



Despite being located closer to Africa than Europe, Madeira is very much a part of Portugal. **Judy Darley** and her new husband, James, set out to discover the island's romantic side

**M**uch loved by British holidaymakers, Madeira is an island of exotic flowers, friendly locals, and more than its fair share of luxury hotels. An evocative, mountainous landscape is a constant reminder of the Madeira's volcanic origins, while the Atlantic Ocean is visible from every terrace and balcony. Reputedly first discovered by an eloping couple shipwrecked on its shores, the island whispers legends from its valleys to its peaks, making it the ideal location for a romantic holiday. Choosing the location for the perfect honeymoon isn't an easy task, even, or especially, if one half of the newly wedded couple is a travel writer. Prior to our wedding on May 25, 2007, James and I looked at countless destinations, considering Mexico, Hawaii and the Azores, before coming across a brochure about Madeira. Described rather deliciously as a "floating garden", the island seemed to be largely overlooked by the crowds of tourists who descend on other tropical paradises. The lack of easily accessible beaches is a big part of that, but my husband-to-be and I have never been fond



# Island of romance



**Clockwise from main** Madeira is an oasis of exotic flowers including these Love Flowers in full bloom; the wedding day; isolated research cabins sitting in the shadow of the mountains on the Desertas Islands; the honeymoon couple enjoying a drink in the hotel courtyard

of lounging in the sun, favouring exploratory holidays in beautiful locations. Madeira seemed ideal, and five days after our wedding, we caught a TAP flight from Gatwick, and landed on the island's tiny runway just over three hours later. Our first impression of Madeira was how luscious and exotically, green it is, with volcanic hills rising steeply from the Atlantic. A fifteen-minute taxi ride from the airport to Funchal would once have meant several hours of travelling across the hummocky terrain, but today a network of tunnels have cut this journey down to 15 minutes, with sea views offered at every turn. Our destination, Estalagem Quintinha de São João, is one of the many hotels that were once the grand homes of wine merchants. As honeymooners, we were benefiting >>

IMAGES: JUDY DARLEY; LYDIA SAMUEL PHOTOGRAPHY (ABOVE)

from the hotel's romantic package, which meant we were allocated a vast suite overlooking the pool, and found a bottle of champagne in our living room on arrival. As we stood on one of our two balconies admiring the dramatic mountains beyond the pool, we breathed in deep and discovered an aroma of flowers and herbs, something we would enjoy wherever we were over the next six days thanks to the profusion of plants blooming in Madeira.

### Ocean waves

On our first day, we caught a taxi to Funchal's harbour where we met the crew of the Gavião, the yacht that was to take us to the Desertas Islands. There were six other passengers, including a pair of Spanish ornithologists who spent the entire three-hour journey looking out for seagulls and other birds wheeling over the waves. The sea was a deep rich blue and as smooth as silk as we set off. After a couple of hours the Desertas Islands appeared on the horizon, looking disconcertingly sinister. A dense, dark cloud hung over much of the island, casting a cold shadow over the sea. The island is one of Madeira's five Nature Marine Reserves and home to 30 monk seals, of which there are only 500 in the whole world. The animals are notoriously timid, and we didn't see so much as a flipper in our time there. We took a dinghy to shore and meandered along the pathways, cautious not to stray and damage any of the rare native plantlife. As well as plants, the reserve is famous for its tarantulas, but the only wildlife we saw were tiny green indigenous canaries, and the researchers who live in cabins on the beach for weeks at a time.

On our way back to Funchal, our captain made contact with a tourist vessel that had come across some dolphins, and we sped over to see them. They darted around the prow of the boat, sleek and beautiful in the astonishingly clear water.

Once back on shore, realising we were ravenous, we caught a taxi to the elegant restaurant at the Bela Vista hotel, where



“OUR FIRST IMPRESSION OF THE ISLAND OF MADEIRA WAS HOW LUSCIOUS AND EXOTICALLY GREEN IT IS”

**Above** Judy and James enjoyed sampling the delights of local food and a bottle of bubbly **Below** Sightseeing with a difference – the couple take an exciting toboggan ride down a steep hill

English antiques add an air of grandeur. Specialties included starters of papaya and melon with smoked ham, and prawn cocktails in a deliciously light peppered sauce.

