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## Now that Madeira is easier to get to, it makes for a great family vacation

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The Fanal Forest, where one can find fog and twisted tree branches with layers of moss. (Photos by Leron Kornreich for The Washington Post)

In fits of hysterical laughter, punctured by shrieks of fear and delight, my daughter and I slid down the steep, narrow streets of Monte in a straw basket pushed by two men wearing traditional straw hats. The wicker toboggan twisted and turned as we gained speed, with the “runners” purposely navigating within inches of walls or turning the basket so we slid sideways. The louder we laughed and screamed, the faster they accelerated.

Street tobogganing is just one of many memorable activities families can experience on the Portuguese island of Madeira, part of an archipelago of the same name that includes three other islands.

Madeira Island marks the emerged top of a huge volcano. Its rich volcanic soil creates a botanical wonderland bursting with diverse flora, and its mountainous terrain provides ample opportunities for commanding views. With natural lava pools, hikes along levadas (Portuguese aqueducts), lush green landscapes, and surfing and sailing opportunities, the mix of nature and adventure makes the 35-mile-long island a great getaway when you're looking to entertain a range of ages.

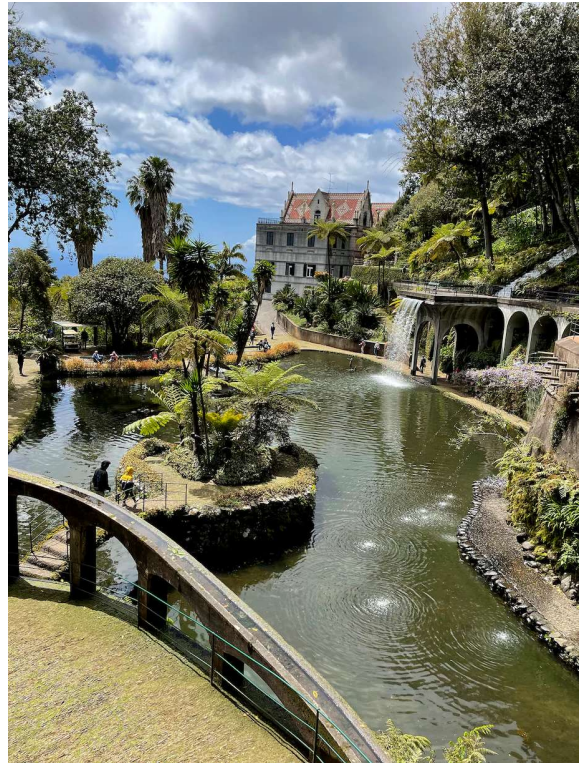
### *How to plan a family vacation that everyone will enjoy*

Madeira is off the coast of Africa, west of Morocco. Getting to Madeira used to be a trek from the United States that required a stop in Lisbon. But in late November, Inovtravel launched [direct flights](#) to the island from New York's JFK airport in partnership with SATA Azores Airlines, reducing travel time to a mere 6¼ hours. We were coming from Madrid, but the direct flight from New York provides the perfect excuse to visit Madeira with the family.

Like most tourists, we started in the capital city, Funchal, on the southern coast of the island. With a population of about 100,000 and a lido, or beachfront boardwalk, lined with casual-to-Michelin restaurants, Funchal radiates energy. The bulk of tourists stay in the São Martinho area, and we enjoyed sumptuous meals twice at Konsai Sushi near the marina, where \$131 bought us dinner for five, including wine.



The Madeira Botanical Garden is one of Funchal's main tourist attractions.



The Monte Palace Tropical Garden is an eye-catching, family-friendly attraction.

Funchal is known for the Madeira Botanical Garden, which has sweeping views of the city and ocean. The cable car to the hilltop area of Monte is conveniently adjacent, and we floated above mountains thickly covered with trees, spotting waterfalls and hikers on trails below, to another garden site. The terraced Monte Palace Tropical Garden is completely different from Funchal's garden. Starting on the top of the trail and walking down, we explored a sculpture exhibit of African art, posed by koi ponds and pagodas in the Japanese gardens, and walked under waterfalls by the lake. The toboggans are a short walk away.

But what really made our trip was getting out of Funchal. We spent several nights on the island's northwestern tip in Porto Moniz, a small town known for its natural lava pools. I fell in love the moment I set foot in the lobby of



the original Aqua Natura hotel and saw the waves crashing against lava formations that serve as breakers to natural saltwater pools. My kids splashed and floated as I took in the view.



The Porto Moniz Natural Swimming Pools are formed by volcanic lava and filled with crystal-clear seawater.



Every morning and evening, we'd stand on the porch, entranced by the scene. On our last, stormy day, we were hypnotized by massive waves cresting against the rock formations and spilling over into the pools where our kids had swum just a few days before. (The hotel offered more than a mesmerizing view; our favorite meals were at its Sea View restaurant, with its menu of elegantly served risottos, fish, meats and vegetarian dishes.)

Children play in the pools.

Adventure on the northern tip of the island entails difficult drives up steep, curvy mountains to see breathtaking vistas of tree-covered mountains dotted with small villages, as well as the bay and its clear Atlantic waters. I nervously pressed the imaginary brake pedal as my husband navigated the hairpin turns to reach Rabaçal and the trailhead to [Levada das 25 Fontes](#) and Risco Waterfall.

### *6 tips for traveling internationally with children under 5*

The approximately 5.7-mile round-trip hike is known for its “25 fountains” levada. (There are 25 springs that are the sources of the levada.) You walk alongside an intricate levada system that's a designated UNESCO World Heritage site. Since the 15th century, aqueducts have carried water for kilometers across the island's mountains and rugged terrain.

For three hours, we hiked in the shade of arching tree branches that created a tunnel effect. The segments along levadas were so narrow at times that we had to climb onto the rim of the irrigation canals to let people coming from the opposing direction pass. When we reached the famous waterfall with 25 fountains, we were rewarded with a lovely resting spot in an atmosphere reminiscent of a rainforest, and we were refreshed by the mist coming off the plunge pool.

On the northern coast, there are numerous viewpoints (“miradouros”), and, in [Santana](#), you can find traditional A-frame Madeiran homes. They’re picturesque with their thatched roofs, red doors and shutters, but many have been converted into souvenir stores. By chance, we came across a home a few blocks from the tourist traps that was recently opened to visitors and that felt authentic. The now-owner’s grandfather used to live there, and everything is preserved as it was when he was alive.



Fog shrouds the Fanal Forest.

Although Santana provides Instagram-worthy moments, the island’s magic, such as the ethereal scene at the [Fanal Forest](#) in northwest Madeira, is often found off the beaten track. On rainy days, the mist creates an otherworldly tableau engulfing the trees as horned cows rest under their twisted branches.

With travel time to Madeira dramatically shortened, it has become a better vacation option. But make sure to stray from the bustle of Funchal to uncover its deeper enchantment.

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