



The viewpoint at Pico Arêeiro

Take a large tablecloth, pull up the centre, and keep scrunching it up until it's the size of an oval dinner plate – now you have a rough model of the topography of Madeira. The island measures 70km by 25, but its central ridge rises to 1800m and the highlands are cut by many ravines that run steeply coastwards. Much of the coastline is sheer, with cliffs that in places fall 600m into the sea. Little is flat – the high plateau of Paúl da Serra in the west, the very centre of the main towns of Funchal and Machico, the area around Santo da Serra in the east, and the airport runway – but half of that had to be built out over the sea on stilts.

Madeira is very mountainous, very verdant, and surprisingly built-up – at least along the southern coast where there's more-or-less continuous habitation all the way from Calheta to Machico. By contrast the central massif is remote and majestic, and much is only accessible on foot. The old roads wind interminably around the hillsides and at one time a journey from one end of the island to the other could take five or six hours. Travel is now made quicker by new bridge-and-tunnel highways, though progress around the far west coast and the stretch between Santana and Ponta Delgada will still be slow. The buses often follow the old routes to service the villages – slow maybe, but a good way to see places off the beaten track.

One of the main features of the island is its extensive network of **levadas**, built to carry water from the mountains and the rainy north to the drier south. These can be anything from a foot across to miniature canals. Their main interest for visitors is that they provide an interesting and virtually unique set of walking routes, with the benefit that most are on the level – though getting on or off a levada can sometimes mean a climb (or descent) of hundreds of metres. There are few real beaches in Madeira, and this tends to dictate the type of people who visit – typically older visitors who tend to stay around the hotel zone and take coach tours, and more active ones interested in levada- and hill-walking, nature-watching and scuba-diving. Funchal is also just big enough for a short city break.

The **climate** is maritime subtropical, with average day-time temperatures in Funchal between 19°C in winter (the coldest months are January to March) and 26°C in summer (July to September are warmest); May to August is the driest period. It's normally fairly mild at night, too. Summer temperatures can become much hotter in easterly winds, and the full sun can be formidable even in winter. 'Winter' can be wet although in the south the rain rarely lasts for long and poor weather can often be escaped by going to a different part of the island. The north is cooler and wetter, and the uplands can be cold, with frosts in winter.



Funchal from Santa Catarina Park

Practical notes

Madeira is a semi-autonomous part of **Portugal** and therefore in the EU, although geographically it is closer to North Africa than to Europe. The formalities are the same as those for visiting mainland Portugal. The language is Portuguese though it's common for people in restaurants, tourist shops and visitor attractions to speak at least some English.

There are no railways in Madeira but the island is well-served by **buses**, with very frequent services in Funchal (the yellow buses run by Horarios do Funchal), fairly frequent ones to places such as Camacha, Caniço, Machico and Ribeira Brava, and at least a daily bus to remoter parts (though they can be slow). There are also good taxi services in Funchal and from many other towns and villages. It's quite easy to hire cars, though (in the centre of Funchal at least) less easy to park them. Town bus timetables, maps and prepaid tickets can be obtained from the Horarios office in the Anadia centre, or for the rural buses download them from the bus company web sites – SAM, Rodoeste, EACL, and Horarios do Funchal. Many buses can be picked up from the termini near the cable-car station or along the sea front in Funchal.

There's plenty of **accommodation** around the island. Many of the hotels advertised by travel agents and package companies are in the Lido area of Funchal – most are fairly smart, a few are luxurious, but it's basically a holiday resort apart from the city itself. While the Lido area is certainly not unattractive, my suggestion is to go somewhere else. In Funchal this can mean one of the many hotels, *residencials* or tourist apartments in the city centre or Old Town (be prepared for at least some noise from traffic), or a private flat. Further out there are *quintas* (manor houses), *pensões* and *residencials* (guest houses), a few self-catering flats and cottages, plus conventional hotels. From a convenience viewpoint the buses radiate out from Funchal, so unless you are hiring a car (which is straightforward enough) it can make sense to stay there, or at least somewhere like Monte or Garajau that has a frequent bus service to the capital.

Outside Funchal, good options include Machico or Santo da Serra for exploring the east of the island; Ponta Delgada or Santana for the north-east; São Vicente for the north; Porto Moniz in the north-west; and anywhere from Ribeira Brava to Prazeres along the south-west coast. If you aren't hiring a car do check bus connections: of the above, Machico and Ribeira Brava are the best connected. Car drivers can consider more isolated spots, particularly for exploring the mountains. Several internet sites have a fair selection of accommodation: booking.com, vrbo and airbnb are good. In the winter, check how high up the accommodation is: even at 300m it will be noticeably cooler than at sea level, and the high plateau will be distinctly chilly.

Madeira has a reputation for being expensive, mainly because it was a favourite destination for well-heeled northern Europeans who took over whole manor houses, engaged servants and ate and drank only the best. You can indulge in opulent luxury, but it's perfectly possible to see the island on a budget with guest houses and apartments from €50 or less per night, and careful selection of flights can make getting there relatively inexpensive. It's also possible to eat out well on a budget (e.g. plenty of €15-20 set menus). On the whole costs are lower than in much of mainland Europe though more expensive than the Algarve or rural Portugal.



The coast road above Boaventura



Forte do Pico

In and around Funchal

Funchal is a capital city on a small scale (a little under 150,000 inhabitants), a little like parts of Lisbon though with different topography. It occupies a plain where the major valleys (*ribeiras*) of São João, Santa Luzia and João Gomes converge on their way to the sea. From this central area it rises 600m and more into the mountains. The city has plenty of shops, bars, cafés and restaurants as well as a history going back to the end of the fifteenth century. It's bustling and full of traffic, but there are also plenty of pedestrian streets and squares. Funchal is an easy city to stroll around – from east to west, see Fortaleza do São Tiago (on the sea front, now an art gallery), the Mercado dos Lavradores (the covered fruit, vegetable, flower and fish market), the Praça Municipio, the Cathedral (Sé) and area around it, the two parks and the marina. There are lots of back streets and little squares, many of them 'dressed' in white and black cobbles, that will reward a few hours of strolling without any particular aim in mind. Forte do Pico is worth a look mainly for the views, and so is Pico dos Barçelos but it's further up – take the bus up and walk back (see the walks later on). There's also a hop-on hop-off sightseeing bus with multilingual commentary that does a tour of the city centre; it can be a good way of getting your bearings for a first visit.



