

Chelmsford U3A Travel Group

Madeira

At the time of writing twenty-four of our members will be enjoying Madeira's balmy spring weather. A further ten of us have already been and returned, and are feeling the benefit of escaping a dismal English February!

Similar in size to the Isle of Wight, the island of Madeira is a province of Portugal, lying 600 miles south west of Lisbon, but much closer to the coast of Morocco. The island was formed 5 million years ago as a result of volcanic activity, which means that it is mountainous, but blessed with rich soil. Crops grown include bananas, sugar cane and grapes that produce the famous Madeira wine.



The island was only discovered 500 years ago by Joao Gongalves Zarco who sailed in the service of Prince Henry The Navigator of Portugal. The island was so named because it was heavily forested (Madeira is timber in Portuguese). Sugar cane – imported from Italy – was the island's first crop, while the island's vines were originally brought in from Crete. The seas around the island are rich – we saw a pod of dolphins on a boat trip – with the most popular catch being the scabbard fish (espada). It tastes much better than it looks!

The population of the island is now around 250,000, of whom over half live in the capital, Funchal. High unemployment, particularly amongst the young, is prompting many to emigrate. This is due to the decline in the agricultural and fishing sectors, and poor salary levels generally. High levels of emigration are nothing new to Madeira, and there are reckoned to be as many as 4 million Madeiran descendants living overseas.

One of the most famous tourist attractions are the wicker toboggans (carros de ceste). The wicker chairs mounted on runners are pushed by drivers in blue coats, white trousers, straw hats and rubber-soled boots, who then restrain the sledge by a rope.

As is the case with the rest of Portugal, Madeira remains a deeply religious society. It has its own version of the statue of Christ The Redeemer. The one in Rio de Janeiro is much more famous, but the one in Madeira pre-dates it. The other two such statues in the world are also in Portuguese-speaking locations – Lisbon, and Macau off the coast of China.



Neil Scott and Anne Brereton on the famous wicker basket toboggan run