

back home from the azores, sitting on my front porch, masked, cause i got covid there. tested negative on the day before i returned home (although the nurse wasn't very precise -- she stuck the swab up each nostril bam bam, certainly not twisting around for 15 seconds each. but she did push it way up there) and tested positive at home, two days later.

so i did a whole bunch of stuff over there. my first organized "tour" per se, a different experience. seven travelers plus a guide and sometimes another guide. dealing with the wants/

needs/personalities of six other people was, well, a lot. at times. we included me, two over-60 women from oregon, two 30ish women, and a 40ish brother and sister. i like them all -- and would like to keep in touch.



someone else planned the hotels, cars, itinerary, entertainment, activities, meals. freeeeeeeeing!! restrictive in only a few ways: times, traveling companions, meals. lots and lots of meals. but overall recommendation, a yes.

our guide, thomas, 30ish, grew up on sao miguel island and knew it front and back, history, culture, people, trees. a sweet, good man who was flexible with everyone's wants/needs/personalities and excited to show us his home.

saturday, 30 april

began and ended the tour in ponta delgada, the biggest town on sao miguel, the biggest island in the azores. we stayed in a hotel on the harbor, which was beautiful and exciting. except on friday and saturday nights when everyone on the island shows up to party and it gets even more exciting and loud for hours and hours on end. even during the usually sleeping hours of 3-6 am. no keeping the balcony door open. so, do yourself a favor (unless you're one of those partying until 4:30 or 5:00) and stay further up in the town or a room not facing the harbor. also, my first room (number 420!!) smelled like cheese.

thomas walked us through town to a welcome dinner. a few times (including this dinner), the only vegetarian offering was mushroom risotto. good thing i like mushroom risotto.





typical of azorean building with volcanic rock.

sunday, 1 may

portuguese national holiday. here it included putting home-made mannequins on a house or business's front step, dressing it up in their own clothes, and positioning it in the midst of a silly action, like having tea.

our first whale watch: out the hotel front door and directly across the street. a local marine biologist first explained how the northern and southern gulf streams meeting at the azores brings all manner of fish and sea life through the area, all year. she discussed different cetaceans and what we would see on board. a pretty big boat, with maybe 100 people on board. spotted two dolphin species: bottlenose and common. and chased some whales, to no avail. loved being out on the ocean, just watching. didn't realize the air would be so chilly racing out and back (even though it was a few hours), and spent much of the trip shivering. ALWAYS WEAR LAYERS people.

after, we jumped into the van and drove down the coast to a small town, vila franco do campo. wearing our swim suits, but not really a swimming vibe today. ate lunch at a harbor restaurant that was all decked out for a girl's communion party. don't remember what i ate. maybe mushroom risotto? on our way out of this town, i



saw a cool looking church up on a hill. thomas said let's go!





baby pineapples!



then to a hundred-year-old pineapple farm. not a scheduled dinner, so i ran down to the grocery store and got a yogurt and some fruit and chocolate, then ended up in the bar downstairs with cheese and gin & tonics. which became my official drink of the trip. reminds you of the british, doesn't it? g&t? at the top of many bar menus here — i guess they've passed it on. a pleasant evening. and i actually slept.

monday, 2 may

today's adventures included a stop at sete cidades, a volcano in the northwest. from the top, you can look down into the crater and back out to see the ocean on all sides again.

immensely beautiful. drove into the crater and hiked around the bottom: old stone homes, some crops and gardens. i asked thomas — no indigenous people on the islands. only pre-portuguese (1300s) settlement found is a small norse village from the 800s. internet supports this, but i also wonder how closely they have searched for additional settlements.



it's a big question on the islands, cause colonizers brought so much of what now remains (flora and fauna) with them. european gardens took a stronghold and now there are hydrangeas along many roads on the islands, along with countless other species that have pushed out the endemic ones. circle of life, huh? we did meet a group trying to counter that, later in the week.



in the afternoon, a two-prop plane flew us 40 minutes to the island of pico, amazing from the air. saw all these ragged, black and bold organic lines undulating across the hills. the pico vineyards. vintners arrange the volcanic rock already-everywhere you look into rows, with breaker rows in between to abate the harsh ocean winds' effects on the grapes. pretty fucking cool. learned all this at the [azores wine company](#). tasted a flight of wine, trying to have my tastebuds suddenly become much more distinct. kinda



pico vineyards

liked 2 and 3 best, but i need lots more practice. we spent the evening (including dinner) at a gorgeous ecolodge.

tuesday, 3 may

claudia, another local guide, picked us up in the van and drove across the hills to some whale watching huts, in the middle of fields and rocks and some cows. the huts had been in these spots for hundreds of years, peopled everyday in the hopes of spotting whales. now, of course, it's for tourists (whaling finally stopped here in 1987). basic idea, guys (always guys, never women, we were told) watch for the whales all day, and when they would see one they gave a heads-up via flares, coded gunshots, etc. now they use cellphones.



into town, we visited the whaling museum and saw a short whaling film made in the 1960s, and that was all i ever need to see ever again about the traditional life of whaling. then lunch. not too hungry.



