



# A Sustainable Tourism Destination

## Ecotourism



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## DEFINITIONS

### *Definition of Sustainable Tourism:*

"Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UNWTO, 2012).

### *Definition of Responsible Tourism:*

"Responsible Tourism is a tourism management strategy embracing planning, management, product development and marketing to bring about positive economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts. ... It is about providing more rewarding holiday experiences for guests whilst enabling local communities to enjoy a better quality of life and conserving the natural environment." (WSSD, 2003).

### *Definition of Ecotourism:*

"Nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable" (Weaver, et. al., 1999).

"Nature-based tourism that stands out as a responsible and more concerned way of getting to know the environment. ... It encourages travelling with less impact, with tourists being environmentally and culturally aware, and it seeks to provide positive experiences for both for visitors and for the host community, generating benefits for the conservation and for the local community" (TIES, 2012).

## BACKGROUND

The Azores have been internationally recognised for their environmental quality and as a destination for sustainable tourism, which is highly appreciated by most tourists nowadays.

The government of the Azores is aware that this recognition should be enhanced and used by all agents, in order to project the Azores as a destination for sustainable tourism of high environmental quality.

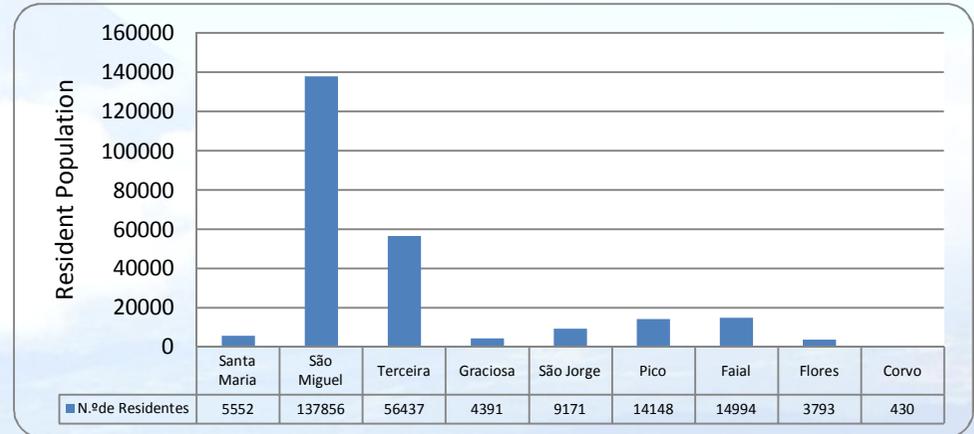
This document aims to showcase the Azores based on a number of criteria and indicators of sustainable tourism that has brought the region recognition and nominations for several awards from various internationally renowned organisations related to the sustainability and environmental quality fields.

# AZORES Overview

The Azores Archipelago is located in the North Atlantic Ocean, off the Iberian Peninsula, about 1 500 kilometres from the European continent, 4,000 km from the American continent, and 750 km from the Madeira Archipelago.

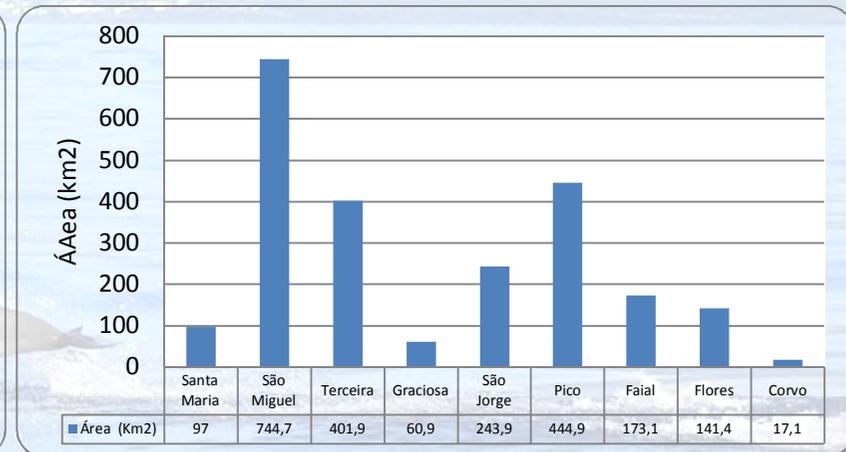
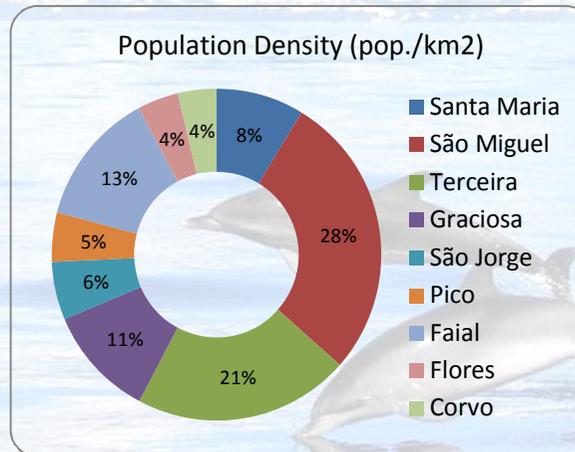
It forms an autonomous region of the Portuguese Republic and comprises nine volcanic islands geographically spread throughout an extension of 600 km. The islands are organised into three groups: Western (Corvo and Flores), Central (Faial, Pico, São Jorge, Graciosa and Terceira), and Eastern (São Miguel and Santa Maria).

