive vegetation, and the **Dormida, Branca and Fontes hills** offer some extraordinary scenery, not only across the island, but also the vast blue sea. On the horizon, the other islands of the Central Group - Terceira, São Jorge, Pico and Faial - can be seen.

The **islets** off the coast add a particular beauty to Graciosa. This is especially true of the **Ilhéu da Praia**, which houses a diverse population of seabirds, the **Ilhéu de Baixo**, opposite Ponta da Restinga, the **Ilhéu das Gaivotas**, near Carapacho, and the **Ilhéu da Baleia**, in the Bay of Ponta da Barca, so called because of its shape (a whale).

The **Lighthouse of Ponta da Barca**, which the inhabitants claim to be the tallest lighthouse in the Azores, stands out from the landscape.

In **Carapacho**, you can swim in the **natural pools** and relax in the warm, **healing waters of the spa**.

A walk around the island, stopping at various viewpoints, completes the catalogue of fond memories that you can keep of the graceful landscape of this beautiful island.

ACTIVITIES

Graciosa is considered exceptional for scuba diving and fishing, and its connection to the sea is ideal for exploring the coast by kayak or boat. Santa Cruz, Folga and Praia Bays lend themselves to activities such as rowing, sailing and windsurfing. Caparacho, Praia, Barro Vermelho and Calheta are great areas for sunbathing and swimming.

The hot springs in Carapacho, at temperatures of around 40°C, are very inviting for relaxing, therapeutic baths in waters of recognised beneficial properties for your well-being. A modern thermal spa overlooking the ocean and the Ilhéu de Baixo offers a wide variety of techniques and specialisms. In the nearby sea, in Carapacho's recently renovated natural pools, you can enjoy a swim in seawater heated by thermal water, for a natural and relaxing thalassotherapy.

Among the island's many footpaths, there is a road that circles the caldera, which can also be explored by bike, horse or car.

The unmissable visit to the Furna do Enxofre, Graciosa's crown jewel, can be complemented, with the support of a guide, by a visit to the island's other volcanic caverns: discovering the underground secrets of the Furna d'Água, the Furna do Abel and the Furna da Maria Encantada can be an unforgettable experience.

FESTIVALS

Graciosa has a festive culture that is expressed in popular dances, brass band concerts, celebrations of the patron saints of the parishes, and in the famous Carnival Balls. In Carnival week, the various island associations organise parades of dancing revellers, who dress for the occasion in original costumes and masks.

The Feast of Senhor Santo Cristo dos Milagres, in August, combines the religious element with other celebrations: concerts and folk dances enliven the historic streets of Santa Cruz. As in the rest of the archipelago, the Feasts of the Holy Spirit have strong roots on the island, and take place from May to September.

CUISINE

Fresh fish is traditionally served stewed or baked. The garlic and rockmelon from Graciosa have achieved gourmet status and are the products of choice in many recipes.

But if there is a typical product, it is the sweets that have adopted the name of the island: the Queijadas da Graciosa (cheese cupcakes), inspired by a centuries-old recipe. The local sweets, wide-ranging and tasty, also offer cavacas (crisp light cakes), rice cakes and encharcadas de ovos (egg-based custards).

Graciosa also produces some fine wines. The white wines, brandies and aperitif wines produced on the island meet even the most demanding palates.

GETTING HERE

By air:

Sata - Air Açores, operates daily flights, normally from the island of Terceira

Find out more at:

- www.sata.pt
- www.visitazores.com

By sea:

Find out more at:

- www.atlanticoline.pt