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How old-fashioned Madeira is reinventing itself as Europe's adventure capital



Topographically, Madeira is constantly falling over itself – it's a crumple of volcanic basalt, rampant greenery, deep troughs and gnarly ridges; there's hardly a flat bit to be found CREDIT: GETTY

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Buffed by wind, the plane banked sharply above the Atlantic, filling my window with blue swell and white horses. We straightened but still rocked side to side. The runway ahead stood on struts in the ocean, exposed and precarious. It was like landing on a trestle table. The pilot wrestled us into position. Closer, closer, closer we came... nearly... but no. With a last-minute engine thrust, we lurched upwards, sky-bound again. The trestle table receded. The weather had won, this time.

It took us a few attempts to touch down at Madeira's Cristiano Ronaldo Airport, a terminus as tricky as its namesake's feet. It's known as one of the world's most difficult landings for pilots, thanks to the cross winds that whip its runway. This seemed quite the contradictory introduction to an island that is more often considered sedate, conventional, maybe even nice-but-dull. However, that perception is being challenged.

All the good things about Madeira still exist – the safety, the hospitality, exotic flowers, just three hours from home. But a new campaign, Madeira Ocean Trails, is aiming to highlight the island's more active possibilities, especially for the growing number of trail runners and hikers.

Topographically, Madeira is constantly falling over itself – it's a crumple of volcanic basalt, rampant greenery, deep troughs and gnarly ridges; there's hardly a flat bit to be found. Now, this terrain has been recognised as a perfect playground for those seeking on-foot adventures.

So, dull? Not a chance. The island – like its airport – is apt to knock you sideways. Extreme sport isn't new to Madeira. Since the mid-19th century, the locals of the Monte neighbourhood have been zooming down the steep streets to the capital, Funchal, in wicker sledges. Ernest Hemingway – a man not unfamiliar with thrill-seeking – found it “exhilarating”. Today, straw-hatted *carreiros* still steer gleeful tourists downhill in these hampers-on-skis, reaching speeds of up to 30mph. I watched from the top as the drivers pushed off, their white trousers flapping, passengers whooping with delight.



Sledging in wicker chairs is something of a pastime CREDIT: GETTY

Passing on the toboggans, I opted for a four-wheel-drive trip to get better acquainted with Madeira's undulations. At the wheel was guide Ricardo Carvalho, apparently half-man, half-Jeep, so comfortable was he with his vehicle. I wondered if, just as pilots need extra training to land at the airport, drivers might require an additional qualification to tackle the roads? Some "roads" barely qualified as such – they were more like ski jumps. But Ricardo was unperturbed as he took me on a tour of the island's east, swinging swiftly around tight corners, horn beeping, brushing aside the banana palms, almost grazing the sides of the hill-clinging houses. "Clutches and brakes," said Ricardo, "they're the parts we're always replacing here."

We revved up tracks through forests of eucalyptus and pine, past fit-to-burst mimosa, exotic bamboo and sugar cane. We took scenic shortcuts over ridges where vertiginous terraces nurtured potatoes, broccoli, watercress and vines. It must have been incredibly good soil for the islanders to bother cultivating these steep slopes, I mused. "They had no machinery anyway, so it wasn't so tough," said Ricardo. "Farmers still have to do everything by hand." On cue, an old man in a flat cap hefted a pail of potatoes up the sheer road beside us.



One of the island's winding roads CREDIT: GETTY

The island's rich soil did seem unlimited in its productivity, which is thanks to the levadas, the network of water channels that irrigate the fields. Madeira was discovered by the Portuguese 600 years ago, and the levadas date back almost as far. They convey precious water from the vital, spongelike laurel forests to the thirsty terraces. Across Madeira, there are more than 1,200 miles (2,000km) of levadas, trickling like veins. The paths alongside these channels are also a big draw, providing fantastic routes for walkers.

I traced a couple of short levada sections, including a stroll along the Ribeiro Frio. En route, the forest dripped and breathed – you could feel the life in it, coursing through the mossy trunks and bearded lichen. I passed a café selling poncha, the local liqueur of aguardente de cana, honey, sugar and lemon, to reach the Balcoes lookout. The view was somehow like China, a mystical, mist-draped scene of verdant slopes falling to a river below; the cloud momentarily parted to show a glimpse of ocean, then the curtain fell once more.