Praça Municipio

Funchal has several attractive and historical **gardens**. In the centre the São Francisco gardens (a smallish square between the coast road and Rua da Carreira) and Santa Catarina park (on the coast road to the west of the city, just before the hotel zone) are basically public parks but they do contain a good selection of endemic and introduced subtropical plants; the latter also provides some good views along the Funchal sea-front. Adjoining the Santa Catarina park is the Quinta Vigia, the governor's residence, with small and ornate gardens (and a collection of caged birds) also open to the public. Further west – continue along the Avenida do Infante and turn right into Rua Dr Pita as the road bears left – is Quinta Magnolia, now a civic building housing among other things the Library of Foreign Culture. The grounds contain a mixture of sports facilities and well-tended planting; walks extend along the Ribeiro Seco back under the Avenida do Infante. Finally the Quinta das Cruzes – up a steep hill from São Pedro church – has an attractive garden and nursery that are free to enter; a viewpoint outside gives good views over the western part of the city.



Quinta das Cruzes

The **Botanic Gardens** on the edge of town, the old Quinta do Bom Sucesso, is well worth a trip; it's an attractive terraced, semi-wooded park with stunning views over Funchal. Getting there is a strenuous uphill hike from the centre but there is a fairly frequent bus, or take the cable car (*teleferico*) to Monte and then another cable car, from nearby Babosas, across the magnificent João Gomes Valley. It includes a small and rather dowdy natural history museum and a pleasant



Jardim Botânico

licensed café. At **Monte** itself the Monte Palace garden, almost next to the *teleferico* terminus, is interesting and well-run if slightly jumbled in style. There's also a small, attractive public garden below the old viaduct (a steam-powered cog railway used to run from Funchal to Monte until the train's boiler exploded in 1943). Apart from its gardens Monte is worth visiting for its iconic twin-towered church, easily visible from much of Funchal and lit up at night. Don't miss the interior. There is also the possibility of riding back into Funchal in a wicker basket sledge, though it will no longer take you all the way to the centre. Finally the Blandy gardens (**Palheiro Ferreiro**) can be reached from Monte via a levada walk, or direct from town by bus. This is more like an English landscape garden in style, interspersed with areas of more formal planting. Again it offers good views over Funchal.

The **Madeira Story Centre** (close to the Funchal end of the cable-car terminus) tells the history of the island in a series of tableaux. It's done well but fairly expensive. A more conventional museum of Funchal's history is located in the town hall on the east side of the Praça Municipal. For anyone with an interest in photography or just pictures of bygone Madeira - the **Vicentes** photographic museum in Rua da Carreira is worth a look. Its huge collection, dating back to 1848, is the work of four generations of photographers from the same family, providing a fascinating historic archive. Other interesting **museums** include Arte Sacra (also in the Praça Municipal), the Museu Municipal (an old-style natural history museum) opposite São Pedro church, and close to it in Calçada de Santa Clara the Frederico de Freitas



Cathedral from Avenida do Mar

museum (a large private collection of items concerned with Madeira). Further up the hill is the Quinta das Cruzes, already mentioned for its gardens, a period house with furnishings, art and antiques.

For wine-lovers **Blandy's Wine Lodge** on Avenida Arriaga is a must; guided tours (in various languages) explain the history and processes of Madeira production, with a sample at the end. There is also a well-stocked shop and opportunities to spend a small fortune on old vintages, as well as more recent and reasonably-priced produce (Blandy's can take your order and deliver it to their shop in the departure side of the airport). A smaller and rather rustic but interesting museum chronicling the history of wine production on Madeira is located inconspicuously on Avenida 5 do Outubro, one of the main routes heading out of the city centre.



Zona Velha

Eating and drinking in Funchal

Madeiran cookery is typically homely but good. There are lots of fish, often reasonably-priced and expertly cooked, including tuna (*atum*), sea bream (*pargo*), salt cod (*bacalhau*), swordfish (*espadarte*) and scabbard fish (*espada*). Espada is the local speciality: it's a long black deep-sea fish with tender white flesh which is served to several recipes (try it grilled with banana). Meat dishes can be indifferent although beef on a skewer (*espetada*) is usually good (don't confuse *espada*, a sword, with *espetada*, something that has been stuck on a sword). Limpets (*limpas*) and squid (*lulas*) are local and usually good quality. Local soup and bread are fine, particularly the *caldeira verde* or green vegetable soup. While Madeira is waking up to the needs of vegetarians, this doesn't mean that all restaurants will have more than the most basic options, and eating-places may be less aware of meat-based ingredients such as gelatine.

Funchal is full of **places to eat** including basic and more sophisticated 'locals', tourist-oriented establishments ranging from poor value to excellent and a few high-class restaurants. At one time I would have recommended the **Old Town** (Zona Velha) as the place to head for – basically follow the sea front to Fortaleza de São Tiago and then turn inland – but it has become so



popular that prices are not always matched by food and service, though there are some excellent eateries here. Another good option is **Rua da Carreira**, a low-key, partly pedestrianised street that runs parallel with the main Avenida Arriaga but a few blocks further back. It's fairly easy to get a reasonably-priced meal here, though again it is becoming more popular and pricier. Some of the other back streets in the cathedral area will also yield good results. Alternatively continue down to the **Marina**; places here are generally visitor oriented but some of them are very acceptable. As a rule for eating out in Madeira, if in doubt choose places where the diners look like locals.

Madeira isn't big on sandwich-type lunches, though it's easy enough to find salads, toast and confectionery as well as light cooked meals such as omelettes, fishcakes and pasta. There are **coffee shops** everywhere – all individual, no foreign chains (other than at the airport) – and the coffee is pretty standard (small cups but not expensive by city standards, though prices are creeping up). Madeiran coffee tends to come espresso-style (*bica*) or in a larger cup with slightly frothed milk (*chinesa* or *café com leite*); for a latte-style coffee ask for *galão*, though if you want an americano-type drink with unfrothed milk you may have to describe it carefully. I haven't noticed much variation in quality between different cafés, so just choose according to location or for the bakery and patisserie products on offer. Bakery-type cafés are generally cheaper, around half or less of typical UK prices; grander city centre establishments such as the colonial-style Golden Gate, along with those monopolising rural attractions such as Raçaçal, are more expensive. Tea is often available and a few tea-houses are appearing: a particularly good one is the **Loja da Chá** in Rua do Sabão, seaward of the cathedral, which has over a hundred varieties of tea to choose from including the rather delicate ones produced in the Azores.

