

# ISLAND LIFE

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1 Swimming at Piscina Natural  
Simão Dias in São Jorge

The isolation of an island can be attractive but it also offers an intriguingly different way of life. *Konfekt* steps into the mid-Atlantic world of the Portuguese Azores to discover how life on a volcanic outcrop informs its people's craft, food and mentality.

Something happens the moment you step foot on an island, no matter how big or small. It's a mentality shift that has to do with feeling detached, independent and loose from whatever lies back on shore. Living on a speck of land in the middle of a vast stretch of sea can have an expansive effect on the way you think about things. In the Azores – the dramatic, volcanic Portuguese archipelago made up of nine islands in the middle of the Atlantic – the world just feels like it's somewhere else; God knows how far. Huddled in a little trio, the central islands of Faial, Pico and São Jorge almost find comfort in one another. But even from many viewpoints on these shores, look out to the wide horizon and all you'll see is water, for miles, for what genuinely feels like an eternity.

This can have two contrasting effects: a sense of profound melancholia (a feeling the Portuguese seem to perfect) but also a surprisingly energising freedom, the perception that this micro-universe does not conform to external rules or pressures.

"It's a place where you feel a lot is possible," says Algarve-born architect Ivo Barão, who lives most of the year in Switzerland but comes as often as he can to the cockpit-shaped getaway he built himself on the southern coast of Pico. "When you draw a project here, you're not abiding to convention; it feels like a blank page."

Many people have come here attracted by this sense of possibility. After flying for hours out of Lisbon over nothing but sea and clouds in an indistinct blueish blur, when these verdant lands finally appear, it feels like a miracle. It's impossible not to think of elated seafarers finding respite after months on their boats. First officially settled by the Portuguese in the 15th century (though debates now rage over whether the Vikings got there centuries before), these islands long had a fundamental role in the trading routes between the Americas, Europe and beyond. "If you sail from the African continent, in order to get to Europe you need to go to the Azores, because of the currents and winds – so, back then, it was really good for the inhabitants to be able to provide fresh supplies such as citrus and wine," says Barão.

Today, plenty of people from mainland Portugal (known here categorically as "the continent") and across Europe still make the journey, fall in love with the place and end up never leaving. Step out on the tiny runway of the island of Pico and you'll immediately fall under its spell. The youngest of the nine islands, Pico was formed by an eruption about 300,000 years ago; the volcanic peak that gives it its name, when it deigns to show itself through the clouds, towers

domineeringly over the whole island. Its potentially destructive power, colossal size and yet quiet presence have a bewitching, humbling effect. Unsurprisingly, the mountain is referred to with reverence as *sua majestade*, her majesty.

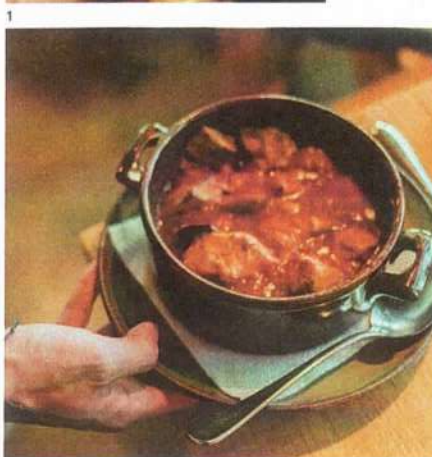
"I don't know what it is – the volcano is magnetic; it just makes you want to come back," says Isabelle Clerc, the founder of Azulejos da Ponta da Ilha, a ceramics workshop dedicated to the traditional painted tiles. A former journalist who worked in audiovisual production in Paris, she is one of the many people who fell for Pico after visiting here for many years; she ended up moving permanently with her husband and son five years ago. "We had been coming as tourists for 20 years, so in 2015 we bought a holiday home. Then we had a baby in Paris; we were working so hard, under so much stress. So we said to ourselves, 'Why not try another life?'"

Right next to her house, her atelier is set inside a former *atafona*, a granary made of lava rocks, on the far east of the island. The drive here snakes through the lushest vegetation, drowning in thick milky fog; being at the whim of Atlantic winds and clouds, the weather on the Azores is supremely changeable, the rain frequent and temperamental. The result is the kind of jungle that feels like an animal's dominion.

