



**When Lyn Boal suggested the Border SAC trip should be to the Azores, she didn't expect the other members to agree so eagerly. Nor to nominate her as trip coordinator. However that's what happened and soon the Border raiders were enjoying the delights of Azorean diving ...**

# Azorean Adventure

IT ALL STARTED at the Border Sub Aqua Club AGM when I had the bright idea to suggest the club went diving in the Azores. At this point I might add I only had a vague idea of where the Azores were, not a clue how to get there, or what to expect once we did. However, one of our more experienced divers had talked up the Azores ever since I had joined the club and sold it really well. I am still asking the question though - how did I end up organising it?

The Azores are a Portuguese territory located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, 760 nautical miles from Lisbon and 2,110 from New York. Of volcanic origin three groups of islands form the archipelago which some scholars believe to be the remains of the legendary Atlantis. The central group, Terceira, Graciosa, Sao Jorge, Pico and Faial are surrounded by the islands of Sao Miguel and Santa Maria on the east and by Flores and Corveo on the west. The Azores enjoy a privileged climate which is temperate and maritime and benefits from the gentle influence of the Gulf Stream. The water temperature varies between 17°C in winter and 24°C in summer.

So with a group of 9 divers and one non-diver we headed to Santa Maria the southern most island. To get there we flew direct from Gatwick to Sao Miguel, these flights run from May to October which covers the diving season (at other times of year flights go via Lisbon). We

then took another short flight to Santa Maria. All flights were with SATA and on request they will give a baggage allowance up to 30kg.

We were met at the airport by a representative from the car hire company who issued us with two cars for our week's stay and introduced us to Robert the owner of the dive centre who guided us to our hotel and took our dive kit in his vehicle ready for the first day's diving. We stayed at Hotel Santa Maria just two minutes from the airport and five minutes from main town of Vila do Porto.

In the morning we headed to the Wahoo Diving Centre run by Robert and Petra, and based in Forno about 20 minutes drive away. Here we had to provide our diving qualification and a recent dive medical as they only take qualified divers out and no courses are run from there. We were all provided with weight belts and tanks and although we all brought the rest of our kit, they do have six full sets available for hire and suits in various sizes. On site they have four Bauer Compressors, air only and 12ltr or 15ltr steel DIN cylinders are available. It should be noted that although this is a pretty basic dive centre it does provide everything you need to go diving.

Robert briefed us on the diving we would be likely to achieve that week, unfortunately as the wind was north-north easterly our dive sites would be

limited to the west of the island with a possible chance to head to some more remote sites should the wind drop. He also pointed out that there was only one decompression chamber in the Azores, that it was not always working and Portugal was the nearest after that - so safety stops were mandatory and incurring decompression stops was not permitted.

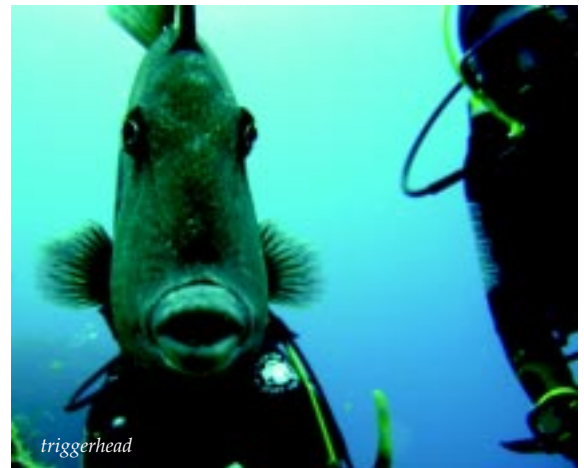
We headed down to the harbour at Vila do Porto where we loaded the boats, one of which was an inflatable kindly known as *Flubba* and the other a flat bottomed aluminium boat. Neither boat made for a particularly quick or comfortable ride in fact in a swell a few found them rather nausea inducing ... every club has its green divers! Thankfully, at the end of this year Robert is getting his new boat - an 8.4m RHIB with a 4-stroke 225HP outboard engine. This will improve divers' comfort immensely.

There are 75 sites around the island which are regularly dived, 25 caverns and grottoes and an additional 12 offshore sites. Fortunately there is only one dive centre on the island so we had them all to ourselves.

Our first dive was interesting, the sea was choppy which made kitting up an adventurous task to say the least (it was the first and last time we kitted up in the water). However as soon as we got under the water it was a different world, the visibility was 20m plus and the water a delightful 22°C. There was an abun-



azorean moray eel



triggerhead

words **Lyn Boal**  
 photos **Andrew Bunyon**

dance of life most notably Moray eels in every nook and cranny. We even saw a rock that looked like a turtle.

Our next dive proved to be a bit calmer and after dropping to 20m we followed a gully covered in Nudibranchs and found a Potato Cod lurking round some rocks. At the end of the gully was a large wall with a hole about one metre in diameter. The water looked lovely and blue on the other side and like any diver would we headed through. I make that sound easy but if you didn't get your timing right the water surged against you and spat you back out after which you flew backwards for about six metres in a less than cool manner but enjoyable none the less. Once you did make it through it was the most amazing rock formation probably best described as diving through Swiss cheese.

Day two we headed to a plateau which rose up from the seabed at 10m to 17m. This was a breathtaking sight as it was like diving an underwater Giant's Causeway. A diving geologist's dream I would imagine. In the afternoon we dived a site off a small island at the south west of Santa Maria known as the Snail Trail. There were many Nudibranchs and some were rather large. At about five metre we found more 'Swiss cheese' formations and a cave; unfortunately we could not make it into the second

cavern due to the swell.

