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The Magic of Happenstance... Madeira, Portugal

The Magic of Happenstance... Madeira, Portugal, Part 1



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Happenstance landed me in Funchal, Madeira, Portugal during the Extreme Sailing Series, a Catamaran race that tours the world over the course of 10 months.

No, I'm not a sailor, nor did I know anything about sailing other than the fantasy images in my head of cocktail sipping, Docksider-wearing glamorous rich people relaxing on the Mediterranean Sea, intercut with horror images from films like *The Perfect Storm* and *The Guardian*.

Although I've travelled extensively internationally, Madeira wasn't on my radar. But having been there for just 5 days at the suggestion of a Portuguese friend who helped arrange the itinerary for several European sports reporters and me, I'm ready to relocate.

The small volcanic island with 300 tunnels and virtually no crime has an almost 600-year history. This is the Cliff Notes version of my action-packed, blink-of-an-eye, whirlwind experience in the eco-centric paradise.

Here are several highlights from my journey:

HIGHLIGHT #1 - Cristiano Ronaldo, cliff-side dining, rainbows, and nuns...

After flying through the night and not having slept, I arrived at the hotel at 9:30am only to be swept up immediately for an open jeep tour into the mountains. I went from sea level in Brooklyn, to an airplane, to sea level in Funchal, to over 6,000 feet, back to sea level, and through four climates, all before lunch!

The required first stop was to see a mural of one of the Island's most treasured god's - football (soccer) player Cristiano Ronaldo. He co-owns the CR7 Hotel, themed with all things soccer including Astroturf carpeting, closets designed like lockers, and a painting of him above the bed. Next to the hotel was the CR7 Museum, dedicated to all things you know whom, including a life-sized statue. National treasure for sure, mixed with perhaps a slight ego.

Back in the day, because of its ideal location between Africa and Europe, Madeira was a major hub for international trade and is even considered one of the world's first tourist destinations, which brought with it kings, queens, aristocrats, art, jewelry, and merchants, all an aphrodisiac for pirates.

There we were, less than two hours after I arrived, up in the breathtaking mountains at a lookout point overlooking Nun's Valley (Curral das Freiras), where the nuns of the island set up a village to escape the female-hungry pirates. No joke!

It was misty, foggy day, with a slight drizzle, and then as if on-cue in a Hollywood movie, a full rainbow appeared over Nun Valley.

Seriously?

Still a crunchy granola hippy chick under it all, I took this as the most perfect sign from the universe that my trip was blessed by the heavens!

It only got better from there. The scenery, vegetation, ocean view, hairpin turns, picking fresh tropical fruit off trees along the road, chickens and pigs hanging out

unsuspecting of their imminent fate, day lilies and other tropical flowers, all were spectacular.

And then, as though we arrived in the fantasy land of Narnia – the indigenous Pine Forest in Montado do Barreiro National Park. Moss covered trees, some with wild mushrooms that no doubt could cure anything, against the white mist, Lily of the Valley trees aka Beard of Old Man, whose trunks were turned into walking sticks (who knew, I thought they were just pretty flowers that came up from the dirt), chestnut trees, eucalyptus, and absolute silence, an unfamiliar sound to this Brooklynite.

Lunch was at Quinta Do Furaio, a 44-room hotel even higher up in the mountains, but when we arrived, the hotelier decided lunch was to be outside.

A long table was set at the edge of the cliff, with a backdrop overlooking what could have been the Big Sur area in northern California, all with a bird's eye view of the Atlantic Ocean. Traditional drinks were served -- Madeira on Ice, with medium dry Madeira wine, orange, lemon, mint, and lime juice, which we drank as the chef fed us Salada de Queijo Fresco e tomate (salad of homemade cheese and tomato), espetada de Novilho da Regiao em Pau de Louro aka regional salted beef skewer on bay leaf wood, followed by Tarte Fina de Maca com Gelado Vinho Madeira (apple tart fine with Madeira Wine ice cream). Yum and delicious, are understatements.

Yes, Madeira Wine finds its way into a plethora of unexpected dishes in Madeira.

Once a month, guests of this hotel trek in the middle of the night up the mountain with lanterns, to watch the sunrise and eat the breakfast that's waiting for them on the mountaintop. This was the first of many times during my visit that I asked, "Can I have job here?"

HIGHLIGHT #2 - Wine, not whine, and breaking convention...

What better time to visit an historic winery for a tour and tasting than first thing in the morning. I had jetlag so technically it was the middle of the night and easily justified to drink at that hour. No whining from me!

American pride at 200+ years old is fine and dandy, but being in the Madeira Winery, that's been around since 1840 and run by seven generations of the same family was humbling.

A couple of fun facts about Madeira wine:

- America's first Independence Day toasted with it.
- It's kept in attics, as it needs heat to age.
- The heating process was discovered by accident in the early 18th century by sailors when a barrel was accidentally left out in the sun.

- Barrels are kept upright, not on their side.
- Grape skins are separated – there's no color divide; white grapes make red wine; red grapes make white wine.

If only America's brave new world were that simple.

HIGHLIGHT #3 – Dolphins, sex, almost skinny-dipping, Grub Hub Madeira style, and a cable car...

