

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Adventure island

Known for its appeal to retirees and those seeking a slower pace of life, the Portuguese island of Madeira is shaking off its staid and sleepy image, finds **Laura Millar**

I am a woman on the edge – literally. I'm sitting in something which resembles an oversized breadbasket, poised at the top of what looks like the Tarmac version of the Cresta Run. Ahead of me lies 2km of steep, downhill, twisting road, polished to an obsidian shine in places, testament to the decades over which the activity I'm about to experience has taken place.

I'm in the hilltop district of Monte, which looms 1,840ft above Funchal, the capital of Madeira.

Sitting 600 miles south of the western coast of mainland Portugal, and directly to the west of Africa, this lush little island was first claimed by Portuguese sailors in the 15th century and swiftly colonised. By the 19th century, it had become fashionable for wealthy residents to construct summer homes up here, away from the heat of the city (as, despite its

proximity to the coast, it can get humid and sticky). Horse drawn carts ferried people up the hill; the only problem was that the roads were so precipitous, getting back down again was a trickier issue. Hence the giant breadbaskets.

The concept of using large, woven wicker "sleighs", or toboggans, came about around 1850. Attached to two flat planks of wood, or runners, the idea was that passengers sat inside. However, instead of being attached to an animal, as the carriage would simply pull the beast down with the force of gravity, it was steered by humans. Two men, known as *carreiros*, would guide the toboggan from behind with ropes, acting as steering, and – crucially – as brakes.

Dressed all in white, with straw boaters, they looked not unlike Venetian gondoliers. The most important part of their uniform,



View from the cable car looking down on Funchal, main; ready to ride the toboggan with the aid of two *carreiros*, above

however, was the thick soled shoes they wore to act as resistance between the road and the toboggan. And the tradition continues to this day – now, of course, mainly for tourists (the invention of the car, and braking systems, has meant that locals don't need to use them) but it's a brilliant piece of ingenuity, and I'm about to find out how it actually works.

The heavy toboggan strains at the

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ropes, as my two friendly *carreiros*, Tomas and Filipe, get ready to launch.

The angle of the road seems impossible; I suddenly know how those hapless celebrities who face down the vertiginous ramp in *The Jump* must feel – how are we not just going to go plummeting recklessly to the bottom? But these guys know exactly what they're doing. They have to – they're only allowed to do this job if the older generations of their family have done it too.

With a sickening lurch, we're off – and it's utterly terrifying. I'm told they can reach speeds of nearly 35mph, and as the wind whips past us, the *carreiros* seem to accelerate, pushing off against the road with their feet, swinging the toboggan from side to side – eliciting rather unladylike screams from its occupant – and generally bombing down the track as if they were going for gold in the Winter Olympics.

Once I relax, it becomes exhilarating; and even though we only go as far as the suburb of Livramento, and not all the way back to Funchal, it's been a wild ride, and I have the utmost respect for the men

who have done it for decades.

At the disembarking point, I spot coaches and cars filled with more carreiros, waiting to take them back up to the top. While I drifted up here on the city's cable car, which was installed in 2000, passing above the sinuous, curving terraces cut into the side of the hill for growing the grapes for Madeira's famous wine, lush banana trees, eucalyptus plants and terracotta rooftops, back in the old days, they'd have to sling their toboggans onto their backs, and make the hard return slog up to Monte on foot.

As a first impression, it's not exactly how I pictured Madeira. My granny came here on holiday, drawn, like many, to its year-round warmth – making it perfect for a festive visit – and it attracts silver-haired hikers, those in search of a slower pace of life, and nature lovers. But these days it's hoping to shake off its slightly staid reputation and appeal to a broader range of visitors, particularly foodies, and those who want to take part in more adventurous pursuits, like diving, paragliding, or canyoning.

The day after my tobogganing experience, I sign up for a jeep safari with Mountain Expeditions (www.mex.pt), a suitably high-octane way to see more of the island, as we'll be going off-road, taking old farmers' and rangers' routes through Madeira's ancient, UNESCO heritage forest.

My guide, Joao Bento, left his job selling sports equipment in Porto in 2006 and came over to find a better work-life balance. Now he spends every day in the outdoors, with a wealth of knowledge about the island's history and its diverse fauna and flora – which has earned Madeira its nickname of the Garden of the Atlantic – which he's only too keen to share.

As we inch up cork-screwing roads with dizzying gradients, many with sheer drops on at least one side, I try to concentrate on what he's saying about the Jurassic-era laurel trees we pass through, rather than the prospect of tumbling down into the gulfs and chasms made by the many hills and mountains which form Madeira's intricate topography. I've never seen so many different shades of green; the smell of pine and

eucalyptus mingle in the clean, clear air.

