
São Jorge: the island of fajãs

ABOUT



Photo: Rui Vieira

São Jorge: the island of fajãs

São Jorge is an island of cliffs, crags and *fajãs*, one of the greenest in the Azores archipelago and the perfect place for a holiday in contact with nature and the sea.

The island is 54km long and 6.9km at its widest point, and is part of the **Central Group** and one of the apexes of the so-called "**triangle islands**", together with Faial and Pico, from which it is 18.5km away.

From a landscape point of view, the contrast of the **central mountain range that runs almost the whole length of the island** stands out, with its rugged, jagged coastline, dotted by the typical *fajãs* that extend into the sea. The *fajãs* are small plains originally created by lava or landslides and **there are over 40** on São Jorge, which has earned it the nickname **island of *fajãs***. In some cases there is only pedestrian access, so the **trails** are one of the best ways to discover it, using paths that are suitable for various physical conditions and specialist guidance.

From the **Fajã da Caldeira do Santo Cristo**, the most famous because of its tasty **clams**, to the **Fajã dos Cubres**, with its crystal clear lagoon, and the Fajã do Ouvidor with its natural pools, a tour of the island of São Jorge means admiring the land divided into plots for subsistence farming, the stone houses with three-pane sash windows, the waterfalls and the curious steel cables for transporting wood to the coastal plains.

This stunning coastal scenery would not be complete without the **Islet of Rosais** and, off the eastern tip of the island, the **Islet of Topo**, a nesting ground for many seabirds and home to fine examples of the endemic flora of the Azores. These are the reasons which, combined with the landscape, led to its classification as a **Nature Reserve**.

In the island's central plateau, at 1053m above sea level, you will find the highest point on São Jorge, **Pico da Esperança**, from which you can enjoy unforgettable views over the island itself, closely guarded by Pico, Graciosa, Terceira and Faial. It is at this higher point, an area stretching from Pico do Areeiro to Pico das Caldeirinhas, via Pico da Esperança, Pico do Carvão and Morro Pelado, that the presence of an endemic vegetation of great botanical and scientific value gave rise to three Natural Forest Reserves, which adopted the name of those four peaks.

The various viewpoints scattered around the island, such as Ribeira do Almeida, Fajã das Almas, Fajã das Urzes, Fajã dos Cubres and Norte Pequeno, offer views of undisputable beauty.

São Jorge comprises 2 municipalities, **Calheta** and **Velas**. In Vila das Velas, the **Portão de Mar** (Sea Gate) welcomes travellers from boats docking at the port, sending them on their way to the town's central square, where they can visit the **Parish Church of São Jorge**, with the adjoining **Museum of Sacred Art**, and the **Town Hall**.

As you walk past **Urzelina** your eyes will be drawn to a church tower, isolated amidst the landscape, almost completely surrounded by black rocks. It is the only remnant of the original building which was buried by the volcanic eruption of 1808. In **Manadas**, it's worth noting one of the most interesting examples of Baroque architecture in the Azores, the 18th century **church of Santa Bárbara**, with its black and white façade and rich interior. **Calheta** and **Topo** are picturesque harbours, where ancient houses and churches, such as the **Church of Santa Catarina**, the **São Jorge Museum** and the church of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, all have their stories to tell.

Double crochet **quilts** are still made in wooden looms and the artisans can be found at work in Fajã dos Vimes. The handicrafts cooperative of Ribeira de Nabo is a showcase for these quilts, also known as "**São Jorge blankets**".

Don't miss

- > surf the waves of Fajã da Caldeira de Santo Cristo
- > taste São Jorge Cheese, the clams, barnacles, crabs and limpets

FESTIVITIES

Like on the other islands, the Feasts of the Holy Spirit also have a tradition on São Jorge among the population and are held between May and September.

The feast is dedicated to the island's Patron Saint, St. George, and is held in the Velas municipality around 23 April, and includes a procession, concerts and exhibitions.

The Velas Cultural Week enlivens São Jorge and the other "triangle islands" during the month of July. The programme consists of various activities such as yachting events, concerts and a gastronomic fair. Also in July, the town of Calheta boasts a July Festival packed with ethnographic parades, popular music, sports events and exhibitions.

There are also religious pilgrimages on the island, which take place in the various fajãs and are events which bring together religious devotion and popular festivals.

ACTIVITIES

São Jorge has excellent natural conditions for maritime activities such as scuba diving, whale watching, fishing, sailing and kayaking. However, one of the biggest attractions is the waves of Fajã da Caldeira de Santo Cristo: a constant and regular wave that forms on the rock slab is classified by both professionals and amateurs as absolutely extraordinary for surfing.

On dry land, the relief of the island is perfect for unforgettable walks and mountain biking circuits. Climbing, based on Urzelina, canyoning or the exploration of the Montoso and Bocas do Fogo caves, 140m and 120m deep, respectively, are another good challenge for amateurs and experts alike.

GASTRONOMY

Internationally renowned, with a unique taste, São Jorge Cheese is probably one of the most well-known gastronomic products of the Azores.

Situated in Beira, the São Jorge Union of Agricultural and Dairy Cooperatives is the centre for the curing, classification and certification procedures for the cheese produced on the island. The Denomination of Origin is only awarded to cheese that meets the requirements in terms of ingredients and traditional methods. It is believed that the production of cow's milk cheese goes back to the influences of the Flemish settlers in Topo. São Jorge Cheese, semi-soft or hard, has a slight tangy aftertaste, comes in a wheel shape and weighs 7-12 kilograms, and is usually cut into wedges.

Spontaneously born and bred in the Nature Reserve and Special Ecological Area of Caldeira de Santo Cristo, clams are another culinary wonder of São Jorge.

The microclimate of some fajãs has allowed the emergence of special agricultural crops, such as a coffee plantation, a rare case in Europe: in Fajã dos Vimes you can enjoy coffee with an intense aroma and flavour, made with grains harvested locally. It is a possible complement, like cinnamon brandy, to the island's sweets, where coscorões (wafers), rosquilhas (pretzels) and curd cakes are traditional recipes.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Learn more about São Jorge Cheese from the São Jorge Union of Agricultural and Dairy Cooperatives

- www.portais.ws/uniqueijo
- www.lactacores.pt

GETTING HERE

By air with "Sata-Air Açores", which operates daily flights to São Jorge, usually from Ponta Delgada and Lajes airports on the Island of Terceira. The average flight time from Terceira is 30 minutes.

For more information: www.sata.pt

By sea, there are regular connections from the other islands: Faial (1h 15m calling at S. Roque do Pico and Madalena), Pico (30 minutes) and Terceira (2h 30m). The duration of the trip depends on the carrier you use.

For more information: www.atlanticoline.pt and www.transmacor.pt