The archipelago has a total area of 324,9 km<sup>2</sup> and a resident population of 246 772 inhabitants, according to the 2011 census carried out by the National Statistics Office (INE, 2011).



Source: INE data, 2011

The Azores Islands feature very different areas, with São Miguel being the largest island with 744,7 km<sup>2</sup> and Corvo the smallest with 17,1 km<sup>2</sup>. In terms of population density, the Azores are also quite diverse, with the highest concentration on the islands of São Miguel and Terceira, and the lowest on the islands further to the west, Flores and Corvo.



Source: INE data, 2011



The Autonomous Region of the Azores is one of the seven outermost regions of the European Union, according to the Declaration annexed to the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, which recognised, for the first time, the notion of "remoteness".

The islands of the Azores, though scattered and distant from the Iberian Peninsula, have scheduled air and sea connections, with 10 commercial ports and 9 regional airports and airfields. There are also scheduled flights linking the islands to the Portuguese mainland, Madeira, Canary Islands, as well as charter flights to various European and North American destinations during certain times of the year. The island of São Miguel is the largest of the Azores and the main gateway for charter flights.

The main industries are agriculture, dairy farming, cattle raising, fishing and tourism, which is becoming the major service activity of the region.

The Azores Islands are already known for their sustainability and for various features that range from the rich and protected marine life to the protected natural areas with properly regulated trails, to eco-schools and to the use of renewable energy sources.

# AZORES A Sustainable Tourism Destination

## Protection of Nature

With only 5% of the surface occupied by buildings, the islands feature a very rich natural environment. One of the highlights is the incredible variety of volcanic phenomena: cones and domes, craters and lakes, caverns, caves and springs of thermal water. The important geo-sites of the nine islands and the seabed are included in the Azores Geopark, part of the European and Global Networks of Geoparks.

The rich marine life of the Azores, including dolphins, sperm whales, bearded whales, beaked whales, turtles, seabirds, pelagic fish and cold-water corals, is unique. All of this can be experienced through well regulated tourist activities, such as diving, snorkelling, and whale-watching boat tours.

There are still small stretches of the original *Laurissilva*, a subtropical evergreen forest, dating back to the Tertiary period, a true living fossil.

The various protected areas of the Azores, as defined under regional, national and international law, are part of the Regional Network of Protected Areas of the Autonomous Region of the Azores created by local law. This network reclassifies all protected areas of the archipelago and groups them in nine Island Nature Parks (PNI) and in one Marine Park in order to promote a joint and coordinated management of all areas. The Island Nature Parks (PNI), in addition to grouping all protected areas, classify them and define the criteria for their management and use. The regional network of protected areas of the Azores is not static and continues to grow, while its regulation continues to improve.

There are over 60 walking trails throughout the islands that give one access to the natural areas and beauty of the Azores. The creation, signalling, use and preservation of the walking trails are regulated by regional law. Signalling respects international standards for marking walking routes. The trail of Madalena on the island of Pico, lying along the protected landscape of the vineyard culture and overlooking the sea, was considered one of the 8 most unique trails in the world by Bootsncall. However, the other islands also offer open views over the sea and over the neighbouring islands.





