Pico, the mountain island

ABOUT

Photo: Maurício de Abreu

Pico, the mountain island

With an area of 448km2, the Island of Pico is the second largest in the Azores and one that is home to Portugal's highest mountain, also called Pico, at 2,351m above sea level. Often referred to as the Mountain Island, Pico forms one of the points of the so-called "triangle islands", being the most southerly of the central group of the archipelago, and just 6km from Faial.

Pico's hot, dry climate, together with the mineral-rich lava soil and the organisation of the land in a stunning mosaic of black stone - the "currais" (plots) – has meant a growing success in the cultivation of vines, predominantly of the Verdelho variety. Gradually, the wine and the brandy became more and more appreciated both on and outside the island, and Verdelho achieved international fame. It has long been exported to Europe and America, and at the time was even a feature on the dining table of the Russian Tsars.

The extensive lava fields that dot the island's landscape, which the local population calls "lajidos" or "cookie lands" form the Landscape of the Pico Island Vineyard Culture, declared World Heritage by UNESCO in 2004. Lajido da Criação Velha and Lajido de Santa Luzia are the best examples.

On the black lava ground, the "rilheiras" - ruts left by the wheels of ox carts carrying the grapes and barrels – are worth seeing, and in the harbours and coves along the coast the "rola-pipas" - ramps excavated to make it easier to roll the barrels of wine to the boats, still remain as witnesses to the wine industry.

The immense volcanic cone of Pico Mountain, the third largest volcano in the Atlantic, imposes itself on the island's landscape. Inside its main crater there is a cone of lava designated Piquinho, on top of which fumaroles permanently vent steam to remind us of its volcanic nature. At around 1250 metres above sea level, where the footpaths to the Mountain start to climb, you can get a view of much of the island, as well as the neighbouring Faial and São Jorge. The climb to the top is tiring, but rewarded by fantastic, unique panoramic views which, on a clear day, offer the additional reward of a glimpse of the islands of Graciosa and Terceira.

It is on Pico that one of the largest visitable lava tubes in the world is found, in the Gruta das Torres, which stretches for five kilometres and is embellished by various types of lava stalactites and stalagmites, and ridged walls.

For lovers of geotourism, there are other must-see sites to visit: the Furnas (geothermal sites) of Frei Matias, Silveira and Montanheiros; the "Mysteries" of Santa Luzia, Prainha and S. João, formed by lava from volcanic eruptions that occurred in the sea and were joined to the island; and also the Arcos do Cachorro, an impressive grouping of lava perforated by numerous tunnels and caves through which the sea passes creating a maelstrom.

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Other places to visit are the Capitão, Caiado and Paul lagoons, and also the Terra Alta Viewpoint on the road that circles the island to the North, from which you can see the island of São Jorge, and the landscape that Pico's wealth of forest offers.

Pico is a land with a strong whaling tradition. The island is divided into 3 districts, Madalena, São Roque and Lajes, and like the other islands in the Azores, its architectural heritage is concentrated mainly in the churches and chapels in the various parishes: the Churches of Santa Maria Madalena, in Vila Madalena, São Roque and the Convent and Church of São Pedro de Alcântara in São Roque do Pico, and Nossa Senhora da Conceição and the Chapel of São Pedro in Lajes; but there are also many others.

The Pico Museum is also worth a visit, with its three divisions: the Whaling Museum in Lajes, the Whaling Industry Museum in São Roque, and the Wine Museum, in Madalena, each of them portraying an important period in the history of Pico. The Wine Museum is housed in the former Carmelites Convent, and offers visits to the vineyards, wine tasting, and in September, the opportunity to participate in the grape harvest.

Besides its natural wealth, Pico also offers a fine gastronomic heritage, very much based on fish and seafood, whose highlights are the famous Caldeiradas (bouillabaisses), stewed octopus with vinho de cheiro, sausage with yams, molha de carne (a roast meat speciality) and fish soup. Its figs are also famous, with their bright red flesh, and the honey produced from frankincense flowers and Pico Cheese – soft cheese from cow's milk (particularly São João and Arrife). All washed down, of course, with Verdelho wine, or with the Island's highly prized red and white wines.

Pico is a land with a strong whaling tradition, and various handcrafted items of whale bone and tooth, as well as straw hats, flowers from fish scales and wooden miniatures of whaling boats are all good suggestions for souvenirs.

