

madeira

DIZZY HEIGHTS

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THE ISLAND OF MADEIRA, also known as the floating garden of the Atlantic Ocean, covers an area of only 737 square kilometres. Its capital, Funchal, is a well-known cruise-ship destination and Madeira attracts almost one million visitors annually. At first glance, this does not bode well for a good birding venue. Well, it is – and there is much more. If we could characterise the island of Madeira in a single word, it would be ‘diversity’. And if we could add a second word, it would be ‘accessibility’. You need only travel a short distance from the very touristy places around Funchal and along the south-eastern coast to realise that this island has a few surprises in store.



The island of Madeira is situated in the Atlantic Ocean, about 900 kilometres from the Portuguese capital of Lisbon, and 630 kilometres west of the Moroccan coast. Politically and culturally it belongs to Europe, but geographically it is part of the African Plate. Madeira is, in fact, not a single island but an archipelago consisting of two inhabited islands, Madeira and Porto Santo, and two uninhabited island chains, the Desertas and the Savage Islands.

The distance from Madeira to the neighbouring Desertas Islands and Porto Santo is 37 kilometres and 50 kilometres respectively. The Savage Islands are 230 kilometres south of Madeira, and 165 kilometres north of the Canary Islands. Both the Desertas and the Savage

islands are nature reserves and may only be visited as part of a guided tour.

Together with the archipelagos of the Canary Islands, the Azores and Cape Verde, Madeira forms what is known as Macaronesia, the ‘fortunate islands’ as it translates from the Greek. All the islands are volcanic in origin and evidence of this can still be found in many places – if you are interested in vulcanology, don’t miss the ‘Grutas de São Vicente’, where you can walk in old lava tubes and learn about Madeira’s geological past.

Despite the fact that Madeira is only 57 kilometres long and 22 kilometres wide, the island features an amazing variety of habitats. Roughly speaking, along the central part, a high plateau and a mountain range with elevations up to 1 861 metres above sea level

Above *The Madeira Firecrest is the smallest of Madeira’s birds. Its active behaviour often makes this endemic difficult to locate.*

Opposite *Space is limited on Madeira, so houses and fields are constructed on amazingly steep slopes, such as the Curral das Freiras.*

form the backbone of the island. In the northern half, spectacular ravines are covered with lush subtropical laurel forest, while the coastline is characterised by steep cliffs. The south is far drier and is dominated by agriculture and urban settlements. And last but not least, at the eastern tip is the desert-like peninsula, Ponta de São Lourenço.

The volcanic origin of Madeira suggests that it has never been part



of a continent and all native species inhabiting the island today (plants and animals alike) once reached their new home via long-distance dispersal – and simply by chance. Some 300 bird species have been recorded on the Madeira archipelago; slightly more than 40 of these breed on the island, and are mostly species or subspecies endemic to Madeira and Macaronesia, respectively. There are three endemics on Madeira: Trocaz Pigeon, Madeira Firecrest and Zino's Petrel.

The archipelago of Madeira is an important breeding habitat for pelagic seabirds. Many of these birds can be seen from land: sea-watching is possible from everywhere along the coast, provided you remember two things – the light and the height. Depending on the time of day and the weather, light conditions can change dramatically, making the identification of birds difficult. Also, make sure you are not too high above sea level. Recommended sea-watching areas include Ponta da Cruz, the most southerly point of the island, near Funchal, and Porto Moniz on the northern tip. Species you will easily see include Yellow-legged Gull and Common Tern.

If you are interested in pelagic seabirds, it is a good idea to take a boat trip. A number of companies operate from the harbour of Funchal and a variety of tours are on offer. But unless you are looking for a party atmosphere, with lots of beer and loud music, choose

carefully. We highly recommend the company Ventura do Mar, which runs a beautiful sailing ship of the same name, and has friendly and knowledgeable staff. Their tours range from a half-day trip along the coast of Madeira to visits to the other islands of the archipelago. During trips to the Desertas Islands, you might even see Zino's and Fea's petrels, but they are usually impossible to distinguish at sea. Fea's Petrel, also called Bugio's Petrel, is endemic to Macaronesia and breeds on the Desertas Island of Bugio. There is no guarantee which species you will see during a trip, but Cory's, Manx and Little shearwaters and Bulwer's Petrel seem to be more common, with Madeiran and White-faced storm-petrels being rarely seen.