The Azores Islands are an important nesting site for seabirds and a resting site for migratory birds diverted from their routes by bad weather. Every year the archipelago receives hundreds of birdwatchers from various European countries. There is a plan to minimise the impact of artificial lights, and a LIFE project is underway to restore the habitats of wetlands that are important for migratory birds.

The awareness campaign SOS Gagarro (SOS Cory's Shearwater), which takes place every year from 1 October to 15 November, when the Cory's Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea borealis*) migrates, has increasingly engaged the Azorean community. It involves picking up young Cory's Shearwaters that become disoriented by road and car lights when they leave the nest for the sea. Besides picking up and releasing Cory's Shearwaters by the sea, awareness raising activities are developed in schools and for

drivers, alerting for the disorientation that lights can cause to these seabirds.

Several LIFE projects have taken place in the archipelago in recent years to restore habitats for birds. The "Life Priolo" ("Life Azores Bullfinch") project was developed between 2003 and 2008, with the aim of protecting and restoring stretches of *Laurissilva* forest, the natural habitat of this endemic and endangered bird, the Azores bullfinch (*Pyrrhula murina*), with the project receiving the European Union award "Best of the Best – Nature".

## Identity and Culture

The architectural heritage of the Azores is promoted by a number of policies aimed at the preservation and appreciation of the region's traditions and cultural heritage. A network of museums throughout the islands preserves the history and the tangible heritage of the archipelago, while offering visitors an opportunity to learn more about the Azores through different exhibitions.

Since 2012, the Azores have been considered by the European Coastal and Marine Union (EUCC) as the greatest example of sustainable tourism in Europe, by profiting from a policy that focuses on producing high-quality local and regional products in a traditional





way, particularly wine, cheese, fruit, tea and tuna.

Tuna fishing is an activity in which the archipelago stands out in terms of sustainability, thanks to the traditional and environmentally friendly way adopted, namely the *salto e vara* (traditional fishing with a rod), a method that selects the best specimens, safeguarding the preservation of the species and respecting the marine ecosystem. The nongovernmental organisation Earth Island Institute awarded this traditional method the certifications "Dolphin Safe" and "Friend of the Sea", being the first tuna fishing method in the world to receive these awards. The fish is processed on the island of São Jorge and is among the most sustainable canned tuna in the world market.

Furthermore, "the region was able to overcome the economic difficulties that could have resulted from the international ban on whaling, transforming this ban into an opportunity to develop whale watching". Several whaling museums were created and many whaling boats were restored on different islands of the Azores. Today these whaling boats are used for holding sporting events on the islands, known as *Whalers' Regattas*, which are deeply rooted on the island of Pico, where teams from several islands gather every year.

The landscapes of traditional cultures are well preserved, as is the case of vineyards, tea plantations and olive groves. The tea plantations of the Azores are unique in Europe, and tea is produced organically with the leaves being dried employing the same eastern techniques that have been used in China and Pakistan for millennia. Moreover, the Government of the Azores has recently put forward plans to support and recover the culture of abandoned vineyards.

The History of the Azores is well represented in the unspoilt landscapes of traditional cultures that began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the first settlers arrived, in the manor houses from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the wine cellars, in the churches, and in the harbours. The greatest examples of the preservation of the region's heritage are the city of Angra do Heroísmo on the island of Terceira and the Landscape of the Pico Island Vineyard Culture, both classified by UNESCO as world heritage sites.

Rural traditions are well preserved and deeply rooted in the Azorean way of life. Rural life is organised according to the seasons and festivities that determine the rhythm of life. Given the remote location, the people of the Azores have always cultivated and produced their food and drink. Many local products are certified, including wine, cheese, meat, fruit and





tuna.

The Azores are a safe place with hospitable people. Crime is very low; 96% of tourists report being satisfied with their visit, and residents are also satisfied with their presence, which shows that they are aware of the importance of responsible tourism for their economy.

Despite pressure from the United States, regional authorities are aware that the Azores are known for their environmental quality and for the diversity of their biodiversity, features that may be jeopardised by the possible use of GMOs. Instead, the government has focused on the development of organic farming by providing training to farmers and by implementing financial support programmes for the development of this type of chemical-free agriculture. Currently, the Azores are protected by regional law against the cultivation of GMOs.

