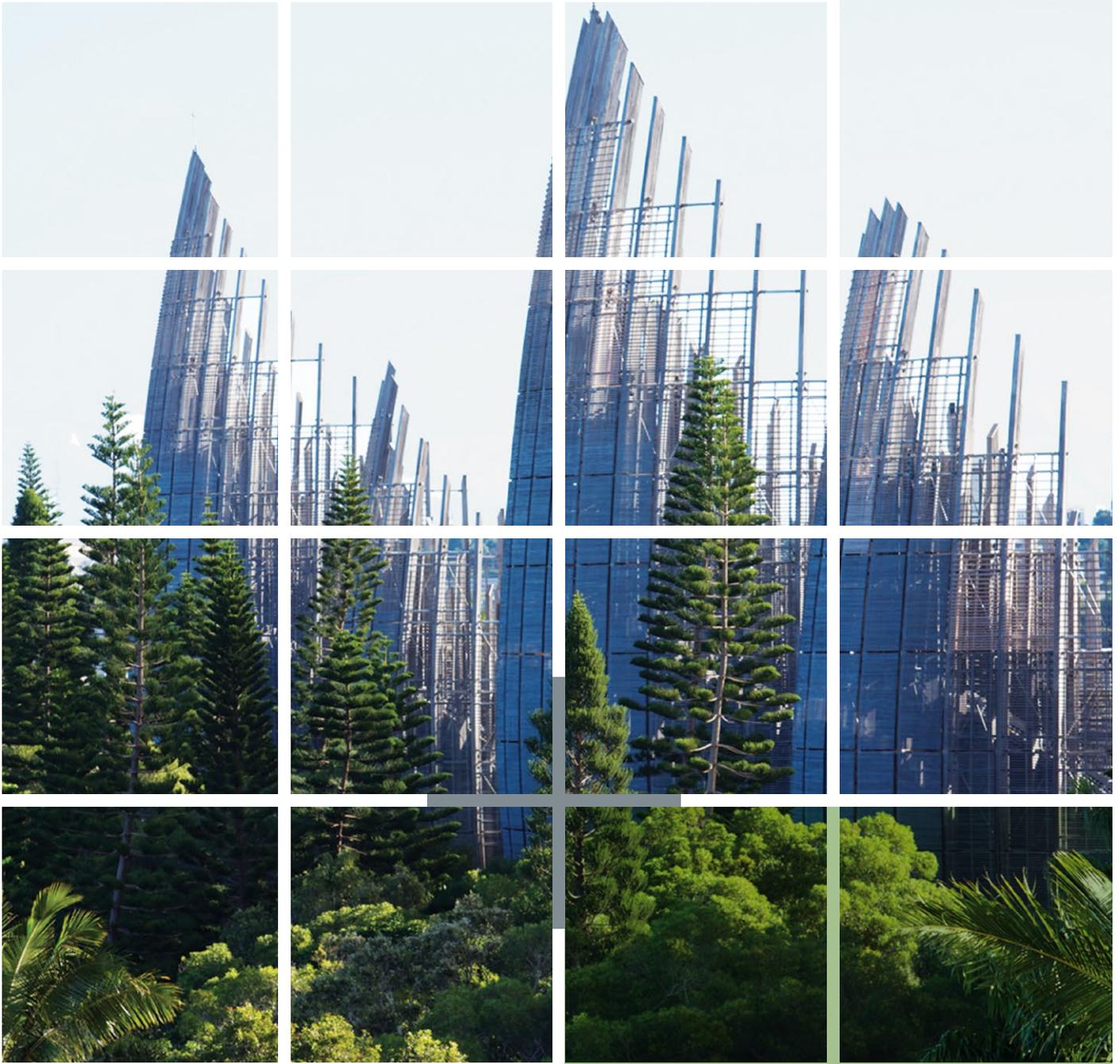


LET'S Travel

THE MAGAZINE
THAT STARTS
YOUR JOURNEY

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- + Vanuatu
- + Beverly Hills
- + Port Douglas
- + New Caledonia
- + South Australia
- + Lord Howe Island



MARIE BARBIERI



She's a freelance travel writer and photographer, a devout yogi and Elvis fan, but most of all, Marie Barbieri is an insatiable world rambler.

Now an island-hopper, thermal pool-hopper, beach-hopper and reef-hopper, Marie was also a job-hopper until she found her voice training to be an actress on an HND in Performing Arts at De Montfort University Bedford, followed by a BA in Drama at Exeter. But she landed her true role in life as a travel writer.

Born in London, Marie had donated her heart to Sydney by the time she was 21. She then hopped between hemispheres before finally migrating to Adelaide five years ago. Always in search of footprint-free sand, Marie has come across a few indelible travel moments on her journeys.