A hiking trail above the clouds CREDIT: GETTY

Ricardo and I continued to Quinta do Furaio for a delicious lunch of scabbard fish and limpet risotto. From our veranda table we looked along the island's north coast, a seaboard that gets quite a beating. The prevailing winds hit full force, eroding the cliffs into submission; the rocks simply drop into the spume. Just below the restaurant, I noticed a patch of land for sale. It was overgrown, seemingly unreachable, utterly impractical. And I began to day-dream of buying it, pitching a tent and spending my life looking out on that wild, hostile shore.

“Madeira was attacked by pirates many times from the 16th century,” Ricardo told me, before revealing he has pirate blood himself. “In the years after pirate raids, lots of births were registered with an ‘unknown father’ – including one of my own ancestors. I think it’s why I like to have a rum every morning.” In 1566, French pirate Bertrand de Montluc sailed his armada into Funchal and went on a rampage, killing hundreds of locals. After this, fortresses were built to defend against attacks. “They didn’t need to build many defences on the north coast,” Ricardo added, as we both gazed along the wall of insurmountable rock.



The island is littered with fortifications CREDIT: GETTY

Or was it? A few days later I found myself edging along just such a rampart via a groove somehow hewn from the cliffside, with streams tumbling down and scrub falling away to the waves below. I was trotting along behind Sergio of the company Go Trail Madeira, experiencing one of the island's Ocean Trails. As well as being spectacular, this stretch also happened to be the last part of the Madeira Island Ultra Trail (MUIT), a running race that celebrated its 10th anniversary in April. The full race is 71 miles (115km) long, linking Porto Moniz in the north-west and Machico in the south-east, via 6,109ft Pico Ruivo, the island's highest point. Sergio and I were tracing the 12km (seven-mile) route between the towns of Porto da Cruz and Machico, via the Vereda do Larano path.



Sheep on PICO RUIVO CREDIT: GETTY

We began at Engenhos do Norte, the only steam-powered rum distillery left on the island. But there was no time for boozing. We left Porto da Cruz, dodging wave spray on a coastal track before climbing into the rural hinterland. We passed alongside goat-grazed fields and followed flat levadas. Then we joined the wild cliff path, wending around with the rock and looking along the headlands to where the island's far east finger – Ponta de Sao Lourenco – fizzles into the ocean. There was nothing dull about this, at walking or running pace.

Madeira, with its rarely flat, sparsely populated wilderness, is built for trail running. The sport has boomed here in the past two years, with more local races on the calendar and big-name athletes coming to compete; Portugal's top trail runner, Luis Fernandes, is from the island. But you don't need to be a mountain goat, or even a runner, to make the most of the island. The idea behind Ocean Trails is more of a mentality shift; it's letting the world know that "safe" Madeira has thrilling routes, whatever pace you want to travel.

Slow was definitely my choice the next day as I climbed from the north coast seaside town of Porto Moniz to the high plateau area of Fanal, a sharp ascent of 3,300ft. This was also the first stage of the MUIT race; as I huffed and puffed upwards, skipping streams, springing over mosses, brushing the ferns and stepping over roots, I couldn't imagine still having 62 miles (100km) to go.

When I reached the plateau, the mist was all-encircling, the views nonexistent – but it was magnificent. Fanal is home to some of Madeira’s finest Unesco-listed Laurisilva, the primary laurel forest that cloaked much of southern Europe 40 million years ago but is now rare. It was like a fairy tale. The trees appeared as ghosts, faint phantasms with crooked limbs reaching out of the haze. Some were like grandfathers, stooped, beardy and wise. It was all I could do to stop myself giving them a hug. There was something calming about it; you could feel the ancient forest’s balm soak in through your shoes, along with the puddles from the recent rains.

That evening I was back in Funchal with a glass of poncha, watching the annual carnival parade flash by in a flurry of feathers and thongs. I wished I’d still be around a few days later, for the Tuesday parade. “We call it the Silly Carnival,” the taxi driver told me as we headed to the airport. “Anyone can join in. People dress how they want, politicians are mocked; it’s more of a social satire.” That sounded more like the island I’d found. Madeira, with a bit of an edge.

Where to stay

Overhauled in 2017, Tiles is a smart tower block in Funchal’s main hotel district, with bright rooms, a big pool and a rooftop bar; doubles from £85 B&B (tilesmadeirahotel.com).

[Aqua Natura](#), in Porto Moniz, is a friendly base by the town’s spectacular natural pools; doubles from €76 (£68) B&B.

What to do

Go Trail Madeira organises trail-running and hiking day-trips and tours (gotrailmadeira.com).

Mountain Expedition offers 4x4 excursions (mountainexpedition.pt)

Further information: madeiraallyear.com