

Santa Maria is beautiful, affordable

Editor's note: This is the first of a series of articles on all of the nine islands that form the Azorean archipelago, located in the middle of the North Atlantic approximately 900 miles from the coast of Portugal and 2,000 miles from America.

The Azores were reputedly discovered by the Portuguese navigator Diogo de Silves sometime in 1427. No traces of previous inhabitants or visitors were found on any of the islands when they were discovered.

The archipelago has a total land area of approximately 868 square miles and is formed by the following islands: Santa Maria, São Miguel, Terceira, Graciosa, São Jorge, Pico, Faial, Flores and Corvo. Currently, this autonomous region has a population of approximately 243,000 inhabitants.

Island of Santa Maria

The island of Santa Maria, located 55 miles south of São Miguel, was the first one to be sighted by the Portuguese navigators and it is the most southern and eastern of the islands, closest to the European continent and the first one to be settled.

Its history revolves around small farming communities whose main concern was to defend themselves against pirates that attacked the island from time to time. In fact, Christopher Columbus and his men were suspected of being pirates in 1493 when they sought refuge from a storm in the Bay of Anjos. They were held prisoner for a few days until the islanders could be sure it was safe to release them.

The biggest and most important change for the island occurred in 1944 with the arrival of the U.S. Armed Forces and construction of a large airport by those same forces.

The Americans and the airport brought

new life to the island, and introduced a more progressive lifestyle than the island had previously known.

Following World War II, however, the Americans departed for the island of Terceira, turning the airport and its supporting facilities over to the Portuguese government. Until construction of airports on the other islands was complete, Santa Maria remained - for many years - as the gateway to the Azores. Much has changed since then, and Santa Maria has lost much of its prominence; though none of its charm.

The island's capital and municipal seat is Vila do Porto, the first town in the Azores. Most of the island's hotels, restaurants and businesses are located there.

Like the other islands of the archipelago, Santa Maria has many tourist attractions. Vila do Porto features the Fort of São Brás (an old Portuguese fortress), a museum and several churches.

When I toured the island, I particularly enjoyed the view from Pico Alto, the island's highest point at 1,925 feet. From there you have an excellent view of the whole island. Other points of interest worth visiting are Praia Formosa, a beautiful sandy beach. This is the site of the internationally renowned music festival called "Maré de Agosto" (August Tide), which is held annually during the second week of August.

São Lourenço Bay, located on the island's northeast side, features hillsides covered with vineyards — it is an extraordinary panoramic view, particularly before the grapes are harvested.

The Bay of Anjos is a charming little village that features a small chapel where supposedly Christopher Columbus' men prayed during their port call, when returning from having discovered the Americas.

Another of the island's characteristics that caught my attention was the round shape of the chimneys. They reminded me of those in Algarve on mainland Portugal, probably because the first settlers came from that southern Portuguese region.



Santa Maria attracts tourists mainly because of its peaceful and bucolic nature and undulating, steeply sloped landscape. It is a slower, calmer paced environment, particularly suited for those who need a break from the stresses of work.

The climate is different - not radically, but different - from the other Azorean islands, as well. It's drier in Santa Maria, and summer is more temperate. Ocean lovers will find the island's blue waters a true paradise for water-skiing, windsurfing, sailing, fishing and snorkeling. Big Game fishing is a recent activity that has been attracting many national and foreign tourists to the island.

Despite the beauty and abundance of Santa Maria, the island is lightly populated - only 6,500 or so inhabitants (people say there are more cows and sheep than people on Santa Maria.) The primary occupations and industry are farming and fishing.

There's only one way to get to the island during the winter: air travel. The regional airline, SATA-Air Azores, offers daily flights for approximately 160 Euros. In the summer you can look forward to taking a ferryboat to Santa Maria or one of the other islands.

Overall, such a trip is quite affordable. Food and lodging won't set you back much and mementos will be plentiful.

One challenge you may face, however, is a possible language barrier. Santa Maria hasn't had an American presence for decades, so you may not find many English-speaking locals. Take along a good phrase book, and a positive attitude, and you'll do fine.



Coastline of Maia Village in Santa Maria. (Courtesy photo)