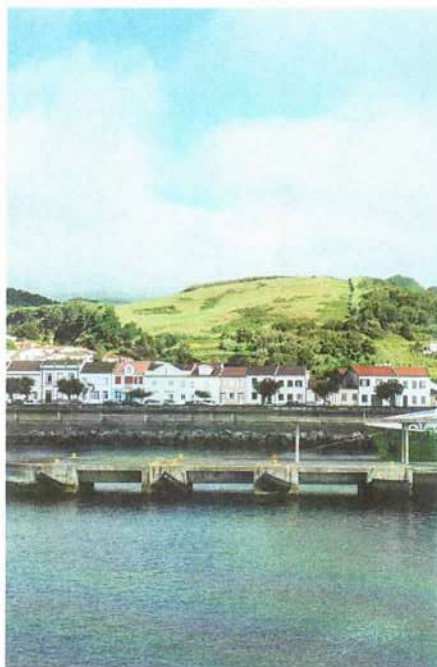
The fertile volcanic soil and hair-curling humidity might allow for the most luxuriant plant growth but they are not great for tile-making, which is why Clerc has to have them shipped in from "the continent" before painting and burning them in her kiln.

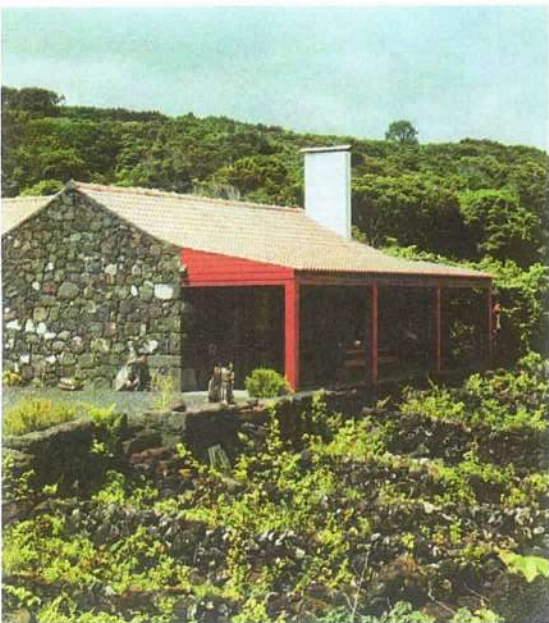
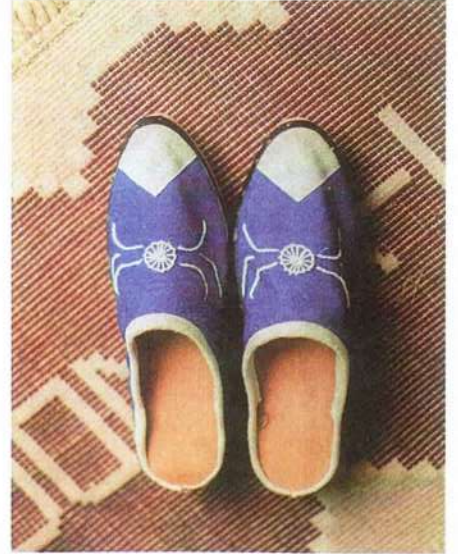
"Azulejos aren't really a tradition in the Azores; there's only one other ceramics maker in the archipelago," says Clerc, a drawing enthusiast whose tiles depict common sights around the island, from bright-red rock fish to the mountain itself, rendered in the cool blue of cobalt oxide. "Having been to Pico lots of times, I knew it was hard to find beautiful objects made on the island to bring back home. There was nothing apart from the potter down the road, who was already here when I arrived."

