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Road trip Audi adventure in the Azores



MARK PORTER

FURNAS is a handsome, brightly painted village lying in the shadow of the volatile volcano after which it was named. It wouldn't look out of place in the Pyrenees. Except it's in the middle of the Atlantic, a thousand miles west of Lisbon and a good way east of New York, in a place where the Earth's bowels erupted 20 million years ago, blasting nine sharp volcanic fragments into the briny.

This remote archipelago is at Europe's western most extremity, boasts ancient New World cities and some of the most spectacular scenery on the planet. Despite its location, the Azores are as much part of Portugal as the Algarve. And the cost of getting there and back – direct from Manchester or via Lisbon from Glasgow – is usually less than £60.

I had driven from Ponta Delgada, the city on the main island of São Miguel.

If ever a place was designed for pleasure driving, or rallying, for that matter, it has to be São Miguel. Its cliffs and coastlines are more dramatic than anything in England's West Country and mountain roads offer an eagle eye view of the vast seascape from way above.

At lunchtime I pitched up in Furnas exhilarated by the perfect roller coaster ribbon of EU-funded Tarmac. WAYZOR, the island's new hire car company, had fixed me up with an Audi Q2, a pocket-sized SUV ideal for the purpose.

Banks of hydrangeas (hortensia) seemed to line every road and track with a crash barrier

The magnificent view over the twin lagoons to Sete Cidades and, below right, the steaming fissures at Furnas

of pale blue foliage. They provide a splendid contrast to the jungle-like interior and sudden gaps reveal vistas of green tumbling down to the sea and a coastline dotted with fishing villages.

I passed the world championship surfing haven of Ribeira Grande before heading up into the mountains and the clouds. The Q2, with its twin-turbo 1.0 engine and manual gearbox was certainly up to the job. Acceleration was never likely to cause whiplash but the Q2 was nippy nonetheless.

Furnas appeared round a bend in the road. Steaming fissures belched plumes of steam into the warm summer afternoon. A man was unearthing a large pot from the boiling morass where he'd buried it and nearby a woman hauled a steaming yellow bag of maize onto a wheelbarrow.

My billet was the Terra Nostra Garden, an art deco spa hotel somehow transported here from another world of opulence and chic in 1935. It was like stepping out of the

jungle and straight onto an old Cunard liner. I checked in and walked into the village for lunch.

I had to pick my way between tightly packed tables to get seated at the Miroma. Here they serve cozida, a local delicacy. The meat (pork, beef, chicken, sausages and black pudding) goes into a pot and spends six hours simmering in the boiling mud, while the vegetables go in another, to be reassembled in the kitchen. The result is a gargantuan and toothsome affair, avowedly not for the faint-hearted. My assault on the pot was lengthy, accompanied by a perky local red from the island of Pico.

The afternoon was spent wallowing in the thermal lake in the large private parklands that comprise the Terra Nostra's grounds. There are discreet baths bubbling with thermal waters hidden among the foliage for those wanting privacy.

The following day I drove what must be one of the world's greatest routes, the old ►



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► coastal road up to Nordeste. The first section took me down to Povoação, where the first Portuguese colony settled in 1427. It is now an elegant port dominated by a towering backdrop of foothills. The road out rises steeply and soon you're looking down on Foia da Terra and Fagundas 1000 feet below.

There are lots of viewpoints with beautifully tended rest areas and municipal barbecues for public use. The views are vast and the word "breathtaking" is inadequate. Each corner reveals a new wonder.

I drove back to the hotel along the new motorway in order to make the Terra Nostra's Michelin-rated dining room but not before scooting down a steep road into the fishing village of Maia. It reminded me of how Cornwall used to be – men fixing nets on the quayside with older folk sitting outside their cottages talking, everywhere brightly painted.

I then spent a couple of days in Ponta Delgada, exploring the west of the island. My room at the Grand Hotel Atlântico overlooked the lido and port. It is the only 5-star in the Azores and was an ideal spot to explore the splendid restaurants in this bustling town with its handsome Portuguese colonial architecture. If you go, you must check out the tiny and refined Tasquinha Vieira restaurant or the charming and hugely generous Taberna Açor, both in the old town.

