



# INTO THE WILD

Mykonos or Ibiza it ain't, but if your soul is crying out for a bit of nature then the Portuguese island **MADEIRA** in the Atlantic is an eco-adventurer's paradise

Tired of coming back from a busy break feeling like you've been hit by a bus? Fear not, for there's an often-overlooked island paradise that will leave you feeling like you've glimpsed through heaven's gates. Forget everything you think you know about the much-maligned Madeira: there is so much more to this place than botanical garden tours for groups of grannies. First off – the men are hot. This is the birthplace of perennially shirtless footballer Ronaldo and many of the locals share his look. Sadly, you won't get much of an opportunity to sample the local talent – the gay scene is non-existent – but it's actually quite a relief being forced into a situation where you have absolutely no possibility of misbehaving. Anyways, there are all sorts of wholesome pursuits that you will want to be going to bed early for...

Madeira is one of the few places on earth where you can catch a cab from the coast to the misty mountains above the clouds in under an hour. Its sub-tropical climate, deep Atlantic channels and dramatic landscape provide the ideal setting for year round outdoor activities. There's loads for adrenaline junkies to get stuck into like canyoning and scuba diving in the crystal-clear waters. What better way to begin the day than with a dolphin and whale-spotting trip ([www.rota-dos-cetaceos.pt](http://www.rota-dos-cetaceos.pt))? Madeira's unique mid-ocean positioning means that you are virtually guaranteed to be able to swim with a pod of dolphins and watch one of the four species of whale swimming in the waters.

After debarking in the marina we were met by Cristiano Andrade, who runs his own company, Mountain Expeditions ([www.mountainexpedition.pt](http://www.mountainexpedition.pt)), which involves him driving you up the mountain in his (very sexy) Land Rover jeep. A man with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the island's flora and fauna, this handsome Madeiran Indiana Jones will take you up some pretty hairy tracks through the forest to the towering peaks above the clouds. His command of the terrain is impressive – as are his gorgeous hairy tanned legs. Make sure you sit up front like I did, but try not to give it away and take too many pictures of him instead of the scenery.

After a packed lunch prepared by Cristiano himself, he drops us off for a Levada walk. These manmade waterways cling to the mountain sides giving you access to landscapes that would usually require serious mountaineering skills. Ambling



Estalagem da Ponta do Sol



Riso



Cristiano Andrade

effortlessly along these pretty irrigation channels takes you into prehistoric forests, through volcanic gorges and past tumbledown shacks that belong to the farmers at work on the steep green slopes around you. Wild lilies and orchids line your route, and you have to make sure you don't get sidetracked by the stunning valley views down to the Atlantic – if you lose your step and fall off the edge, it's curtains. Apparently Darwin catalogued more animal species here than in the Galapagos. There's a definite Jurassic Park feel to this place but rest assured the worst you'll come into contact with is a slightly surprised-looking goat. But I suppose you could always hurl yourself down a gorge and play the damsel in distress card in the hope that Cristiano will come and rescue you.



Beautifulness



Art Museum

**WHERE TO STAY**

**REID'S PALACE**

[www.reidspalace.com](http://www.reidspalace.com)

Its Capri-like setting atop a cliff with vertiginous steps down to the sea is unbeatable. Part of the Orient Express group, you'll feel like you have been transported back to another era where glamour rules. If you can stretch to it, try and get room 872 (junior suite) for its stunning wisteria-clad terrace overlooking the 10 acres of gardens and the sea below. The vestiges of bygone glamour are everywhere, with old black-and-white shots of an élite set living the high life adorning the walls. It's like walking into an Agatha Christie novel with a beautiful terrace for cocktails, and the clifftop Cipriani restaurant oozes old-school glamour. There's also a brand-new spa with chill-out balconies where you can sun yourself in complete privacy post-treatment to the sound of the crashing waves below. A truly breathtaking place.



Choupana Hills

**CHOUpana HILLS RESORT AND SPA**

[www.designhotels.com](http://www.designhotels.com)

Sitting on your wooden balcony at the Asian-influenced Choupana Hills at 6pm, you can listen to the church bells chime in the town of Funchal below and watch the cruise ship slowly pulling out of the port. This magical spot, blissfully peaceful with woody nature all around you, is Zen heaven. But be warned: children are allowed, which, if you are unlucky, could easily kill the blissed-out vibe.

**ESTALAGEM DA PONTA DO SOL**

[www.designhotels.com](http://www.designhotels.com)

High on the cliffs above the village of Ponta do Sol, this stark white hotel is a modernist lover's dream with smooth black slate floors and crisply geometric whitewashed walls. All of the rooms have balconies, so you can take in the amazing panoramic views, while the infinity pool allows you to sink into the endless expanse of azure water and sky stretching to the horizon.

**WHERE TO EAT**

**ARMAZEM DO SAL**

Rua da Alfandega, 135 Funchal

Tel: 291 241 285 [www.armazemosal.com](http://www.armazemosal.com)

A great place to sample lovely Madeiran wines.

**RISO**

Rua de Santa Maria, 274 Funchal

Tel: 291 280 360 [www.riso-fx.com](http://www.riso-fx.com)

Cracking location slap-bang on the sea.

**WHERE TO DRINK**

**CAFÉ DO TEATRO**

Av Arriaga next to the Municipal Theatre

Tel: 291 226 371

Head here for cocktails under the stars. Everybody who's anybody in Madeira will drift through during the evening. The DJ livens up at about 1am. If there's any gay guys about then they'll be busting moves on the dancefloor here I'm told.

**ART/DESIGN**

**PESTANO CASINO PARK**

[www.pestano.com](http://www.pestano.com)

Architect buffs will fall off their (well-designed) blocks when they find out that there is a 60s-tastic hotel and casino on the island designed by no other than the legendary Brazilian starchitect Oscar Neimeyer (the dude that built Brasília). I'm guessing by the look of the guests on the day I dropped by that they had no idea they were holidaying in a work of art, but that doesn't detract from the splendour of this colossus.

**CASA DAS MUDAS ARTS CENTRE**

Vale dos Amores 9370 Calheta

Tel: 291 820 900

Award-winning architect Paulo David's Centro das Artes, Casa das Mudanças is an unexpected find on top of a cliff. It cuts a contemporary dash of black basalt stone. The café has a lovely sunny terrace.

**GETTING THERE**

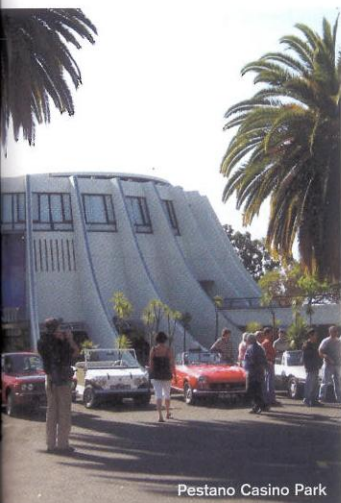
[www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)

Catch the lunchtime 3hr 40 min flight from Stansted and arrive in time for a sundowner cocktail.

**WHEN TO GO**

[www.ap-madeira.pt](http://www.ap-madeira.pt)

Madeira's climate is moderate all the year round, with highs of 28°C in summer and 20°C in winter, making it great for a winter-time sun break.



Pestano Casino Park



Reids Hotel