Many traditional **bars** are fairly basic men's drinking dens. In town the café-style and more trendy-looking bars, or places with outside seating, are often better and more welcoming to women and couples. Out of town hotel bars and some of the more rustic establish-

ments can be fine too. Many bars and restaurants wouldn't think of stocking anything other than Portuguese **wines**, and the variety and quality (of reds at least) is a revelation. For whites try João Pires, and the verde or green wines (fresh and slightly sparkling) such as Casal Garcia or Gatão can be refreshing on a hot day. There's plenty of Madeira of course, occasionally provided as a free taster; the drier varieties, sercial and verdelho, make good aperitifs, while sweeter boal or malvasia (malmsey) work best as dessert wines; you may be offered a glass free after a meal. A few bars stock a variety of **beers**, mainly lagers, but apart from Super Bock from mainland Portugal your choice may be limited to the locally-brewed Coral, a light, hoppy lager that is surprisingly good to my taste, particularly on a hot day. Coral Tonica is a dark version a little like a light, chilled stout.

For self-catering (or packed lunches), Funchal has a good selection of **supermarkets**. The main supermarket chains are Pingo Doce, Sã and Continente. Some of the best in the city centre (both Pingo Doce) are in the La Vie centre close to the roundabout at the end of Avenida Arriaga, and on the lower floor of the Anadia centre. For car drivers there is a large supermarket with parking in São Martinho (Hiper-Sã), and there are others around the island for instance in the 'Camacha Shopping' complex and in Calheta.



Camara de Lobos



Around the island

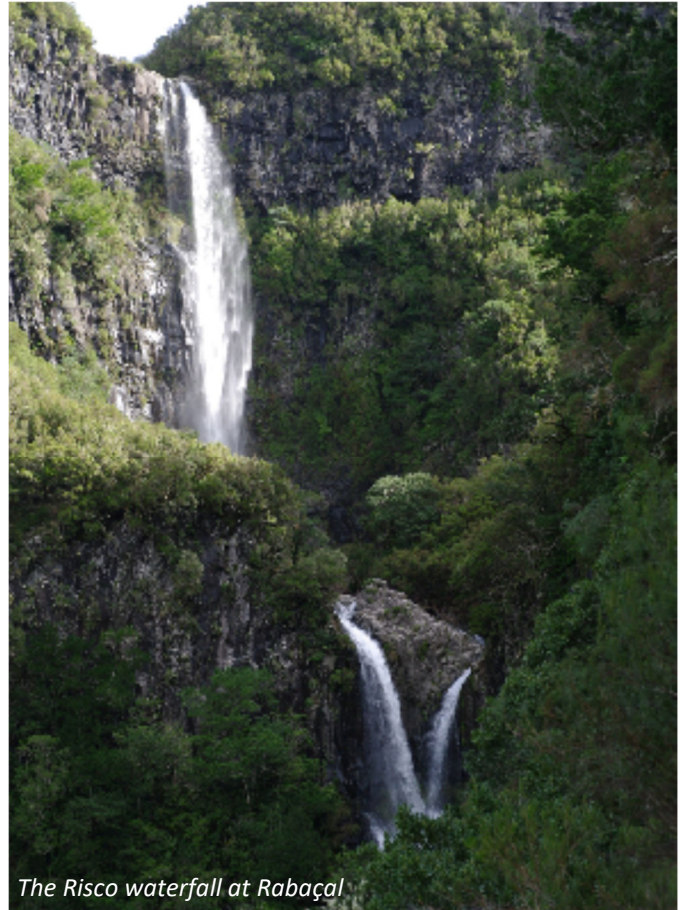
Organised coach trips can be a good way to see (part of) Madeira, though the whole island in a day is too much. A tour of the western half can be worthwhile if you are staying in Funchal and relying on buses, as the public services to the far west are slow and don't include the high plateau. Or hire a car: there are plenty of firms in Funchal and prices are no more than middling, but be warned that off the main routes the roads can be steep, narrow and tortuous and some have sheer drops with little protection.

The south coast going west from Funchal is sunny and has the more obvious seaside resorts. Almost attached to the capital, **Camara de Lobos** is pretty from above and has an attractive fishing harbour, as well as some very acceptable eating places. However it also has a down-at-heel quality, and this is the only place in Madeira where I have been hassled by beggars or felt particularly conscious of needing to protect my money and camera. Slightly further on is Cabo Girão, with the highest sea cliffs in Europe, complete with glass viewing platform – OK for a quick stop-off, or as the starting-point for a walk back to Funchal. A funicular descends from near here to a small area of cultivated land at sea level. Next is **Ribeira Brava**, a small but lively and well-provisioned coastal town at the southern end of the north-south road that runs up to the Encumeada Pass. Walk in a couple of blocks from the sea front and there is an old church and some traditional shops. The small harbour is entered through a short tunnel in the cliffs.



Ribeira Brava

Westwards is a string of villages and small resorts – Tabua, Ponta do Sol, Madalena do Mar, Calheta, Jardim do Mar and Paúl do Mar. On a car tour it's worth stopping off at one of them; Ponta do Sol is quite attractive, but my favourites are **Jardim do Mar**, where steep cobbled pedestrian streets lead to the sea, and **Paúl do Mar**, nestled under the cliffs. There are a few large hotels and several villas and *residencials* along this warm and sunny stretch of coast.



The Risco waterfall at Rabaçal

There's also some accommodation higher up at places such as Arco da Calheta and **Prazeres**, though in the winter it can be much cooler here than at sea level. Prazeres is a spread-out, relaxed, well-equipped village with a good selection of restaurants and accommodation. Further on, the westernmost village on the island – Ponta do Pargo – has an excellent café-restaurant (O Fio) close to the lighthouse.

Inland on the western side of Madeira is a wide area of ravines, forests and moorland that includes the **Paúl da Serra**, a moorland plateau at 1200m above sea level. It's good country for a scenic drive; the winding but wide and well-surfaced road on to the plateau from Ribeira Janela is particularly attractive as it crosses the **Fanal**, a large expanse of dense maquis and spreading old *til* trees. The area is also home to the spectacular walking area around **Rabaçal** at the head of the great Janela valley (see the walks section). For long Rabaçal had no public facilities, but even if you aren't a walker it is worth a trip: there is a minibus down to the Rabaçal house which now has a café in an atmospheric

setting. The walk to the Risco waterfall is fairly easy. Beyond Rabaçal the road continues on to Porto Moniz, with turns to Calheta and Prazeres.