If you have never heard the calls of Cory's Shearwaters returning to their breeding colonies, try to do so. Sitting out on our balcony late one evening in Arco da Calheta and listening to those calls was like listening to Donald Duck trying to imitate a kittiwake.

While on the water you will see not only birds, but also different dolphin species and, if you are really lucky, you may get a sighting of a Mediterranean monk seal. There is a small breeding population of about 30 of these animals, believed to be the world's rarest pinniped as well as one of the most endangered mammals, around the Desertas Islands. In addition to the Desertas Islands tours, during June and July Ventura do Mar organises a limited number of trips to the otherwise inaccessible Savage Islands. These trips are designed especially for dedicated bird-watchers – with good sea legs.

The breeding site of Zino's Petrel remains well protected at Pico do Arieiro, which, at 1 818 metres, is one of the highest peaks on the island. This petrel is Europe's rarest breeding seabird – with a population of fewer than 80 breeding pairs and a total estimate of 400 individuals, it is considered to be near extinction. As it is not easy to actually get to see this petrel, we recommend a visit to the Zoological Museum of Funchal, where they keep a stuffed specimen. This is admittedly not very exciting, but it is probably the only way to be guaranteed a sighting. The closest you can get to the living birds is on a guided tour, during ▽

Zino's Petrel is Europe's rarest breeding seabird and, except for this stuffed specimen in the museum in Funchal, it is difficult to get a sighting. At sea it is tricky to distinguish from Fea's Petrel, and you may only get close enough to the breeding site to hear its calls rather than see the bird itself.



Above Sculpted by erosion, this volcanic rock stands proud at the north coast near Porto Moniz. Small pebble beaches are typical of Madeira, while sandy beaches are found only on Porto Santo.

Right, top The colourful male Madeira Chaffinch. These confiding birds appear within minutes of you preparing to have a picnic on levada walks.

Right, middle Its tendency to favour rocky and scrubby terrain makes Berthelot's Pipit an easy-to-find bird on the Ponta de São Lourenço, at the eastern tip of Madeira.

Right, bottom Cory's Shearwaters are relatively commonly seen during pelagic trips. The most exceptional feature of these birds is the calls they give when returning to their colonies.





Top The Levada do Caldeirão Verde in the north-eastern part of Madeira provides spectacular views of the laurel forest.

Above The Trocaz Pigeon frequents laurel forest where, despite its size, it is often overlooked.

Opposite There is an almost enchanted, other-worldly atmosphere among the old til trees on the Fanal.

which you are taken at night to the breeding site to hear the spooky calls of the birds arriving at their nests. The best time to visit is between April and mid-August. Remember to take warm clothing as, despite temperatures on a summer's day at Funchal climbing to 30 °C, in the mountains it may get no higher than 7 °C and be accompanied by strong winds.

In the western central part of Madeira lies the plateau Paúl da Serra. Its sparse, low vegetation is in sharp contrast to the laurel forest, and a consequence of deforestation and pasture farming in years gone by. Reforestation has started on the Fanal, the northern part of the plateau between the Ribeira da Janela and the north coast. This area has a very special atmosphere because it supports the oldest til trees on the island. Fog from the sea rolls in quickly, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of a scene from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Even though the Buzzard, the largest bird of prey on the island, occurs in a wide range of habitats, we had good sightings of a couple of them in this open landscape. Another bird worth mentioning is the Woodcock: it breeds

on the plateau and is best seen at dawn, in flight against the sky.

The other two endemics, the Madeira Firecrest and Trocaz Pigeon, can be found in the laurel forest. In Portuguese, Madeira means 'wood' and refers to the dense laurel forest that extended over most of the island before it was colonised in 1420. Laurel forest is a humid, subtropical evergreen woodland which is endemic to Macaronesia and a relict of those that once enveloped vast tracts of Europe. Today, the world's most extensive acreage of this forest is found on Madeira, where it covers only 20 per cent of the island and was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999.

An easy and beautiful way to explore this habitat is to hike along the levadas. These irrigation channels used to transport water from the wetter north of the island to fields and plantations in the south. The first levada was built in 1439 in Funchal and by 1980 the system covered some 5 000 kilometres. Walking along the levadas will lead you into spectacular valleys and provide fantastic views. While doing this, you might have to walk on a very narrow path or on the levada rim, close to the edge, or through tunnels at some stage, so to enjoy these



walks you should not suffer from vertigo, and do remember to take a torch.