ACTIVITIES

Whale watching is the natural extension of the island's whaling tradition, now adapted to modern times. The waters of Pico are suitable for the practice of sailing and canoeing, and a boat ride enables you to see the inlets cut into the coast, which are ideal for rock fishing and diving.

The islets off Pico, in the Faial channel, are known worldwide as the perfect spot for scuba diving. The most common species of fish are the Barracuda, Bonito and Tuna, although you can also find local species such as Grouper, Snapper and Parrotfish. The underwater lava formations are spectacular, with caves, tunnels and archways. The most popular time of the year for scuba diving is June, so as to witness the arrival of the stingrays.

Pico has no sandy beaches, but those who like to swim have natural pools formed by volcanic rock and the temperature of the sea water, warmed by the Gulf Stream, is always a pleasant surprise.

Everyone finds it tempting to climb the mountain, but this requires some physical and psychological preparation, as well as suitable footwear and clothing. The climb is done with a guide and it is compulsory to wear a GPS bracelet. The return journey takes at least four hours. Some tour operators offer overnight stays on top of the mountain, so you can enjoy the setting sun and the first rays of dawn.

The lava tunnel in the Gruta das Torres enables you to experience the underground world of the island, taking as your starting point the well-stocked visitor centre. The visit lasts about an hour.

The island's well-structured network of footpaths, cycle tracks, and donkey and horse tracks, allows you to enjoy the landscape calmly; and for those who prefer to pump adrenaline, there's always the option of touring by mountain bike, quad bike or cross-kart, or even by practicing rock climbing.

FESTIVITIES

Besides the Feast of the Holy Spirit that is celebrated across all the islands, Pico has a special devotion to the Senhor Bom Jesus Milagroso (Miraculous Lord Jesus). The festivities take place in São Mateus, around 6 August, and are based on the veneration of pilgrims to an image originating from Brazil and displayed in the Shrine of Bom Jesus Milagroso.

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In Madalena, the feast dedicated to the patron saint of the district, Santa Maria Madalena, includes religious events and sporting and cultural activities that enliven the month of July.

In São Roque, the Cais de Agosto combines concerts with craft shows and sports events.

In Lajes, Whaling Week pays tribute to those who participated in this important socio-economic activity in the Azores with a varied programme that takes place towards the end of the summer.

In September, the town of Madalena stages the Harvest Festival, with an arraial (popular feast) and ethnographic events based on the culture of the vine.The whaling boat races are very symbolic on the island of Pico. The races, in wooden boats with space for up to six oarsmen, are a constant presence in a number of festivals and there are hard-fought contests between crews from all over the island and the other "triangle islands."

GETTING HERE

By air with "SATA-Air Açores" which flies daily to Pico, normally from Ponta Delgada and Lajes airports on Terceira Island, the average flying time being 40 minutes from Terceira and 60 minutes from São Miguel.
More information: www.sata.pt

By sea, there are regular connections from the islands of Faial (15 minutes) and São Jorge (30 minutes). The length of the trip depends on the carrier used.
More information: www.atlanticoline.pt and www.transmacor.pt

USEFUL INFORMATION

For more information about Pico and the Azores, visit: www.visitazores.com

Public transport:
Apart from taxis, car rental services and excursions organised by various travel agencies, Pico is served by public transport with several routes to anywhere on the island:
-Northern Route
Madalena> São Roque> Piedade
-Southern Route
Madalena> Lajes> Ribeirinha

Pico Natural Park
This is the largest natural park in the Azores, comprising 22 protected areas. It has four environmental centres: Casa da Montanha, Gruta das Torres Visitor Centre, the Interpretation Centre for the Landscape of the Vineyard Culture, and Moinho do Frade.
For more information about the park and its footpaths, visit:
- http://parquesnaturais.azores.gov.pt
- www.trails-azores.com
- Pico App

DID YOU KNOW...

Do you know what maroiços are?
Pyramids built with stones from the cleaning and arrangement of the land for the cultivation of vines, typical of Pico, especially in the area of Madalena. These are the stones that are used to make the walls of the currais.

Do you know what Estrelinhas are?

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They are tiny birds from this island, many weighing only 5 grams, with a yellow crown on the head.

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