

August 18, 2004

Our 1½ month stay in the Azorean archipelago has definitely been one of the highlights of this cruise. We continually were enchanted by the beauty of the islands and hospitality of its people. The people were pleasant, laid-back, and proud of their heritage and deep-rooted traditions dating back some 300 to 500 years. The Azorean cheese, bread, and wine were delicious and made a delightful addition to any meal. While in the Azores, we enjoyed some of their festivals or “festas” and visited four of the nine volcanic islands: Faial, Pico, Terceira, and Sao Miguel. Being at the crossroads of the Atlantic, the Azores also displayed much seafaring and maritime history. If it weren’t for the sailing seasons, we could easily have lingered longer.

We spent four relaxing, peaceful weeks in Horta on the island of Faial. This “downtime“ was much needed by us both, and the time passed by so quickly. We enjoyed walking around the quaint, charming town with its narrow cobblestone streets and mosaic designed sidewalks. Almost each street had a different design. Families ate late and so often we would hear from our boat late into the evenings (almost until 11:30 pm) the sounds of children playing in the small park nearby as their families lingered along the waterfront socializing with neighbors. As there were only about 15,000 people on the island, it was evident that almost every family knew every other family. It also made us feel quite safe to be in such surroundings.



Pictures of Horta



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It was so much fun staying in the Horta Marina. Not only was the marina right in the middle of the small town, but we were surrounded by a large cosmopolitan cruising community. Around 1175 cruising boats visited Horta each year, and when we arrived on July 4th the marina was packed. Although many different countries’ flags from around the world were represented and many different languages were spoken, there was a common bond amongst us all. If only the world could have that common link.



During our first four days we rafted along the inner breakwater outside of two other boats, one Danish and the other French. For the remainder of our stay we were moored in a slip and enjoyed fellow cruisers from Canada, Spain, the United Kingdom, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands. As the month of July progressed, the marina became less crowded with more boats leaving than arriving.



Kuhela Horta Marina

When we first arrived in the marina, we were amazed by all the beautiful and colorful graffiti left by fellow cruisers on the walls and walkways of the marina. It was a tradition for all cruisers calling in at Horta to leave their boat’s name on the marina walls or walkways. Otherwise, it was said that bad luck would befall the crew and its boat during their next passage. So, almost every day we would see fellow cruisers hard at work painting their graffiti before they set sail. Even tourists came down to the marina to look at all the artwork. So that we wouldn’t have bad luck, our signature can now also be permanently seen on the Horta marina wall. As KUHELA is an Hawaiian word meaning “to move along as the crest of the sea,” Mary painted a wave design.

