

Readers' cruising destinations, near and far

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Why Cruise the Azores?

Simon and Carla Fowler loved the Azores so much, they stayed an extra week

The North Atlantic circuit typically sees two main ocean crossing periods: cruisers sail from Europe to the Caribbean, often via the Canary Islands, after the hurricane season ends in November, then in late spring/early summer many head back east again via Bermuda and the Azores, returning to Europe ahead of the following year's big storms.

After a five-week stop in Bermuda, in mid-May we set sail aboard our Lagoon 400 catamaran *Ocean Fox* once again for the planned 12-day crossing to the island of Faial and the harbour of Horta in the Azores. This west to east crossing is far more challenging than the tradewind route further south to the Caribbean. By the time the breakwater came into view we'd been at sea for 18 days, but we had made it, even if we had travelled further than the rhumb line would suggest.

Atlantic crossroads

Horta is known as the Crossroads of the Atlantic. Most yachts crossing will stop here to take on fresh provisions, change crew and fill their hungry fuel and water tanks. After a short break most move on, heading east to Europe. They have great memories of Horta from Peter Café Sport to the brightly painted breakwater covered



TOP Pico Island and its Ponta do Pico volcano, seen from Horta on Faial
ABOVE Horta from seaward

in the names of passing yachts; many may add their own logo as a right of passage.

But the Azores has so much more to offer yachtsmen and visitors than a simple rest spot, it is a cruising ground in its own right. It is made up of nine islands, two to the west, Flores and Corvo, the central group of five islands, Faial, Pico, São Jorge, Graciosa and Terceira. Ninety miles east you have the capital Ponta Delgada on the island of São Miguel and the small island of Sta Maria is a day sail away. Each one is special in its own way.

Peter Café Sport has been looking after yachtsmen in Horta for 102 years. The business is now run by Pedro, the third generation of the family to do so. From their position overlooking the harbour they are the first stop for information, repairs and food and not forgetting their own gin to be added to the ships stores. We were placed in quarantine for 48 hours on arrival, but the boys from the cafe came out, sporting their bright red, blue and

yellow hats, offered us the menu from the cafe and the opportunity to order provisions. It was our first experience of the Azores hospitality that we experienced over and over again.

The harbour at Horta is immense and includes plenty of areas to anchor within the breakwater as well as the marina and the mole. Included in the minimal charge

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Simon and Carla Fowler have been living on board their Lagoon 400 catamaran for over two years. They made their way

across the Atlantic in January 2019 and completed their Atlantic Circuit in 2020, having ventured off the beaten track in the Caribbean to visit Los Roques, Islas del Rosario, Bocas del Toro and Cuba.



FAR LEFT
Welcoming for
sailors: inside
Peter Café Sport
in Horta

LEFT The Fowlers'
Lagoon 400
Ocean Fox in Pico
Harbour



is a dinghy dock, showers and freshwater. The esplanade is paved in the traditional white and black cobbles that you find throughout Portugal. And this is all backed by the 7,000ft high classic volcano cone of Pico some four nautical miles away across the Straits of Horta.

Volcano view

We chose a night stop at the harbour of Madalena on Pico. Primarily a fishing harbour we had no problem finding a space on the wall for the night along with the local boats. They actually encouraged us to stay and took our lines. There is no formal paperwork to complete in Madalena or dues to pay. The inner harbour with its damaged mole shows that these waters can be wild during the winter months.

In summer the place has a quiet, sleepy charm with its brightly painted houses, diving shops and bars. Many people visit on a day trip from Horta, to walk to the top of Pico; the brave ones stay overnight to see the sunset and sunrise the following morning.

Our next stop was a few hours' sail through the deep blue waters of the Atlantic. These islands are the tops of volcanoes, coming up from the seabed some 2,000m below. The sea is as blue as you could ever imagine.

Velas, on São Jorge, is a welcoming marina. Set right into the cliffs of the island, tucked away behind the mole which in turn is hidden away by the commercial breakwater. Jose, the harbour master always manages to find a berth for visiting yachts in this small and compact marina. We stayed for five nights on the reception quay as being a cat we were too wide to fit into the berths, but that was not a problem at all.

