

Life on the island of Maio

Maio, as the local people say, still belongs to the “backyard” of the “forgotten islands”. Only few travellers choose to come to this island specifically. For this very reason, Maio is still one of the last paradises on this globe, and it is not for nothing that the Cape Verde Islands’ other epithet is “the Islands of Bliss”!



Vila do Maio is the capital of this 27 km long island which boasts a maximum width of 16 km and only about 7500 inhabitants. To state an exact number would be quite difficult, seeing the many pregnant women. Vila, the largest settlement, is laid out in checkerboard fashion on terraces. If you think you got lost in the maze of little alleys, just walk downhill and you’ll hit the large promenade of “Amilcar Cabral”. You get your bearings quickly.



This little town with its jetty and its airport acting as gateways to the world is quiet, peaceful and clean. Pretty little roads lined by brightly painted houses reflect the simple but happy life here. Narrow alleys provide quick shortcuts to wherever you want to go, and most doors are as open as the friendly smiles of the people.



Visitors are greeted with a friendly “Bon dia! Boa tarde! Todo bom?”. Unlike on the other islands, they needn’t worry about being pestered by begging children or worry about being mugged. To keep things this way, we should never give any opportunity to theft, not should we make money presents or distribute a lot of gifts. A beggar debases him- or herself, and that is something we should avoid at all costs. People here are still very conscious of their colonial past, and memories of their slavery past are still present in their minds and touch a raw nerve.

Casita Verde

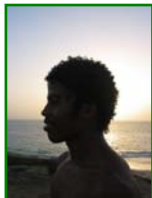


Simple bars and restaurants, cosy cafés and beach bars, fruit and vegetable vendors selling from trays carried on their heads, home-baked pastries,



roadside clothes stalls, all this invites for going on a stroll. The open doors give view into a woodworker's shop, a building material vendor's, a corner shop for groceries and household stuff, a tailor's, into the barber's or

shoemaker's. Little money is made with small trades and commissions, but people make ends meet. Time's there for the wasting. Children play in the streets, on open stairs or along the central beach. At sundown, the locals have a habit of throwing themselves fully dressed into the sea to refresh themselves and freshen up their clothes at the same time. Happy laughter accompanies their splashing and dipping.



Casita Verde

Around noon a fleet of shipping boats steers into the harbour, and the women carry the finest fish from the catch on their heads to the nearby fish house. Fresh fish! A boon for Maio, both for the locals and the visitors. A beloved evening or Sunday pastime for the people here is to go angling, and whatever they catch tastes better to them than any fish bought.



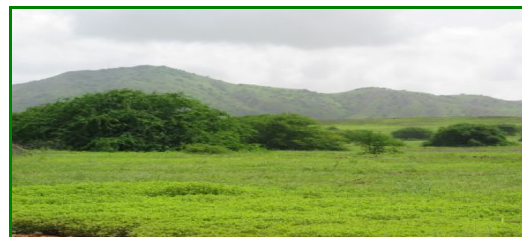
Once a week a freighter is supposed to pop by Maio and supply all the necessities for the people. For weeks on end this works quite well, then there is a delay – unexplained. The word “program” seems to be a foreign concept. However, things have really improved in the course of the past years, and imported goods appear in almost luxurious abundance. A number of large supermarkets stand to prove it. These

days there are even three banks vying for customers with their ATMs accepting VISA and MasterCard.

TACV flies to Maio airport on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Delays and flight changes must be scheduled in and found out about. On Cabo Verde the clocks tick at a more relaxed pace. “Take it easy”, is the word.



On a tour of the 269 sqkm large island you will become aware of the bizarre contrasts: the turquoise-blue sea delineated against beaches of white sand stretching on for miles; abrupt lava cliffs; the largest acacia forest on the Cape Verde islands, where charcoal is being produced; high sand dunes at Morinho provide a wonderful view over wide and empty beaches and the colourful salt desert near Cascabolho. The lonely volcanic desert on the eastern part of the island, with its oases brimming over with palm trees, papayas, mangoes and bananas in its irrigated gardens, is both surprising and impressive. The highest point of the island (421m) is however not an attractive prospect for a climb: Mount Penoso translates into “the arduous mountain”. Quite differently so on Monte Batalha (249m) near Morro; here you enjoy a wonderful view – all the way to Santiago Island, when the weather is clear.



Along the roads and on the coast, little friendly villages arise from the dry desert land and display their traditional, often colourful houses. The people eek out a scant if not poor existence. They raise cattle and grow vegetables or fruit on a small scale, try themselves as handymen, artisans or construction workers. While a lot of households in Vila do Maio are already connected to mains water, the women in the villages still carry 25

litre canisters on their heads from the watering hole to their homes. Electricity and phone lines have been extended to all villages in the last five years – an enormous



Casita Verde

progress. But not every household can afford being connected to them and use of these expensive commodities.

Music, often live, lures visitors to the villages and invites them to stay a bit longer. Whether the bar can whip up a cold beer or Coke depends on the supply boat, the organisational talent of the bar owner, or even on erratic power cuts.



Every year more and more retaining walls can be seen in the wide “ribeiras”, the dried out river beds. These walls, built to retain waters accumulating in the rainy season, ensure they don’t wash down to the sea and take the fertile soil with them. The valuable liquid is retained, can be pumped into tanks and used for irrigating fields. The Ministry of Agriculture grants subsidies for digging wells and building irrigation facilities. In this way, more and more desert patches develop into green vegetation pads.



Progress on the Cape Verde Islands still depends on development aid, both financial and in goods. However, a perspicuous observer

notices the enormous improvements in the fields of health care, schooling and training, water and energy supply, sewage, rubbish collection, import and export of goods, as well as telecom and internet use. How important even small subsidies and support projects are, can be seen and marvelled at every day. Emigrants provide not the smallest part of support by sending in their savings abroad to their families at home.



Nature conservation agencies take an increasing interest in protecting the turtles laying their eggs in the sand of lonely beaches in the months from July to September. Up to 120 eggs in a nest end up bringing forth not more than four grown-up turtles. From January to March Wales are passing by Maio, and the boat from Praia to Maio is sometimes accompanied by dolphins and flying fish. As late as two years ago there were ample spiny lobster in the sea, but now they are hard to get, as they mostly end up in the kitchens of the big hotels in Praia, on Sal and Boavista. This is another area where better controls could help avoiding total exploitation of the sea.

Casita Verde



Europeans tend to make clever comments. However, we who live on the island are guests here, just like any visiting tourists. This is why I have decided to observe more than to judge. It is the best way to fully enjoy this paradise with all one's senses. Light, sunshine, the rolling sea, peace and quiet, nature and last but not least the wonderful people here make this island lovable 360 days of the year.