Distributed throughout the nine islands, there are 7 environmental interpretation centres and 19 other facilities that support the interpretation of the nature of the Azores, along with 8 museums that form the regional network of museums.

## Environment

There are excellent beaches available in the Azores. In 2014, the region received a total of 32 Blue Flags from the European Blue Flag Association. In about 50% of the beaches of the Azores, the bathing water quality is either Good or Excellent, according to the European Union Directive on Bathing Water Quality and to the report by the European Environment Agency.

In the Azores, Rustic Golf is an alternative to golf practiced in traditional courses. It takes place in pastures and open fields and does not require artificial irrigation as the fields are naturally watered by rain.

The regional airline SATA recently renewed its entire fleet with planes that reduce fuel



consumption and CO2 emissions, changed some routes and improved fuel efficiency. SATA Air Açores was also the first company in the world to adopt new technologies by painting its aircraft in a way that reduces weight and consequently fuel consumption. In fact, the company is exempt from the purchase of CO2 allowances, thanks to the reduced emissions calculated in 2010.

## Renewable Energy

The Azores should also be praised for the use of renewable energy. The archipelago has considerable renewable energy sources, such as wind, hydro and geothermal. Geothermal energy is the source that has the greatest potential, as a result of the formation process of the archipelago and of its location along the Mid Atlantic Ridge at the confluence of three tectonic plates - American, African and Eurasian. In this region, there is an intense volcanic activity, as well as other surface manifestations, all of which are indicators of the huge amount of endogenous energy that exists underground in many parts of the archipelago.

The regional government is committed to the exploitation and optimisation of these energy sources, in particular geothermal and wind. Currently 28% of the energy produced in the archipelago comes from renewable sources, a percentage that is expected to reach 75% in 2018. In addition, the *Green Islands* project is also being implemented in a partnership between universities and private entities, with the aim of making two or more islands energetically self-sufficient by 2018 and of serving as an example of energy sustainability.



## Biosphere Reserves



Three islands of the Azores (Graciosa, Flores and Corvo) have been classified as Biosphere Reserves thanks to the relationship between man and ecosystems that they feature.

Being aware of the challenge of combining development with the preservation of a low level of pressure on the natural environment and of a reduced use of natural resources, the Government of the Azores considered that the classification of Corvo, Flores and Graciosa as Biosphere Reserves could be the answer for this

challenge.

This award certifies the good conservation status of the natural world, the balance in the relationship between man and the surrounding environment, and demands the creation of logistical conditions for the development of activities that promote good environmental practices and scientific research.

By certifying these three islands with this award of excellence, all products and services will have an immaterial added value, and prices may increase to levels consistent with the quality of life equivalent to any particularly favoured area of the planet, without increasing the pressure or load that would be fatal to the environmental and social sustainability.

## UNESCO World Heritage Sites



In the Azores, there are two areas classified as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the city of Angra do Heroísmo on the island of Terceira since 1983 and the Landscape of the Pico Island Vineyard Culture on the island of Pico since 2004.

### ANGRA, WORLD HERITAGE CITY

There were essentially two reasons that led to the classification of the city of Angra do Heroísmo as a world heritage site. On the one hand, there is the layout and organisation of the city in the form of a chessboard with the particularity of it being adapted to the direction of prevailing winds; on the other hand, it is a living witness of the history of sailing in the Atlantic and of the life of the early colonial and commercial empires at the planetary scale.

Angra was a mandatory stop for ships from the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the emergence of steamships in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are several wrecks with stories to be told in the Angra



Bay, along with two imposing fortresses, St. Sebastian (16<sup>th</sup> century) and St. John the Baptist (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries), which are unique examples of the military architecture that protected the bay with crossfire.

There are numerous convents and churches of baroque inspiration dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and houses with history and balconies of painted wood that contribute to the understanding of the Portuguese architecture in Brazil.

To protect and promote the underwater heritage of the Angra Bay, the Government of the Azores created the Underwater Archaeological Park of Angra do Heroísmo, which has been used by the underwater tourism sector of the island as an important resource for recreational diving.

