

Tui Airways flight attendant



Going green

Read the latest about the green list destinations you can sell right now as *Travel Weekly* reports from Portugal, Gibraltar and Iceland in the first of a regular Restarting Travel series

PICTURES: Joe Pepler/FinPop



Ben Ireland at the Eira do Serrado viewpoint

Travel Weekly news editor **Ben Ireland** joins Tui's first restart flight to Madeira to see what package holidays to Portugal will look like this summer

A blur of streets slips by, the breeze picks up and my face mask almost goes flying as we hurtle around the corner of a steep Funchal street on a toboggan.

You might think I've gone dotty from the lack of travel in the past year, talking about what sounds like a winter sport in a year-round destination where the temperature rarely dips below 17C. But these basket-style street toboggans don't need any snow – they're made of wood, with a seat that is surprisingly comfortable for something that wouldn't look out of place in your nan's living room.

Granted, we weren't there for comfort but for speed, duly delivered by the straw-hatted toboggan steerers of Carreiros do Monte (€15). Their traditional get-up only added to the experience (as did stopping to grease the toboggan so we could go faster).

Maintaining this tradition is a nice touch, with the practice dating back to the 19th century when it was invented as a way to navigate the city's steep hills. Wearing a mask is a modern addition, and currently a must in public places in Madeira including outside.

At the end of the route, I stop to speak to the owner of a souvenir stall, who says: "This is the first time I've spoken English in months." Whether a savvy sales pitch (I bought a fridge magnet) or a sad pandemic truth, I sense a genuine relief in her voice that one of Madeira's top-two tourism markets is back in town.



A VIEW TO A THRILL

Tobogganing is the most adrenaline-fuelled way to experience the island's views, and, boy, are there some views in this neck of the woods. (As an aside, Madeira is Portuguese for 'wood', so named by seafarers who took timber from this volcanic archipelago to build ships).

To get up to the starting point, we took the famous cable cars, soaring over terracotta roofs, staggered gardens and the flora and fauna of this unique landscape (€11 one-way). The view is quite something, even for those of us with a touch of vertigo.

That vertigo might be harder to manage when you're looking out from Cabo Girão, the highest sea cliff in Europe. There was a slight wobble in my knees as ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Toboggan ride; Funchal Cable Car; Tui's Yvette Travers; restaurant at Hotel Riu Palace Madeira PICTURES: Joe Pepler/PinPep; Ben Ireland

I approached the edge of the lookout point, glass floor of the skywalk beneath my feet, and a sign pointed out we were 580m above sea level. I could just about make out the waves far below in the distance. And while gazing out at the sweeping view is enough to make you feel small, it was a welcome change after the past 14 months to be reminded of how wide the world really is.

If your knees can handle going even higher, head 1,094m above sea level to Eira do Serrado, where you won't be short of selfie opportunities. Visitors are bussed most of the way, but a 10-minute walk to the summit gets you up close to the greenery that envelops the impressive and vast Valley of the Nuns – named for the remote village where local sisters fled to avoid the French corsairs who plundered the island for sugar in the 16th century.

WARM WELCOME

Despite its remote qualities, Madeirans are keen for travellers to return. The feeling was mutual at the Hotel Riu Palace Madeira, where staff were palpably excited to welcome their first customers back.

Yvette Travers, Tui's service delivery team manager for Madeira and Porto Santo, described the atmosphere as "jubilant" as the first UK package holidaymakers in months arrived at the resort.

"The whole island is geared up to welcome people back," says Travers, who has lived here for 18 years. "Everybody's really happy."

She points out there are some Covid restrictions to remember. As well as compulsory mask wearing (apart from poolside and while eating), Madeira is subject to an 11 pm curfew until further notice.

"We have to be considerate of the rules but in a nice way," she says. "The key is talking to guests

clearly so it's audible through the mask, and smiling through the eyes," she explains.

"From the first touchpoint, we need guests to feel secure," Travers adds. "People are on their holidays so need to be relaxed, but they also need to know they're in good hands and that the measures are sufficient."

She expects mask wearing and frequent hand sanitising, made easy with stations throughout the hotel, to remain in place for the foreseeable future. And the hope is Madeira's green list status will too.

"It feels different this time," she says. "It's a cliché, but it feels like the new normal now. There was a nervousness when we restarted last year but not this time.

"Guests are happy to be away and feel quite comfortable. For a lot of people, it's their first holiday in two years, and we're mindful of that. We want to give them a good, and safe, holiday." **tw**

BOOK IT

Tui offers a week at the 4T-rated Hotel Riu Palace Madeira from £787 per person on an all-inclusive basis, with flights departing from Gatwick on June 28, and transfers. A Nuns Valley and Madeira wine tour, taking guests to Pico dos Barcelos and Eira do Serrado, followed by a local wine tasting, costs £26 including hotel pick-up and a guide. tui.co.uk