In the morning we walked the fifteen-minute route to the town centre, enjoying the fact the layout of the town means everything is within easy strolling distance, with the main attractions at the lowest point, spread along the waterfront. There's a lot of building work happening in Funchal, but glowing pink swathes of bougainvilleas and purple jacaranda trees brighten the profusion of concrete, while the central streets are patterned prettily with white marble and black basalt cobblestones.

After exploring the traditional shops of embroidered fabrics and tropical fruit liquors, we paused for a refreshing strawberry and kiwi iced tea at Loja do Chã, a tea shop overlooking Praça do Colombo, one of the many elegant squares. By now it was lunchtime, but we were saving our stomachs for Reid's Palace Hotel's famous afternoon tea.

Reid's Palace is one of the island's most emblematic buildings, whose guests have included characters such as George Bernard Shaw and Winston Churchill. Our guide showed us the George Bernard Shaw suite, a series of beautiful rooms with walls painted featuring delicate Oriental-style trees and flowers. The Winston Churchill suite is reputedly even grander, but was currently occupied by guests paying over €2,000 per night for the privilege, though, our guide told us, beaming, that rate does include breakfast.

We were lucky enough to be allocated the best table on the tea terrace, though all are excellent, with sweeping views of

the palm gardens and Funchal Bay beyond. We opted to have champagne with our tea, and sat sipping it in the sunshine while enjoying the ambience of a tinkling piano, before getting stuck into the dinky sandwiches, cakes and scones.

On the stroll back into town we paused in the Santa Caterina Park, where colourful blooms attract enormous butterflies, and a statue of Columbus, who once lived on nearby Porto Santo island, overlooks the harbour below.

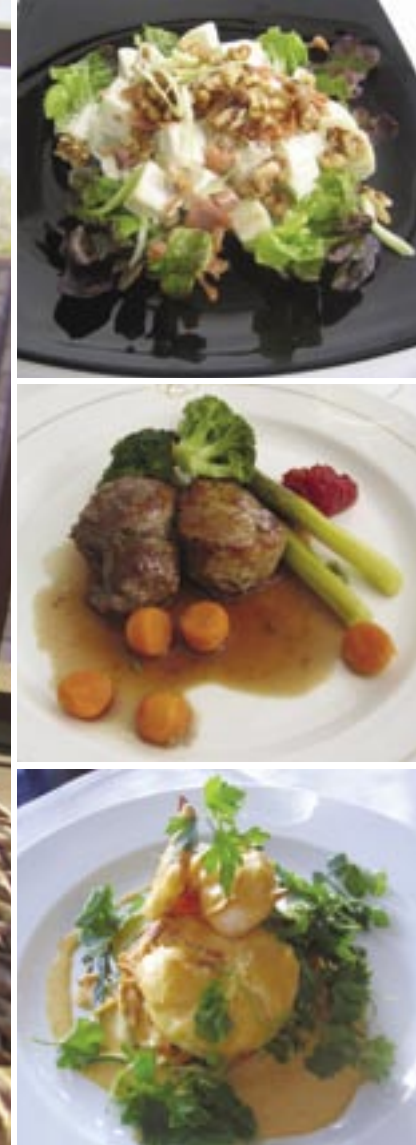
The following day we indulged in a full programme of sightseeing, ensuring we sampled all the key attractions. Soon after breakfast we headed to Blandy's Madeira Wine Lodge. This sweet-smelling series of buildings houses vast barrels of wine, with the youngest stored in the attic where the heat of the sun improves their caramel flavours, perfect for offsetting the rich, moist Bolo de Mel cakes.

This was followed by a visit to Mercado do Lavradores, close to a bridge where the island's most copious residents sunbathe; beautiful bright green, orange and brown lizards with long tails and sweet little faces. The market is a bustling, colourful place, with piles of gleaming fruit, vegetables and flowers pawed over by locals and tourists alike. At the insistence of one stall owner, we tried slices of pale creamy custard apples with knobby green skins like a turtle's shell.