Who knew that dolphins were polyamorous, females don't know who the baby daddy is, and they do girl on girl, boy on boy. After the mother has her last baby, that baby takes care of the mother for the rest of her life. Each male has eight dolphin mamas for reproduction. Pregnancy lasts six months, and their life expectancy is 40-50 years.

We headed out dolphin watching with Rota dos Cetaceos, and two guides - our very own Gilligan and the Skipper meet Jacques Cousteau. They guaranteed we'd see dolphins because they had spotters at various points on the cliffs of the island with binoculars, tracking where the dolphins were hanging out.

With a determined focus, they straight-lined us out into the Atlantic, and alas, they were right. The motorboat engine was cut as we were surrounded by schools of dolphins, including mother's training their 1-2-day old babies how to breathe.

All the tour companies came to an agreement with the government to not spend more than 20 minutes at a time around the animals as it causes them too much stress and they could have dolphin heart attacks. Yes, we all got teary-eyed at that thought!

The owner of the company, whose grandfather was a whaler, was on a mission to save the whales, dolphins, and seals.

Our dolphin time was up, and the boat headed straight to the cliff shoreline, but not before a swim stop. Unprepared with no bathing suit, I stripped down to my thong and jumped in after a bout of shyness. I thought about how liberated the dolphins were and figured my boobs and booty would go unnoticed.

There was a lone small house in a crevasse along the shore where a fisherman lived with his wife. People called him daily to see what he'd caught, they placed their order, he later picked them up by boat (his place was only accessible by sea or scaling the side of the cliffs), and brought them back to his house where his wife had prepared their chosen fish for lunch. If only Grub Hub or Seamless in New York were like that!

Our skippers left us at our lunch spot -- the restaurant in Faja dos Padres, set in a remote cove along the southern coast at the bottom of Cabo Girao, the second highest cliff in the world. At this secluded tourist resort, we ate fresh tuna cooked Madeira

style, drank Malmsey wine, watched the ocean do its thing, and relaxed even more than I thought was possible.

Until 1998, this location was only accessible by sea, but it turned out our ticket out was what they call a 'modern glass elevator,' up almost 1200 feet making it one of the highest in Europe.

To get to it, we walked through beautiful land filled with papaya, mango, avocado, banana, passion fruit, and guava trees. This was a good distraction because the ride up the side of a mountain in that elevator thing was scary! I just kept repeating in a rapid monotone, 'don't move, don't move, don't move.' Not sure why, just a nervous reflex!

HIGHLIGHT #4 – Tobogganing down a mountain in a wicker basket, blow torching sardines, and mojitos...

The above-mentioned highlights were fabulous but could be considered in the realm of normal. Not the case for what came next.

Up another mountain we went in a cable car from the center of Funchal to Monte for a wicker basket toboggan ride back down the mountain. Excuse me, say what?

Originally this madness was a means of fast transportation circa 1850 down to Funchal, but somewhere along the way, it became a great tourist draw.

Seated in this two-seater wicker Uber on wooden runners, we were pushed and steered down the mountain by two traditionally dressed men in white cotton clothes, straw hat, and rubber-soled boots they use as brakes. Not a confidence building sight!

We literally flew down the mountain to Livramento, which, by the way, was on the regular narrow street with parked cars and pedestrians. It took about 10 minutes to go 1.25 miles at almost 30mph. And yes, we were screaming all the way down as at times we were headed straight into whatever was in our way.

For another early morning drinking experience – the best mojitos in Madeira, we drove across the island to Calheta where we met Fabio Afonso, owner of Maktub Paul do Mar. Think Woodstock circa 1968 meets Jamaica to equal another piece of heaven.

This small but mighty destination that was all about mojitos, reggae, and sunsets, won awards two years running for selling 2,000 mojitos in one year. With the universal sounds of Bob Marley playing and a slow jam pace, the restaurant was covered with visitor's writings all over the wall, leaving comments or messages for friends that would arrive at another time.

Inside it looked like a giant souvenir. For room service, you lowered a basket out the window and Fabio sent up a mojito! Ah, the small touches go so far!

With mojitos in hand at about 11am, Fabio brought a slab of salt rock to the table and lined it with big sardines. Then out came the blowtorch, yes that kind of blowtorch, with which he cooked the sardines one at a time. Melt-in-your-mouth delicious. Mine was a virgin mojito so I didn't imagine this!

'Can I have a job here?' I asked as I hugged him for one last photo.

The Tourism Bureau tagline/slogan for the island said it best. **Mind. Body. Madeira.** It was truly paradise and a place I shall return to often with my brand new 52-page passport that's aching to be stamped, and a reality in America that makes me want to relocate pronto.

Comments, shares, and likes are welcome!

Susan Jacobs is a writer, storyteller, strategist, and world traveler. She contributed a chapter to the book "Pain, Purpose, Passion: That Was Then, This is Now," and has a book publishing deal with The Round House Press for whom she is working on her first memoir. She is a contributing blogger for Huffington Post, Yogic Living, Thrive Global, and Identity Magazine, and her writing has appeared in FourTwoNine Magazine, Aquarian Times, Spirituality & Health, PR Week, and IndieWire.