

Big adventure beckons on small island of Madeira

Canyoning a popular activity along with hiking, surfing, snorkelling and more

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MADEIRA, PORTUGAL The sound of shallow water rushing over rocks and plunging off ledges — we hear the river before we see it.

The river winds through a narrow canyon on the way to the Atlantic and there is really only one way to explore it and that's by "canyoning." It involves rappelling down the sides of waterfalls, jumping into pools of deep water and sliding down rocky chutes that have been carved smooth by water over the eons.

The sport started in the 1970s in France and Spain and is growing around the world as people spend more time outdoors in nature. After trying canyoning in Mexico and loving it, I wanted to get closer to its roots.

Which explains why, on a March morning, I'm dangling from the rocky precipice at the top of a waterfall in Madeira, a far-flung island in the Atlantic that's closer to Africa than Portugal, to which it belongs.

"Enjoy the view," says Vitor Nunes, our lead guide with Epic Madeira. Even though I'm safely harnessed and helmeted, a rush of adrenalin makes it hard to remember where to put my hands and how to move my feet.

But as I lean back to enjoy the cool spray coming off the waterfall, my muscle memory kicks in and I find my groove.

With more than 130 canyons carved into its mountainous terrain, Madeira is considered one of the best places in the world for this outdoor sport.

Not only that, but this tiny island — 40 Madeiras would fit onto

Vancouver Island — also boasts amazing hiking and mountain biking trails, surfing, snorkelling and diving, and for those with less extreme appetites, many magnificent gardens.

"Stick a stick in the soil and it blossoms a week later," chortles Sofia Maul, our guide on a walking and eating tour of Funchal, the capital of the Madeira archipelago, which also includes the populated island of Porto Santo.

During the age of discovery, Maul explains, Portuguese and other explorers would stop at Madeira to resupply and repair their ships. Often, they would bring plants and trees from faraway places, which inevitably thrived in the island's rich volcanic soil and "eternally spring" weather.

It's those two factors — its subtropical climate and its volcanic origins — that also make Madeira an outdoor adventure hot spot, year-round.

One day we drive to the north side of the island with a guide from Adventure Kingdom, one of several dozen local companies offering walking tours along the island's "levadas."

These stone channels dating back to the 15th century were built to carry water from the wet side of the island to the dry side.

Today, about 200 levadas still carry precious water for irrigating fields and gardens, but they also provide an unparalleled walking experience on the narrow dirt trails that run alongside them.

Our walk begins along a levada with sweeping views over a wide valley.

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Madeira, a Portuguese island in the Atlantic, is an outdoor adventure hot spot. The island is a popular spot for canyoning, which includes rappelling down the sides of waterfalls. *EPIC MADEIRA*

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