We set off to find the other member of this tiny creative cluster following signs towards "O Oleiro", the potter, down narrow lanes, driving past houses that bear the dark marks of humidity, like make-up smudged by tears. The artisan's lanky Russian wolfhound Satine comes to greet us first. François René Lebon also relocated from afar but he has been in Pico long enough to feel like an islander (if it wasn't for a lingering Belgian accent). A former hairdresser from Charleroi, he moved with his wife 25 years ago and turned his hobby into a profession. His son and



1. Filipe Rocha displaying his wine
2. Albacore tuna stew at Magma
3. Safe harbour
4. On the ferry
5. Traditional craft meets new design
6. Slip into a slower rhythm
7. Inside Azores Wine Company's apartment
8. Lava residence on Pico
9. Cooperativa de Artesanato Senhora de Encarnação



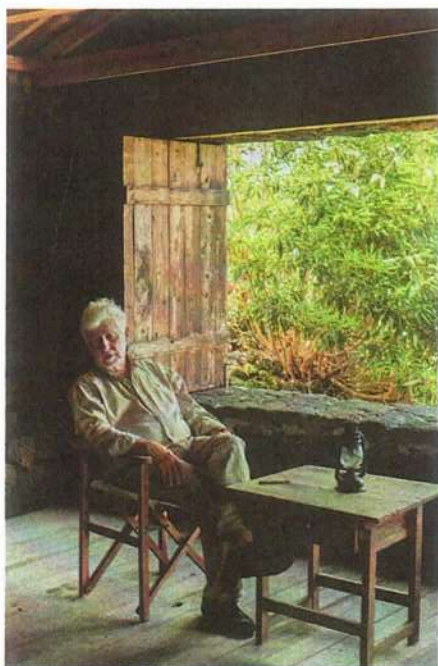


daughter-in-law soon followed, opening a bed-and-breakfast next to his workshop. "We were pretty much the first étrangers on the island but we never really felt like foreigners – only maybe the first day," he says of the welcoming nature of residents. "I love the people and the quality of life."

When we visit his cavernous showroom-cum-atelier, the kiln is full of pieces undergoing the first of their three firings: his rough, tactile cups, plates and jugs end up on tables around the island as well as being shipped off to customers around the world. It's a Sunday but this doesn't seem to put him off his work: Lebon sits down at his wheel every day, without fail, at 06.00. Weekends mean very little when time feels docile, and the island's nature decides a day's rhythm. "You don't know what day of the week it is," he says. "Life just goes at a different pace. That's why I say we are open from midnight to midnight – I'm always here!" As he walks us around the white-washed buildings on his plot of land, now bathed in glorious (if fleeting) sunlight, among tall aloe flowers shooting up between aromatic bushes, he admits that he doesn't



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**Stay:**

**Adega Do Fogo, Pico**

Owner Benedita Branco took over a 200-year-old manor house near Santa Luzia and turned it into a residence with six wonderfully airy bedrooms that can be rented all at once. The stunning view of the Pico from the azure pool has to be the biggest draw but the atmospheric patio, terrace, massage area and sauna also help. Property manager Elizabeth is on hand to make delicious and inventive breakfasts that feature herbs and vegetables from the on-site growing patch. There is also a shaded area among the trees where the team organises corn-bread-making workshops. [adegadofogo.com](http://adegadofogo.com)

**Azores Wine Company, Pico**

Despite being conveniently located close to the main town of Madalena, the atmosphere here is of perfect seclusion. All rooms have huge floor-to-ceiling windows that look out to the vines beyond; the minimal spaces are tastefully decked out in handsome leather and rattan mid-century furniture. Of course, the wine in the mini-bar fridges is top-notch – though do make sure to book yourself in for a tasting-menu dinner at the on-site restaurant for the full experience. Breakfast is exceptional – don't miss the pineapple jam. [antoniomacanita.com](http://antoniomacanita.com)

**Eat:**

**Magma, Pico**

Another of Branco's projects on the island – housed inside Lava Homes apartments, her other hospitality property – Magma is a modern restaurant that's open to the community as well as the guests. This is a great place to try lapas, a mainstay on most Azorean menus: only seafood aficionados will enjoy these salty molluscs, here cooked wisely with just the right amount of garlic. [lavahomes.com](http://lavahomes.com)



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1. Casa da Atafona, an António Baião's property
2. Picking the bounty of Adega do Fogo's garden
3. António Baião
4. The islands' distinctive red and green palette
5. On the tiles
6. Azulejos-maker Isabelle Clerc
7. São Jorge's eponymous cheese



miss Belgium one bit. "For my job, I need to be alone and quiet," he says. "I don't feel isolated: we have nature around us. OK, we don't have theatres or shops, but it depends what your priorities are in life."