The City of Angra do Heroísmo has undertaken several initiatives to revitalise the historic centre of Angra, including the opening of spaces that can be visited with an interpretive guide, the organisation of walking activities to learn more about the city, and the preparation of a comics book about the city of Angra as a world heritage site. These initiatives aim to give different uses to the city and to increase the interaction of people with Angra. Moreover, the Chamber of Commerce of Angra do Heroísmo has been making various efforts to revitalise the traditional shops of the city, mainly by conducting promotional campaigns throughout the year and by providing additional animation in festive seasons.

The criteria set out by UNESCO for preserving the city of Angra as a World Heritage Site, as well as the incentives for the maintenance of the spaces in the historic centre of the city, are welcomed by the local community that recognises that this is the way to preserve the cultural and built heritage of the city and to attract tourists, with this being another indicator of responsible development.

## LANDSCAPE OF THE PICO ISLAND VINEYARD CULTURE

The Landscape of the Pico Island Vineyard Culture covers a total area of 987 ha surrounded by a buffer zone of 1,924 ha, featuring two iconic sites with extreme beauty and a rich natural landscape located in extensive lava fields, the Lajido da Criação Velha and the Lajido de Santa Luzia.

These sites were classified for being excellent representations of the traditional architecture linked to the vineyard culture and for the landscape and natural elements that they feature. Moreover, the diversity of their fauna and flora is associated to the abundant number of endemic species and of communities that are both rare and



protected.

This landscape shaped by the people from the island of Pico bears witness to what was once a very busy activity and consists of a long network of stone walls that forms a mesh that runs parallel to the coast and that penetrates to the interior of the island. This mesh consists of small rectangular enclosures which are called *currais*. These walls were built to protect the vines from the wind and seawater. This extraordinary patchwork of small fields dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with houses and farms from early 19<sup>th</sup> century, chapels, small quays and tidal wells also being part of this rich landscape and culture.

To combat the neglect and promote the rehabilitation of vineyards located in the areas of the World Heritage Site and in the buffer zone, the Government of the Azores created a financial support program aimed at winegrowers for the rehabilitation of abandoned vineyards and for maintaining production using the traditional methods and varieties from the island of Pico. Nine years after its introduction, the area under production increased from 75 ha to 126 ha.

To regulate and facilitate visits to the unique landscape of the most interesting points of this World Heritage Site, three walking trails have been created and signalled, so that visitors can walk through ancient paths along the maze of vine enclosures and oxcart tracks left on the stony ground that are called *relheiras*. Boots n ALL, an independent publisher of travel guides, considered one of these paths - Vinhas da Criação Velha - as one of the eight most unique trails in the world.

## Tourism in Rural Areas



Tourism enterprises in rural areas have been taken advantage of the restoration of old houses in the Azores. Studies show that the main motivation for starting this activity is related to the increase of value of family assets.

As an alternative to traditional hotels, this type of accommodation has increased in recent years. In 2004, the region only had 56 units of rural tourism but today this number has nearly tripled to 156, offering a total of 1 157 beds, representing 11,4% of the total accommodation capacity of the region.

Aware of the increasing concerns about local sustainability of tourists who use accommodation and tourism enterprises, the Government of the Azores has developed a certification program for the environmental quality of accommodation units with criteria

adapted to the reality of the Azores, awarding those that meet the criteria the certification *Miosotis Azores - Green Lodging*.

With the exception of Corvo, this type of accommodation is spread throughout all the islands of the Azores, and they have demonstrated to have a huge potential to attract tourists from different parts of the world.

## AGROTOURISM

It should also be noted that some accommodation units have focused their business on agrotourism, a relatively new area of Rural Tourism, and since they are part of a rural area that is no longer synonymous with backwardness, the cultural heritage and landscape they have to offer become an asset, attracting many city dwellers who feel increasingly willing to retreat to rural areas where contact with nature is put front and centre.

In this type of tourism, guests may witness activities related to farming carried out by the family that welcomes them, participate in these activities, and also taste some of the typical dishes of the region. For farmers, this is an extension of their farming business and does not aim to replace their main activity, but it is of great importance for their children or grandchildren given the transmission of traditional knowledge and of the environmental legacy that still persist in rural areas and that can promote a new tourist activity, which is quite viable.

