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Angra do Heroísmo, Terceira, The Azores

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TRAVELER'S JOURNAL

The Azores: So Near, and Yet So Far

BY MIKE THIEL

Try telling friends at your next Christmas party—as Gail and I did—that you've just come back from the Azores. Most will look at you with a blank stare. And no one is likely to come back at you with that smug "Oh yeah, we visited there years ago" response.

Last fall, we jumped at the chance to add this archipelago to our "islands collection." It didn't require much of a hole in our schedule; with departures from Boston on Azores Express/SATA every Tuesday and Friday night, and a flight time of just four hours and change, those of us in New England could even enjoy a long weekend there. But for the true island aficionado, it's worth a much longer visit.

If you equate islands with great sandy beaches, the Azores will not meet your expectations. But

if you can look beyond that, the Azores rate an "A" for adrenaline-inspiring scenery, adventure, and, most important, authenticity. The archipelago consists of nine inhabited islands—actually volcanic mountaintops—stretching some 400 miles from northwest to southeast in the middle of the Atlantic. They are about 800 miles from Portugal, their motherland, and operate as an autonomous region. The last major volcanic eruption took place off the island of Faial in 1958, and evidence of volcanic activity—in the form of fumaroles and hot springs—still is everywhere.

A Drive to Remember

We flew directly to Ponta Delgada, the principal city on the main island of São Miguel. This 40-by-15-mile island is ruggedly beautiful, with forested volcanic mountains and crater lakes running along its spine, pastoral fields in the valleys, and a jagged coastline of inlets, headlands, and cliffs. Ponta Delgada is an attractive mix of modern and classic Portuguese colonial architecture, with many vintage churches, fortifications, and

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Mangia, Mangia at Villa Mangiacane

If you love eating well as much as you enjoy traveling well, you owe yourself a visit to the *table d'hôte* of **Villa Mangiacane**TM in Florence. This elegant little Stein hotel has just 26 guest rooms and is a microcosm of what the perfect Italian experience should encompass: personable hosts, stylish surroundings, a pleasant dose of culture, and—most important for food and wine enthusiasts—inventive and inspiring cuisine.



Simply by osmosis, Villa Mangiacane would be expected to excel in the area of fine dining. After all, this sun-drenched, 16th-century hillside estate is set square in the middle of the legendary Chianti Classico winemaking region, and has more than 500 acres of vineyards and olive groves to call its own. The vines produce a full-bodied Chianti Classico from Sangiovese, Canaiolo, and Colorino grape varieties, as well as a delicious Merlot. Several vintages have caught the eye of *Wine Spectator* magazine, including its Chianti Classico Riserva 2004. And the extra-virgin olive oil produced under the Villa Mangiacane label—known for its distinctly peppery notes—is currently used

in several Wolfgang Puck restaurants, a testimony to its superb quality.

Dining at this classic Tuscan estate is an experience that engages all the senses. In the spring and summer, you can breathe in the herb-infused scent of the kitchen gardens and listen to the hum of bees at work as you sit at your luncheon table on the outdoor dining terrace. You also can be seated in the elegant dining room or attend a special tasting dinner in the Vinoteque wine cellar. In the winter, it's fun to cozy up for comfort food—warm, fresh pasta and freshly baked breads—served by the open fireplace in the villa's Olive Oil Kitchen.

But even so simple a meal as breakfast is not slighted here. All breakfast breads are baked fresh and often served warm from the oven, with the Villa's own homemade jams and local honey. Yogurts, fresh eggs, meats, and delicious juices are served with cherries and figs—in season, of course—picked right from the estate's trees. The figs might also be served with prosciutto for lunch, along with other traditional Tuscan dishes like pasta with clams and fresh herbs served in a white-wine sauce. This might be followed by a salad of thinly sliced zucchini dressed with toasted pine nuts, drizzled with olive oil and lemon juice, and sprinkled with fresh mint from the garden—very refreshing!

Dinner is a bit more sophisticated and intriguing, with more complex flavors and elegant ingredients. Best described as Italian with an international twist, it features dishes like Irish beef loin filled with foie gras and served with Tuscan vinsanto reduction, or red tuna and porcini mushroom sauté with Tuscan bread soup. After dinner, guests often stroll out to the loggia for conversation, an after-dinner drink, and an absolutely mesmerizing view of Florence sparkling in the deepening valley below.

With its progressive attitude toward the dining experience, Villa Mangiacane recently was able to attract the bright talent of a highly sought-after local chef,

Chef Massimo Bocus



THE STEIN GROUP

Massimo Bocus. This young, passionate culinary expert actually began studying law, but soon found that it seriously limited his time for his first love—creativity in the kitchen. His culinary training taught him a deep respect for food and for the emotional effect it has on his guests. "Food is the frame of a society," he says. "It can easily change one's mood, it can seal a memorable moment, and a taste can bring back a distant memory."

Rather than serve predictable dishes, Chef Bocus likes to use as many different ingredients and products as possible, meshing the flavors together in new and creative ways. He also enjoys sharing his love of cooking, and has opened his kitchen for one-on-one and small-group cooking lessons. These are held in the beautiful main kitchen, with its huge original hearth and exquisite tilework. Part of the adventure is visiting local suppliers with Chef Bocus and picking his brain about how to choose the best cheeses, seafood, and beef. Once you've joined him for an afternoon, you'll understand why he believes that food is more than "a way to feed your body."

If you're intrigued, but a trip to Tuscany is not in your immediate future, Chef Bocus invites you to try his flavorful recipe for "Seared Red-Tuna Fillet in Sesame Crust with Potatoes-and-Olive-Oil Mash, and Tomatoes-and-Orange-Zest Marmalade." Visit www.Hideaways.com/recipes—or call Hideaways Travel Services (877-843-4433) if you prefer sampling the real thing in person! **H**