In any case, there are residents who have taken the matter of the dearth of cultural attractions into their own hands. Continuing along the ring road that skirts the whole island at the foot of the volcano, which today is shrouded in a permanent low cloud that gives it a Mount Olympus look, we head down roads lined with tall bushes of light-blue hydrangeas and descend into the village of Lajes do Pico. One of the red-roofed buildings in this pretty coastal town is home to Companhia das Ilhas, a publishing house and bookshop founded by Carlos Alberto Machado and his wife, Sara Santos. A poet, playwright and professor from Lisbon, Machado met Pico-born Santos when he came to the island in 2002 to speak at a conference about love: two years later, he joined her here for good. Despite starting their publisher in 2011, the pair didn't open a shop until 2020: today the tiny store stocks the imprint's own fiction, poetry and drama titles as well as high-brow classics of literature from around the world.

"There wasn't a bookshop on the island, so we had to create our own," says Machado. Companhia das Ilhas' own catalogue is made up primarily of Portuguese authors, more than a quarter of which are Azorean. "Some people claim that there is such a thing as an Azorean literature, with its own specificity in language," says the academically-minded Machado as the rain roars outside the windows. "For me, it's more about themes and subjects; it's about speaking of the mountain, the blue of the sea and the green of the plants." These elemental ingredients are not just part of the backdrop; they are fundamental pieces of people's sense of belonging. Santos has kept fairly quiet until now, in a laconic manner that appears to be widespread among Azoreans. When we ask her why she likes being in Pico, she responds clearly and concisely. "We have a big relationship with the sea. It's difficult to live away from it."

Some people have tried – or have had to. Just as much as newcomers are drawn to this place, many residents have sought to escape these islands in search of a more profitable life. In the 19th century, when whaling was one of the island's main industries, many men left to join the big boats on the US coast; over the following decades plenty more went off to make their fortunes away from these agriculture-driven lands. For Alexandra Teles' father, the problem was the Salazar dictatorship: a dissident who refused to do his military service, Teles' father couldn't come back onto Portuguese territory until 1975, when the dictatorship finally ended. Teles grew up between France, the UK and Canada but she used to come to Pico on holiday, to visit her grandfather. She remembers when the easiest way to see a whale here was on the rock beach, after it had been killed

by the whalers: this type of hunt wasn't outlawed until 1987. That's why she and her late husband started Espaço Talassa out of Lajes' quaint harbour in 1989. Her responsible whale-watching company has been followed by many more such tour organisers around the island – and this new line of business has become fundamental for Pico's economy.

"My husband and I would sail boats," she says from her HQ, a corner building fronted by a cheery model of a whale's tail. "We used to do charters around the island. Eventually we asked ourselves: how do you see a whale? We met someone who used to work as a lookout, so he showed us and we thought, 'This could be a thing.'"

Today she employs about 20 people: marine biologists, skippers and assistants who come from all around Europe to work with the cetaceans. And though she never originally expected to live in Pico year-round, the tenacious Teles has slotted in perfectly in her ancestral home. "We islanders call ourselves 'small rocks on a big rock,'" she says with a smile. "We are used to earthquakes, storms, the wind and the sea. It makes you more resilient. The island feels primitive."

Nowhere does that primitive power feel as tangible as when you finally step into the waters. It's pointless or plain dangerous to try to swim directly into the ocean – those pointy, atmospheric cliffs were made to be a mariner's ruin. Everybody heads to *poças*, the natural swimming pools dotted along the coast, instead. Sheltered by a ring of rocks, they let the tide in through their little apertures but the waves still pour in foamy and unexpected. Jump into these clear but dark waters and the chilly swell will make you gasp for air, tightening your chest; it's a bracing, life-affirming kind of swim. The Azores aren't really made for a standard beach holiday; this is a place where you must pack a raincoat alongside your swimsuit. But when you hoist yourself up on the step ladder and finally lie down, dripping, on the basalt platform, the black rocks exude the kind of low, deep heat that reaches all the way to the bone.

