

Green means go

Since being included on the Government's first green list Madeira is enjoying some overdue attention – and it has plenty to attract sun-seekers and outdoor enthusiasts, says **Jools Stone**

HIKING LEVADA DOS TORNOS

The sweet scent of jacaranda trees fills the air and it's impossible not to feel cheered by the sheer abundance of bright blooms of bottle brush trees. By mid-May Madeira is fully in flower with wild orchids sprouting from the roadsides.

We're taking a short hike along the levadas, a series of ancient water channels used for irrigation to spread the water from lush northern lands to the drier south of the island. The whole network stretches to 2,000km and remains a popular series of trails for walkers.

We pass waterfalls and cross over stone bridges, overlooking deep gorges decked in emerald vegetation. At one dramatic viewpoint we spy a colourful pair of Madeiran chaffinches courting each other while rust-hued geckos bask in the sun trying to look inconspicuous.

Madeira sits closer to the African continent

than the European mainland, yet despite the temperature gauge hitting the mid-twenties, the cute A- framed wooden craft stalls characteristic of the island are mostly selling knitted hats, jumpers and ponchos!

After hiking for an hour or so we're scooted away on a Jeep which cuts its way effortlessly through the spongy forest floor to a restaurant in Santiago with an awe-inspiring view of the rugged northern coast, with the headland jutting out like some giant sleeping, foliage-clad dinosaur. Here each lavish course is paired with a different Madeiran wine – the perfect way to toast this distinctive slice of volcanic paradise.

In high demand

The subtropical Atlantic island of Madeira, along with the rest of Portugal, was one of the first destinations to be added to the UK Government's 'Green List', with UK visitors now able to visit the island

without facing quarantine restrictions.

Madeira has also introduced a new 'Green Corridor' for inbound travellers from the UK, which means that no testing is required for those with vaccination certificate or proof of recovery within 90 days. Additionally all visitors can benefit from one free PCR test on arrival with results processed within 24 hours.

As a result, the island has become a favourite among holidaymakers desperate to get away, with Jet2 reporting that summer bookings increased more than 600% in the 24 hours following the announcement.

Airlines such as Jet2, easyJet and BA have been quick to facilitate demand by adding more flights and holidays from airports in England and Scotland.

Nuno Vale, Director of Madeira Promotion Bureau, commented: "We are ecstatic and beyond amazed with the good news. This will be absolutely crucial for all our UK ▶



MOUNTAIN VIEWS FROM PICO DO ARIEIRO



COASTAL VILLAGE OF PONTA DO SOL



TOBOGGANING IN MONTE

► partners and tourism sector overall. Most importantly, our local members, hotels, leisure and incoming companies will finally restart their activity, welcoming British tourists as usual, who we believe are very keen on travelling right now."

He added: "In a year of great challenges for the tourism sector, Madeira knew how to tread a path of exception, and we are now receiving excellent opportunities ranging from structural work to ongoing promotions. This has been a massive vote of confidence from visitors and tour operators, which Madeira aims to continue throughout 2021."

Portugal's natural gem

Covid-19 cases in Madeira have decreased significantly in recent months and the island is fully open for business with the curfew now reduced to the hours of 23.00 to 05.00 and restaurants now open until 22.00.

G Adventures has experienced high demand for its new Hiking in Madeira option, which explores the island's many hiking trails, including 'levada' walks to waterfalls or rugged mountain paths along breathtaking peaks.

Aside from its natural appeal, Stu Darnley, National Sales Manager, believes that Madeira will serve as a popular alternative to Portugal's busier tourist hotspots, saying: "With Portugal opening its borders to UK travellers, and with the Green List still so limited, it's secured a top spot for many holidaymakers looking to get away in the coming months. But as travellers lock in their trip to the sun, there will be the inevitable issue of crowds in popular hotspots like Lisbon and Porto."

He added: "Madeira is a fantastic

alternative to mainland Portugal but has, unfairly, been seen mainly as a 'silver traveller destination'. In reality, this couldn't be further from the truth, with the island offering a huge diversity of landscapes, great food, amazing adventure activities, trekking options for all levels and beautiful remote areas away from the busy streets of Funchal.

"Our new Hiking Madeira tour saw sales peak throughout May, as travellers looked for different ways to explore the green list destinations."

