

Portugal on par

The Algarve might be Portugal's go-to for golf, but Madeira is making a play to be the next place to tee off, finds **Chris Hewitt**



Porto Santo golf course

PICTURE: Nuno Andrade

The golf ball soars through the azure sky, a white dot framed against a blanket of blue, receding into the distance until it lands on a bed of bright green grass. It's 230 yards away and I'm gobsmacked. I've never hit a golf ball so far.

There will be those who ascribe the feat to luck, of course. I prefer to think that I was inspired by my surroundings, teeing off with one of the most breathtaking views I have ever beheld – the Madeiran capital city of Funchal lies several hundred metres below me, and I am surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. Perhaps the high altitude, far above sea level, also helped my ball to whistle through the air like a rocket.

All I know for sure is that, on the fairway of the 16th hole at Palheiro Golf, I had found my new favourite place to play. I was made for Madeira, and Madeira was made for me.

RISING STAR

At first glance, Madeira doesn't seem made for golf. When you first arrive at the Cristiano Ronaldo international airport (you'll never guess where he was born), the word that comes to mind is 'hilly'. Born of volcanic activity many thousands of years ago, Madeira rises out of the Atlantic with its highest peak, Pico Ruivo, stretching up an impressive 1,860 metres.

Embedded in those hills are houses, churches and a cable car that stretches from the suburb of Monte down to Funchal. With space at a premium on an island that is just 35 miles long and 14 miles wide, it may seem like the last place you'd find a golf course, and the last place you'd come for a golf holiday. Not so. Slowly but surely, Madeira is becoming a serious destination for golfers who want world-class courses amid world-class surroundings. ➤

DESTINATIONS

GOLF & SPORTS TOURISM | MADEIRA

3

MADEIRA ACTIVITIES

Take a 4x4 tour

With winding cliff roads, driving in Madeira is not for the faint of heart. So let someone else do it, preferably in a 4x4 that can make short work of big hills. Some of the sheer drops will make your stomach sing, as I found on a tour with Green Devil Safari.

Watch the sunset

On the way back to Funchal, pop in for a bite to eat (try black scabbardfish, a local delicacy) at Sol Poente, a Ponta do Sol restaurant that seems to have been strategically placed for the best possible view of the setting sun.

Toboggan to the city

Make your way up to Monte and then head back down again via this utterly singular experience in which you sit in a wicker basket while two nattily dressed men push, pull and slide you down 1.25 miles of roads at hair-raising speed.



PICTURE: Shutterstock/Victor Maschek

BOOK IT

Sunvil offers a seven-night holiday at Casa Velha do Palheiro – a historic boutique hotel located on the Palheiro Estate with panoramic views of the golf course – from £1,736 per person based on two sharing, including flights from Gatwick to Funchal departing on December 1, 23kg of luggage and private transfers. Golf payable locally. sunvil.co.uk



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: New Year's Eve fireworks, Madeira; Palheiro Golf course, Funchal; Santo da Serra Golf course, Funchal

PICTURES: Henrique Seruca; Shutterstock/Brester Irina, Yosefer



top tip

Recommend golfing clients visit madeiragolfpassport.com to gain discounted packages with a Madeira Golf Passport

There are currently two courses on Madeira's main island, though one of them is essentially three courses in one. Santo da Serra, about 25 minutes from (and several hundred metres above) Funchal, is a 27-hole course that opened in 1991. It has three distinct nine-hole layouts: Desertas, with its lush fairways and beautiful water hazards; Machico, with its fabulous views of the distant mountains, not to mention a testing tee shot over a deep gorge (a test that, sadly, I failed); and tree-lined Serras.

Santo da Serra was the first course to officially open on Madeira, and it was joined just two years later by Palheiro Golf, although both courses had existed as private enterprises since the 1930s. The latter, about 10 minutes' drive from the heart of Funchal, also boasts staggering scenery (it recently won World's Best Panoramic Clubhouse at the World Golf Awards) and presents its own tough challenge. When you can tear your eyes away from the views, that is.

DRIVING FORCE

If clients are still sceptical about a golf break on an island with just two golf courses, say the two magic words: Porto Santo. Part of the Madeiran archipelago, this island can be reached via a short flight or daily ferry. It has a four-mile golden sand beach and, more importantly for some, an 18-hole course that opened in 2004, designed by the late, great Seve Ballesteros.

I didn't get to play that one. Nor did I get to play the course that could well be a game-changer for Madeira. Ponta do Pargo, about 45 minutes' drive from Funchal, will be the home of the island's third course, designed

by legendary British golfer Sir Nick Faldo. It is due to open in January 2027 and could become a beacon for birdie hunters. I got a preview of the under-construction course, threaded delicately around Ponta do Pargo's clifftops, and it promises to be truly spectacular.

"Almost every hole has a view of the sea," says Saulo Nunes, a senior technician at the Madeira Development Society, who gave me a guided tour. "It's more directed to the player who wants thrills." It will take the number of courses on the archipelago to four and help unlock the door to lengthier golf breaks.

OFF COURSE

On the rare occasions when the swinging stops, there's plenty in Madeira to keep golfers occupied (as well as any golf widowers or widows along for the journey). Funchal, founded in 1421, would take a dozen walking tours just to scratch the surface. Foodies will find plenty of choice, including three Michelin-starred restaurants, and for obvious reasons the Madeira wine flows like water.

A well-timed trip could coincide with festivities such as the Wine Festival in August and September or the Columbus Festival (as in, Christopher), also in September, while New Year's Eve has an enviable fireworks blowout. Such is Madeira's climate that, with 10 hours of sunlight on January 1, clients could have a lie-in after burning the midnight oil and still have time to cram in 36 holes on any combination of the island's courses before the sun dips below the horizon. But whatever the time of year, convincing golf-loving clients to visit Madeira should be a piece of cake. **TW**