

CAPE VERDE ISLANDS

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Where America's Hurricanes Begin

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I left 72°F weather in Southern California and flew to Boston, whereupon I immediately lost fifty degrees! Overnight in Boston, and then a late evening six-hour non-stop flight from Boston to Praia [national capital city of Cape Verde Islands (15°N 25°W)].

NOTE: Due to a rather substantial Cape Verde Islands emigrant population in U.S. New England states, TACV Cabo Verde Airlines (the national airlines of Cape Verde Islands) provides regularly scheduled flights between Boston and Cape Verde Islands.

Stepping off the airplane, I was greeted by 94°F sunny weather, but stiff Atlantic Ocean breezes brought temperatures down to comfortable low 70s. (December through March are dry, sunny, breezy months; August through October is the rainy season.)

My accommodations were nice, clean and comfortable. (There are several such hotels in the Praia region.) Since my visit was to be short, I began my explorations immediately.

Cape Verde consists of ten major islands (nine of them inhabited) and five islets all of volcanic origin. Just west of the islands, cloud formations increase in strength and spin, pushed westward by ocean currents and prevailing winds. Gaining strength, they can become hurricanes, eventually slamming into Caribbean islands, Mexico and Central America, or the U.S. East Coast or Gulf States. (But it is these same ocean currents and prevailing winds that pushed Christopher Columbus' ships to the New World.)

Santiago is the largest island of the archipelago and the first to be settled; the city of Praia is located at the southern tip of this island. Travel publications reported that Santiago is a composite of all the other islands, with sandy beaches, desertlike plains, verdant, windward valleys and mountainous interior. It is also home to nearly half of the country's population. For these reasons, I selected to remain on this island during my short visit.

Cape Verde Islands were discovered by Portuguese mariners in 1456. The islands remained a Portuguese colony for over 500 years, becoming an independent nation on July 5, 1975. Praia has a number of colonial buildings, and two rather decent beaches. Cidade Velha is located 10 miles from Praia, and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site as the first European settlement in the tropics, founded in 1462. There is a cliffside fort with old Portuguese cannon, as well as ruins of a cathedral and pillory on the old town square where enslaved captives were chained up and displayed. The remoteness yet strategic position of the Cape Verde Islands made them a perfect clearinghouse and to provide ships with provisions for the transatlantic slave trade.

The following day, I hired a taxi for an island tour. (Four hours; Cost: 70 Euros.) The southern area of the island (where Praia is located) is rather flat and arid. But soon the nice paved roads began climbing mountainous terrain. The road took us through several valleys; each valley -- due to its elevation, rainfall, etc. -- seemed to support different types of agricultural products: papaya farms in one valley, sugar cane in another valley, lemon and lime trees in yet another valley. Slightly higher elevations favored farms with potatoes, tomatoes, string beans. But none of the valleys seemed large enough to support more than ten farms.

Our paved asphalt road gave way on the northern half of the island to the old style roads: many smooth lava bricketts. As a result, the drive became slower and somewhat bumpy. The road passed through many villages, with some new houses painted with bright colors but more unpainted unfinished construction -- and yet occupied -- houses. Many of the villages had their own Roman Catholic church (95% of the population are of Roman Catholic faith), a community water facility (women carrying plastic buckets of water from the facility on their heads was a common sight; some were talking on their cell phones at the same time!), and pigs, goats and chickens running across roads. Yet, Cape Verde Islands have the highest standard of living of any West Africa nation.

On the northwest coast of the island is a new "tourist attraction" not yet mentioned in any travel publications: an old prison used by Portugal's fascist dictator, Antonio de Salazar (1936-1974) to incarcerate exiled political dissidents and others.

Many of the cities, towns and villages boasted of newly constructed schools. Virtually all children of primary school age attend school. Cape Verde Islands have a 76% literacy rate. Cape Verde Islands population (approximately 500,000) is of primarily mixed European and African descent.

Efforts are being made to boost the tourism industry. New developments on some of the outer islands include villas, townhouses and condominium units -- as well as shopping centers, restaurants, bars, etc -- to attract Europeans, Americans, etc. But these efforts have been hindered by the current global economic recession.

But one part of the tourism industry seems to have over-developed: the ubiquitous taxis on the islands!

And then, on the next day, my flight returned me to cold Boston, with another overnight stay, and then a flight back to (rainy!) Southern California.