Next morning the wind had dropped so we took the opportunity to head three miles out to Ambrosia. There is a line attached to a plateau at 50m which then drops away to 500m. We went down the line to about 40m where we could still see the surface, and down past the plateau, clearly. A few big fish scattered on our arrival. We then ascended to 10-15m for the rest of the dive and hung in the deep blue ocean like a human kebab waiting to see some sea life. This site is normally great for seeing Manta Rays; up to 20 at a time have been seen but unfortunately not on this occasion. The end of August typically offers the best weather for diving the Azores and is a good time for seeing large sea life however this year the season reportedly peaked in June and even the local fishermen were struggling to get out for a good catch.

The next few dives consisted of more fantastic sites teeming with fish and with lots of interesting rock formations. We spotted a stone fish, fire worms and even a few crabs. Of course I have to mention our Manta Ray encounter though only one person saw it while the rest of us headed down a chimney to 30m to look at the black coral. So do we believe him? That is the question!

*continued overpage*



## Azorean Adventure

Then, sadly, we came to our last dive which was like nothing any of us had experienced before - it was suitably called the Shrimp Cave. The cave entrance was between 10-15m and funnelled back to a small pocket about one metre from ceiling to floor. The entire cave was crawling with shrimp, one swipe with a goody bag and it would have been full. We were encouraged by our guide to turn off our torches and let the shrimps crawl over you. As we headed back to the boat a Trigger fish came to play but thankfully was in a good humour!

Unfortunately the weather did not permit us to go to the more remote dive sites; there is a marine reserve 24 miles north east of Santa Maria consisting of the Formigas Rocks which rapidly descend to the bottom of the ocean, while three miles further - Dollabarat, a seamount whose depth rises from several hundred metres up to just four metres.

Our dive guide has spotted whales on the way there and reports that the area has lots of marine life including mantas, Wahoos and much more. Wreck enthusiasts would not be disappointed either.

The biggest debate we had before going was what kind of suit to take; the dive centre recommended a 7mm wetsuit or a 5mm wetsuit with a shorty over the top. They also strongly recommended against taking a dry suit, though the reasons for this were questionable. Being hardy Scottish divers (tight with their money) most people took a 5mm wetsuit and felt warm enough although on one or two dives they felt cold towards the end. I was the only one who took a drysuit and with a t-shirt and tracky bottoms underneath I was cosy in the water and on the boat. The only downside was being on a boat all day it was not so easy for me to go to the toilet but

I'll leave that one to your imagination. Overall we agreed the best combination was a 5mm wetsuit with a 2mm vest; trust Craig to be right as usual!

John our honorary club member and non-diver spent his days travelling round the island by car and hiking where possible. The scenery was of course beautiful and there were plenty of walks, however by day five he was getting a little restless as Santa Maria is quite a small island.

Our guide told us that the Azores is a great place for whale watching and mentioned many encounters with whales and dolphins though we didn't see any. Some of the other islands such as Sao Miguel run a lot of whale watching tours.

Of course no diver's trip would be complete without plenty of food and drink. Santa Maria being a small island did not have a great choice of places to eat however we were never stuck and found two of the restaurants on the island to be great. Rosa Alta and Atlantida were our regular choice. Local beef, pork, chicken are readily available and so is some of the freshest and tastiest fish. We were big fans of their King Prawns cooked with garlic, chilli and ginger and ate many a kilo of them! The local cheese is also amazing, however there are not as many options available for vegetarians. Most importantly the alcohol was very reasonably priced and the majority of our meals including plenty of alcohol cost about 20 euros.

I think most of us would say Santa Maria is an amazing dive destination, the dive sites are varied and the visibility was great at 20-40m plus, best suited to experienced divers as it is oceanic deep blue diving with a need for good navigation skills. It may not be the easiest place to get to but it is well worth the effort. With the new RHIB at the dive centre, diving should be much easier - however be warned the diving is challenging and there are no frills.

I think next year some are looking for warmer weather and calmer waters. The rest of us just can't wait to return!



*in the shrimp cave*



*bright eyes*



*Molly and Jackie making good time*



*exit from the tunnel dive*

## >> THE AZORES - USEFUL INFORMATION

### >> Flights

SATA up to 30kg weight limit on request. London Heathrow to Sao Miguel took 3hrs 30mins / Sao Miguel to Santa Maria 30mins. [www.satainternational.co.uk](http://www.satainternational.co.uk)

### >> Accommodation

B&B or self catering available on the island. As well as the tour company the dive centre knew of other suitable accommodation.

### >> Diving

Wahoo Diving Centre, Santa Maria

Robert & Petra Minderlein

Tel: 00351 296 884005

[www.wahoo-diving.de](http://www.wahoo-diving.de) / email: [mail@wahoo-diving.de](mailto:mail@wahoo-diving.de)

We paid about £35 per dive. Should be noted that in addition to

this each diver has to pay an additional 29 euros to go to

Ambrosia and 69 euros to get to the Formigas.

### >> Tour Company

Archipelago Azores, Keswick, UK

Tel: 01768 775672

[www.azoreschoice.com](http://www.azoreschoice.com) / email: [info@azoreschoice.com](mailto:info@azoreschoice.com)

Our trip was organised by them and everything went smoothly.

Would definitely recommend using them unless you are keen to book everything yourself.

### >> Cost

The full trip including, flights, B&B accommodation, car hire,

transfers, 10 dives including weight belt and tank cost £950.

Sure it could be done for less though.

### >> Chart

Flores, Corvo & Santa Maria with Banco Das Formigas. No 1959

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holidays in the Azores, call us on

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