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# AZORES: EUROPE'S HIDDEN

# GEM

by [Bridget Shirvell](#)



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**F**ar off Portugal's coast, roughly a third of the way to Boston lies a collection of islands that mesmerize. Called the Azores, the nine volcanic islands that stretch 250 miles east to west make up an autonomous region of Portugal that for decades was Europe's hidden gem. That's slowly changing as more and more people discover the archipelago of lush greenery, dotted with quaint historic towns surrounded by waters ripe with fish.

Settled two centuries ago the islands have emerged as leaders in sustainability and paradise for nature lovers, adventure seekers, and even culinary tourists. You're going to want to visit the Azores before even more people unearth their charms.

## What to do

All nine islands have their own vibe and while you probably won't be able to visit all of them in one trip, part of the beauty of Azores is being able to create a tailor-made trip based on your interests.

## São Miguel

Start your Azores adventure on São Miguel, the largest of the islands. Even those seeking nothing but nature should spend at least an afternoon in the capital of Ponta Delgada. Wander the streets, browsing menus until you find a tapas restaurant where you want to indulge. You can't pick wrong. There are also art galleries to explore and live music in the evenings. Agri tourists



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will want to visit the tea plantation in the town of Ribeira Grande. It's the only tea plantation in Europe and the two nearby tea factories, [Chá Porto Formoso](#) and [Chá Gorreana](#), offer tours and tastings. Adventure seekers should head to the Parque Natural da Ribeirados Caldeiroes where you can explore the hiking trails and marvel at the waterfalls. You can even rent some of the small houses in the park. Before venturing off São Miguel soothe any lingering plane travel aches at the hot springs of [Terra Nostra Botanic Gardens](#).



*Sao Miguel. Tea Plantations | Photo: Associação Turismo dos Açores*

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# Terceira

Moving from southern island of São Miguel to the central islands, history lovers will want to spend at least one day on the small but charming Terceira. It's main town, Angra do Heroísmo is the oldest on the Azores and Unesco World Heritage Center.



Typical Houses in Terceira Island | Photo: Associação Turismo dos Açores

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# Faial

If you make it to the Azores March through October, on another one of the central islands, Faial, you'll find some of the best whale watching and water sports.



Faial. Humpback tail | Photo: Hans van Klinken, Associação Turismo dos Açores

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# Flores

Moving to the western islands, Flores has to be seen to be believed. With less than 4,000 residents, Flores is a quiet retreat where in the spring blue and pink hydrangeas seem to bloom everywhere. Along with the islands of Corvo and Graciosa, it is a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve.

## Where to stay

Places to rest your head at night abound in the Azores. Create your own itinerary while island hopping and you'll find hostels in most of the towns, B&Bs in the countryside, and locals renting out homes or rooms through AirBnB and other services. On the larger islands there are also many hotels. On São Miguel try [Hotel Talisman](#) or [Quinta do Mar](#); on Pico, [Baía da Barca](#); on Terceira, [Quinta do Martelo](#). Keep in mind that on some of the islands, accommodations are limited, especially in the busier months, so no matter your preference you should make reservations in advance.

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*Flores. Hydrangeas | Photo: Turismo Açores*

## How to get there and when to go

Depending on where you're based, getting to the Azores is either a snap or it's own form of adventure. SATA airlines operates direct flights daily from Boston, as does TAP Air Portugal from

London. While flights from Boston are only 4 and half hours, at upwards of \$700 roundtrip they are pricey and no matter where you're coming from you'll want to give yourself at least a week on the islands. Once you've arrived, travel between the islands can be its own challenge. SATA operates flights between the islands but the schedule is sporadic at best. There are also ferries between the islands. Remember you're on vacation with (ideally) plenty of time; all the best places are often difficult to get to and the travel will be more than worth it.

For the best weather plan a trip between April and October as the rest of the year can be rainy. April and May will offer cheaper hotel and tour rates with decent weather.



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## *About me*

Bridget is a digital journalist, world traveler and farmers market forager. Her writing on food, travel and the environment for national publications has taken her from Argentina to Cambodia. Now based in New York, when she isn't writing or editing you'll often find her searching out new coffee spots and attempting to wear her golden retriever out with long walks.



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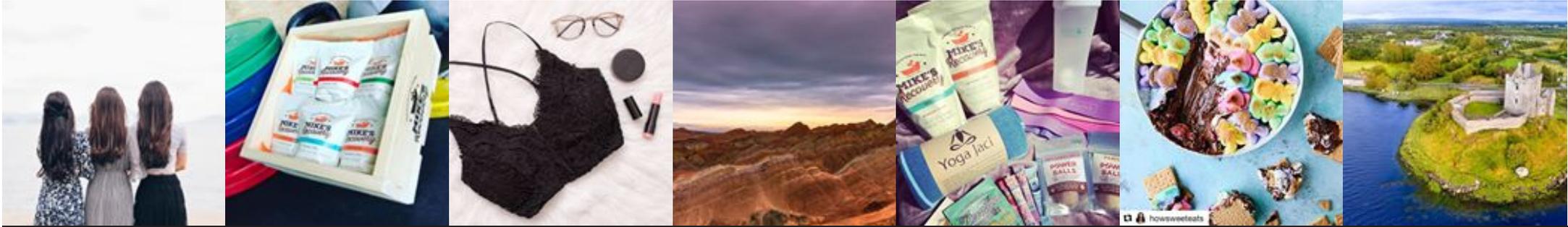
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