

DESTINATIONS

SPAIN & PORTUGAL | MADEIRA

POSTCARD

Madeira



There's nothing like hitting the road to explore this Atlantic island, now on the UK green list, writes **Samantha Mayling**

A masked man leaps out of a 4x4 and approaches me with what looks like a handgun.

No, it's not a James Bond scenario, but rather my guide, Jeff De Gouveia, taking my temperature before I clamber into his Land Rover.

Thanks to Madeira's stringent screening of visitors, I am allowed to sit in the front which, even though I'm wearing a mask, feels intrepid in these days of cautious social interactions.

We leave Funchal and quickly reach the dramatic peaks of this breathtakingly beautiful volcanic island. Having emerged from lockdown in England, I'm eager to chat to the first new person I've met for over a month. Jeff is equally garrulous, keen to showcase Madeira's history and stunningly steep, lush landscapes.

He's from South Africa, with Madeiran roots, and tells me why many Madeirans emigrated in the island's impoverished past – before European funding for the airport and road network opened the destination to tourism. Covid has since devastated the tourist trade, but speedy action by the local government to screen arrivals means infections remain low and the island – along with the rest of Portugal – will be on the UK's green list from next week.

Jeff is also in the vanguard of a recent trend for younger, active travellers seeking soft adventure among Madeira's craggy summits.

Our first stop is Pico do Arieiro. At 1,800 metres high, it wouldn't look out of place in Scotland or New Zealand, and even has remnants of snow from an earlier flurry. We pass stone igloos that were used to pack snow so it could be carried by 'ice runners' down to Funchal.

Jeff skilfully navigates bumpy cobbled roads to our next stop, a walk along Balcões levada, part of a 500-mile network of irrigation channels that are ideal trekking routes. We admire splendid views of a laurel forest gorge – a highlight of this Unesco-listed World Heritage landscape – and reach an Insta-friendly viewpoint, where kestrels, buzzards, robins and the Madeira firecrest may be spotted.

Next we head to Santana village, famous for its traditional thatched houses, where we dine at Quinta do Furao, feasting on limpets, chicken gizzards, octopus, Santana bread and sweet potato cheesecake.

Then it's on to Caniçal, a former whaling village where scenes from 1956 movie *Moby Dick* were filmed, before going back to Funchal.

For anyone lured by the island's green-list status but unsure where to start, this tour is a convivial way to explore off the beaten track and see Madeira through the eyes of a passionate local. **TW**



BOOK IT

Local tour firm Hit the Road Madeira offers private tours for one or two people from €135, or €375 for a group of 12. Trips last four to eight hours, with sunrise and sunset options, plus lessons about *espetada* – the Portuguese way of cooking food on skewers. Jeff can work with agents to tailor-make itineraries. hittheroadmadeira.com



TOP: Trekking on Pico do Arieiro
ABOVE: Jeff De Gouveia of Hit the Road Madeira

PICTURE: Andre Pontes