On the north-west side of the island the only centre of any size is **Porto Moniz**, an attractive fishing village and seaside resort that has accumulated a fair collection of accommodation and eating-places as well as attractions such as rock swimming pools, an aquarium and now a the Living Science Centre. It used to be approached from the east by a corniche road running along the north coast, constructed by hand at great effort and cost of lives; this road arrived at a viewpoint above the village (see the picture below) before descending a steep zig-zag. The replacement route runs mainly underground and enters at sea level. It is much faster, but lacks the scenic (if vertigo-inducing) drama of the old road. For several years it was still possible to drive westwards along sections of the cliff-edge, but the road is now becoming choked with rock and it will soon be lost forever, even for walkers. The viewpoint can still be reached from the south, and if you are sure-footed a good way of coming into Porto Moniz is on the steep old trail from Santa Maria Madalena (locally known as **Santa**). Check the (very infrequent) bus times if you don't want to walk back up.



Travelling along the north coast brings you to Ribeira da Janela, the start of the great valley that ends at Rabaçal, and then to Seixal, a harbour village that is worth a short stop. The road finally arrives at **São Vicente**, which sits at the junction of the northern end of the island's main north-south road, on the opposite 'pole' to Ribeira Brava. The first thing most visitors will see is the strip of bars, restaurants and seaside shops tucked under the cliff on the coast road, and the car driver is almost excused thinking that this is all there is. The old centre – still a village in character – is half a kilometre inland, and although it only consists of a couple of streets behind the church, it's rather picturesque. There are several quiet bars to sit in (or outside of) and savour the atmosphere, as well as a choice of guest houses providing an alternative to the sea front hotel. Another mile or so inland are the *grutas*, a series of lava caves open to visitors via a guided tour. When I first visited in the late 1990s the caves offered a simple and interesting experience, but the recent



addition of a new vulcanology centre and repetitive audiovisual displays have in my mind enhanced only the price. A pleasant and not too precipitous walk (depending how far you go) along the Levada da Faja do Rodrigues starts at nearby Miradouro.

From São Vicente it's worth following the somewhat twisty road south over the **Encumeada Pass**, rather than taking the new tunnel. Stop off at one of the refreshment points to admire the views and perhaps take a short walk: the Bar Encumeada, at the top of the path is the start of levada and mountain walks in several directions. A little further down is the large Residencial Encumeada, and beyond that the Pousada dos Vinhaticos above the village of Serra da Agua (climb to the viewpoint next to the Pousada to see the improbably pointed Cristo do Galo or Cock's Comb mountain).



Continuing east from São Vicente the ‘fast’ road continues to **Ponta Delgada**, a relatively flat sea-level village with a bathing pool and various accommodation options. Beyond here is one of the last compulsory sections of the old, twisting coast road (the other is on the west coast between Ponta do Pargo and Porto Moniz). It starts off by going steeply uphill to **Boaventura**, with its attractive church and the Solar de Boaventura hotel-restaurant; the if you are just passing at have a coffee in their circular conservatory. A couple of good walks start here, described later. On to Arco de São Jorge and (not missing the roadside viewpoint at Arco Pequeno) São Jorge itself where the fast road starts again, then to **Santana**. Santana is the most popular destination on the north-east coast and it is home to several (mainly reconstructed) traditional A-shaped thatched cottages, which would have had space for animals and storage below and living quarters above. There is also a *teleferico* down to the coast. Finally it’s worth calling in to the coastal village of **Porto da Cruz**, if only to watch the waves crash on the beach and see the mighty Penha d’Agua or Eagle Rock in close-up.



Penha d’Agua

Inland in the eastern half of the island are the **great peaks**, Pico do Aréiro (or Arieiro), Pico das Torres and the highest, Pico Ruivo, all over 1800m. There’s a road to the top of Pico do Aréiro (which has a café, shop, small museum and conspicuous radar dome), and Pico Ruivo is not too difficult a walk from the car park at Achada do Teixeira, reached from Santana (if you have time, stop off at the Rancho Pico das Pedras and do the short woodland walk to pretty **Queimadas**). The first viewpoint on the Aréiro-Ruivo walk is fairly easy to get to as well, and well worth the effort when the mountains aren’t shrouded in mist (or alternatively have their heads above the clouds). There is however a very long drive between the two ends of the peaks trail. Expect seriously cold weather up here, down to freezing in winter with ice on the paths. Not far from Pico do Aréiro is **Ribeiro Frio** (‘cold river’), home to a trout farm and the starting-point for several walks (as well as the longer levada walks, there’s a short level one on the west side of the road to Balcões, which has good views).



Camacha

Also east of Funchal are the two substantial villages of Camacha and Santo da Serra, connected by a regular bus service and a choice of two levadas, and the little hamlet of Portela. The attractive village or small town of **Camacha** is the home of the island’s wickerwork production – call into the Café Relógio off the large, partly cobbled main square to see examples. The village square is also the place where football is supposed to have been introduced to Madeira by an English resident, Harry Hinton, in 1875. Away from the square and close to the village church are some good local café-bars and a larger restaurant. A short distance out of the village in the Funchal direction is ‘Camacha Shopping’, when it was first built the island’s biggest shopping complex.

Further east **Santo (Antonio) da Serra** sits on a high plateau, not far from Madeira’s airport. It is almost unique in having a long, straight and almost level main street. The Estalagem Serragolf just east of the village is a well-established and comfortable hotel and restaurant, and Santo da Serra has a selection of other eating -places as well as a lively Sunday market. At the eastern end of the village there’s an attractive if slightly overgrown public park in the grounds of an old manor, the Quinta do Santo da Serra; walk to the end to find a belvedere called the Miradouro dos Ingles, with views over the northern suburbs of Machico and out to the São Lourenço peninsula. North of Santo da Serra is **Portela**; its main importance from the visitor’s perspective is its views to the north coast, its position at the start of several walks, and its cosy part-thatched bar and restaurant.



Santo da Serra



Machico

At the eastern end of the island the **São Lourenço peninsula** straggles out into the sea, with an atypical, largely treeless landscape. There is now a café in the old Casa Sardinha near the far end. Tucked in under the peninsula is first a new marina development, then the small industrial town and free port of Caniçal; there is an interesting whaling museum here, along with plenty of coffee shops and a couple of decent restaurants. A little to the west the island's second town of **Machico** is worth a visit (easy by bus from Funchal) or a short stay; it now has a golden beach to go with its fishing and yacht harbour, the sand imported from Western Sahara. There is nothing particularly remarkable about Machico and most of it is fairly modern; the only things that stop it becoming an urban sprawl are the steep hills either side of its valley. Nevertheless the new sea front and the old town just behind it provide a very pleasant spot to spend a couple of hours or more, and it's not difficult to find a good café or restaurant. Pico do Facho, above the town to the east, provides far-reaching views across Machico, the airport, and Caniçal and the São Lourenço peninsula; a road snakes its way almost to the top.

