

Macaronesia:

The Blessed Islands

MACARONESIA---It isn't often that you go somewhere and don't even know it until you get back home. Such was the case with my visit to two islands off the coast of northeast Africa- Madeira, a part of Portugal, and the Canaries, a part of Spain

> By: Dominick A. Merle



A house almost obscured by colorful flowers in Funchal
بيت مغطى بالورود في فونشال



View of Funchal and the sea
منظر لفونشال والبحر

The two are actually the central core of a group of four island chains in the Atlantic Ocean that make up the almost mythical land of Macaronesia, I learned while doing a little research for this article. You'll find it listed just before the word "macaroni" in Wikipedia, the world's largest online encyclopedia.

Macaronesia-- not to be confused with Micronesia, another group of islands in the Pacific- comprises the Azores (Portugal), Madeira (Portugal), The Canaries (Spain) and Cape Verde, a separate republic. The Azores are in the middle of the Atlantic between North America and Europe, Madeira and the Canaries are off the coast of Morocco, and Cape Verde is much further south, just west of Senegal. All are

volcanic in origin, and although they have had very little to do with each other throughout history, they are now collectively known as Macaronesia, which comes from the Greek word loosely translating to "blessed islands."

Many of the natives of the four island chains probably don't even know they're living in Macaronesia. In fact, Cape Verde and the Azores are so far apart that they may never have even heard of each other. But from Madeira to the Canaries is a mere 50 minutes by charter propeller plane, making them much easier to combine on a mini-Macaronesia trip. You get two countries, two cultures and two distinct looks.

I began in Madeira at the capital city of Funchal nestled between the mountains and

the sea. Funchal is home to roughly half of Madeira's 300,000 residents and is on the same latitude as Casablanca. We stayed at the Hotel Tivoli Ocean Park in the newer section of the city, an area of hotels, restaurants and shops that didn't even exist when I first visited 10 years ago.

Mother Nature continues to be the star attraction of Madeira. The island is a scant 57 kilometers long and 22 kilometers broad, but a mountain range running down the center of the island like a spine makes Madeira appear almost as tall as it is wide. The tiny hillside villages have a fairytale-like quality; the houses seem to be dropping out of the sky facing every-which-way, and some appear to be growing right out of the mountains. ▶

And only in Madeira do cows live in tiny A-framed houses called “Palheiros” which dot the hilly terrain. The animals are tied to their sheds- some say to keep them from falling off the cliffs, while others claim to keep them from trampling crops. Agricultural land is precious on mountainous Madeira. A piece of ground the size of a bedroom is quickly turned into a vineyard, and when the grapes are harvested, the land below the vines may yield potatoes. The near-tropic climate and lush volcanic landscape make Madeira a botanist’s paradise. While there are several fine botanical gardens in the Funchal area, a simple hike on a mountain trail can lead into an explosion of aromas and blazing colors-birds of paradise, magnolias, mimosa and scores of varieties of orchids will greet you along the way.

The vibrant colors of the landscape have been an inspiration to well-known painters over the years. One of them, Winston Churchill, albeit an amateur, often came to the fishing village of Camara de Lobos to capture his quaint landscapes. Other famous “regulars” to Madeira included Bernard Shaw and Sarah Bernhardt.

We took a cable car ride from Old Funchal to the mountain village of Monte and enjoyed a striking view of the harbor and orange-tiled rooftops along the way. At