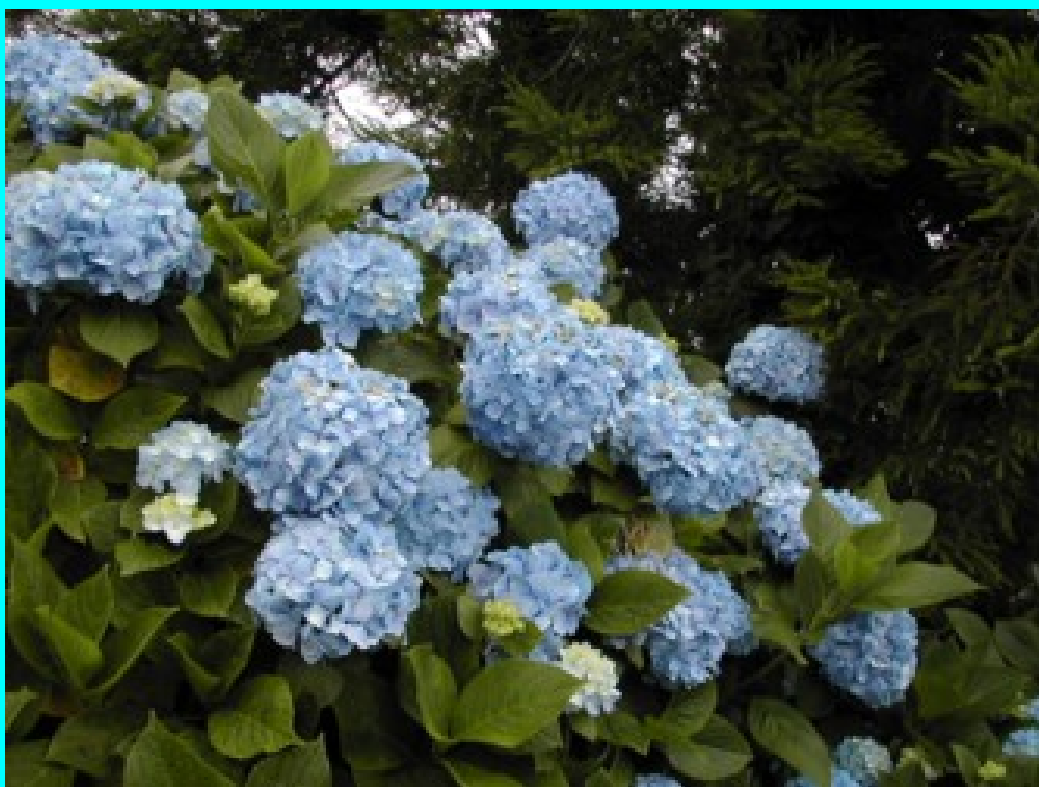


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Even though we had a most relaxing time while in Horta, we still worked on the boat. As this was our initial European port, Phil was busy in the beginning converting some of our boat systems to European standards such as our electrical and water connections. Also, it was necessary to get the items fixed which had caused us problems on our passage from Bermuda to the Azores. Our first week in Horta the parts were ordered to fix our self-steering vane, and a week later those parts arrived and Phil fixed the vane. Phil designed a new chain stripper for our anchor windlass, had it fabricated at a local shop, and then reinstalled it on the windlass. It now works better than before. Our email modem was sent off to Germany to be repaired. It was fixed the same day it arrived in Germany, just a week after mailing, and then took four weeks to be returned to the Azores arriving just five days before we departed for Portugal. Also, our Sumbrella protective covering attached to the outside of our roller-reefing jib had started to unravel while at sea and it was re-sewn at a local sail shop.

During our stay we rented a car for a day with another cruising couple and explored the island of Faial. As Faial was only 67 square miles in area, it didn't take long to travel around the island. From different viewpoints we overlooked beautiful pastoral scenes. Whitewashed houses with reddish-orange tile roofs dotted the landscape. On Faial fields were separated by hedges, and on the northern side of the island these fields were hedged by hydrangeas. As the soil on Faial was acidic, these hydrangeas were blue in color. In July when the hydrangeas were in bloom, a mass of blue could be seen dividing the fields and lining the roadsides. It was quite spectacular.



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In our travels that day, we visited the Botanical Garden at Flamengos, the large crater (caldeira) in the center of the island, Ponta dos Capelinhos on the far western tip of the island, and the natural swimming pool at Varadouro. In 1957-1958, eruptions occurred at Capelinhos creating two more square kilometers of land to Faial. A visit to the small museum nearby brought the entire eruption to life. A total surprise was the natural swimming pool we saw at Varadouro. Azoreans loved the water, and as there weren't many natural sand beaches on the island of Faial, natural swimming pools were created around some of the interesting basalt rock formations lining parts of the island. This one was stunning with its narrow concrete walkways; it was almost like something that one might see at Disneyland.



From our boat we had a beautiful view of the majestic dormant volcano of Pico when it wasn't hidden by the clouds. This mountain was around 7700 feet high, making it the tallest in Portugal. It was only befitting therefore that we visit the actual island of Pico across the narrow channel from Faial. Pico was about 2½ times the size of Faial with about the same population. We took the early morning ferry over to the small town of Madalena and then traveled by bus along the southern shores of the island to Lajes do Pico. Here we visited the Whaler's Museum (Museu dos Baleeiros) which displayed an interesting exhibition showing how whaling was done in the Azores using small open whaleboats outfitted with sails and hand-thrown harpoons.