Returning towards Funchal the first significant settlement is **Santa Cruz**, unfairly maligned because of its nearness to the airport. Close-up the village and its church are much more attractive. Past the airport are Caniço and Garajau. Caniço de Baixo is a low-key, well-kept resort with a beach of sorts, favoured by Germans and containing a few decent bars and restaurants if not much else. **Caniço** village is worth a look if passing, while Garajau is basically a mini-resort with, on a path down towards the sea, a statue of Christ like a smaller version of the ones in Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon. A cable-car descends to the beach.

Exploring by bus

As mentioned in the introduction, there is an extensive network of bus routes in Madeira that make it possible to see much of the island from Funchal without hiring a car or using organised trips. The bus companies all provide timetables on their web sites. The following

excursions (assuming a start from Funchal) focus on the north and west of the island; the eastern half, from Ribeira Brava around to Santana, has more frequent services.

The 'grand tour': Porto Moniz and the far west. Starting at 9am, buses 80 and 139 link up to provide a circular route out to Ribeira Brava, north to São Vicente, on to Porto Moniz, then back via Ponta do Pargo and the south coast. The disadvantage of this route is that it involves five to six hours of bus travel for around 3½ hours in Porto Moniz, and a few ten-minute stops elsewhere.

Ribeira Brava, São Vicente and Porto Moniz. A better way to see the north-west is to take bus 7 at 7.30am (schooldays) to Ribeira Brava, which allows an hour to explore before catching bus 6 on to São Vicente. On weekdays there's then a choice of two buses to Porto Moniz, depending on how you want to balance time between the two places. The earlier, weekday bus 150 gives half an hour in São Vicente, but allows enough time to continue to Lamaceiros or Santa for a walk. From Santa walk down into Porto Moniz, or from Lamaceiros explore the Janela valley, returning in enough time for the return bus to Porto Moniz. This will give you two hours there before heading back along the north coast on the 139, either directly to Funchal or breaking the journey at Ribeira Brava perhaps for a meal.

The Encumeada Pass. Several walks start from Encumeada: using buses 7 and 6 as described above allows an hour's break in Ribeira Brava, and over six hours for exploring around Encumeada before the afternoon bus returns (if return bus 6 is on time, you can swap to a fast bus in Ribeira Brava to arrive earlier back in Funchal – or take a break before catching a later one). The returning bus stops both at the Encumeada Pass outside the bar, and at the Hotel Encumeada further down.

The north coast. Take buses 7 and 6 as described above, but continue on the 6 to Arco de São Jorge. It's possible to break at any of the intermediate stops but make sure you are at Arco de São Jorge by 16.30 when the 103 returns to Funchal via Santana. If you take the



South from the Encumeada Pass



6 directly to Arco de São Jorge you can break for an hour or so before catching the lunchtime 103 to Santana, with a longer break there before returning to Funchal on the next bus 56 or 103.

The south coast: The south coast buses beyond Ribeira Brava (principally 8, 80, 142, 146 and 163) link up most of the towns and villages as far as Ponta do Pargo. Careful planning and an early start make it possible to have an hour or more in each of Ribeira Brava, Ponta do Sol, either Prazeres or Ponta do Pargo, and on the way back Calheta.

Walks

Madeira is superb walking country. There are challenging mountain walks, a few woodland strolls and the occasional coastal path, but much of the walking on the island follows the *levadas* – channels for carrying irrigation water that hug the contours, whether that involves meandering gently through bucolic countryside or clinging to the edge of dramatic cliffs with the forest floor a thousand feet below. The walks that follow are some of my favourites; refer to the various walking guides for more details. I mostly use Sunflower Books' excellent *Landscapes of Madeira* (LM) by John and Pat Underwood, now on to its fourteenth edition (2019). Other useful guides include Discovery Walking Guides' two-volume *Madeira Walks* (DWG), by Shirley and Mike Whitehead; the Underwoods' *Walk and Eat Madeira* (WEM); and Paddy Dillon's Cicerone guide (C), which has some longer and more challenging walks, though be warned that he assumes no fear of heights. Some of the more popular walks are now signposted 'PR' trails, and leaflets about these can be downloaded from www.visitmadeira.pt or obtained from the tourist office in Funchal.

Some warnings before embarking on the levadas or mountain walks. First, some levadas (even on the PR routes, which are otherwise well-maintained) have unfenced sheer drops, often with only a narrow path or ledge. On my first visit to Madeira I walked the length of the Levada do Curral, one of the routes in the Cicerone book, which was extremely exposed; in my

view it is only suitable for experts on this kind of terrain who have absolutely no fear of heights. Walkers who aren't familiar with Madeira might prefer at least initially to go as part of a group (there are several firms offering guided levada walks; I haven't used any, but most seem to be reliable).

Secondly, there are *very* occasional reports of walkers being threatened and robbed, particularly in the western Funchal and Camara de Lobos area, and to a lesser extent between Monte and Camacha. Finally landslides and rockfalls can close routes at any time of year; particularly on the PR routes repairs are done quickly (or at least 'closed' signs are put up), but if you have the misfortune to walk just after bad weather and encounter a dangerous section, do turn back.

Monte. Monte is an old spa, now a suburb of Funchal. There is a good (steep downhill) walk across the João Gomes Valley, along the Levada do Bom Suceso, on to the botanic gardens, then to Funchal on roads (see LM, DWG or WEM). An alternative is to take the *teleferico* (or the cheaper bus) to Monte, walk up to Terreiro da Luta and back (start behind the bar in Monte square, follow an old cobbled trail past the 14 stations of the cross, turn right on meeting the road at the top), then take the lower *teleferico* to the botanic gardens, and walk downhill into Funchal. The Levada dos Tornos walk (below) can also be started at Monte using a zig-zag path before joining the levada at Romeiros.

The popular **Levada dos Tornos** (in all the walking books) runs from above Monte all the way to a point a couple of kilometres from Santo da Serra, though it



would take a long day to do it all – so it's best split into two sections, Romeiros to Camacha and Camacha to Santo da Serra. A torch is needed for tunnels. The first half makes a pleasant and fairly easy walk, with a tea house *en route* and a good choice of cafés and bars in Camacha; the second half is more precipitous and requires a steep climb before a roundabout route to the finish. There's also an alternative easy strolling route using the partly-redundant **Levada da Serra**, explained in LM and WEM, that runs from Romeiros via Camacha to Portela.