"Last year, I witnessed a bemusing scene on a road trip up to Lake Eyre in the South Australian outback," says Marie. "We happened upon a scruffy lone traveller traipsing alongside the red dusty road with two camels. It turned out that this nomad, a Klaus Menzel, had been walking around Australia for an incredible 16 years! Klaus, Willy and Snowy drag a sawn-off wagon, tailored with a solar-powered refrigerator, and simply follow the seasons. After a few words, and a pat of Klaus's fly-ridden camels, into the sunset-lit desert they continued to plod. I'll never forget that. Only in the outback!"

But Marie's passion for travel writing as a career began when she took a trip to the Mediterranean island of Mykonos. "I was escaping the sounds of my sobs and the shadow of my frown from a shattered relationship, so I took off: just me, my boots and I. Not wishing to stay at a dusk-'til-dawn beach party on this particular night, I packed up, only to read: 'If you miss the last boat from Platis Yialos beach back to town, you're stuck there.' I'd missed it, and I was stuck there. So off I clambered across the island's parched and barren terrain.

"Realising I was on the path to nowhere, with the sun almost set, I came nose-to-nose with two Greek men accompanied by a very tall, long blond-haired male - quite a sight in the twilight horizon. To my slightly lusting delight, my venture had also been the quest of the bronzed male, who turned out to be Swedish and equally lost. The two Greeks had knowledge of English like I had of Greek, or Swedish for that matter, but in the most surreal manner, we all communicated without a single common word. Now very dark, and walking for a good while, a torch appeared and my new Greek friends introduced us to their family of goats. By a small shed hidden in the shrub, I soon found myself feeding milk from a bottle to the smallest. Goat-sitting in Mykonos to a tanned audience under the rising moonlight - priceless!" ❖

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SUBLIME SAO

Words and images by Marie Barbieri



Proud Azoreans prepare to decorate



The woodland walk to Lagoa das Furnas



Furnas' scorched, dripping canvas

“**H**ail Mary full of grace...” recites the woman in the row before me. The nails of another claw at the arm rest, Freddy Kruger-style, to my right. Overhead lockers rattle and creak, and my own expletives punch through my gated teeth.

Landing on Sao Miguel is a rather alarming affair. After four hours from London over a choppy and austere ocean, we descend over the mid-Atlantic ridge. Reassuring hills and pastures slideshow through one side of the aircraft’s windows, but through the other, a crumpled seascape remains a good hundred metres below. As the aircraft’s wings seesaw into alignment over the runway that perches precariously on the island’s cliff-top perimeter, the tarmac strikes the landing gear. I’m surrounded by an epic unrecognisable landscape, and I wonder if I’ve discovered the legendary Atlantis.

Sao Miguel is the largest of the Azores’ archipelago’s nine

islands. They squat between continents some 1,500 kilometres off mainland Europe and another 3,900 from American shores, refusing to be swallowed by the mighty Atlantic.

I’m hungry to sight Sao Miguel’s crater-lakes that sink between haunting igneous peaks. The hydrangea-lined road gives way to Sete Cidades, where the jewels of Lagoa Verde and Lagoa Azul (green and blue lakes) are set within a 12-kilometre ring of forested walls. From the Vista do Rei lookout, I see why this 400 metre-deep extinct volcano carved Sao Miguel onto the tourist map ... or perhaps stencilled it; I’m the only soul here, apart from the emblem of the Azorean flag (a majestic buzzard), soaring at eyelevel on an invisible updraught.

Driving around the crater, I pass the Muro das Nove Janelas (nine wall window) and purposely stall at an ancient aqueduct. Moss-coated, it echoes a Monet scene. A bridge segregating the lakes leads me to the picturesque hamlet of Sete Cidades.

MIGUEL



Fern-draped Terra Nostra Botanical Gardens



The moonscape of Lagoa do Fogo



The neo-gothic Sete Cidades church of 1852

culture quietly simmers. Isolation and devastating natural catastrophes, such as the unforgiving earthquake that erased the island's original capital of Villa Franca do Campo in 1522, have sharpened the locals' spirit of survival, and deeply-embedded Catholicism. It's Easter, and outside their pint-sized homes, grandparents and children celebrate by decorating the streets with azalea petals; all arranged in carefully-measured geometric patterns.

Sitting by a petal-carpeted road, it's as if I've been catapulted back a few centuries; probably the only fragment of Europe where you could still imagine this - at least until an inattentive hire car drives across the junction, its tyres crushing the delicate floral arrangement and causing a tirade of local uproar. One elderly villager flies into a just rage, fists flailing and feet stomping. I head over to help salvage his crushed petals.

"This is my village ... my history ... visitors must respect!" he sobs, tears pooling. Who could disagree?

