

## Madeira

This Portuguese island has been considered an ideal holiday destination since time immemorial. But is it really?!

Madeira due to its remote locations, far from both Europe and Africa as well as away from major sailing routes, remained undesired and rarely visited by sailors for a long time despite being known by them. Moreover, it was an uninhabited island. No native people lived there, so when a ship was pushed off course by bad weather, and reached the island, there was no need to fight for it. The sailors simply went ashore, replenished their supplies, repaired the damages caused by the storm, and sailed away. Supposedly, it all adds up, except for a small detail. The sailors did not actually land on Madeira but on the much smaller Porto Santo Island. From there, they could see a much larger island with mountains covered in dense forest. This sight tempted them to return a year later, this time setting foot on Madeira itself. Officially, the discovery of Madeira is attributed to three Portuguese sailors: João Gonçalves Zarco, Tristão Vaz Teixeira, and Bartolomeu Perestrelo. As I mentioned earlier, in 1418, a powerful storm forced them onto the shores of Porto Santo.



*The view from the highest peak of Madeira-Pico Ruivo (1,862 meters a. s. l.).*

*Photo: Krzysztof Tęcza*

These explorers upon seeing the dense forest covering the mountainous terrain, named the island—"the island of wood"—Madeira. From the beginning of its colonisation, sugarcane plantations were established on the island, because sugar was a highly profitable commodity then. Settlers came from Portugal, the Netherlands, and Italy, as well as Moors and Spanish Jews. Black slaves were brought in to work on the plantations from Africa. Unfortunately, over time, local sugar producers could not compete with the cheaper sugar from Brazil, which resulted in the decline of the sugar industry on the island. However, wine production flourished, and began to be sold in increasing quantities. Today, since there are not many

people of Black skin colour on the island, it is worth mentioning that this is because enslaved workers were later sold and sent to Brazilian plantations.

When it comes to wine, many different types are produced. However, the most famous is Madeira-a fortified wine that has been made on the island for 300 years. Initially, it was a rather poor-quality wine exported in large quantities to Europe. According to historical accounts, when the first shipment arrived at its destination, it turned out to be much better than expected. After many experiments and studies, the reason for wine transformation during the sea voyage was discovered. Today, the wine is intentionally heated to accelerate fermentation-a process called maderisation. Thanks to this method, Madeira wine is considered the most durable wine in the world. In fact, on the island, you can buy bottles of Madeira dating back to Napoleon's time. They can cost several hundred euros.



*The Mountains of Madeira are full of spectacular weather phenomena.  
Photo: Krzysztof Tęcza*

Today, Madeira is a holiday destination for tourists from all over the world. Since even in winter the temperature does not drop below a dozen or so degrees Celsius, the island remains green with vegetation and colourful with flowers all year round. Madeira is commonly called the island of eternal spring. Here are also preserved the laurel forests, which are listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Autonomous Region of Madeira consists of four islands, but only two-Madeira and Porto Santo-are inhabited. The capital, Funchal, is home to half of the island's population of around a quarter of a million. The tourism industry contributes to one-fifth of the region's revenue.

Looking at the development of tourism, it becomes clear, that a large number of tourists are not satisfied by relaxation only. Thanks to well-developed trails, primarily following the levadas-irrigation channels that carry water from the mountains to lower-lying areas-the

tourists set out on mountainous hikes. These trails, running along cliffs and steep slopes, offer panoramic views. The places with numerous waterfalls are sufficient lure for tourists.

I will just add that the mountains dividing the island create weather variations depending on where we are. This can make planning hikes a bit challenging. On the other hand, thanks to these high mountains, we can use good-quality roads running through tunnels (here is nearly 200 tunnel roads). This allows us for quick travel to the other side of the island where the sun shines. The highest peak in Madeira is Pico Ruivo, which has 1,862 meters above the sea level.



*The laurel forest. Photo: Krzysztof Tęcza*

Of course, Madeira is not only mountains but also numerous landmarks. We find here many architecturally valuable churches, especially in Funchal. There is also The Monte Palace Tropical Garden with lush vegetation, in which are hidden the building of The Museum of Semi-Precious Stones and Minerals as well as The Museum of Contemporary Art.

The most recognisable attraction in Madeira is the wicker toboggan sledge ride. The wicker sledges are driven by two *carreiros*, who are dressed in white. They wear rubber-soled boots to brake if necessary the sled that speeds on the asphalt roads. Some call this 2-kilometer sledge ride the craziest attraction on the island. It's understandable, considering that the ride takes place on an active street where cars now and then pass the sledges.

Let me add that we can also find Polish traces in Madeira. Marshal Józef Piłsudski stayed on the island for medical treatment, and Pope Paul II also visited. However, the most famous person in Madeira is Cristiano Ronaldo, one of the greatest footballers in the world. Cristiano was born in Madeira, his family lives here, and we can dine at his restaurant, or stay at his hotel. Ronaldo is known for his financial support for residents after cataclysms that struck the island. His most significant contribution was financing the construction of an intensive care unit in the local hospital. It's no surprise that a statue of Cristiano Ronaldo has been placed near the ocean. Tourists are almost always seen here, taking souvenir photos.





*Madeira is above all an abundance of fruits. Photo: Krzysztof Tęcza*

Returning to the initial question, based on everything I've seen and experienced during my stay, considering both mountain hikes and explored landmarks, as well as the atmosphere in the restaurants-I can't answer otherwise than: Yes, Madeira is an ideal place for a holiday. It's worth flying here to discover the island, get to know people, and enjoy the stunning views. Thanks to everything I've experienced here, I'm sure that I'll return here one day.

Krzysztof Tęcza