



Home to Reid's Palace, one of the world's most famous hotels, Madeira is known as the Atlantic's floating garden. Its afternoon tea, black-tie dinners and world class spas appeal to a luxury market. But it has a wild side.

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

text PHILIPPA ANDERSON



▲ The pool in Reid's Palace offers a magnificent view of the sea

It's not something I would recommend. Nor is it something I do normally in company. But I was with friends. The sauce remaining from my prawns was just too good not to mop up with the delicious warm bread. And, hey, I felt I'd just had a scary experience being pushed down a mountain in a toboggan so it seemed fine to let go of table manners a little.

We're sitting outside the O Regional restaurant in Madeira's old town. The waiter arrives. It turns out that my delicious prawns were cooked simply, he tells me, in wine with a little garlic. And the bread (bolo de caco) is irresistible because it's made with sweet potatoes as well as flour, then cooked in a wood fire. "It's okay," he says. "Lots of people use the bread to wipe out the dish." I doubt it.

It's our last night. The simple surroundings add something to the food and we feel relaxed, sitting outside on a pavement and not in a formal restaurant.

GARDEN OF THE ATLANTIC

When I told people I was off to Madeira, most said: "That's where that lovely hotel is, isn't it?" The island is known for its five-star hotels particularly the world renowned Reid's Palace. For years it has had a reputation for a genteel, almost old-fashioned black-tie tourism, a favourite stop on the old steam cruise liners. But Madeira has a wild side, too.

Flying into Funchal just six days ago, the picture of the vast expanse of sea seen through the airport's floor-to-ceiling windows positioned the island for me: miles from any-

where. Madeira is almost 600km off the coast of Africa's Moroccan coast and almost 1000km from its Portuguese capital of Lisbon. Just 57km by 22km, it's but a speck in the Atlantic Ocean.

Rows of smart, yellow Mercedes taxis wait in line to whisk new arrivals into nearby Funchal. On that short journey I got an immediate sense of how man is still trying to tame the island — some 600 years after it was first discovered.

Dubbed the 'Garden of the Atlantic', this natural paradise is characterised by steep hills and deep ravines. For years man has snaked his way round hairpin bends following the ridges north to south. Now he just cuts straight through them. More than 90km of tunnels have been gouged through the mountains in the last year alone, the taxi driver, Juan, told me. Like many Madeirans, he ventured to Brazil but returned to his home roots — the pull of his native island too strong to resist.

My first impressions of Funchal as we drove the new highways and darted through traffic were mixed. But then this close-up doesn't do Funchal justice. It was later when I escaped into the hills that I began to appreciate the natural harbour, the way the tiled roof houses cling to the hillside and the abundance of green that predominates.

"Here we are," said Juan. This was not how I had imagined Reid's (as it is known). Photos show a hotel amid splendid gardens and yet the taxi simply pulled off the busy road.

Once a magnificent mansion, the roadside view belies its old colonial style and remarkable position. It was as if we had stepped back into another era. Our room, in the main building (ask for this rather than the newer garden wing) was



Afternoon tea at Reid's is a throwback to a bygone age



very chintzy and afforded splendid views of the sea. Like many buildings in Madeira, the hotel seems precariously perched. Ten acres of semi-tropical gardens cling to the cliff sides with the deep Atlantic below.

That first dinner in the main Dining Room was a feast with delicious pan-fried sea bass and, of course, jacket and tie are *de rigueur* for men. Many people come to Madeira just to stay at Reid's — it has cachet. And, of course, a guest list of royalty, aristocracy, celebrities and personalities going back years. As the hotel boasts: "you almost expect to spot Winston Churchill taking afternoon tea on the terrace...to find the Empress of Austria staring out to sea from her verandah...or to stumble across George Bernard Shaw mastering the intricacies of the tango on the lawn".

WALKS IN THE INTERIOR

Our first day was spent exploring the delights of Funchal town. Here, elegant shops, pavement cafes, baroque churches and colourful markets vie for attention. Look up and you will see a cloak of trees on the surrounding mountains; look down and you will see mosaic pavements made from local volcanic stone. Even out of the flower festival season (April), it's easy to see the island's floral attributes, for example, the river flowing through the city is covered with a deep canopy of pink and mauve bougainvillea. A visit to Adegas de São Francisco (St Francis Wine Lodge) proved a must to learn about 150 years of Madeira winemaking and, of course, for some serious sampling.

Day two and straight after a champagne breakfast, I was persuaded to swap my heels for hiking boots (bought

three years ago and never worn, despite good intentions).

Madeira boasts many walks in the interior, particularly those alongside the levadas. These levadas are a series of water channels built by early settlers to bring water from the north of the island to the fertile south. An incredible feat of engineering with an almost imperceptible gradient, today they stretch to 1600km, criss-crossing the mountains. Footpaths were built alongside for maintenance and until the 1980s these paths were almost unknown. Now they are bringing a new generation of tourists — people who want to walk on the wild side.