Joao explains the word "madeira" actually means wood; between the 15th and 19th centuries, the dense forest earned money as its bounty was exported throughout Europe for construction. Today the forests are filled with acacia, sweet chestnut, fruit trees and more.

We drive to the second-highest point on the island, Pico do Arieiro, which, at 1,818m, offers great views of the craggy mountain scenery around it. Throngs of hikers are setting off on well-marked trails, many towards some of the island's 1,500 miles of levadas, the man-made water channels which help irrigate the volcanic soil.

Then it's back down through narrow forest trails, and as we bump along various bone-jarring tracks, Joao jokes that it's like a free massage.

Later, we stop off at the Skywalk of the Miradouro Cabo Girao, a viewing platform with a giddy glass floor, which extends over a cliff – at 580m, it's apparently the highest in Europe. I inch over it gingerly, looking down onto craggy, black rocks, the Atlantic sea churning and roiling at their base. Another hair-raising, and breath-taking, experience.

When I get back to my hotel, the elegant, pink, 125-year old Belmond Reid's Palace, which looms high over the bay of Funchal, and which has hosted distinguished guests from Winston Churchill to European

royalty, I need something to steady my nerves. Out on the black and white floor-tiled terrace, lined with palm trees and looking like the setting for an Agatha Christie novel, I order a Funchal tonic. The globe-like glass contains a large serving of gin mixed with fresh local fennel juice (indeed, Funchal means 'fennel'), adorned with a sprig of dill. It's enjoyable, refreshing and surprising; much like Madeira itself. ■

Jet2 flies direct from Edinburgh or Glasgow to Funchal; for prices and to book, visit www.jet2.com. Double rooms at Belmond Reid's Palace (0845 077 2222, www.belmond.com) start from €415 (£370) per night including breakfast. For more information on Madeira, visit www.madeiraallyear.com



A jeep safari with Mountain Expeditions will take you off the beaten track

STAYCATION



Feast on Fife's hidden gems

Rosalind Erskine takes a two-day culinary tour of the East Neuk's picturesque fishing towns

It's not the norm in most coastal town chippies to stand in a queue waiting for your supper whilst reading about the famous clientele. But at Anstruther Fish Bar, this is exactly the case. The award-winning shop has served everyone from Hollywood celebrities including Tom Hanks to royalty – Prince William was a regular when he was at St Andrews University – and has the press clippings framed on the wall to prove it.

Serving a range of boat-fresh fish and seafood, the fish bar is a well-known and often extremely busy haunt in the picturesque East Neuk village. But what else does this pretty part of Fife have to offer the foodie tourist?

With Scotland's food and drink scene experiencing a boom – thanks mainly to the explosion of Scottish gins and artisanal producers – it's only fair to assume that this stretch of east coast, with its mix of farmland and beaches, will be home to some fine examples of homegrown fare.

A two-day trip is a good length of time to truffle out some of the hidden gems in Fife – from gin and whisky to cheese and seaweed. Anstruther is a great place to base yourself, as there are also a range of quaint guesthouses and B&Bs that are perfectly

positioned to cater for visitors at any time of the year.

The Lahloo Guesthouse, is just a hop skip and jump away from the famous fish bar and scenic harbour. The house was built in 1800, and was the birthplace of Captain John Smith, famous for sailing tea clippers. Sleeping four guests in two double rooms, it is ideal for couples or solo travellers and owner Jean was extremely friendly and helpful.

Kingsbarns Distillery is a must-visit. Independent bottling giants Wemyss malts invested nearly £3 million into the distillery and have taken over the operation from their partnership with Douglas Clement, a former caddie at the nearby Kingsbarns golf course. Inspired by the tourist opportunities at the nearby towns, including St Andrews, the distillery and visitor centre opened in 2014 and released its first spirit in 2015.

With their single malt still maturing, Kingsbarns opened its doors to Darnley's Gin as production moved from London to the Gin House – a former farmhouse – on the site.

Tours of the distillery and Gin House (plus tastings) can be booked online and provide an interesting and informative look at this fledgling operation.

If you're after a more family-friendly destination then a trip to Cambo Country House and Estate, which is only a 15-minute walk away from the distillery, is worth a visit. The estate is known for its snowdrops, which bloom in late winter. Tours of the gardens will keep the kids entertained as will the visitor centre, gift shop and café.

On day two a drive to Elie and a walk on the beautiful beach is a perfect start to the day. If you arrive early enough you may see the Mara Seaweed guys hard at work hand harvesting the wide variety of seaweed in the waters, ready to be

A drive to Elie and a walk on the beautiful beach is a perfect start to the day

sent to be packaged in Edinburgh.

Next stop is Pittenweem, home to an extremely popular arts and crafts fair in the summer. Anyone with a sweet tooth must pop into the charming Pittenweem Chocolate Company's Cocoa Tree Shop and Café. Opened ten years ago, the shop sells handmade chocolates and the café serves the best hot chocolate I've ever tasted.