Therefore, agrotourism brings a bilateral cultural exchange in which both parties come out with an added knowledge. On the one hand, farmers and their families have an excellent opportunity for the development of their cultural level, and on the other hand, tourists may learn and be part of rural life, satisfying their curiosity about the countryside as an escape from the deteriorated urban life in which they may live.

## AZORES GEOPARK *A Case of Good Practice in Sustainable Tourism*



The development of geotourism in the Azores through the Azores Geopark project, which is part of the European and Global Networks of Geoparks, was considered by the Eucc as a case of good practice in sustainable tourism destinations, proving to be a good example of how good management and development of geotourism can generate large socioeconomic benefits and serve as a model for other regions to achieve sustainable tourism.

The importance of protecting and promoting the geological heritage of the Azores emerged from concerns about the pressure put on geological sites by the development of tourism in recent years, and from the need to create alternative forms of tourism to contribute to the socioeconomic development of rural areas.

The integration of the Azores Geopark into the European and Global Networks of Geoparks has helped to raise awareness for the preservation of the archipelago's geological characteristics and has made it a popular and attractive destination internationally in terms of geology and landscape. This has reduced the effects of seasonality and generated new job opportunities, new economic activities and additional sources of income, especially in rural areas.

Geotourism has proven to be an excellent way to raise people's awareness for the value of the natural resources and cultural heritage of the local communities.

## AZORES An Ecotourism Destination?



By definition, ecotourism is nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable, generating benefits for the local community.

Despite the Azores offering excellent conditions for the development of ecotourism given their rich natural environment, we do not want to risk labelling and promoting tourism as ecotourism without meeting the principles of this concept. Nonetheless, we mention below the activities that are most likely in line with the philosophy of this segment of nature tourism.

## Whale Watching



Whale Watching is the activity most in line with the philosophy of Ecotourism. It is the oldest tourist entertainment activity available in the Azores.

There are specific regulations for the licensing of this activity and a code of conduct that defines the rules for how vessels approach cetaceans in order to cause the least possible impact. The department of the University of the Azores dedicated to the study of the sea has carried out several scientific research studies on these species, some in partnership with foreign universities both from the European and American continents.

All companies that offer this service have a biologist who monitors the activity and a lookout on land who uses binoculars to spot cetaceans and relays the information to the skipper at sea. The biologist also has the function of briefing tourists about this activity, showcasing the cetacean species that may be spotted in the Azores, the most important aspects of their biology, behaviour and conservation status. The biologist can also accompany the skipper at sea to provide further information about the species sighted.

Whale watching companies can also contribute to research studies by providing information about the cetaceans sighted and photographs.

Whale watching can also be complemented with the theme of Whaling, which was one of the livelihood activities of the Azorean people for some time and which was transformed into the tourist activity of Whale Watching when the ban on whaling came into effect. For an approach the Whaling, one can pay a visit to the Whaling Museum in Lajes do Pico and to the Museum Factory in São Roque do Pico. Given that eco-tourists are generally sensitive to the subject of whaling and to visits to whaling factories, this theme should only be addressed as an indicator of how the local population was able to reverse whaling into a tourist activity that focuses on the contemplation and preservation of species. Factories and museums remain as a way to promote the heritage and as a source of income for the Azorean economy.

## Natural Vegetation of the Azores and Walking Trails



On some islands, the Azores still feature some small patches of *Laurissilva* Forest, which is considered to be a living fossil from the ice age, since in the last glaciation of the globe, it only survived the cold in the biogeographic region of Macaronesia (Azores, Madeira, Canary Islands, and Cape Verde) thanks to the regulating function of the Atlantic Ocean. The best preserved patches can be found on the islands of Pico, Terceira and São Miguel. The Azores also feature 73 endemic species, that is, unique species in the world, with one of the most iconic being the *Azorina Vidalli* whose genus *Azorina* is the only one endemic to the Azores.

The sanctioned walking trails of the Azores lead tourists to areas with a high environmental and scenic interest. Given that parts of these natural areas are very sensitive, the Government of the Azores is preparing training for tour guides for the access to these

areas and for providing proper environmental information about them.

The creation, signalling, use and conservation of these walking trails are regulated by regional laws and signs conform to the international standards on the signalling of walking trails.