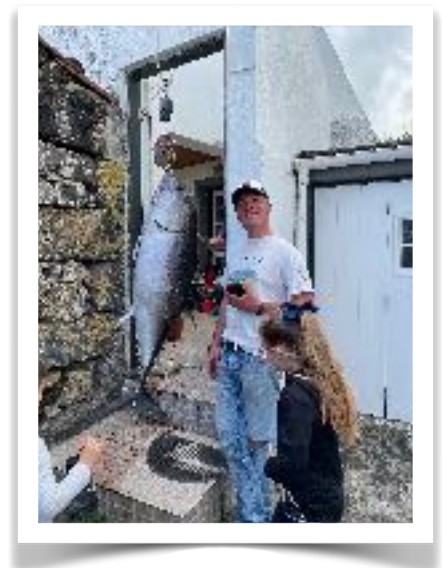
rubber pants and jacket make for a much more comfy (warm) whale watching trip

but! super duper cool whale watch. in a much smaller boat called a zodiac (i think it seats 14) where you straddle a bench and have a high seatback, kinda reminding me of a rollercoaster. it's all well and good for tall people (although i'm sure they have their complaints) but if you're short, like me, your feet don't touch the bottom of the boat easily, so it was a constant game of just the right pressure to my inner thighs... anyway. our captain/guide were great.

i didn't bring my phone/camera on any of the watches cause 1) wanted to be completely present and not worry about catching the moment on film; and 2) wanted no touch with the reality of our so-called supreme court. so on the whale watch, we first saw

some bottlenose dolphins, then some risso dolphins, then a pod of young sperm whales (with tail shot!), then some common dolphins, and then we were heading back into port. it'd been a few hours and we were already kinda late, and my belly was hungry. but then the captain turned the boat back out. kept going and going, the other direction now. and then we saw them: two blue whales. oh man, even just seeing the dorsal fin sticking out of that immense back, coursing through the water. so wonderful. we are so small.

after the watch, claudia showed us lejes, her hometown. we met and talked to the dude who had caught a tuna we saw on the marine crane coming back into port. the guy had the fish hung up in the doorway to





his house. kids running around. he touched up his hair and pulled the pants straight before i took the picture.

we returned to our beautiful hotel, but didn't have time to really walk around the tremendous grounds



cause dinner at the hotel restaurant, which was fun. claudia had taught

us all the very distinctive call of the cory's shearwater, protected birds of the azores. i'm not good with birdcalls, but that is one i will never forget. they are LOUD at night, and claudia has their call down perfectly. we all tried to match it. back to the beautiful room and the loud birds and the eco luxury of the azores. and a good caps game.

wednesday, 4 may



ferry to faial, and the port of horta

early leave call (7am) so no getting to look around the grounds. to the ferry. on the way, we stopped for coffee, and i watched a medium-sized dog of indeterminate breed melt back and forth into the colors of the stone house behind him.

drove around faial island, stopping at miradors, cliffs and pools, and the lighthouse that survived a volcano. climbed all the steps. interesting geology lessons but don't remember any of the names. do remember the concepts though.





lots of steps to the lighthouse top. but what a view!

ate a picnic lunch at the caldeira park by the volcano's edge. reminds me of the parks at home that have picnic areas and shrubbery for walls.

food was good -- from an adult with disabilities operated food caterer. this was cold and windy and rainy and still pleasant. hmmm.



learned my lesson the first time, and let the group visit the whaling factory without me. i stayed outside and drew and was glad to be where i was.

