

# Known for cheese, Sao Jorge also known for beauty



A view of Faja Dos Vimes on the island of Sao Jorge. The Fajas are flat low-lying areas originating from the collapse of cliffs and mudslides along the coastlines on both sides of the island.



(Above) An old windmill in the Village of Urzelina.

(Right) A view of the island Pico from Sao Jorge. (Courtesy photos)

Unlike other Azorean islands, São Jorge is very long and narrow with a line of volcanic peaks down its peaks.

Thirty-four miles long and five miles wide, São Jorge's central plateau is about 2,296 feet. The coast is very steep, almost vertical, particularly on the island's northern side. If you ever stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon you would recognize how it feels to stand on the cliffs' edge of São Jorge.

The exact date of its discovery and settlement is unknown but the earliest reference to São Jorge dates from 1439 and by 1443 the island was already inhabited. A Flemish nobleman, Wilhelm Ven Der Hagen, was among the first settlers who arrived at the island and he founded the village of Topo in 1470.

For centuries a lack of sheltered ports caused isolation and affected the trade with other islands. The island was also affected by natural disasters, namely volcanic eruptions. The 1808 eruption destroyed the village of Urzelina, leaving only a church bell-tower sticking out of the lava. That tower still stands today and constitutes the village's landmark.

## Attractions

The island is divided into two municipalities or districts: Velas and Calheta. Velas is the island's main town, where you will find many attractive old buildings and churches, as well as the island's main port. It's also the main economic and trade center. Calheta, the other seat of the municipality, is a small town, built parallel to the coast with white buildings forming a sharp contrast against the green of the nearby cliff and the black lava rocks. It offers a characteristic view, especially if observed from the ocean.

Other villages worth visiting, for their scenic beauty and slow and easy pace are Ribeira Seca, Urzelina, Manadas, Santo Amaro, Santa Antão, Topo, Norte Grande, Norte Pequeno and Ponta dos Rosais.

Among São Jorge's main attractions are the "Fajãs." These are flat, low-lying areas, originating from the collapse of cliffs and mudslides, which stretch along the coastlines on both sides of the island. Many have been converted into fertile fields where farmers grow yams, corn, vegetables and other products. Some of the fajãs are inhabited and their population increases significantly in the summer months when island natives and emigrants return to occupy their summer houses. Some of the well-known fajãs include Grande, Vimes, São João, Cubres, Ouvidor and Caldeira de Santo Cristo. The latter is probably the best know because it features an un-

derwater cave and a lake where you can find clams (the only place in the Azores where these bivalve mollusks can be found.)

## Culture

Just like on Terceira, the Holy Ghost Festival is celebrated intensively throughout the island.

Street bullfights, imported from neighboring Terceira, are also held during the summer months. Every year, the town of Velas organizes a "Cultural Week" during the last week in April. It features lectures, conferences, book fair and musical concerts. The town of Calheta organizes an annual festival in July named "Festival de Julho," which attracts hundreds of tourists from the neighboring islands.

For those who enjoy outdoor activities, the island has two campsites, located respectively in Urzelina and Portinho da Fajã Grande near Calheta. These two areas offer hot water showers and kitchens and are also supported by nearby restaurants. They are ideal for a relaxing week in contact with nature or even just a weekend on the island.

## Food

São Jorge's restaurants offer a wide variety of typically Azorean meat and fish dishes. Special mention should be made of its cheese, which is considered the best in the Azores and has long enjoyed international fame. It is much appreciated in Portugal and in the U.S. and Canada by the Portuguese emigrant communities.

Thanks to an abundance of fish and other marine life, São Jorge is a paradise for those who enjoy fishing, snorkeling and other water activities.

Like in other islands of the archipelago, the regional airline SATA-Air Azores has daily flights to São Jorge originating on São Miguel and Terceira. Airfare cost from Terceira is about \$123 round-trip, depending on the exchange rate. Ferryboats also serve the island daily during the summer months, either from Faial, Pico or Terceira.