My fog lifts and I now ascend to splendid Lagoa do Fogo (Fire Lake). A veil of cloud suffocates the lookout, as it thirstily slurps at the crater's serrated peaks. But I'm patient. As the sunshine thaws the sky's stubborn lid, snippets of this extinct volcano, brazenly maimed by seismic warfare, weld together. I gasp at its bewitching basin, which exposes forested beaches returning their smiles to the sun. Spotting an ant-sized trekker needling his way down the lake's verdant wall, I join his snaking trail, each step bookended by indigenous flowers. Descending, it's a noiseless world, until a flock of gulls perform their ritualistic dance of vertical dives, telling me there must be fish in Lagoa do Fogo.

Traversing the island, I journey through tortuous terrain, where chilly waterfalls plunge into hot springs, and where cobblestone avenues border peaceful cedar forests and meadows cloaked in heather. Orange and pineapple groves, banana and tea plantations, lava-stone fences delineating dairy farms - all evidence of the



islanders' livelihoods. At the outpost of Nordeste, I reach public gardens so finely manicure, I feel I'm trespassing on someone's private lawn. Ponta do Sossego protrudes a splendid belvedere showcasing flirtatious flowerbeds and masculine trees. Again, I'm a solitary soul. I stare transfixed from this mind-blowing lookout at the thunderous Atlantic laundering lava-encrusted cliffs.

Azoreans embrace their peculiar natural habitat most proudly within the Vale das Furnas (Furnas Valley); the island's thermal hotspot. Hugging the azalea-garlanded Lagoa das Furnas, I spot steam rising and catch a nostril-full of that familiar sulphuric stench. After a two-kilometre woodland walk, I face a traditional Azorean outdoor kitchen, well worth the whiff. Above geothermal springs, casseroles are pulled from the ground's fumaroles.

"What are you cooking?" I ask an aproned restaurateur. The ground hisses around my feet, the heat challenging my boots. "Cozido das Furnas," he replies, "our traditional dish – pork, yams and cabbage." He lowers down his muslin sack-wrapped earthenware pot by ropes. "I leave it for some seven hours for the earth to cook." Covering the hole with a lid, he then shovels on soil, creating a smouldering culinary wigwam. Nearby, mud pools belch up their own gastric juices and thermal springs make an outdoor steam-room around camera-wielding tourists. It's like an olden-day Rotorua, and a magical sight.

While searching for orange plantations in 1769, American Thomas Hickling must have realised that nature plays hard in Furnas. Having built his mansion here, he crafted Terra Nostra Botanical Park with gardens plucked straight from Alice in Wonderland. Weaving pathways frame contoured pools and stepping-stones cross a pond fed by two streams – one cold and one steaming hot. And nature's show is curtained each side by draping ferns.



Rust-coloured ponds at Terra Nostra Botanical Gardens

Fronting Hickling's mansion is a lake-pool of auburn-tainted thermal water - and in I plunge. Romancing couples, the aesthetically gifted, the aged and arthritic all immerse themselves beneath this healing 40-degree blanket, away from the chilly spring wind. Iron-rich, this geothermal lake's therapeutic properties now work their wonders on me. I willingly accept its pummelling force of spring-fed healing. My indulgent afternoon continues inside 1883-established Gorreana Tea plantation; Europe's oldest. Here, I follow the life of the leaf, from picking, drying and grinding, to the final green tea in the cup that's now cradled between my hands. Exotic and robust, the taste of this tea represents the island itself, as does the tea lady replenishing the crockery.

"You enjoyed iron pool today?" she asks. Still clasping my cup, I sip, staring, intrigued as to how she knew. I'm that memorable? Did I forget my bikini top? Had I gone in naked? It's one of those unsettling moments when clearly you should remember someone, but don't.

"Wonderful thank you!" I reply with questioning eyes. She says nothing, so I go for it: "And you? You were there also?"

"No," she replies with a grin. "Your nails ..." she adds, boldly smirking. "They'll gradually lose their orange stains from iron oxide in some weeks!"

In the shower, about to head for the airport, I seriously hope they don't ask me to take my shoes off, as I stare down at the ten fluorescent toenails shining up at me. ■

FACTS

Getting There: Fly to Sao Miguel on the Star Alliance network with Air New Zealand (to London) and TAP Portugal (to Ponta Delgada). Visit: www.staralliance.com

Entry: New Zealand passport holders do not require a visa for stays of up to 90 days.

Currency: The Azores uses the Euro

Stay: Hotel Terra Nostra Garden in Furnas is a lava-stone's throw from the magical iron-water pool. It also serves the traditional cozido dish. www.terranostrahotelazores.com

Climate: The Azores enjoys a temperate maritime climate with a high annual rainfall and associated humidity. Winter temperatures (December-February) reach around 14°C and summer temperatures (June-August), around 23°C.

www.gorreanatea.com

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