"When you swim in the water, even if it's cold, there is a strange energy," says António Baião, a former Lisbon-based lawyer who started buying up old homes around the island 20 years ago to preserve their architecture, and now lets those properties decked out in vintage furnishings and antique objects. "Pico is a special place: even migrant birds come here and don't want to leave." Wait until after dark and you'll hear those birds' loud cries, a guttural, repetitive noise: it's the *cagarros*, whose unfamiliar call make up the deafening soundtrack of Azorean nights.

There is perhaps another reason why this island feels so elemental and raw. The lava that flowed off the volcano – and makes up the crunchy, dark soil – is used to build almost all structures. When importing materials is complicated, one must make do with what the land yields; almost everything is made from these porous black rocks. Around the island, traditional low walls made from

lava stones parcel out the land in small, irregular shapes, like a convoluted spider's web. At first, it's not easy to understand their purpose, but peek inside the allotments and you'll notice tender, bright-green vines growing out from the soil. First constructed in the 16th century, the walls were built to protect the precious plants from strong winds and unforgiving salt, as well as to give off heat during cold nights. These structures helped to make Pico a wine-making success: 200 years ago, the Azores were among Portugal's main wine regions, exporting bottles across the ocean. But after the deadly phylloxera infestation of the mid-19th century all but destroyed the plantations, the vineyards were swallowed up by the forest.

"This is the hardest possible place to make wine," says Rocha. Born in the Azores' capital of Ponta Delgada, on São Miguel, he has an islander's kind of tan: a deep caramel hue that comes from spending so much of life outdoors. "Between the wind and the humidity, it's a nightmare of challenges." Compared to regular vineyards on the mainland, Pico's yield about 10 to 15 per cent; and yet this complicated genesis is also what makes the wine so special. Fresh with a bright salinity, Azores Wine Company's whites have popped up on the lists of Portugal's best restaurants over the past 10 years. Other than producing about 100,000 bottles a year under Azores Wine Company's label, the large tanks inside the winery are also used by other

where you can spend the night, around his wine-making facilities. Shaped like a rectangle surrounding a rocky cloister, this handsome, low-slung concrete structure was designed by Portuguese architects Sami and London studio DRDH. Other than six beautiful apartments, where the building's minimalism is softened by rustic but elegant textiles, he's also set up a restaurant where chefs cook an ambitious tasting menu out of an open kitchen, with dishes based on local produce, including fish tartare, Azores beef or wagyu meat from Pico.

Pico is not the only island overshooting the manufacturing capabilities that its small and tricky geography should allow for. The neighbouring island of São Jorge (which owes its name to its shape, like the legend's slain dragon) produces much of the dairy eaten on the mainland – and you'll be hard-pressed not to find its eponymous cheese on every breakfast menu on the Azores. To get there, we have to load our car onto the belly of a ferry and cross the narrow channel that divides us from the small port of Calheta. When we hop on the first service in the morning, the slate-grey ocean rumbles and everything is covered in bruma – the archipelago's relentless low fog.

By the time we disembark, the moody traditional fado coming out of the car radio, accompanied by the melancholy strumming of a viola da terra, fits in with the brooding atmosphere. The road to the cheese factory weaves through forests and hilly fields – where, predictably, plenty of cows are mooching about (it often feel as though there are more cows than people on the archipelago). This specific white-and-black breed – and the fact that the animals can graze all year round on pastures that are kept well-irrigated by the rain – is the secret to the pungent hard cheese.

"We've been in this factory since 1991 but cheese production on the island dates back 500 years," says our guide Norberto Andrade inside the Queijo de São Jorge factory – one of three on the island – as he walks us past vats of churning milk, then inside chilly but divinely smelling rooms stacked with 50,000 maturing wheels. Each of the factories collects milk from the surrounding farms, operating like a co-operative, and much of the work on the production line – be it shaving off some extra wax from a cheese's coating or measuring the weight of every slice – is also done by hand.