Eira do Serrado to Curral das Freiras. In most of the walking books. Take the bus to the Eira hotel (check the timetable as not all Curral buses stop here) then walk the short distance to the viewpoint to admire the villages over 500m below. Return to descend the trail to Curral; it's a shortish walk with good views and an impressive waterfall near the end, but it's steep downhill all the way – a pole or two are useful, and watch your step. Return on the bus directly from Curral to save a strenuous walk back.



Ribeiro Frio area. Most of the books include the popular, scenic medium-length walk along the Levada do Furado to Portela. It's best avoided in or just after heavy rain as there may be no views and lots of water cascading on to the path. There are narrow paths above drops, but they are well-protected. An alternative is to turn right at the Lamaceiros water-house and finish in Santo da Serra. There are refreshment stops at both ends, whether finishing in Portela or Santo da Serra, as well as buses back to Funchal (assuming the walk is timed to meet them). But take some refreshments as there is nothing in between. There is also a very worthwhile circular walk based on Ribeiro Frio that breaks off the Levada do Furado to climb alongside the cascading Levada Bezerro (in WEM/LM), and a detour to the tower at Pico da Suna (LM). Other walks in the area include a short signposted there-and-back stroll out to the Balcões viewpoint on the western side of the road, and an old trail that can be followed from Poiso down to Ribeiro Frio (included as the start of a longer walk in the Cicerone guide).



A contrast to the often busy Levada do Furado is provided by the **Funduras** forest to the east of Portela. Several circular walks can be made up, or a path followed down to Marçoços (DWG and WEM). Views are limited to occasional glimpses north and south, but the woodland trails are fascinating and feel remote and primeval; here you may walk for hours without encountering another person.

Rabaçal. Perhaps the best place to get a feel for the interior of the island: this is a rambler's paradise at the head of the great Janela valley, with wooded gorges, high cliffs and dramatic waterfalls. It gets busy at any time of year, so start early and walk down before the shuttle bus starts and the walking groups arrive; save the café until you have come back from the 25 Fontes walk. The walking guides all include several levada routes for this area, and the most popular destinations (Risco and 25 Fontes) are well-signposted once you have descended to Rabaçal house, which can be done by shuttle bus from the car park at the main road (an interesting variation described in LM and DWG is to start from a picnic area on the ER211 south of Rabaçal and walk through a long tunnel to the main walking area, bringing you out below the level of the house). I also like the higher-level (and level) routes on the Levada do Paul (to the Cristo Rei monument and back) and the more exposed Levada do Alecrim, which takes you along the opposite side of the Janela valley (both in LM). There's no public transport to Rabaçal, but organised walks run on most days of the week.





Encumeada Pass. Several walks start here, including a fairly short one on the Levada do Norte (via tunnels) into the Folhadal, a remote area of primeval rainforest (WEM/DWG). Others include a levada walk to Rabaçal which requires a good head for heights, a challenging and punishing walk with over 1500m of descent to Ribeira Brava, and a fairly easy trail on the eastern side of the Pass to the grass bridge at Curral Jangão that can be continued all the way to Curral das Freiras (Cicerone). West of Encumeada there are also some circular walks on the Paúl da Serra that are ideal for motorists.

The Fanal. This is an atmospheric and scenic area of dense maquis dominated by gorse and tree heather, with gnarly *til* trees growing in the open. A short circular walk with good views (LM) starts from the forestry house off the road. You can make up other walks in the area, but they will generally be there-and-back parallel with the road.

From Queimadas. Queimadas, south from Santana, is a pretty hamlet with a small car park. A possibly exposed levada walk (depending on the state of the railings) winds around valleys to the Caldeirão Verde, a pool with high waterfalls that rivals those in Rabaçal (in most guides). The levada continues to the Caldeirão do Inferno in the remote heart of Madeira. Mountain paths (described in the Cicerone guide) also make it possible to complete a long and very strenuous circular walk along the levada to the second tunnel, then uphill to Pico Ruivo, on to the Achada and finally back downhill to Queimadas.



The high peaks. With a car, do Achada do Teixeira to Pico Ruivo and return, or start at Pico do Aréiro and walk to the first tunnel before turning back (or complete the strenuous return trip from Aréiro to Ruivo and back). Alternatively do an organised group walk taking in all three, with transport laid on at the finish. More ambitious routes for mountain experts lead over the 'spine' of the island to Encumeada or Curral das Freiras. All these walks have spectacular 'top-of-the-world' views; the longer ones involve long exposed sections and thousands of steps, some unprotected and slippery.



Levada do Caniçal and coast path to Porto da Cruz. The levada (LM or DWG) starts at Moroços, snakes around the hillsides above Machico, then breaks at the Caniçal road tunnel - with the option of walking downhill (or catching a bus) into Machico, walking through the tunnel and continuing on the levada to Caniçal, or hiking up the hill (Pico do Facho) outside Machico. Machico to Caniçal can be made into a circular walk using a trail above the sea cliffs: it is described in WEM and DWG (detailed instructions are needed as the trail isn't easy to follow). A more ambitious walk (LM) starts at the Caniçal tunnel, follows the levada northwards, then takes an old trail to the coast at Boca do Risco. From here walk along the narrow cliff path - great care is required as there are unprotected drops into the sea - to Lorano, Maiata and finally Porto da Cruz for a bus to Machico or Funchal.

Ponta do São Lourenço. The far eastern part of Madeira is exposed, rocky and largely treeless, unlike anything else on the island. The walk out towards Ponta do São Lourenço has excellent views along the coast and back towards the high peaks; be sure to visit the Baía d'Abra before starting. There is now a kiosk café with toilets just before the end (the walk finishes abruptly at a viewpoint, with no access to the islands or lighthouse below). There are lots of steps and the route follows a knife-edge ridge at one point, but it is well-protected by railings. The parking area near Baía d'Abra can become very busy, but it is also served by bus 113 via Caniçal and Machico.

