

Madeira – Monte Palace Tropical Garden

Considered by many to be the most beautiful, it is undoubtedly one of the most interesting gardens in Europe. Situated on a hillside descending toward Funchal Bay, it is not a place for those comfort-seeking. Unfortunately, visiting it requires quite a bit of walking. Interestingly, getting to the garden itself is not particularly difficult. We come up by the gondola, which glides over the rooftops of houses that are situated across the hillside. The view during the ride up is indescribable. The ride itself is only the beginning. Now, after passing through the entrance gate, the actual walk through the garden begins. We have hundreds of steps to climb, intertwined with paths leading through various sections of the garden. We should know that around every corner there is something intriguing, something that will tempt us to pause and soak in the beauty of the surrounding plants. But not only. The garden is also home to many animals. There are peacocks, swans, wood ducks, mandarin ducks, and also flamingos. Admittedly, the colour of flamingos leaves a lot to be desired, which is likely due to the type of food they are fed.



Photograph: Krzysztof Tęcza

But let us start from the beginning. The history of Monte Palace begins in the 18th century, when the English consul, Charles Murray, established a farm here, later named Quinta do Prazes. In 1897, the estate's new owner, Alfredo Guilherme Rodrigues, built an architecturally interesting palace, which was transformed into the Monte Palace Hotel. Unfortunately, over time, this building gradually fell into neglect. This building would likely have turned into ruins if it were not for José Manuel Rodrigues Berardo, who acquired the property in 1987. He dedicated the first years into transforming the area into a beautiful tropical garden. Berardo imported plants and trees from all over the world and planted them throughout the grounds, enriching the vegetation here. But he did not do it in a slapdash way. Berardo had thought everything out. Thanks to this, he created several themed gardens. The owner also took on the restoration of the dilapidated palace, which after renovation, became an ornament to

the park. Unfortunately, tourists are not allowed to enter the building, because it houses the offices of the foundation that oversees the park.

As we walk along the park paths, we will reach the oriental garden, where plants representing the nature of China and Japan are gathered. But not only that. We can see statues of Buddha, stone lanterns, pagodas, and bridges, as well as a marble dragon surrounded by children, symbolising fertility. Spending time in this part of the garden gives us the chance to witness, or, in fact, to feel the harmony between human and nature. The area is watched over by the Fodo guardian dogs, which assure a sense of safety and mutual respect.



During our walk, we will notice cycads, of which there are over 500 specimens growing here. The garden has 30 out of 65 known species of this plant, making it one of the most complete collections in Europe. It must be said, the garden is stunning all year round. There is hardly any visible division between the seasons. Of course, depending on the time of year, there may be more or fewer blooming, or fruit-bearing plants, but even in winter, it is fabulously colourful here. We will see azaleas, hortensias, proteas, strelitzias, clivias, and bamboos. Of course, these are only a few examples. In addition, the great trees are equally impressive. Sequoias, magnolias, araucarias, cypresses, and olive trees are all grown here.

An interesting fact is the placement of various architectural and decorative details among the lush vegetation. These include tiles depicting scenes from Portuguese history or religious events. In addition to completely new tiles created in our century, there are also old, original ones that have been relocated here from various places around the island. Some of them date as far back as the 17th century.

Right from the entrance, we can admire 40 large panels arranged along the pathway, which illustrate Portuguese history. Each of them presents the most important moments from the history of this seafaring nation.

There is also a series of 166 panels illustrating “The Adventures of the Portuguese in Japan.” It is no secret that Portugal has had centuries-old trade relations with Japan. Another interesting exhibition is “Zimbabwe Contemporary Sculpture Garden,” which showcases the richness of African culture and art.



I have not mentioned yet the museum established here. Since it is located in a multi-story building, we first encounter contemporary art. Officially, it is stated that this exhibition allows us to familiarise ourselves with the process of evolution and the present state of contemporary artistic expression. We will see many beautiful works here, but in reality, a million dollars for whoever can fully understand these artistic forms. In the lower part of the building, there is a collection of minerals and gemstones. Here, we truly witness the beauty of nature. Their stunning colours, sheen, and texture make it hard for us to leave this place.

I am not sure if I am expressing the opinion of the majority of tourists visiting this exceptional garden, but I believe I am. The visit is complemented by numerous eating spots. Starting with a stand near the pond with flamingos (Lago Central Lake) with Piña Colada served in a fresh pineapple, all the way to the Bluehouse Café. There, we can admire the view of Funchal Bay, relax after a tiring walk, as well as recharge by enjoying a delicious cake, and savour an interesting flavoured drink, which is included in our ticket.

The best awaits us at the end of our walk. If someone has no longer the Energy to make their way back to the entrance, remembering that we have been descending the hillside the entire time, they can use the garden’s transport service and hop into an electric car that will take them to the entrance gate. Those who are in better shape, or those who enjoy mortifying themselves, can take the stairs up. And if they do not run out of breath, they will reach the upper gondola station, where they can ride down to the city.

Krzysztof Tęcza
Translation: Natalia Pławiak