In a similar vein, independent travel agent, Rachel Tredwell of Not Just Travel, has seen an upsurge in interest. "Madeira has always been popular with British tourists due to its close proximity to the UK and stunning outlook with lush landscapes and Atlantic coastal views. We are now seeing exceptional interest."

What's new

New Brand: Discover Madeira has launched a fresh brand identity centred on the theme of 'Belonging', with a new strapline 'Madeira. Belongs to all.'

The new identity, described by the Tourism Promotion Agency as 'vibrant and playful', has four pillars: A place where I feel good, a place where I feel I'm among friends, a place where I live like a local and a place I always want to return to.

Hotels: The new Zino's Palace in Ponta do Sol, Madeira island, is an opulent historic hotel housed in a heritage building from 1905 with five types of rooms including some suites with sea views.

Set in Funchal city centre, in the quaint old town, is Okulus Villa. A private oasis with four en-suite bedrooms all with stunning views.

Built into the mountainside, the luxury villa features a seafront rooftop terrace with infinity pool and hanging garden and has stairs leading directly down to the beach.

New modern Next Hotel opens this summer as part of the Savoy Signature Collection aimed at hip travellers and digital nomads. All rooms offer balconies and there's an extensive pool-side terrace to enjoy.

Located a few metres from the Cathedral of Funchal is the new Se Boutique Hotel. The 54-room four-star property describes itself as a 'cosmopolitan and urban hotel' in the heart of the city.

Tour operators: Jet2CityBreaks is launching city breaks to Funchal in Madeira, with packages available from November 1, 2021. Flights will operate from nine UK bases.

G Adventures has launched a new six-day Hiking in Madeira tour from Santana to Funchal. Priced from £633pp (usually £749) for departures in September 2021.

Cruise: Riviera Travel's new ship, *World Voyager*, will operate a Morocco, Madeira and Canary Islands cruise as part of its 2022 ocean cruise programme. It will take place on March 24 and April 10 with prices starting from £2,999pp for 11 days.

Top experiences

Toboggan your way down Monte

Only in Madeira can you strap yourself into a wicker basket to hurtle your way down a steep hill. Take a unique exhilarating 30km p/h ride down the dizzying streets of Monte in a purpose-built wicker toboggan expertly steered by white suited men who'll ensure your safety.

Spot marine life: Madeira's archipelago is home to a great range of marine life. Clients could spot around 30 species of whales and dolphins who inhabit these waters, including bottlenose dolphins and blue whales, whilst on a RIB boat tour staffed by an expert marine biologist. Visit the Desertas Islands and meet the refuge of the Mediterranean Monk Seal, better known as the 'Lobo Marinho' (or sea lion).

Taste Madeira wines: A visit to Madeira is not complete without tasting the island's famous wines at one of its award-winning wineries, traditionally accompanied by a Madeira honey cake.

The wines are delicately cultivated by hand, in small poios lands (terraced landscapes), either in the mountains or by the sea. The classic tippie is a liqueur wine but other varieties include Sercial, Boal, Verdelho and Malvasia.

Stop and smell the flowers: Madeira is justly famous for its tropical gardens which make for a wonderfully



PONTA DE SÃO LOURENÇO, THE EASTERNMOST POINT OF MADEIRA

sedate afternoon. The island's Botanical Gardens is among the best, home to over 2,000 plants.

Meet some of the island's rare birds at Liroi Park, which is home to Cockatoos and 'Loricos' (a parrot species) from the Asian tropical islands, Australian parakeets and dwarf parrots among others.

Where to book it

SOVEREIGN - 01293 839473

Sovereign offers a seven-night stay in December at The Cliff Bay, Funchal, from £799pp. The price includes breakfast, return flights from Gatwick, private transfers and airport lounge access. sovereign.com



Located in the heart of Madeira in Portugal, a few meters from the Cathedral of Funchal, is the four-star Se Boutique Hotel.

Combining comfort and character, the cosmopolitan property offers 54 guest rooms, an indoor swimming pool, restaurants, and a terrace bar with panoramic views of the city of Funchal.

Guests can enjoy the hotels vast collection of private art or discover the historic area of Funchal, the Mercado dos Lavradores farmers market, the Cable Car, and the Marina, which are all within walking distance.

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