And wild it is. While some walkways are easy, others involve long tunnels, waterfalls and views totally unsuitable for any vertigo sufferer. We opted for a painless start and took a taxi up to Quinta do Palheiro Ferreiro. The main house is closed to the public but the gardens are worth a visit. How could this be Europe? One moment it seemed like an English rose garden and next it was more like a tropical garden with exotic flowers like Bird of Paradise.

A stunning golf course forms part of this estate and the adjacent five-star Casa Velha do Palheiro hotel is an excellent place to stay and eat. Leaving behind this aristocratic estate, we set off for our first levada walk. Just four kilometres took us through fragrant woodland, alongside running water, past tumbling streams and over a delightful stone bridge and at different stages offered us varying views of Funchal's natural harbour. Our destination was Monte and the easy option of a cable car ride down to the harbour was our choice. Then back for a luxurious soak in the bath at Reid's and dinner at the hotel's pristine Italian restaurant Villa Cipriani offering superb views of the sea.





▲ Villa Cipriani, an Italian restaurant adjoining Reid's, offers superb views

GLIMPSE OF A BYGONE AGE

Over the week I needed little persuasion to explore further and become more adventurous in terms of length and difficulty of walk. Which day was my favourite? Curral das Freiras (Nun's Valley) and Ribeiro Frio (Cold River) both come close.

Coach tours are organised to Curral das Freiras but the road misses the best view. Instead we took a taxi to Eira do Serrado. As the taxi wound its way ever higher, the air was filled with the distinctive, heady smell of eucalyptus. Terraced hills dominated the breathtaking view from our start point. The sound of the clanging bell in the deep cauldron-shaped valley set our direction as we set off on an old cobbled donkey trail which zigzagged its way from 1094m down to the little bridge over the river below.

At times sweet chestnut branches obscured our vision, but there was no doubt about the destination as we negotiated continuous steep hairpin turns (I counted 52). Never had I thought that I would prefer to climb rather than descend. The pace was knee-achingly steep and certainly not for anyone afraid of heights. And then suddenly clearly below us was a picturesque scene plucked surely from a musical film set. Tea and delicious, moist cake (Madeira cake, of course) awaited us in the pretty village.

Ribeiro Freia involved another winding taxi ride only to arrive at what seemed to be no more than a bend in the road with a few houses huddled together (more like Switzerland than Portugal). After a delightful lunch of fresh trout (from the local fish farm) we set off on what was to be a round trip. In eight kilometres we met just one other group of walkers and passed only one farmhouse standing alone high on a hilltop. The climb

was strenuous but rewarded us with outstanding views and rare moments by the polished river rocks where all we heard was the clear sound of running water and singing birds in the trees.

The walk to Madeira's highest summit (1861m) required yet more exertion the next day. Pico Ruivo with its wind-sculpted rocks has a moon-like feeling and the sense of achievement on reaching the top certainly felt like a 'giant leap'.

On the way down we swapped stories with another group of walkers. How the island offered great accommodation (no hiker's huts for me) but also the chance to enjoy the wilderness. How we walked like we had never walked before.

Then came the advice: "You haven't taken tea at Reid's. You simply must. You haven't taken a ride in the toboggans? That's been the highlight of our trip."

So next day we had afternoon tea on the terrace at

Reid's with delicious scones and cakes. All terribly civilised and certainly a glimpse of a bygone age. Then I found myself back at Monte in a large wicker carrinho de cesto (literally 'basket car') being flung down a steep street head on to oncoming traffic at top speed. The two condutores, complete with traditional hat and boots,

steered the metal-shod toboggans around the corners with some skill, though seemed to delight in making it a rough but exhilarating ride.

And so to the O Regional restaurant. It was not recommended, but definitely a find. The main course of estepada (regional kebabs) arrives. Chunks of beef skewered on a stick of scented bay and cooked over a wood fire are brought to the table hanging vertically on a metal rack. "How do they taste so good?" I ask the waiter.

He tells me: "It's the garlic, the herbs, but especially, the bay skewer. It simply grows wild in the local forest." ▲

FOR YEARS MADEIRA HAS HAD A REPUTATION FOR A GENTEEL, ALMOST OLD-FASHIONED BLACK-TIE TOURISM.



factfile

WHERE TO STAY

Reid's Palace Hotel
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www.reidspalace.com

Hotel Classic Savoy
Avenida do Infante
Funchal
Tel: +351 291 213000
www.savoyresort.com

Crowne Plaza Resort Madeira
Estrada Monumental 175
Funchal
Tel: +351 291 717700
www.madeira.crowneplaza.com

Madeira Palácio
Estrada Monumental 265
Funchal
Tel: +351 291 702702
www.hotelmadeirapalacio.com

WHERE TO EAT

O Regional
Rua D Carlos 1 54
Funchal Old Town
Tel: +351 291 232956

O Jango
Rua de Santa Maria 164
Funchal Old Town
Tel: +351 291 221280

Restaurante Tokos
Estrada Monumental 169
Funchal
Tel: +351 291 771019

Casa Velha do Palheiro
Palheiro Golf
São Gonçalo
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The Monte toboggan run