Velas is the charming capital of São Jorge with its narrow roads and squares, some of which have bright red bandstands, just hovering as if from

another time. The Azores and in particular São Jorge, is well known for its cheese making. We took a hike up into the hills to the cheese factory of Cooperative de Leitaria da Beira. The cheeses are all natural and their taste changes only by their age. We bought a few slices together with some honey brandy known as Aguardente, perfect with ice to toast at sundowners. Checking in and out of these islands is made simple, each harbour master has access to your ships details on their computer system. You just need to sign the invoice and pay the bill. A 40ft monohull would be charged about €14 a night, and that includes water and



'Checking in and out of these islands is made simple'

electricity. Stay for a year and it drops to €100 a month.

Our next passage lasted about nine hours and brought us to the UNESCO World Heritage site at Angra do Heroismo on the island of Terceira, the most easterly island in the central group. For centuries Angra was the most important town in the Azores, mainly because of its sheltered harbour. Now there is a breakwater and a marina that will give good shelter from any conditions.

The city is notable for its fine buildings, squares and churches, its cobbled streets adding to its beauty. It is easy to see



The city of Angra do Heroismo on the island of Terceira



TOP LEFT The lagoon of Lagoa des Patas is found in Terceira's interior
ABOVE LEFT Fortress on Monte Brasil, Angra. **ABOVE RIGHT** Harbour at São Miguel

why this is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, being given its status in 1983, while it was still recovering from a devastating earthquake in 1980. The only signs now are the new terracotta roofs topping off the repairs. The city is overlooked by the giant castle of Monte Brasil which holds an imposing position on the headland overlooking the marina and city.

Natural beauty

Terceira has so much to offer with its natural beauty. Some fellow boaters, Jeff and Paula, invited us out for a tour. As you travel up the volcano of Sta Barbara the roads and fields bordered by hydrangeas and alliums is a breathtaking vista. As you enter the pine forests, the trees fold around you in rows along the side of the road. An area called Lagoa das Patas (Lake of the Ducks) is worth a visit, a stunning lake hidden away in the forest. It's laid out for locals to spend the day, with barbecue stations provided between the trees.

The passage to São Miguel is 92 miles, around 16 hours. This could be an

overnight sail or an early start, to arrive as the sun sets. We opted for the latter and were dropping the lines at 4.30 in the morning, two hours before first light. We had a close reach for our journey, the wind blew up to 37 knots at times, with a cross sea to go with it. This just reminds you that you're not in the shelter of a mainland but out in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

The harbour wall at Ponta Delgada is over 1.5km long and provides shelter for two marinas, a fishing harbour, a military base and is the main port for the Azores. But somehow this all seems to fit together and has a peaceful feel. We were directed to the newer west marina for our stay and were soon tied up to the floating pontoon, from where it's just a short walk across the road to town.

Once you go past the newer hotels along the waterfront, the rest of the town has that traditional Portuguese feel of black and white streets, colonnades and street cafes, all in a classic design. For us coming from the Caribbean it was so good to find our first proper mall and



Ocean Fox's logo painted on the side of the breakwater in Horta

supermarkets in months, being back in civilization having been starved of what the 21st century has to offer for so long.

São Miguel has endless attractions for the visitor, from venting geysers, vast crater lagoons, waterfalls and stunning views. We took a guided tour around the island: the twin crater lakes called The Lake of the Seven Cities is a must-see, as one is blue and the other is green.

Furnas, the large volcano on the island is still venting its gasses, heating water up to boiling point; the locals use it for cooking by boiling or by dropping a pot on a line into the ground. São Miguel also boasts the only tea plantation in Europe at Plantacoes de Cha Gorreana. Here tea is still made with traditional methods, the smells, sights and the noises of the clanking machinery is not to be missed.

We loved our visit to the Azores so much we decided to stay another week. Its laid back charm, food and hospitality is not to be missed. It is a cruising destination in its own right, despite being a little challenging at times. I hope one day we'll find ourselves crossing these charming islands again.



Europe's oldest and only remaining tea plantation is found on São Miguel