### Tropical gardens

For panoramic views of the town, we rode the cable car from the waterfront to Monte, a peaceful 10-minute swoop over the houses and terraced green hillsides, coming to a halt just outside the Monte Palace Tropical Gardens. This is

**Above** Food at its best **Below** The Palace Tropical Gardens is a haven of peace and tranquility **Next page** Judy and James enjoy a dramatic view of Funchal Bay from their hotel balcony



the perfect place for a romantic stroll, exploring the shady paths and stepped walkways, and admiring exhibitions of African carvings. A lake of Koi fish, entranced by the patter of multiple waterfalls, provides a sense of tranquillity, as exotic dragon trees bleed red sap and Love Flowers glow blue against the deep green foliage, adding splashes of colour. The Japanese Garden is home to a number of serene statues of Buddha, while in other areas sculptures, ancient panels of traditional tiling, and the largest vase in the world can be found among the leaves.

We headed to Quinta do Monte for lunch, a hotel with its own small chapel where couples can get married before holding lavish receptions in the airy, light-filled restaurant. The meal was one of the loveliest I've ever eaten, starting with a refreshing salad of lettuce, walnuts, apple and smoked salmon, served with a light yoghurt dressing, then tender pieces of veal followed by apple tart and ice-cream, all washed down with Madeira wine.

Refuelled, we were ready for our toboggan ride down the steep hill, steered by two men dressed in white and wearing straw hats. The descent is rather undignified, but great fun. It is a hilarious journey of twists and turns that must have seemed terrifying to the 19th-century ladies who once used this method of transportation, before being carried back up the hill in hammocks.

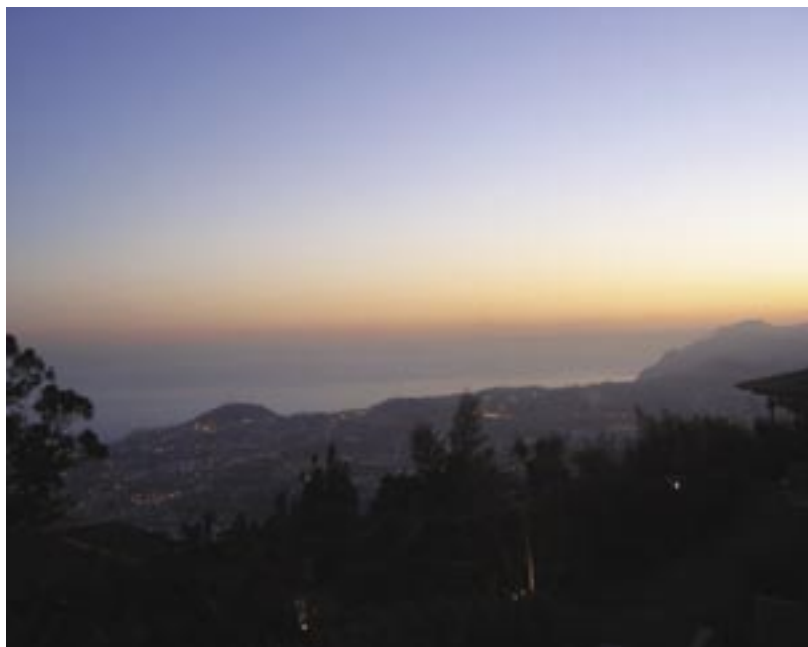
The final treat of the day was a trip to Cabo Girão, Europe's tallest promontory and the second highest in the world – standing 580 metres above sea level. Breathing in the scent of eucalyptus trees, we stared down the dramatic cliff to the deep turquoise of the Atlantic Ocean, stretching all the way to the horizon to meet the vivid blue of the sky.

On Sunday morning, we woke for the last time in Quintinha de São João, and packed our cases before strolling into town. Many of Funchal's shops and restaurants were closed, but the 15th-century cathedral was crowded with pious, and >>



IMAGES: JUDY DARLEY





curious, people eager to hear mass beneath its ornately carved Mudejar roof.

Then it was time to leave the city and head for the Choupana Hills Resort and Spa, where we were indulging ourselves for our final day on the island.