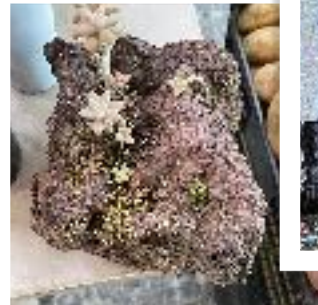
claudia dropped us at another hotel, again on the harbor, before returning to pico by ferry. this hotel is owned by the same group as all the ones on this trip. they've got the atlas obscura azores trip locked down. although they are very nice hotels.

met everyone to walk to a peter's bar, just a block down, scheduled to go to dinner after. when everyone sat down inside the bar, i took my g&t (local gin) out to the pier

and sat on the wall watching the world go by. after an hour or so, decided to get food at the raised patio by the pier (also part of peter's bar i learned). got to watch a huge sailboat and the people and listen to the conversations etc for a couple of hours. way too big and dry a tuna steak. but g&ts were good. walked around the town, back along the harbor, to my hotel room on the harbor happy.







thursday, 5 may

walked around the town of horta for miles and kilometers and hours. got a plant in a rock. got a magnet. took tons of pictures of the sailor's walls, which people have been painting for decades. rained on a lot and had a hoodie, but not the rain repellent jacket. d'oh.



flight back to sao miguel and then a van ride to furnas, a town on the other side of the island that sits in the bottom of a volcano caldera. gorgeous. formal gardens, luxurious rooms (but first without a bidet). dinner was served outdoors, and it got cool so they gave us bright green, warm blankets. afterwards, a visit to the thermal pool. really big, and not so easy to see in the dark, which was nice. back to the room and took a shower to get the thermal pool leavings off me. sat on the lounging couch and watched the first period of the caps games. sleepy. they were losing anyway.

thermal pool looked pretty serene in the dark. you have to take my word for it.





friday, 6 may

walked around garden grounds. so carefully tended and pristine. manicured.

later on, we drove higher up into the northwest, with stops along the way. thomas took us to meet a forest engineer who runs a non-profit working to re-populate the island with native species, under the aegis of only known to exist here extinct for a while. his includes greenhouses and

saving the azores bullfinch, and thought to have been compound (of sorts) fields and a lot of very earnest people. an idealist



wall of moss!



fulfilling his life's wishes. told him thank you for what he does which seems like such a fucking liberal white woman thing to say. but i

just wanted him to know that i really appreciate him and his work. cause i do. then to the mountain top to find this one azorean bullfinch species and we do and it's pretty cool. also, there was pink moss all over the place. damn that was cool. and THEN to the tea

plantation and factory and oh that was so awesome. i loved this place. original factory machines from 100 years ago still in use, and generations of the same family still working there. people actually picking out the final branches before being bagged. so fucking cool.

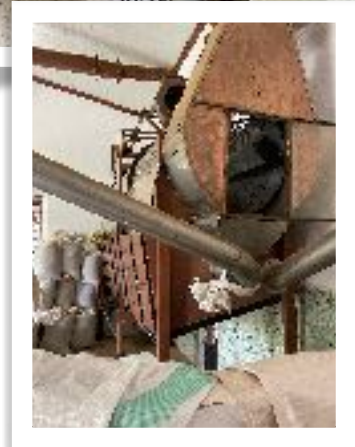


tea bushes



pink moss!!!





back to the original loud harbor hotel. i skipped the group meal to catch up and chill. posted a blog about the sidewalks and drew a little and wrote a little and it was good.

saturday, 7 may

everyone else went to swim with the dolphins. lots of reasons why i didn't go but foremost is that i would be very very cold for a few hours -- wet and cold-- and freezing in the water. number one reason. second is that it didn't feel right somehow to enter their territory and swim. so i went to look at the market (huge bright vegetables, also where i probably picked up covid) and a couple graveyards.



crypts look like mini houses



thought these were lots of baby graves, but turns out they are the cremated remains from one family



windows allow you to see caskets sitting on shelves inside





a little later, walking through town, i heard delicate string picking and strumming. followed the sounds to a small, hole-in-the-wall workshop, nestled among some houses and stores. met hugo raposo, who's family has been playing fado guitars and portuguese violas (also a sort of guitar) for generations. he apprenticed with a master luthier and now makes/restores/repairs the instruments himself. he taught me that an azorean guitar has a teardrop at the top of the neck. he also played for me, beautifully.

had to get a covid test (negative) to travel back to the US the next day, and then we all jumped in the van and drove to the top of another caldeira, watching the clouds roll out. then to some more thermal pools, where we met a soccer team from the seychelles on the island for a game later that day.



our farewell dinner at quinta dos sabores was pretty amazing. basically in

the main room of someone's house on a non-descript street about 25 minutes from the port. six or seven (?) small courses, delicious (no mushroom risotto!). thomas surprised us by asking the island's famous musician, Rafael Carvalho, to come play his viola de terra, a 12-string small guitar. one of the best parts of the whole trip. he played between the first and second entrees, for 30 minutes or so. our own private concert. amazing.

overall, a fantastic trip. saw so many beautiful places and things. thrown back into togetherness with seven people i didn't know and came out better for it. found kindness and fun and laughed and explored. a good good trip.