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As Pico was the youngest island geologically in the Azorean archipelago, its terrain was different from that of Faial. Here, instead of hedges separating the fields, lava rock walls were built. The early settlers created their first vineyards by building small lava-wall enclosures to protect their plants from the salt winds and also gain extra heat for the plants. As we traveled along on the bus, it was exciting to still see these small enclosures. Even today, most of the Azorean wine is still grown on the island of Pico. Before catching our ferry back to Faial, we visited a small wine museum in Madalena.



While in Horta, we enjoyed some of its festivities. One took place on a Saturday evening when a small village procession of drums, children carrying village heirlooms, young women dressed in “capote” capes, and decorated ox carts with squeaky wooden wheels paraded down to the waterfront proudly displaying their heritage and deep-rooted traditions.



Sea Week (Semana do Mar), held the first week in August, was Horta’s biggest festival of the year. Throughout the month of July we watched as colorful lights were strung along the waterfront, booths were put up, and stages erected. During the days of the Portuguese empire and later during the whaling days of the 1800’s, Horta was a major port and repair facility. During its prime as a whaling center, there could be as many as 150 whaling ships anchored in Horta bay at any time. Now it was a major port of call by yachtsmen from around the world. Thus it seemed fitting that Horta have a big sea week celebration. As such, we the cruisers at the Marina were presented on the Friday proceeding Sea Week with a blue hydrangea plus a bottle of Pico’s best white wine, Terras da Lava. We postponed our transit to Terceira by a few days to enjoy some of the festivities of Sea Week. These included partaking of fish soup and pork shish kebob, watching the opening ceremonies on Sunday, observing the festival of Nossa Senhora da Guia, and enjoying some of the nightly entertainment.



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Most memorable was the festival of Nossa Senhora da Guia, the protector of the fishermen. This started with fishing boats carrying the honored statue of Nossa Senhora da Guia from one side of Horta to the main wharf where a blessing was then given by the priest. Next, the solemn procession continued to the church accompanied by two village brass and woodwind marching bands (called filarmonicas). As we watched the procession, it seemed like everyone was swaying back and forth in unison to the beat of the music, a most endearing scene



The evening entertainment during Sea Week took place on one of the four stages set up for the weekly event with different groups playing at 9 pm, 11:30 pm, and 1 am. The main nightly performance always took place at 11:30 pm on the main stage located at the marina. On Sunday night we heard the beautiful singing by the Portuguese singer “Vitorino”.

Monday afternoon, August 2, we departed Horta and sailed overnight 73 nautical miles to the town of Angra do Heroismo on the island of Terceira. This historic regal town captured our hearts with its beautiful 17th and 18th century architecture and delightful people who were so very proud of the great role their town had played in Azorean and Portuguese history. Angra was the first settlement in the Azores to gain the status of town, the last Portuguese territory to submit to Spanish rule, the first capital of the Azores, and in Portuguese history an important Liberal stronghold during the struggle between the Liberalists and the Absolutists. For its role, Angra was renamed “Angra do Heroismo” for its “demonstration of patriotism and spirit of sacrifice.”



The marina at Angra do Heroismo was built at the footsteps to the “original doors” of the city, symbolically represented by arches. Each day as we entered the town through these arches, it was exciting to think that these same arches were walked under by sailors of an earlier era when Angra’s harbor was a major port of call to many ships. Because of our travels to Cartagena, Colombia, it was interesting to realize that the Spanish armadas returning with treasures from the New World stopped in Angra during the 17th century to regroup before heading to Cadiz, Spain. This was due to the many pirates off the North African coast.



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The population of Terciera was around 57,000, and its size was just a little smaller than that of Pico. We spent six wonderful days enjoying Angra do Heroismo and the island of Terceira. We explored many of Angra’s beautiful buildings and churches and visited its museum. We toured the large impressive Spanish fortress “Fortaleza de Sao Joao Baptista” built in the late 16th century, hiked to the top of Monte Brasil, and tried “alcatra,” a meat dish cooked and served in a clay pot. From our boat, the sounds of church bells could regularly be heard.