In the morning I was picked up from the Grand and whisked up into the mountains in a Land Rover through cloud one minute and sunshine the next. My guide was Wilson Silva from Greenzone Azores, a polyglot able to crack jokes in three languages.

TRAVELFACTS

Ryanair flies to Azores direct from Manchester or from Glasgow via Lisbon
Mark and family were hosted by Bensaude Hotels (www.bensaude.pt) at the:
Terra Nostra Garden Spa Hotel, Furnas, São Miguel: +351 296 549 090
Grand Hotel Açores Atlântico, Ponta Delgada: +351 296 302 200
Audi Q2 provided by WAYZOR car hire: www.wayzor.pt.
Mark and family travelled by ferry from São Miguel to Terceira and back with Atlanticoline: www.atlanticoline.pt
Guided tours of São Miguel with Greenzone Azores: greenzoneazores.com



Mark with his trusty Audi Q2, which proved more than a match for the mountains of São Miguel. Right, the Terra Nostra Hotel entrance



We arrived on a plateau with two lakes shrouded by lush forestry and towering banks of rock. Below us, in the distance, was a vast expanse of shoreline onto which the mighty Atlantic surf pounds day and night.

We ended up looking down at the Lagoa Azul (Green Lake) and Lagoa Verde (Green Lake) from the crater road high above. These are vast volcano craters that have become lakes forming a sort of vast amphitheatre with great forest covered volcanic cliffs bearing down on them. And in the distance the deep blue ocean and idyllic town of Sete Cidades.

Ana and the children flew in and the following morning we took the five-hour ferry to Terceira to stay in the port of Angra do Heroísmo, now a UNESCO world heritage site. Terceira is smaller than São Miguel but just as charming and another good place to

DRIVEFACTS

MAKE: Ax Make: Audi
MODEL: Q2 1.0 TFSI SE 5dr
HOW MUCH: £21,445 (£36,795 for 2.0TFSI Quattro edition)
HOW FAST: 122mph
0-60MPH: 10.1secs
ECONOMY: 55.4mpg
EMISSIONS: 117g/km

put the Q2 through its paces. It was easily big enough for the four of us and met with approval all round.

"How much is it?" enquired Ana. "I think you must buy one." The Q2 is not cheap. The base model is over £21,000, but it is an Audi – a shorter, fatter yet taller version of the A3. Despite being only a 1.0 litre engine, it is surprisingly poky even fully laden, and was good off-road. The more powerful and expensive models come with 4-wheel drive, but this was good enough for our needs.

The Azores encapsulate many aspects of what is scenically best about Europe. Imagine fabulous sea cliffs with a plateau of moorland, out of which rises an alpine mountain range and lakes of startling colour. And always with the lowering threat of volcanic catastrophe! No wonder the folk are so laid back.

Jeep show as new Renegade is unveiled

JEEP has confirmed pricing and specifications for its recently refreshed Renegade, which is set to arrive in the UK this month.

Starting from £19,200, the Italian-built compact SUV gets a revised look, more equipment and improved safety, along with a new engine line-up.

The new look comes thanks to a redesigned front fascia, although Jeep's iconic seven-slot grille is still present.

New LED headlights are available as optional extras on all models and as standard on high-spec Limited and Trailhawk models. Entry-level Renegades are powered by a new three-cylinder 1.0-litre turbocharged unit,



delivering 118bhp and 190Nm of torque. Another petrol option is offered in the form of a four-cylinder turbocharged 1.3-litre engine, which can be had with 148bhp or 178bhp, with both outputs delivering 270Nm of torque.

There's also the choice of two diesel engines, which are revised versions of those offered on the outgoing model.

Three gearbox options are on offer: A six-speed manual, a six-speed dual-clutch automatic and a nine-speed torque converter automatic. There's also the option of front or all-wheel drive. An updated Uconnect infotainment system is also on offer.