

Valleys, lakes and golf courses in Sao Miguel

The island of São Miguel is the largest in the Azorean archipelago with approximately 291 square miles and a population of about 120,000 people, nearly half of the Azorean population. It also has the biggest economic impact due to its several industries, including tobacco, beer brewing, sugar and tea production, and pineapple plantations. The island's primary occupations are farming, fishing, industry and services.

The island's settlement started in 1444 with the arrival of settlers from the mainland provinces of Estremadura, Upper Alentejo and Algarve. The first inhabitants were later joined by others from the island of Madeira and possibly France. The fertile soil and the island's geographic position at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and the Americas contributed to rapid economic growth based on the production of wheat, sugar cane, wine and dairy products. By the end of the 18th century, the export of oranges to England also brought a period of great prosperity to the island.

São Miguel was occupied by the Spanish in 1582 after the defeat of a French fleet off the coast of Vila Franca do Campo which had Portuguese on board in support of Dom Antonio Prior do Crato's claims to the Portuguese throne.

The island is politically divided into six municipalities: the districts of Ponta Delgada, Lagoa, Vila Franca do Campo, Povoação, Ribeira Grande and Nordeste. The island's capital is Ponta Delgada, the largest, more developed and most populated city of the Azores. A charming and cosmopolitan city, it features some beautiful churches, monuments, palaces, a museum, modern hotels and a recently inaugurated shopping mall. The city is also the headquarters of the Regional Government of the Azores and the University of the Azores.

Ponta Delgada hosts the Azores' most important religious fest, called "Festas do Senhor Santo Cristo" (festivities of Lord Holy Christ), which is held every year on the fifth Sunday after Easter. This religious tradition goes back to the end of the 17th century with the fame of the miracles obtained through the grace of the Lord Holy Christ, whose statue is venerated in the Convent of Senhora da Esperança. The religious parade dates from that period, and even today is routed through the same city streets - a living parade of tens of thousands of pilgrims and the faithful who follow the image of the Holy Christ.

One of São Miguel's main attractions is undoubtedly the beauty of its landscape. The Caldeira das Sete Cidades, a large crater with a 7.5-mile perimeter with its green and blue lakes surrounded by steep slopes covered with trees and flowers, is a good example of beauty at its best.

The Valley of Furnas, a true paradise at the bottom of a vast crater where springs flow free, is another natural wonder of this island. In this valley are a fascinating park, thermal springs and sulfur pits with boiling mud. Next to the valley is the calm, romance-inspiring Lake of Furnas. Sought by the natives of São Miguel as well as tourists on weekends, it's a great place to have picnics and to experience a relaxing environment. This is the area where the

famous local dish called "Cozido das Furnas" (a stew made of mixed meats and vegetables) is cooked by burying hermetically closed pots containing the food in the hot soil.

The Lagoa do Fogo (lake of fire), Pico do Carvão and Tronqueira, are just some of the other natural scenery sites I recommend you to visit. The villages of Ribeira Quente, Porto Formoso, Vila Franca do Campo, Ribeira Grande, Povoação, Capelas, Mosteiros and the district of Nordeste are other places worth visiting. Nordeste is one of the most attractive districts of the island due to its luxuriant vegetation and neatness.

São Miguel features two beautiful golf courses - Batalha and Achada das Furnas - with 27 and 18 holes respectively, which provide golfers with many hours of golfing pleasure. Like most of the other islands, the climate is mild. Ocean lovers will find beautiful blue waters where they can swim, sail, fish or snorkel.

An international airport and seaport serve São Miguel. The regional airline, SATA-Air Azores, offers several daily flights to the island for approximately \$150, depending on the exchange rate. Ferry boats travel between this and the other islands between May and September. Like Santa Maria, you may find a language barrier, but not as much as a smaller island, since you will be able to find more English-speaking people.



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(Above) The Caldeira das Sete Cidades is a large crater with a 7.5-mile perimeter with its green and blue lakes surrounded by steep slopes covered with trees and flowers in Sete Cidades Valley.

(Right) Thermal springs and sulfur pits with boiling mud can also be found in Sete Cidades Valley. (Photos by Staff Sgt. Olenda Kleffner)