Those with a more savoury palate need only make the short drive to the St Andrews Farmhouse Cheese Company. This dairy farm diversified



Clockwise from main: Anstruther Fish Bar; Darnley's Gin; St Andrews Farmhouse Cheese Company

in 2008 to produce a range of unpasteurised milk cheeses, which include the moreish Red Anster, made with garlic and chives. As well as picking up some cheese, oatcakes and chutney from the shop, visitors can also see the cheese being made and tucked into a spot of lunch at the charming café.

If you'd like to try a little piece of Fife at home, then East Neuk Cooks (who catered lunch and dinner for us on the first night) offer fresh, homemade dishes for delivery – from canapés to cakes plus everything in between. The gin and lemon drizzle cake was a firm favourite although all dishes were of superb quality. ■

The best, and most direct route to the East Neuk is to drive but if that isn't an option then trains run frequently from Edinburgh to Leuchars, and take about an hour; www.scotrail.co.uk Rooms at the Lahloo Guesthouse (www.lahloobandb.co.uk) start from £69 per night including breakfast. Tours of Kingsbarns Distillery and Darnley's Gin House can be made through the website (www.kingsbarnsdistillery.com) or by phoning 01333 451300. Cambo Estate gardens, gift shop and café are open daily from 10am-5pm; www.camboestate.com

48 HOURS IN

Kommeno, Corfu

Friday, 2pm

Check in at the palatial Corfu Imperial with a chilled glass of freshly squeezed juice while smiling staff whisk you through the formalities. The hotel stands on the Kommeno peninsula, and doubles cost from £270 (www.corfuimperial.com, reservations.ci@grecotel.com).

3pm

If you can bear to leave your room with its views of blue sea and green hills take your pick of the hotel's three private beaches. Watersports include water skiing, parasailing, windsurfing and canoeing.

9pm

Dine at Aristo, the Corfu Imperial's gourmet restaurant, where chef Matteo Temperini presents a memorable €90 tasting menu (€125 with wine) of dishes like smoked grouper with fennel bulb, and trilog of lamb with mizythra cheese croquette and artichoke cream.

Saturday, 10am

Hop on the hotel's free shuttle for a morning shopping and sightseeing in Corfu Town (return at 1:35pm).

2pm

Lunch at the Corfu Imperial's Yali Waterfront Restaurant. The menu features classic Greek seafood.

4pm

Enjoy a 30-minute "relax massage" (€50) or a full hour's deep tissue massage (€120). Emerge feeling fabulous.

9pm

Dine at Steak and Sushi, the hotel's new surf and turf restaurant.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Comfort in Cumbria

Located 17 miles north of Carlisle, The Pentonbridge Inn serves dishes created by Marcus Wareing protégés Jake and Cassie White. Take advantage of A Cumbrian Country Christmas package, available Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays until 30 December. It includes a double room, breakfast, a welcome gift and a three course à la carte dinner, all from £220 per couple. **Call 01228 792732 or see www.pentonbridgeinn.co.uk**

Get creative

Set in 20 acres of grounds in the Yorkshire countryside, Middlethorpe Hall will be the ideal spot to rejuvenate. On 19-21 January, it'll be holding its first Creativity, Health



11pm

Stroll to the Corfu Imperial's sister hotel, the Grecotel Daphnilya Bay Thalasso, for late-night cocktails and dancing at the classy Mandolato Beach Club.

Sunday, 11am

Visit Danilia, a faithful restoration of a 1930s Corfiot village, complete with church, cafe and taverna. Rescued from demolition by Grecotel. If you experience a spot of déja vu, it's because you've seen Danilia on telly – it was used as a set for STV's *The Durrells* (€10).

2pm

Explore olive groves and country roads on horseback from riding stables around 4km from Kommeno; book through the hotel (€55).

8pm

Spoil yourselves with a private sunset dinner on the beach, with a personalised menu and your own waiter.

Monday, 9am

Check out for private transfer to the airport. ■

Robin Gaudie

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) and Thomson Airways (www.thomson.co.uk) fly to Corfu from Edinburgh.

& Wellbeing Weekend led by dance movement psychotherapist Dr Allison Bakari-Singer, who will help guests explore dance, movement, writing and craft. The weekend costs from £549pp (two sharing) with Pride of Britain Hotels, including two nights' accommodation with breakfast, two lunches, two dinners, four creative sessions and spa access. **Call 0800 089 3929 or see www.prideofbritainhotels.com**

Barcelona bound

Jet2CityBreaks are offering three nights' B&B at the four star AC Hotel Som by Marriott in Barcelona, plus flights from Glasgow on 28 December, all from £299pp based on two sharing. **Call 0800 408 5594 or see www.jet2holidays.com**