Boaventura. There are walks on the Levada da Cima above Boaventura, and to Arco do São Jorge on an old trail hugging Pico Alto called the Caminho da Entrosa (LM/WEM). The former has two short exposed sections and can involve walking under waterfalls similar to the one shown on the next page. Both have good views and are 'front door' walks if you're staying in the Solar; it's also possible to start at the pools in Ponta Delgada, follow an old trail from the nearby roundabout up the hillside to Boaventura, then combine the walks to reach Arco de São Jorge. The No. 6 bus returns to Boaventura and Ponta Delgada.



in most potentially dangerous spots; this is still a first-class walk even if not followed as far as the tunnel as described in LM. The Cicerone guide describes a longer walk (that I haven't done) that starts near Fonte do Bispo high on the Paúl da Serra, necessitating a taxi or friendly car driver. This walk descends steeply to the levada, and follows it through several further tunnels (and waterfalls) before meeting the end of the route described above. LM suggests doing it in reverse, which involves 800m of ascent but is probably safer.

In the **south-west** of the island, a single levada runs from Cabo near Ponta do Pargo all the way to Canhas. Various walks are described in the books, basically involving using the bus to connect between different parts of the levada; check bus times and organise the walk to suit, or use a taxi. A circular route can also be done between Ponta do Pargo village and Cabo, using a quiet road to return (DWG).

Another good walk in this area is the triangle between Jardim do Mar, Prazeres and Paúl do Mar: the tough hike up to Prazeres is compensated for by the corresponding downhill zigzag path and the gentle stroll between the two coastal villages at sea level, which is best done so that you are off the beach no later than an hour after low water. A longer alternative, which doesn't depend on walking the coastal section at low tide, descends from Prazeres to Paúl do Mar, along the sea front, then climbs on an old trail to Fajá da Ovelha; from there return to Prazeres on the levada.



São Vicente. There's a short there-and-back walk starting from Miradouro (near Ginjas) along the Levada da Faja do Rodrigues (LM). The start of the walk is quite bucolic and uneventful, but the path quickly leads to a superb *caldeira* or 'bowl' fed by waterfalls, a sort of mini-Rabaçal (see the picture on the next page). It's fairly easy and only gets precipitous if continued on the narrow ledge past the waterfall.

The lower **Janela valley.** This fairly easy walk winds along the western and southern flank of the Janela valley, showcasing the scale and majesty of Madeira's largest gorge. Join the Levada da Ribeira da Janela where it runs into the reservoir at Lamaceiros, a short walk from Lamaceiros village and bus stop (LM). The start of the walk is an idyllic and uplifting stroll through lightly wooded country past the occasional picnic table, with views first to the mouth of the valley and later towards Rabaçal at its head. It gradually becomes more precipitous, although there is protective fencing



There are also some good walks around Funchal. The **Socorridos valley** is included in LM and DWG. The Levada dos Piornais starts off as an easy stroll through banana fields above the hotel zone (not described in the book). Past Quebradas the walk continues through a crawl under rocks and then springs into mid-air on an aqueduct (both can be avoided by following the route down the steps as described in the book). On rejoining the levada continue as far as you dare before turning back. The Levada do Curral continues all the way to Curral das Freiras (it is described in the Cicerone book), but walking it would involve traversing long sections on unprotected narrow ledges cut into the cliff.

Other short walks can be made up in the Funchal area by taking a bus to a viewpoint and strolling back down. One that I like is **Pico dos Barçelos**, from where you can wander downhill on the pavement to São Martinho and then pick any of several routes back to the centre. Another, with views over Funchal bay from the east, is to take the bus out to the Ocean Gardens hotel on Estrada Conde de Carvalhal, and walk back into town from there.

On the other side of town, take the bus to **Cabo Girão**, then after taking in the views follow the Vereda do Lombo do Facho and Caminho Velho do Rancho down to Camara de Lobos (see WEM). Walk around the harbour, then follow the sea-front path past the cement works and along Praia Formosa to the headland at Piornais. Following a short diversion inland, a tunnel provides a passage through the headland, although if it is closed the detour on the road is not particularly interesting. The final stage of the walk returns to Funchal via the hotel zone.



Vertically downwards from Cabo Girao

Note. Between November and March there are fewer flowers the higher up you go, so some of the higher-altitude levadas that the books describe as lush with blossom will be disappointing in winter. I did the Santo da Serra to Sitio das Quatro Estradas circular walk (LM) in January and there were no views and no flowers, only lots of slippery mud, fallen trees and a cold stream to ford. Steep downhill sections can also be very slippery and potentially dangerous, though many will dry out after a couple of rain-free days even in winter.



Levada da Faja do Rodrigues

Porto Santo and offshore

Porto Santo is Madeira's only inhabited neighbour, about 40km from the larger island and around the same size as Jersey. With a resident population of only 5000 plus a few hundred visitors catered for by maybe nine or ten hotels and guest houses, it is quiet. It's very different from Madeira, more like a smaller and quieter version of Lanzarote – flat and golden-brown with now-extinct volcanoes, a magnificent sandy beach and palm trees. While you won't be guaranteed good weather, the climate is drier than on the bigger island and often a degree or two warmer. Porto Santo can be visited from Funchal on the comfortable ferry (about €50-65 return), apart from a month or so when it is hauled out for winter maintenance. Sailing is an experience in itself and provides good views along the southern Madeiran coast and the São Lourenço peninsula. Alternatively take the plane (Binter, around €100) for more time to explore.



Porto Santo beach



A **day trip** doesn't allow enough time to see the whole island but it's ample for walking along the beach to Vila Baleira and exploring the immediate surroundings, or hiring a bike. Car hire costs the same for one day or three, so it isn't very economical for a day trip. A longer stay allows for some real exploring. Half a day is ample for a quick recce of the whole island by car; the real convenience of hiring is for driving to secluded bays or the starts of walks. There is a bus service with several different routes, including one that can be used for an island tour, but most services run only once or twice a day; an exception is the no. 1 to Camacha (timetables from the terminus in Vila Baleira).

Vila Baleira is the only settlement of any size on Porto Santo, and it is hardly more than a large village; it does however have a supermarket, banks, petrol stations, coffee shops, bars and restaurants as well as most of the island's hotels. The central square is quite pleasing and has two café-restaurants with outdoor seating; nearby is the Museu Cristovão Colombo, claimed to be the place where Columbus lived when he visited the island. Travelling around the island visit Calheta in the south-west for views of the rocky islet Ilheu de Baixo (and be sure to detour to the Miradouro dos Flores for better views of the islet and a panorama along the south coast); north of the airport, call in at the Fonte d'Areia, a spring purported to bestow eternal youth; drive around the winding but wide mountain road in the north-east of the island, stopping off at various viewpoints and taking a detour to the little beach at Porto dos Frades; and visit the harbour, where yachts on passage – Porto Santo is a favourite transatlantic stopover – are invited to contribute a small mural to the harbour wall.

