

THE AZORES

By Eva Newton

In 1432, the uninhabited 9 islands that comprise the Azores, was discovered by Portuguese seamen. These islands are located some 1100 miles from the Portuguese coast and are sometimes referred to as the Atlantic Islands. They are a stopping off place even today, even as they were used by the Portuguese on their explorations returning from Africa, India, China and later, the Americas.

They are volcanic in structure and are considered to be part of a vast Mid-Atlantic Ridge. Volcanic activity has persisted in these islands from earliest colonization to recent times.

Goncalo Velo was not only the discoverer of these islands, but also its first governor. These islands are located in a sub-tropical high pressure area and enjoy a temperate and only slightly variable climate. In the winter, the archipelago is subject to strong winds and storms which can prove destructive. Minimum winter temperature is about 41° F. and maximum in the summer averages 82° F.

The islands are not large. Santa Maria, the easternmost of the group, has an area of 42 square miles and is seventh in size. Many Texas cattle ranches could easily swallow the 20,000 acre area whose population intensely cultivates what arable land there is. Santa Maria is without good seaports and permits landing only when the winds from the northerly direction make the bay of Vila do Porto on the southwest of the island accessible.

Sao Miguel, just to the northwest of Santa Maria, was the second of the group to be discovered. It is the largest of the islands in this archipelago, with a length of 41 miles and width of from 4 to 9 miles, encompassing 297 square miles.

Terceira, the third island to be discovered, is the most important of this central group measuring 21 miles long and about 12 miles at the widest part of the island, a better part of its 223 square miles taken up by a vast volcanic cone and crater. The coasts of this island are rocky with steep cliffs.

Graciosa, encompasses only 27 square miles, is the least mountainous and the least wooded of the Azores. Again, there are no good harbors.

Sao Jorge lies twenty-three miles to the southwest of Graciosa and measures 28 miles in length and 3 in width at the widest place, a long slender island. Its 40 square miles is hemmed in by four other islands, Terceira, Graciosa, Pico and Faial. Unlike some of the islands in this group, Sao Jorge has a number of excellent bays and ports, along the southern coasts.

The islands of Faial and Pico lie south and west of Sao Jorge and are separated by a narrow channel. Geographically, economically, and politically, they may be considered as one. Pico is the most impressive of the Azorean Islands with its highest peak rising 27,000 feet above the floor of the ocean and 7,615 above sealevel. Pico measures 27 miles by 8 and is the third largest in size in the archipelago, with an area of some 175 square miles. This island has the least amount of cultivable lands and thus fishing has been its principal occupation. Also, there is a dearth of fresh water on Pico. The coastline is steep, there are no harbors but some small coves where small craft can land in fine weather. Pico is heavily forested, making the charcoal business a lucrative one.

Faial has a length of 11 1/2 miles and a width of 6 1/2, an area of 64 square miles. A large part of the island has weathered into fine fertile soil, making Faial a great agricultural community. Generally, there is not much fresh water but conservation of rainwater to use in irrigation suffices to grow verdant crops. Although most of the coastline is steep and rocky, there is a fine harbor on the southwest side of Faial across the strait from Pico Island which is protected from most winds.

More than a hundred miles northwest of Faial lie two very isolated islands, Flores and Corvo. Flores, the most westerly, covers some 57 square miles, is heavily wooded in its central region, covered with flowers and shrubs and is well watered, has 8 lakes and many creeks and streams to carry off the fresh water to the sea. Because this particular island lies nearer the polar front, it is subject to more violent and numerous storms. Again, there are no harbors and the coastal waters are treacherous.

Corvo, fifteen miles to the north, is the smallest of the nine Azorean Islands and has an area of only 7 square miles. There is only one inhabited area of the island, the village of Rosario. There are no mountains besides the single crater, no valleys, no natural barriers to winds and storms, no forests nor woods with almost inaccessible cliffs facing the sea everywhere but where protective anchorages may be found in time of emergency.