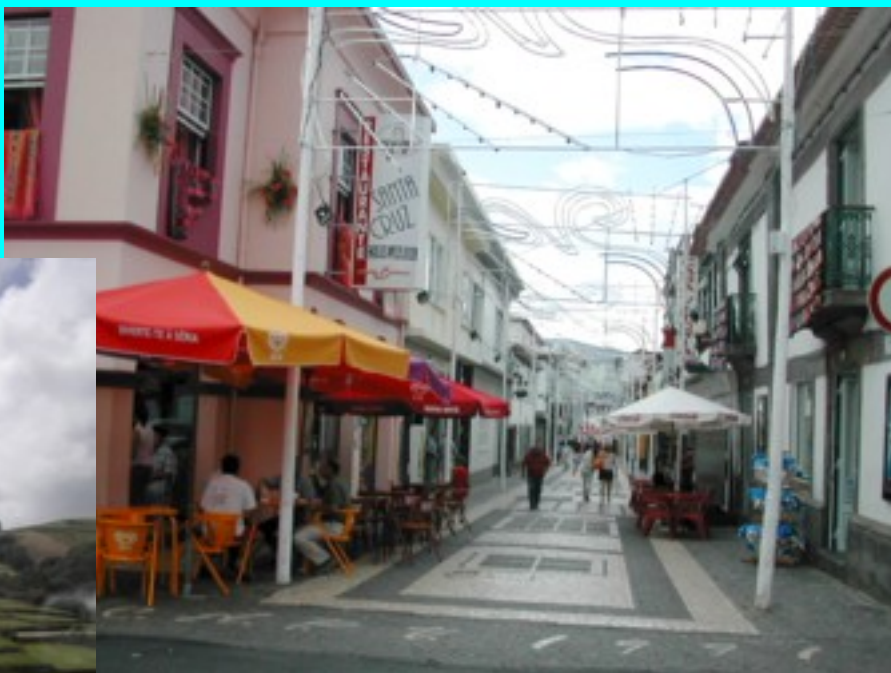
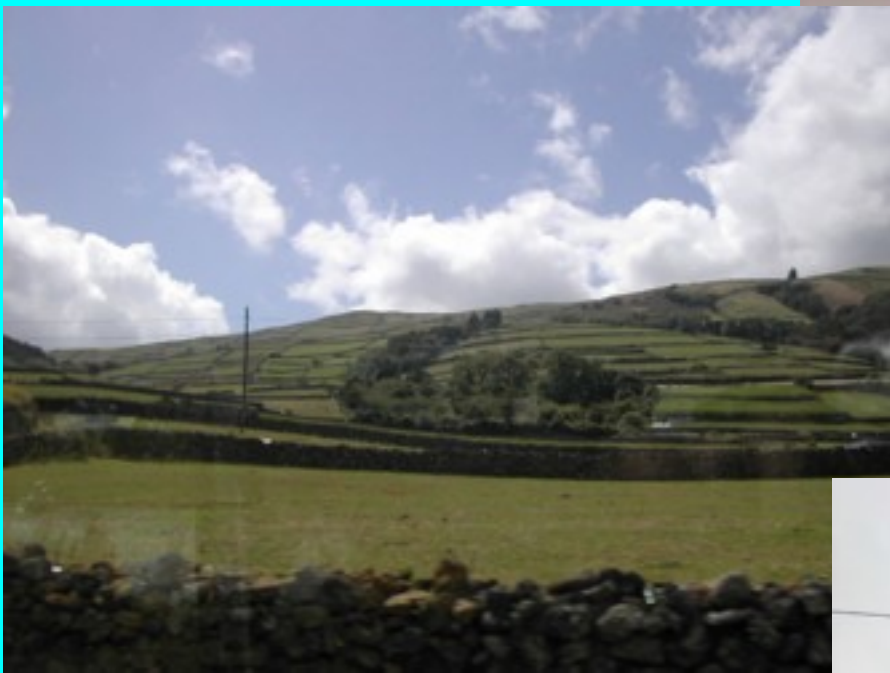


Fortress Fortaleza



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During our stay we spent two days exploring Terceira by bus. The first day we traveled along the southeastern shores to the town of Praia da Vitoria, and the second day we traveled along the western shores to Biscoitos. As we traveled along on the bus, we saw some of the small chapels (imperios) of the Holy Spirit. Although these chapels were on all the islands, it was the ones on Terceira that were most striking due to their many bright and festive colors. In all, there were 68 “imperios” on Terceira.



