



The Fajas Island

The several dozen Fajãs are the visual symbol of the island of São Jorge. These tongues of land – that surfaces that reach up through the sea and are the result of collapsed cliffs – run along both sides of the island. Access to them is by land or by sea, and those who go there realize that they are in some sort of paradise. Indeed, the Fajãs' tranquility and spectacular beauty are a constant appeal to travelers and tourists. These Fajãs provide a haven for important species of flora and fauna, and are unique and magical places with special characteristics. For example, Fajã dos Vimes is the only place in the Azores with a coffee plantation; the lagoon at the Caldeira de Santo Cristo is the only place in the archipelago where clams are raised.

A long, narrow island, quite rugged due to the natural magnificence of its mountainsides formed by abrupt cliffs – a ridge runs down São Jorge's spine that at Pico da Esperança reaches a maximum elevation of 1053 meters (3,455 feet). The vegetation is lush and the scenery striking. From São Jorge we can see Pico, Faial, Graciosa and Terceira. I recall that it was in the context of his impressions of Pico along with São Jorge that the writer Raul Brandão produced in 1924 the famous phrase that is now widely quoted, "I have come to realize that the most beautiful thing the islands possess, and which completes them, is the view of the island across the way".

São Jorge history consists of resistance and struggle for survival: the island has endured everything from pillaging by pirates and corsairs to the violent earthquakes of 1580, 1757, 1964 and 1980, to food crises in years of lean harvest, to the volcanic eruptions of April 28, 1780 (Queimada), and March 1, 1808 (Urzelina). The top of Urzelina's old bell tower still stands, constituting the last remaining unscathed symbol of the earlier church that was completely buried by the lava stream flowing from the mountain down to the sea.

More than five centuries later São Jorge continues to produce its famous "island cheese", unquestionably a product of the highest quality, judging by the national and international awards it has received. It is an artisanal cheese manufactured from raw whole cows' milk, clotted with animal rennet and aged for a minimum of three months – a technique whose origin points directly to a Flemish influence. São Jorge is now and forever the poetry of its Fajãs and the rugged beauty of its mountains and cliffs.



Vitor Rui Soares, 2015.