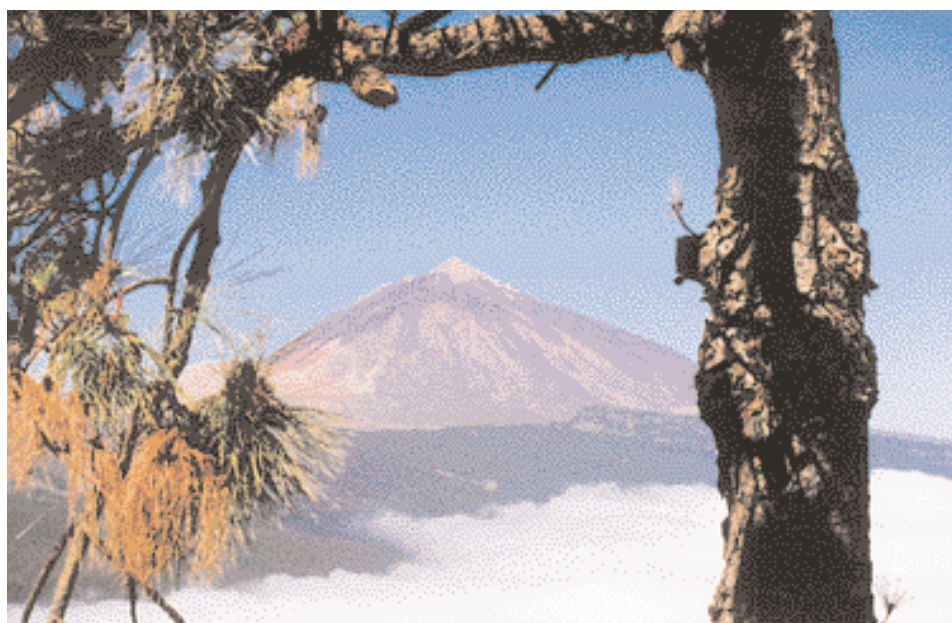
the top, in the center of the village, women were selling beautiful lacework. After a light lunch, we walked to one of Madeira’s best known attractions, the toboggan ride. Once a well-established means of transportation in the hilly terrain, the toboggans are now used solely by tourists. They are made of wicker with wooden runners and each can accommodate two people. Men wearing old-time straw hats steer and control the toboggans down the road, much like a dogsled. It’s about a 20-minute ride down, and costs about \$15 per person.

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Taking its name from the largest island of the group where Funchal is located, the archipelago of Madeira also includes Porto Santo Island, which caters to the sun and surf set, and two other islands inhabited only by sea lions and sea birds. Madeira vineyards were once managed by Jesuit priests. Each September, there are colorful festivals that celebrate the grape harvest. Seafood, of course, plays a large role in the typical menu, but grilled meats



Strange volcanic plants in Tenerife
نباتات بركانية غريبة في تاناريف



Volcano framed by tree branch in Tenerife

منظر لبركان من خلال الأغصان في تاناريف

are also common and honey features prominently in desserts.

From Funchal we took the short charter plane to Tenerife, the largest of the six Canary Islands, and checked into Hotel Botanico. The Canaries are about twice the size of Madeira and attract two to three times as many international tourists, upwards of 10 million a year. Much closer to the African continent, from Tenerife to the Sahara Desert is less than 30 miles!

While the vast majority of tourists flock to the Canary Islands for its beaches, there is also rugged mountainous terrain including the 12,000-foot Mount Tiede, Spain’s highest peak and biggest volcano. There is an astounding diversity of plants and animals unique to the world in this area along with more than 700 species of insects. ▶

Shaped like a duck, Tenerife is dominated by two large mountain ranges, Anaga and Teno. The north is green, the beach playgrounds lie mostly to the south. There are isolated villas along the sea surrounded by banana plantations that serve as retreats for international celebrities trying to avoid the paparazzi press. Mick Jagger, Bill Clinton and the elusive Michael Jackson are reputedly among the recent visitors.

As in Madeira, there are picturesque villages at the base or up the mountain slopes, like the quaint hamlet of Icod, which has something in common with Madeira's Monte and its tourist toboggans. Except in Icod, there is no charge for the toboggan ride, but the stakes are a little higher.

Every November 29th a festival takes place in Icod to mark the harvesting of grapes. One of the "highlights" of the celebration is careening down the streets on any type of wooden board available, often a simple door, at speeds approaching 25 miles per hour. There are usually a number of crashes and spills along the way and ambulances and medical attendants wait below to treat the injured. Amazingly, Icod officials claim there has never been a fatality.

Until recently, Madeirans went to mainland

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Portugal and Canary Islanders (Canarios) to mainland Spain for their vacations. Now, they're glancing across the pond at each other- Madeirans like the nightlife and beaches of their neighbors, and Canarios like the rugged beauty and tranquility on the other side.

In addition to the charter propeller planes, overnight ferry service will soon be available between the two islands. After centuries of hardly even noticing each other, love is in full bloom in central Macaronesia. ■

(Dominick A. Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)

IF YOU GO;

From North America, the best air routes are through Lisbon or Madrid, depending on which island you visit first. No visas are required; only a valid passport.

Casual dress is perfectly acceptable on both islands. Bring comfortable walking shoes, and a light jacket or sweater for the higher elevations.

For further information on Madeira, visit:

www.madeiratourism.com or e-mail info@madeiratourism.com

For Tenerife, visit: www.webtenerife.com or www.tenerife.es



Two men contemplating in Tenerife

رجلان متأملان في تاناريف