The Faial Nature Park was selected by the European Commission as the destination to represent Portugal in the EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) program, an important prize awarded by the European Union to the best places in Europe for sustainable tourism that was associated to Portugal for the first time. You can watch the EDEN video about the Faial Nature Park at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyNUqtrvkkU> . The prize was awarded to the island of Faial, but we can say that it could have been extended to most of the islands of the Azores.

The existence of several environmental interpretation centres throughout the nine islands of the Azores further complements this eco-product.

# AZORES Sustainable tourism and environmental quality awards

In the past few years, the Azores have been nominated for several awards by various international entities related to sustainable tourism and environmental quality, namely the European Coastal and Marine Union (EUCC), the European Destinations of Excellence and the National Geographic Traveler.

Deemed “the largest international certification programme for sustainable tourism destinations”, the QualityCoast awards exist since 2007 and have honoured more than 140 tourism destinations in 23 countries. An international jury assesses over one thousand world destinations based on five criteria: nature, environment, local identity, tourism and business, host community and safety.

According to the programme's organisation, the awarded destinations are deemed the most attractive for “visitors interested in natural and cultural heritage, a clean environment, local identity, or business involvement in sustainable tourism”.

The organisation aims to establish an international network of coastal communities that share similar values on sustainable development, nature and biodiversity, cultural heritage and identity, as well as socially responsible tourism, maintaining at the same time high quality standards in their tourism offer.

The goal of the QualityCoast programme is to promote sustainable development in coastal destinations by acknowledging their effort to maintain the attractiveness of these best practices in the future, considering not only tangible aspects, as natural heritage, but also policy planning and sustainable management.

The QualityCoast Award is the recognition, at the highest level, of quality tourism and sustainability.





After receiving the award for three years in a row, the Azores were nominated in 2013 for the **best ecological tourist destination in Europe** by the European Coastal and Marine Union. The Azores were then attributed the QualityCoast Gold Award 2013, which recognises environmental quality in coastal areas for sustainable tourism. From a thousand candidates, the jury selected 100 destinations and, among those, the Azores reached the best score.

This award is based on several factors. The organisation mentions that the Azores have been benefitting from their policy on the traditional production of local and regional products, namely wine, cheese, fruit, tea and tuna, as well as exploring and optimising renewable energy.



In September of 2014 the Azores became **the first QualityCoast Platinum Award winner**, after being evaluated several years in a row, and keeping the highest position in the Global Sustainable Tourism Review.

The organization mentioned as positive aspects, the development of an innovative governance system of Protected Areas, the water management improved by the Regional Plan for the Water (PRAA) which aims to encourage a rational use of water, the well preserved and promoted identity and values of cultural and historical heritage, the tourism business grow in a sustainable way, and the government supports human rights activities as several NGOs and solidarity institutions that are working against domestic violence and offer support and protection of women and children.

The Azorean government recognizes the importance of this award and invites all the enterprises to use the QualityCoast 2014 Platinum Award to promote the region and its potential as a sustainable tourist destination.



**Faial Nature Park**, which stands out for innovation, was honoured by the European Commission as the destination to represent Portugal in the EDEN programme (European Destinations of Excellence). This important award, attributed by the European Union to **the best destinations in Europe for sustainable tourist activities**, is associated to Portugal for the first time. A video on Faial Nature Park is available on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyNUqtrvkkU>

Although this award was given to Faial Island, most of the Azorean islands feature the same characteristics.



The Archipelago of the Azores was ranked the **second best island destination for sustainable tourism**. The survey involved 111 islands and archipelagos assessed by 552 experts. The Azores scored 84 points out of 100. The National Geographic Traveler magazine described the Azores as a beautiful place, home to green mountains and picturesque black and white towns ready to remain untouched.

The archipelago was ranked second because the Azores' strong culture and healthy ecosystems are likely to last, especially since the islands' "capricious climate probably impedes the flow of tourists," according to another expert participating in the ranking.



The walking path of the vineyards of Criação Velha, on Pico Island, was elected one of the eight most unique walking paths in the world by Boots n All, a company that publishes independent travel guides. Around eight kilometres long, this path follows the coastline until the famous vineyards, which are a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



The “Life Priolo” Project was awarded the “Best of the Best – Nature” prize of the European Union. This project was developed from 2003 to 2008 with a view to protect and restore the Laurel forest, which is the natural habitat of the native and endangered Azores Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula murina*).