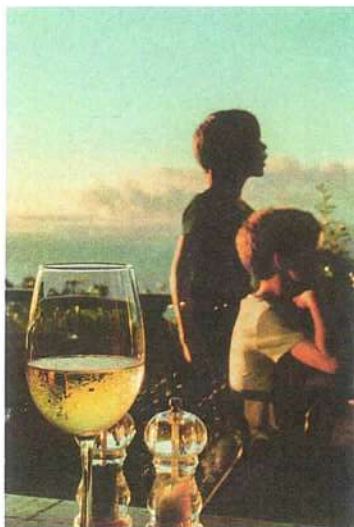
"So many people are involved – that's why it tastes so good," says Andrade. "Everyone on the island has a sense of pride about it. The economy has grown around the cheese; it bears the name of our island."

This attachment to community and ancient skills is also the driving force at Cooperativa de Artesanato Senhora de Encarnação. This co-operative was founded in 1991, when a group of weavers from the island who had nowhere to sell their wares joined forces. Today three people work here permanently while two weave from

"There is no wine region with just one producer, so we want to help. I wanted to do something for the island and contribute to change"



1. Dinner at Magma  
2. Glass of Pico's fresh, saline white  
3. Sua Majestade, Ponta do Pico



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If so many of these walls still grace the island, it's in no small part thanks to António Maçanita, Filipe Rocha and Paulo Machado. The three friends are joined by their shared dedication to restart this wine industry: after wine-maker Maçanita bottled his first harvest on Pico in 2010, the trio realised that there was room for revival and started Azores Wine Company in 2014, recovering about 120 hectares of vineyards (still less than 1 per cent of what existed just over a century ago). By now they have replanted almost 1,000 hectares but the expansion has not made the production process any easier. Aside from the clearly challenging conditions to grow the vines, nothing in the harvest can be simplified by mechanisation.

producers from the island who would not be able to afford their own.

"There is no wine region with just one producer, so we want to help," says Rocha, standing by a row of barrels where a small production of fortified wine is now ageing, waiting to be enjoyed by the next generation. "I wanted to do something for the island and contribute to change."

As the former director of the hospitality school in Ponta Delgada, Rocha is a firm believer in the potential of Azorean talent bringing back knowledge from around the world once they return on home turf. "You need a generation that can create change," he says. That's why he has built his own modern version of an *adega*, a winery

home but the space is jammed full of large old looms that create textiles of different sizes and patterns. Some of these machines require two people to work together, completing each other's movements in a show of intimacy and trust. When we arrive, 74-year-old Florinda Silva is at work on a subtle bas-relief piece, pushing the pedals in silence by the window. Her movements are abrupt and sure-footed and yet there's a hypnotic quality to her craft.

"Nothing ever hurts when I am weaving," she says, passing the shuttle on the loom that she inherited from her grandmother. "It relaxes my whole body and it abstracts my mind." Silva has now taken on the responsibility of passing on her knowledge to the next

generation: after teaching her daughter, she's now training her granddaughter. "Of course, I'm really proud; it means that the skills can survive" she says, as she walks us through a shop full of cushions, tablecloths and blankets (as well as a clothing collection made in collaboration with a fashion designer from Porto, who came here on a residency programme). All of the items are adorned with colourful, geometric designs – and dyed with natural pigments made of herbs, walnuts and onion husks. It turns out the team are also excellent salespeople: we leave laden with stuffed bags.

By the time we're back on the boat to make our return journey to Pico, the sky has finally opened up. In the sun the island

is transformed, and the sea voyage is almost unrecognisable. A pod of dolphins surprises all passengers catching the late-afternoon rays on the top deck, coming so close to the hull that everybody can see their skin glistening in the light. Just as the boat is finally rounding off the island to get to the port of Madalena, the clouds on top of the Pico disperse and the *majestade* finally reveals itself in all its glory. The imposing sight is both awe-inspiring and strangely soothing. It's also definitive proof that no matter how cloudy a day might start, it's always worth sticking things out. The sun does eventually come out and the hardy rocks that have withstood rain, wind and storms will retain the heat for longer than you think. — κ