Prince Henry of Portugal, after first establishing the validity and legality to his claim over the Azores in legal documents sent to Spain and to the Pope in Rome, appointed Goncalo Velho Cabral, a nobleman of his household, to head the first colonizing expedition to the Azores in 1439. The first expedition took the Portuguese to Santa Maria. Cabral had asked Prince Henry to release to his custody people that he felt could help establish a strong colony--he asked for the release of people who were in jail, convicted of minor crimes--he thought these would become the most useful citizens once more and pay their debt to society. Cabrel received his prisoners.

This group of a few noblemen, a few foreigner-adventurers and the prisoners made up the first group of colonists in the Azorean group of islands. Land was cleared, houses constructed, a church built. Cattle and sheep had been brought to roam, breed and multiply. Also, Santa Maria became an important supply base for the Portuguese. He spread colonization to Sao Miguel in 1444. The founding of these two colonies, despite Cabral's efforts, began to wane. In Europe, the Hundred Years War was raging between the French and English. Burgundy was caught between the two and Burgundian county of Flanders became a prime battlefield. Infanta Isabel, the only sister of Prince Henry, was the wife of Philip, Duke of Burgundy and Count of Flanders. She witnessed what the war was doing to her people and appealed to her brother to aid her

people. Prince Henry gave asylum to many refugees in Portugal and some to his overseas colonies. In the Azores, he gave the governorship of the unoccupied islands to Flemish noblemen on condition that they colonize them within a specified period. He supplied the ships and supplies, the Flemish furnished the colonists. Jacome de Bruges, a Flemish count, received the captaincy of Terceira. Jobst van Huerter, lord of Moerkerchen, was appointed captain-donatory of Faial, Pico, and Sao Jorge, and of van Huerter's lieutenants, Wilhelm van der Haagen, attempted to colonize Flores and minute Corvo. Graciosa was given to the care of a Portuguese nobleman from the island of Porto Santo in the Madeira archipelago, one Pedro de Correia, a brother-in-law to Christopher Columbus.

These first Azoreans were of many and varied nationalities. The people who settled in Santa Maria and Sao Miguel were almost wholly from the Algarves region in southern Portugal. Some of them were true Portuguese, some were "new Christians" (Muslims made converts to Christianity); however, most of the rest of the early Azoreans, came from northern France, from Flanders, and from Italy. Of these, the Flemish were refugees from a war-torn area. Italians were traders and merchants who had come to the islands both to partake in the African trade and to invest capital in the economic development of the islands. In addition, there were a few soldiers of fortune like the Drummonds who were from the royal house of Scotland, and the Betterncourts who had owned the Canary Islands and had traded their claims to Prince Henry for landing holdings in Madeira and the Azores. Christianity was the glue that held these diverse people together. Their common language became Portuguese. Being a Christian was the one requirement of Prince Henry for all colonists in the Azores.

With respect to genealogical research in the Azores, this information has been very difficult to obtain. In the early days, all vital information such as marriages, births, baptisms, confirmations, deaths, etc. were recorded in the parishes (freguesias). Some of these records were well recorded and preserved, some less so. A few years ago the Portuguese government directed that all such records be boxed and sent to three central locations: Horta on Faial for the western island group, Angra on Terceira for the central islands, and Ponta Delgada on Sao Miguel for the eastern islands. Many priests painstakingly copied the records before sending the originals to the designated places. Because of this, people going to the Azores have found some success in finding their ancestors. For the most part, the records sat in the boxes in which they were sent, for many years.

However, the Genealogical Society has been able to film these records and soon (this is summer of 1986) these films will be available for research. The acquisitions office in Salt Lake say that they will be giving these records first priority, as most Portuguese who settled in the United States had their beginnings in the Azores.

Other Resources Azores

Wikipedia Article on Azores Islands

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azores>

Azores Genweb Site

<http://homepage.mac.com/kmacardoza/Genealogy/azoresindex.html>

Cyndi's list Portuguese Links

<http://www.cyndislist.com/portugal.htm>

Genealogical Resources for researching in the Azores, Portugal

<http://www.dholmes.com/rocha1.html>