One of the highlights of our stay in Terceira was attending a “Tourada-a-Corda,” a street bullfight on a rope, in the village of Terra Cha. Almost each village on Terceira ended its summer festival with this form of popular entertainment, and Terra Cha was no exception. Everyone that had houses on the street had attached wooden barricades to their fences in preparation for the big event, and so we actually watched from someone’s front yard. The bull came down the street at the end of a long rope held by two groups of five men. Their role was to try to keep the bull under some form of control as it traveled down the street being teased by local men who approached the bull as close as they dared and then ran and jumped the barricades to safety. Each “Tourada-a-Corda” had four bulls, and each bull appeared for 30 minutes. Between the second and third bulls, there was a half hour intermission. To keep everyone safe, one blast signified that the bull was out of his box, and two blasts meant that the bull was back in his box.



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On Monday afternoon, August 9, we departed Angra do Heroismo on the island of Terceira and sailed overnight 95 nautical miles to the city of Ponta Delgada on the island of Sao Miguel. Sao Miguel was the largest island in the Azorean archipelago with 288 square miles, and almost half the population of the Azores lived on this island. During our eight day stay at the Ponta Delgada Marina, we explored the island, enjoyed some of its festivities, plus prepared the boat for its passage to Portugal.



Sao Miguel was known for its spectacular beauty. We rented a car for a day with another cruising couple to tour the island and take in the main sights. As Sao Miguel was a large island and difficult to see in one day, we were quite lucky when our car rental began at 5pm. This allowed us to traveled the western part of the island in the evening, allowing the entire next day for the eastern half of the island.

The picture shown in most tourist pamphlets of the Azores is that of Sete Cidades, a crater located on the western side of the island with its two beautiful lakes. Although the sun was low in the sky when we arrived at the viewpoint for Sete Cidades, the lakes were still a beautiful sight with their tranquil and verdant scenery. The fresh pine scent of the conifer “cryptomeria” permeated the air. As we passed through the village of Sete Cidades, a few farmers were still bringing in their milk from their dairy farms by horse and cart to the local cooperative, a sight not often seen. We ended the evening enjoying a fish dinner in Mosteiros.



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The next day we left early in the rental car to explore some of the eastern sights of Sao Miguel. Beautiful scenery surrounded us as we traveled along the island's northern roads. Sao Miguel had many beautiful lakes formed in its craters, and hot springs were quite prevalent. After leaving Ribeira Grande, we passed a geothermal electric generating plant, enjoyed a short hike to the Caldeira Velha with its hot springs and warm waterfall and pool, took in the breathtaking view of Lagoa do Fogo (Fire Lake), and visited a small tea factory near Porto Formoso. Afterwards, we continued along the road toward Furnas stopping at the viewpoint overlooking both Lagoa das Furnas (Furnas Lake) and the village of Furnas before descending down into the picturesque valley. In Furnas we enjoyed the Terra Nostra Garden and visited the hot springs where food (called Cozido nas Caldeiras) was being cooked in holes about 3 feet deep.



Food Being Cooked By Hot Springs

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That same evening we traveled by taxi to the nearby village of Faja de Baixo to enjoy their “Festival de Folclore.” Three folk dancing groups from different areas took part in the festival. First, they all paraded down the main street toward the church. Then, each group performed their special folkdance routines on the front steps of the village church. As the church was completely decorated with white lights, it made a most dramatic backdrop to the entire evening’s performance. Before departing the Azores, we also enjoyed listening to a “tuna” folklore group of musicians play mandolins and Azorean guitars along the waterfront of Ponta Delgada.

After a most memorable 1½ month stay in the Azores, we departed Ponta Delgada on Wednesday, August 18, at 1:45 pm. Throughout the afternoon we sailed along the southern shores of Sao Miguel. Around 7 pm we “officially” bid farewell to these beautiful green islands as we passed the end of Sao Miguel and headed toward Portugal

