

## Europe Anyone?

My first trip to Europe was in August of 2008. It was a 17 day Trans Atlantic cruise. We left from Miami and got dropped off in Amsterdam. The first 8 days were spent crossing the Atlantic. It was extremely enjoyable. Our first stop was Madeira, Portugal. This is a small island off the coast of Portugal. The captain told us we would dock at 4AM and we would have the day to spend in Madeira. To tell you the truth I had never heard of the place and wasn't really quite sure where it was, but I was more than happy to visit.

I jumped out of bed that morning and literally ran up two flights of steps to the top deck. I wanted to get a quick look at where we would be spending the day. That very first look took my breath away. It looked exactly like the geography books from sixth grade! I couldn't believe it! Since I had never been out of the United States I had no idea that all of the places we studied still looked like they did in those pictures from 20 years ago. I was astounded and filled with glee to see a city of little white cottages with red tile roofs. I was just shocked.

I ran back to our room. Got my friend, Marge and said "Hey, we have to get off of this boat and go to this island - prepare yourself - you are going to be shocked."

We got ready in a hurry, went to the dining room for a quick cup of coffee and then exited the ship. It was a pretty long walk to the town and as we got closer I really couldn't believe it. I had no idea what the other side of the world looked like and I loved it. We got in to town and started walking. The first thing we heard were church bells, it was a Sunday morning. Then what do you think we saw but a group of nuns! Nuns! In their full regalia! Maybe twenty of them. I had not seen that many nuns since Catholic grade school. So we followed them to church. Of course the Mass was in Portuguese and we only stayed a few minutes, but I figured it counted. After we left the church we walked through this beautiful park. That was when I realized that all of the annual flowers I plant every year must have originated here because they were like giant size. I mean geraniums up past my knees, big, huge red blooms. I was smiling from ear to ear. I honestly thought we had landed in the Garden of Eden.

As we were walking a cab pulled up next to us and the driver said "would you ladies like a ride around the island?"

We discussed the price and then agreed that a tour with this taxi driver would be a good idea. We jumped in the cab and off we went. It was during that tour that I fell in love with Europe. He took us high up on a hillside overlooking farms. But these were not like any farms I had ever seen. They were literally layered all the way down the side of this huge hill into the sea. Next he took us to a funicular, of course I had no idea what that was and gladly paid the euro or two to ride it up even higher on the island. Once we got up there - you will never believe this - we rode this funny little go cart looking thing back down! I can't remember when I've been so happy and enthralled. Once this ride ended he took us to the seaside where we saw multi colored boats all vibrantly painted in blues and reds and yellows. On many of the boats it looked like clotheslines with - well I didn't know what was hanging on them. The driver told us it was cod which gets dried and then sold. He also told us this particular part of the island was where Hemingway came to write.

Soon our tour was over and we were back on the ship. I stood on that top deck and watched Madeira fade into the sea with a smile on my face. Next up was Spain, then France, then England and finally Amsterdam. It changed my life. It was me a traveler.