

GRACIOSA AND SANTAMARIA

NATURE SPRINGS AND PRISTINE BEACHES



T H E A Z O R E S

The enchanted island

I do beautifully with the backwater of these days spent on the island of Santa Maria, the most southern and at the same time the easternmost of the Azores. And there is no money to pay for this sense of calm and appeasement. The last time I walked here was to watch, in Praia Formosa, the unforgettable music festival "Maré de Agosto", a good year has already been going on ...

I am staying in a house in Vila do Porto, the county seat, the first urban settlement of these Azorean islands. Its simple linear structure, with a main street running on the perpendicular of the sea ("a cordon de casario in the eminence of the port", called it Vitorino Nemésio) confirms the urban structure of the fourteenth-century boroughs.

I wander the streets of the village and whistle with a whistle of the late Mario Mariante. I go down to the fort of São Brás to remember the adventure of arrivals and departures in São Vapor Days ... It reminds me that this is "the island that smells good," according to Raul Brandão's *The Unknown Islands*. Yes, I can verify: this is the island of the earth's scents, the strong and intense scents.

I go through the Asas do Atlântico Club and Atlântida Cine, where I've done theater for two decades. I meet again an old friend who smiles at me when I call him "cagarro", the nice little bird that gave his nickname to the Marienses.

Santa Maria shares with Graciosa, Flores and Corvo the sad circumstance of being unknown to most Azoreans. And yet, "the island of Gonçalo Velho", the oldest of the archipelago and the first to be sighted (in 1427, at a time when the Azores were already a cartographic certainty), is extraordinarily beautiful and full of contrasts.

From Dos Anjos to Maia, the island presents a very varied landscape, dividing into two distinct parts: a fairly rugged area to the northwest - parishes of Santa Bárbara and Santo Espírito - and a flatter one - Vila do Porto, São Pedro and Almagreira.

An unusual nature, with steep ravines and deep valleys, Santa Maria are two on a single island in only 97 km² of surface: one side is mountainous and covered with massive vegetation; The other is absolutely arid, known as the "red desert." In Barreiro da Faneca the lands are material of red clay and smell permanently of clay.

But for me Santa Maria remains the island-airport, I still am the time of the scales checked there. The airport, built at the behest of the United States of America between 1944 and 1946, would transform the island into a metropolis of North Atlantic aviation. "Little America" was called the Americans. It is the airport with the longest track in the archipelago (3,048 meters long) and that has generated, during decades, a lot of commercial dynamics and social animation. People who speak all the languages of the world are traveling here in the elegant Super Constellation of TWA and in the solid DCC of Pan American. Airplanes from all the world's companies have arrived here: Varig, Iberia, Air France, and Avianca, until the Concorde made technical stops here ... Working in shifts, airport workers and workers gave life to Santa Maria, day and night. Unfortunately with the deactivation, in 1978, of the international airport, the island returned to know days of routine, of marasmo and isolation ...

In contrast, the Atlantic Air Control Center, which controls the airspace of the entire North Atlantic, is installed here, justifying the strategic importance of Santa Maria, the almost obligatory technical scale of transatlantic flights. And since 2008, there is a ground-based satellite tracking station of the European Space Agency (ESA).

Of the several laps I am giving to the island, I never tire of taking photographs of the Marian houses (whose white color is due to the lime of the island itself) that denote clear influences of the traditional Algarian and Alentejo architecture - regions of origin of the first settlers. I contemplate the windows with bars that, from parish to parish and from place to place, vary in color: blue, green, red and yellow. And beautiful, very beautiful is the profile of the chimneys of Algarve characteristics. (The Marians have Moorish blood running in their veins, and tell me if they are not Moorish the toads of the revelers of this island?).

After a visit to the very well-equipped Ethnographic Museum, located in Santo Espírito, I take the photograph of the frontispieces of the churches. I especially like the church of Santo Espírito, one of the most beautiful baroque temples of the Azores, with a facade built with volcanic stones in the 16th century and enlarged in the 18th century. And the exteriors and interiors of the Mother Church of Our Lady of the Assumption and the church of Our Lady of Victory are also of great patrimonial wealth.

In place of the Angels stands the hermitage of Our Lady of the Angels, in which Christopher Columbus ordered to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving on his return from America in 1493. It also says the oral tradition that the navigator will have been taken by pirate, Having been arrested by the governor of Santa Maria - peripécia that ... *se non è vero è ben trovato* ...

I visit Pico Alto (about 590 meters above sea level), a volcano about 3 million years old. From here we observe the whole island and, on good weather days, we can see São Miguel. Before, he had visited Pico do Facho, where signs of fire were being made on the alert for the sighting of pirates and corsairs coming from the sea to plunder the island, scourging its people, desecrating the churches and taking captives. (In the popular language of the Marians there was the interjection of astonishment "Bei!", Which being generally the title of chief in Tunisia, in Santa Maria and also in Graciosa was associated with the name of a terrible and fearsome pirate of Mafoma).

Exuberant and extraordinary is the Bay of São Lourenço, with its white sand beach, and the imposing of its vineyards arranged in an amphitheater on the hillside, protected by basaltic stone corrals. In this beach resort I would like to have a house ... Not far from there is Maia, a nature reserve and also a place of summer, charm and awe.

Yes, Santa Maria is a wonder. For example: I can not go through Valverde or Santa Barbara without thinking that I am in the presence of cribs in real size ...

I look at all this with respect and fascination. And it is from the lighthouse of Ponta do Castelo that it reveals the beauty and the impression of all this telluric grandeur.