As soon as we'd checked in, we headed for the resort's leisure facilities, wallowing in the indoor pool with its bubbles and the outdoor infinity pool fringed by palms, with dragonflies darting overhead.

As the shadows began to lengthen, we hurried back to our room, planning to change and return to the hotel's Basalt Bar for cocktails, only to discover that the chambermaids had left us a chilled bottle of champagne and a plate of sliced tropical fruits. Retreating instead to the balcony, we sat sipping our fizz and watching the sky turn gold and crimson above Funchal bay as the sun sank beyond the mountains.

As the city's lights sparked on, the final traces of colour ebbed from the sea and darkness took over. My husband and I smiled at each other and vowed to return. What better way to celebrate our future wedding anniversaries? ■

## MADEIRA ESSENTIALS

for information on renting or buying property in this area, turn to page 83



Above The luxurious Choupana Hills Resort and Spa is the perfect place to indulge yourself

### WHERE TO STAY

**Estalagem Quintinha de São João**  
Rua da Levada de S. João, 4,  
9000-191 Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 740 920

**Web:** www.quintinhasaojoao.com  
A 43-room renovated manor house, in Funchal, popular with older couples and honeymooners. Rooms from €145 per night.

**Choupana Hills Resort and Spa**  
Travessa do Largo da Choupana,  
9060-348 Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 206 020

**Web:** www.choupanahills.com  
An exotic 62-room retreat with individual stilted bungalows ensuring a private haven where staff cater for your every need. Rooms from €275 per night.

**Estalagem Quinta da Bela Vista**  
Caminho Avista Navios, 4  
9000-129 Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 706 400

**Web:** www.belavistamadeira.com  
A stately 89-room hotel set amid sub-tropical gardens and still owned by the family whose home it once was. Rooms from €212 per night.

### WHERE TO VISIT

**Yacht Gavião**  
Tel: +351 291 241 124  
Take a sunset cruise, sealife safari or take a day-long excursion to the Desertas islands, with prices starting from €23.50.

**Monte Palace Tropical Gardens**  
Caminho do Monte nr. 174  
9050-288 Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 782 339  
Lose yourself among the trees, water features and sculptures, from the Japanese Garden to the Laurissilva area.

**Santa Catarina Park**  
Avenida do Infante  
Enjoy dramatic views over Funchal

harbour and immense lawns surrounded by flower beds.

**The Botanical Garden**  
Caminho do Meio, Bom Sucesso  
9050-244, Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 211 200  
**Web:** www.madeirabotanicalgarden.com

Wander the narrow paths through the gardens admiring a collection of more than 2,500 plant species gathered from all over the world.

**The Old Blandy Wine Lodge**  
Avenida Arriaga, 28  
9004-519 Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 740 110  
An opportunity to learn all about how Madeira wine is made, followed by generous sampling.

**The Madeira Story Centre**  
Tel: +351 291 000 770  
**Web:** www.storycentre.com  
Discover the history of Madeira, from its volcanic beginnings, and see artefacts.

### WHERE TO EAT

**Loja do Chá**  
Praça do Colombo  
Rua do Sabão 33-35  
9000-050 Funchal  
Tel: +351 916500418  
A cute little tea shop offering homemade scones and pastries, plus tea milkshakes, tea lemonade, tea with Madeira wine and tea with ice cream. Alternatively, try the fruity iced tea of the day for only €1.30, or hot tea for €1.40.

**Monte Garden Restaurant**  
Quinta do Monte  
Caminho do Monte, 192  
9050-288 Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 780 100  
Sumptuous food in elegant surroundings, with vast windows providing extensive views over the gardens and the sea beyond.

**Reid's Palace Hotel**  
Estrada Monumental, 139  
9000-098 Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 717 030  
**Web:** www.reidspalace.com  
Sample Madeira's finest afternoon tea for a taste of the influence the British have had over the island. Served between three and 5pm, it's worth skipping lunch for!

### MORE INFORMATION

**Madeira Tourist Board**  
Avenida Arriaga, 18  
9004-519 Funchal  
Tel: +351 291 211 900  
**Web:** www.madeiratourism.org



Above The Botanical Garden is full of colour