

Houses with red-tiled roofs fill the floor of the valley while crops including sugarcane — once the economic engine of Madeira — grow in small terraces. Eucalyptus trees cover the uppermost slopes. Occasionally we step over garden hoses taking water from the levada to private properties. Strict rules govern who gets water each day and how much, with the various users each getting their share.

After a kilometre of gentle incline, we veer off the levada onto what looks like a trail that we'd find in any park at home, but this one and others like it here was created centuries ago, before cars and roads. Today it's mostly used by tourists for recreation.

This trail follows the jagged coastline and the views are staggering. I had no idea we'd be transported to Kauai, but the rugged north coast of Madeira could be a clone of the Pacific island with its almost sheer drop-offs dotted with waterfalls and foliage.

"Many people call it the Hawaii of the Atlantic," says guide Fabio Castro, as we look over the edge. Far below, waves break on an unforgiving shoreline. Unlike Hawaii, there are no sandy beaches here; the island is still geologically too young.

Of course, you can still swim and I do, daily, in our hotel's heated outdoor pools. But even better are the natural pools at Porto Moniz, a former whaling village on the northwest tip of Madeira. Over the course of thousands of years, cooling lava formed natural pools next to the ocean. Replenished daily at high tide, they're delightfully refreshing.

On a jeep tour of the island, we make another wonderful discovery: the laurel forest here is the largest one left in the world. Now protected by UNESCO, its trees are mostly evergreen and covered in mosses and lichens. I imagine it's like time travelling back 10,000 years ago, before the last ice age, when laurel forests covered much of Europe. Step on a dry leaf and you'll release the distinctive scent of bay leaves, a tree that's in the laurel family.

For an island that's best known for its fortified wine, Madeira sure has a lot of outdoor adventures too. *The writer was a guest of the Madeira Tourism Board. It did not review or approve this story.*



Swimmers enjoy natural saltwater pools formed over thousands of years by cooling lava. *DISCOVERY ISLAND*



Many trails criss-cross the island of Madeira. The trails were used before roads were built. *SUZANNE MORPHET*



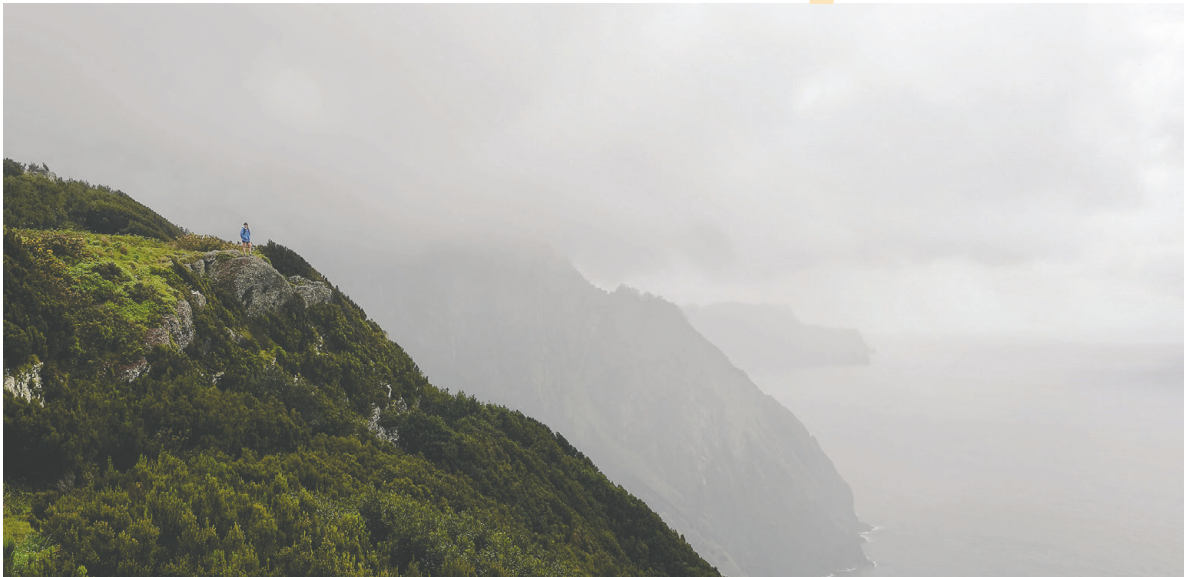
WHERE TO STAY

Reid's Palace, part of the Belmond brand, offers historic luxury from its spectacular setting on a cliff overlooking Funchal's harbour. You'll be in good company as George Bernard Shaw learned to tango while staying here and Winston Churchill wrote his memoirs.

VidaMar Resort, also in Funchal, provides ocean views from rooms in two highrise towers. Guests also enjoy three saltwater pools, a spa and five restaurants on site.



The network of water channels offers unique walking opportunities.



Madeira features dramatic drop-offs. *SUZANNE MORPHET*

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