The Madeira Firecrest, considered an endemic subspecies until 2003, is easy to recognise by its song, but is sometimes difficult to see in the vegetation because of its active behaviour. You might also need a bit of luck with the Trocaz Pigeon. After being excessively hunted in the 19th century, today's population is estimated to number less than 10 000 individuals. Even though the birds are quite large (42–45 centimetres), they are somehow easy to overlook when they are perched. Opinions differ on where and when they are best to be seen, but in our experience you just need to keep an eye open while hiking. Along the levadas you will also spot Grey Wagtail and the Madeiran Chaffinch. The Grey Wagtail is easily recognised by its yellow breast and is often found close to freshwater sources, and, like the Chaffinch, is confiding and habituated to humans.

The reason for the rain and thus the lush vegetation in the northern half of Madeira is the high mountains which traverse the island from east to west, blocking the clouds brought by the trade winds from the north. At the eastern tip of Madeira, the situation is different. As there are no significant mountains on the Ponta de São Lourenço, the clouds just float by, leaving little rain on the peninsula. The resultant desert-like landscape with scrubby vegetation provides suitable breeding habitat for both Berthelot's Pipit and Rock Sparrow. The Spanish Sparrow, however, prefers man-made areas, such as gardens and urban

squares, and it frequents the nearby village of Caniçal.

The absence of very high mountains and thus a dry climate also characterises the neighbouring island of Porto Santo. Most tourists head to Porto Santo to enjoy its nine kilometres of sandy beaches, something that is not found on Madeira. About 250 to 2 500 Hoopoes also live exclusively on Porto Santo. These birds prefer a warm, dry habitat with open cultivated ground, short grass or bare patches.

Finally, there are a number of birds that occur throughout Madeira, especially along the populated coastal areas. These species include the Blackbird, Robin, Blackcap, Goldfinch, Canary and Barn Owl. Kestrel and Sparrowhawk seem to prefer more open areas, while Plain and Pallid swifts are often seen along the cliff line.

All birds mentioned thus far breed on the Madeira archipelago. But despite, or perhaps because of, its remote location, more than 250 species of migrants and vagrants have been observed through the years. It pays to check harbours, jetties and rocks along the coast, especially after a heavy storm, to see what may have been blown in.

We spent 16 days on Madeira and could have easily stayed far longer. If your main focus is to add to your checklist and you do not intend to visit any other islands, one week should be sufficient. But we found that even though Madeira is an exciting destination for birdwatching, its fascinating natural history makes it worthwhile exploring much more of the island. □

off you go...

WHEN TO GO

May to August is the best time to visit. Madeira has a mild, subtropical climate throughout the year, but in winter the north receives its fair share of rain, making levada walks a wet and slippery affair. Also, tours to the breeding site of Zino's Petrel, as well as several of the boat trips, are only offered during summer.

WHERE TO STAY

There is plenty of accommodation on Madeira, ranging from a five-star hotel in Funchal to a quiet self-catering cottage on a banana plantation. If you are looking for peaceful places in the countryside, try Madeira Rural (www.madeirarural.com).

WHAT TO TAKE

Depending on your planned activities, you will need clothes suitable for temperatures ranging from 7–30 °C and a light rainproof jacket, even in summer. For levada walks, hiking boots and a torch for the tunnels are a good idea.

HOW TO GET AROUND

There are public buses on Madeira, and they are a good option for visiting the area around Funchal. A rental car will give you more freedom, but check tyres and brakes – driving on some of the steep, narrow roads can be an unnerving experience. Some hotels and companies arrange levada tours and this can be a useful option as they will arrange to have you collected when a walk finishes far from its starting point. Alternatively, you can call a taxi from almost anywhere on the island.

ORGANISED TOURS

To visit the breeding site of Zino's Petrel, to take a boat trip along the coast or to the Desertas or Savage Islands, contact Ventura do Mar (www.venturadomar.com) or Madeira Wind Birds (www.madeirabirds.com). If you wish to visit the Savage Islands, plan this well in advance, for the number of trips run each year is limited.

FURTHER READING

Oliveira, Paulo & Menezes, Dília. (2004) *Birds of the Archipelago of Madeira*. Funchal. ISBN 972-98431-5-5
 Sziemer, Peter. (2000) *Madeira's Natural History in a Nutshell*. Barcelona. ISBN 972-9177-31-7

INTERNET

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