Porto Santo isn't noted for **walking** in the same way as Madeira, but it does have some good upland and coastal walks – just not along levadas. Two trails are signposted and deserve to be better known. I walked both of them on a fine February day and didn't see another soul, even on the road that connects them. The dramatic PR1 tracks around the side of Pico Branco and climbs to Terra Cha, the final strenuous (and well-protected) ascent being rewarded by a sudden change

of scenery from exposed mountainside to gentle pine woods and eventually a shaded picnic site on the end of the promontory. The PR2 loops between Pico Castelo and Pico do Facho through pleasantly varying terrain, with an optional climb to the Pico Castelo viewpoint; it can be made into a figure-of-eight walk by using a cobbled road on the return. Other walks can be made up from the map; the most interesting are west from Fonte d'Areia, and around the south-eastern tip of the island from Porto dos Frades. Or exchange walking boots for sandals and walk along the beach from Vila Baleira to Calheta, returning by bus.



It's not possible to land on the uninhabited **Desertas** islands without a permit (normally only granted to *bona fide* scientists), but yachts often anchor close by for lunch and to allow swimming and snorkelling. Trips are advertised on the kiosks in the marina in Funchal. A trip on the Santa Maria is also worth doing, once: it's a replica of Columbus's ship that makes short passages along the coast. It can sail but most of the time it's incongruously powered by diesel.

Produce

Madeiran specialities include small, sweet bananas, the rich dark cake called *bolo de mel*, *espada* or scabbardfish, sea bream (*pargo*), tuna (*atum*), and *espetada* (a type of beef kebab). Plus there are all sorts of fruits (look in the market in Funchal to see what a brilliant climate Madeira has for fruit-growing, from apples to bananas, mangos and lemons). Sugar is no longer produced commercially although the occasional remnant of a plantation can still be seen. Look out for crystallised sweets (*rebuçados*), normally in pine, fennel and eucalyptus flavours, often sold from roadside stalls. Madeira is of course famous for its eponymous fortified wine, *vinho da Madeira*. The cheaper wine (normally labelled from dry to sweet) is made from red *tinta negra* grapes, while matured Madeira comes from one of four white grape varieties – from sweet to dry they are malvasia (malmsey), boal, verdelho and sercial; a fifth, rarer variety, terrantez, fits in the mid-



Mercado dos Lavradores

dle of the range. Varieties are rarely mixed, though vintages are – so a ‘ten year old’ wine may contain grapes between eight and twelve years in age, while a vintage of a stated year is from a single harvest. Madeira also produces a small amount of red, rosé and white wine – in my view the red is fine but most of the white is indifferent, excepting the verdelho from Porto Santo.

Non-edible products include wickerwork baskets and furniture (mainly from Camacha), embroidery (particularly very expensive tablecloths), furniture in dark wood, and decorative tiles or *azulejos*. And of course the flowers – some vendors pack them in special boxes for air transport home.

Maps and guides

Over the years that I’ve been going to Madeira I have picked up a fair collection of maps and guides. The best non-specialist small English-language guide that I’ve seen is the Baedeker one (now out of print), which is practical and fairly comprehensive with a serviceable road map. Anita Montonen’s *Madeira in a Nutshell* is a good practical guide, and I also like the Insight Guide, which has plenty of ideas for places to see and makes a good pictorial souvenir. For plant identification, a copy of *Plants and Flowers of Madeira* by Antonio da Costa and Luiz de Franquinho is useful: it is out of print but easy to find on the internet.

I’ve already mentioned some specialised guides in the walking section. The first of these, the Sunflower *Landscapes of Madeira* by John and Pat Underwood, is probably still the best walking book and it includes quite a lot of general information and some car tours. The inclusion of short walks and picnics means it isn’t just for the hardened explorer. If I had to take just one Madeira guide with me, this would be it. The Discovery Walking Guides by Shirley and Mike Whitehead (one with easy to moderate walks, the other with more challenging routes) are more purely walking books and they include waypoints for GPS. Several routes are shared between the books but there are enough differ-

ent walks to make it worth having books by both authors. The Underwoods’ *Walk and Eat Madeira*, also published by Sunflower Books, has a few walks not in *Landscapes*, but its main attraction is the restaurant recommendations and recipes. Paddy Dillon’s Cicero-ne guide adds some more strenuous and adventurous walks, as well as including Porto Santo; be aware that the author is very sure-footed and some of the routes are more precipitous than perhaps most walkers would like to tackle. Finally, Raimundo Quintal’s excellent *Levadas and Footpaths of Madeira* has recently been reprinted; it can be worth having for the local information, anecdotes and almost poetic writing style, although the route descriptions are sometimes quite sketchy.

Almost every tourist map publisher includes Madeira in its series and most are good enough for driving on the main routes (as is the free map available from the information centre, which unlike the priced ones is updated annually). For more detail, choose the World Mapping Project (Reise Know-How Verlag) 1:45,000 map (clear and easy to use), printed on toughened, waterproof paper; the Kompass 1:50,000 map, excellent for detail but denser in presentation; or the Discovery Walking Guides Tour & Trail map at 1:40,000, also available in a waterproof version and probably the best for walking trails (it is now also the most up-to-date). None of these maps are completely accurate, as I found out when staying in the Loreto area; the Kompass one was best. The Portuguese equivalent of Ordnance Survey publishes a series of 1:25,000 maps covering the island and while some detail such as contours is excellent, they are not very up-to-date and can be difficult to follow on the ground.

Porto Santo is shown on the World Mapping Project and Kompass maps (the latter at reduced scale), though the free tourist map is adequate if keeping to marked paths; none show the full range of walking trails. For a more detailed map of Funchal the Geoblocco tourist map is quite good, though for its scale it could have a lot more information. Online, I find Open Street Map has an impressive amount of detail across most of Madeira, and it is available free (as Organic Maps) as a smartphone or tablet app.

Orientation

This map (like any other of the island) will probably be out-of-date by the time you get there, as there has been an ongoing programme of road-building since the early 1990s. The intention is that fast roads will be in place all around the island, filling in the gaps between Raposeira and Porto Moniz, and Ponta Delgada and São Jorge. However, road-building has slowed over the last decade, and the sign 'Obras' (works) is no longer as prominent in Madeira as it once was.



Fire and water

On 20th February 2010 many parts of Madeira were hit by flash floods that caused widespread damage and loss of life. Later in the year, and again in August 2016, the interior suffered sweeping forest fires. While the islanders have been quick to clean up and rebuild, the scars of the most recent fires were only beginning to heal by 2023.