

Pico is second largest Azorean island

The Island of Pico, or Mountain Island as it is also commonly known among the Azoreans, is named for the impressive mountain that emerges from it.

Pico means "peak" in Portuguese. It's the second largest island of the archipelago with a surface area of approximately 174 square miles and a population of more than 15,000 inhabitants.

Pico is the highest mountain of the Portuguese territory with an altitude of 7,711 feet culminating in the crater of Pico Grande, from which rises the volcanic cone of Pico Pequeno or Piquinho.

The climb to the top of the mountain is difficult, but the breathtaking view of Pico and the other islands makes it well worth the effort.

The island was settled around 1460 when natives of northern Portugal arrived after colonizing the islands of Terceira and Graciosa.

Inhabitants initially concentrated on production of wheat and wood, a dye-yielding plant exported to Flanders, but the production of wine and fishing soon joined these activities.

Pico natives worked hard to turn the lava beds into vineyards. The Verdelho white wine of Pico has gained international fame over the centuries and it is highly appreciated in several countries; namely England, the U.S., and Russia, where at one time was served at the table of the Czars.

American whalers sailing in the Azorean waters around the 18th century introduced a new activity - whale hunting - which was, for many years, an important source of wealth for the island.

Whale hunting lasted until the European Union banned it in 1985.

Now, Pico is experiencing economic growth due to the construction of a new port, an airport and the increase of tourism activity.



Pico is the highest mountain of the Portuguese territory with an altitude of 7,711 feet culminating in the crater of Pico Grande, from which rises the volcanic cone of Pico Pequeno or Piquinho. The peak of Pico is the only place in the Azores that receives snowfall. (Courtesy photo)

The island is divided into three districts: Madalena, São Roque and Lajes.

The village of Madalena, the island's main economic center, gained town status in 1723.

Its port, located directly across from Horta on the nearby island of Faial, provides daily maritime connection with that island.

The island's main port is located in São Roque, a small town facing the channel between São Jorge and Pico.

This is an old town, connected with the whaling industry and the site of the only whale rendering plant on the island.

The plant has a display of giant pots and other tools that were once used to render whale fat.

São Roque also features a campsite where you can set up your tent, take showers and cook for a very reasonable price.

The town of Lajes, located on the sunny, southern side of Pico, was the site of the island's first settlement.

It has an important fishing port and is a former whale-hunting center.

The whalers' museum, established in a former boathouse, is one of the town's highlights. It features a varied collection of scrimshaw items, carved in whale's teeth and bones.

A whaling canoe and several other tools used in the whale hunting are also on display.

Although whale hunting has been banned, the town of Lajes still plays an important role in the whaling tradition via whale watching.

This recent activity attracts thousands of enthusiasts who want to see sperm whales up close.

To honor the old whalers, each year the town of Lajes celebrates the "Whalers' Week" during the last week of August.

Other villages around the island that deserve a detailed visit include Santo Antonio, Santa Luzia, Bandeiras, Prainha, Santo Amaro (a small village and the main shipbuilding yard in the Azores), Piedade, Calheta do Nesquim, Ribeiras, São Mateus, São Caetano and Candelaria.

The vineyards of Pico are also very peculiar in that a maze of stone walls forms small fields



where the grapevines grow. The crystal blue sea surrounding the island is a tempting invitation to fish, snorkel and observe underwater lava formations, flora and fauna.

Swimming is possible in several areas along the coast. São Roque and Madalena have salt-water swimming pools.

The countless rabbits that inhabit the island can also provide pleasant hunting opportunities.

Hunters will also have a chance to take aim at pigeons, partridge and quail during hunting season.

Like the other islands, Pico also celebrates the Holy Ghost festival during its season.

Other important festivals during the summer include the festivities of Bom Jesus in the village of São Mateus; Santa Maria Madalena in the village of Madalena; and "grape harvesting week," the second week of September.

You can travel to Pico by ferryboat between the end of May and September, or by airplane year-round.

Round trip airfare costs about \$180, depending on the exchange rate.



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