

Ascent of Mount Pico, Azores 2016

Description

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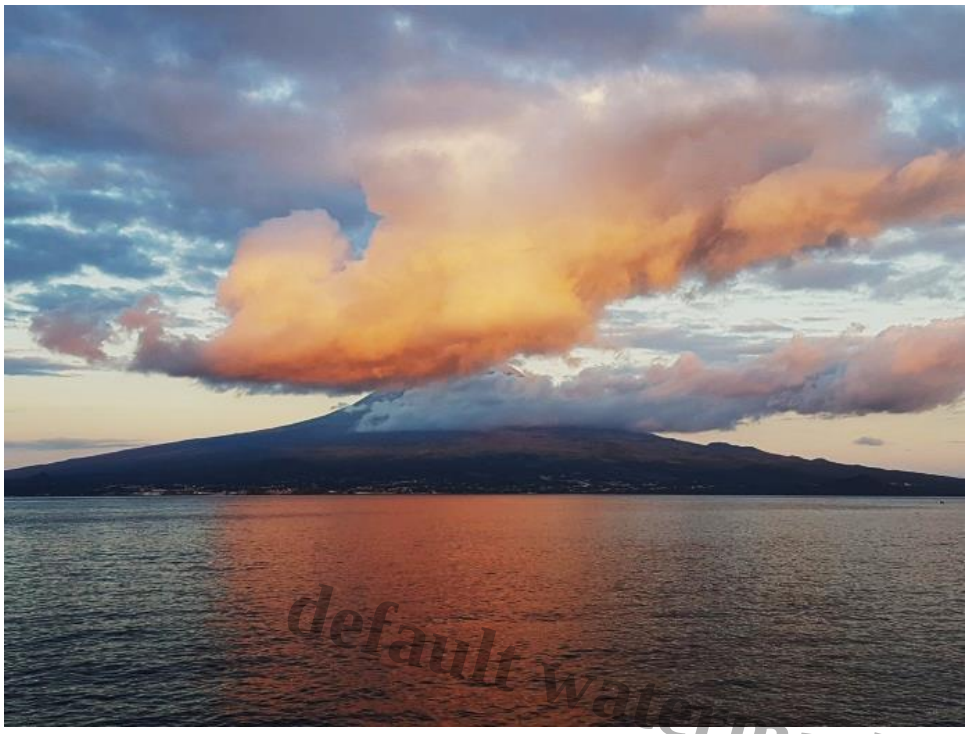



Dry Sherry produced on Pico Island using traditional methods

The summit of Mount Pico is 2,350 metres above sea level, making it the third highest peak in the Atlantic Ocean. However, as it starts 6,100 metres below sea level, the overall height of Mount Pico is an impressive 8,450 metres, making it the highest underwater mountain in the world (ref. Guinness Book of Records).

Fortunately, the hiking trail starts at 1,200 metres, making the total ascent for the hike 1,150 metres. In my mind the main challenge in climbing Pico is the steepness and, at times, poor quality of the path. The path does not zig-zag or follow modest contours, it gets straight to the point with a very direct full frontal assault, to use the mountaineering term. The descent is particularly tricky and should be done slowly. The path is littered with small pebbles that make slipping and falling a real danger. On reaching the crater, I did not look at the final ascent to the top of Pico Piquinho, the volcanic cone situated within the crater, with much enthusiasm. However, when Rosie and Mike decided to do it, I was inspired to join them and pleased I was to make the effort. We were very lucky with the perfect weather. I would not have enjoyed it in thick cloud or rain.

The crater reminded me of â??The Desolation of Smaugâ?• from Tolkienâ??s â??The Hobbitâ?•, where an angry dragon totally destroyed the Dwarf Kingdom with his firey breath. It is a perfect volcanic crater where one could easily imagine the huge eruption that created the island some 240,000 years ago (quite young in geological terms). When on the top, the sea looks a very long way below but what you see is only a staggering quarter of the whole mountain height and a fraction of its massive base.

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As Faial and Pico Islands are so close to each other, the line-of-sight distance from Clive and Jaquiâ??s house to the top of Pico is only 20 kms. Therefore, from their house, there is a clear view of the mountain. I soon realised that the conditions on the mountain are in a state of continuous flux as clouds move in and out at various levels. In fact, it reminded me of Table Mountain, a stoneâ??s throw from my home in Cape Town, where clouds and mist move in quickly from the cold Atlantic Ocean.



At the Top Beacon Charles with Cointreau, Rosie and Mike



In the Volcanic Crater with Pico Piquinho in background



View from the Top



The Long and Rough Descent

The next day I felt surprisingly strong and did the 7.5 km Caldeira do Faial trail on Faial Island. With a huge crater of 1.5 kms in diameter, this is the original volcano that created the island. I was immediately struck by the green beauty of the mountain, making it very different to Pico. Faial is known as â??The Blue Islandâ?• due to the hydrangeas that grow in stunning abundance on the island. From the rim of the Caldeira crater to the sea far below, these blue flowers could be seen everywhere.

However, on day two and I woke up with an acute attack of the â??Pico Shuffleâ?•. My legs were so stiff that I was walking like an old man and staggered through â??Gruta das Torresâ?•, a larva tube cave on Pico Island, in some discomfort. Fortunately, I was fine the next day.



Clive looking into the Caldeira Crater (Itâ??s much bigger than it looks in the photograph

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The Caldeira Crater Rim



Charles and Jaqui dwarfed by the Hydrangeas

Pico Island produces the most wine of the Azores Islands. Wine production goes back to the 15th century when wine grapes were introduced by Franciscan Monks. As Pico is mostly volcanic rock with little soil, vines are grown in traditional Currais or small plots using walls of rock in place of trellises. Originally the soil was transported by sailing ship from nearby Faial Island. This is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Traditional Currais Vineyards on Pico Island



Some Pico Wines

Clive and Jaqui, thank you very very much for your unbelievably sincere hospitality. I knew that my Azores holiday would be special but it exceeded all expectations. It was great to meet your many

interesting friends on Faial Island, meet your many pets (there is a story in that alone), go for amazing hikes and circumnavigate the island by both road and sea. I will remember those 10 days forever. Your planning of the Pico hike was perfect, from the weather to the team and your personal ferry home in â??Boatieâ?• when we missed the big ferry.

A friend of mine, Kevin Wood, is a retired craftsman living on the banks of the Goukou River in Still Bay, about 350 north east of Cape Town. He hand-made a beautiful fish filleting knife for Clive with a sailfish attacking a bait-ball embossed on the blade. As a matter of co-incidence, his original knives were made with bone from the jaw of a sperm whale, brought to Cape Town from the Azores by yacht many years ago. Now, as he has run out of whale bone, he is using East African rose wood salvaged from the â??Oosterlandâ?•, a sunken sailing ship in Table Bay.

Am I pleased that I climbed Mount Pico? Definitely yes, it was a mental and physical achievement for me. Would I do it again? No, there are so many more beautiful, albeit less challenging, hikes in the Azores that I would prefer to do, should I return one day.



River in the background



Ke**vin at Work with the Goukou**


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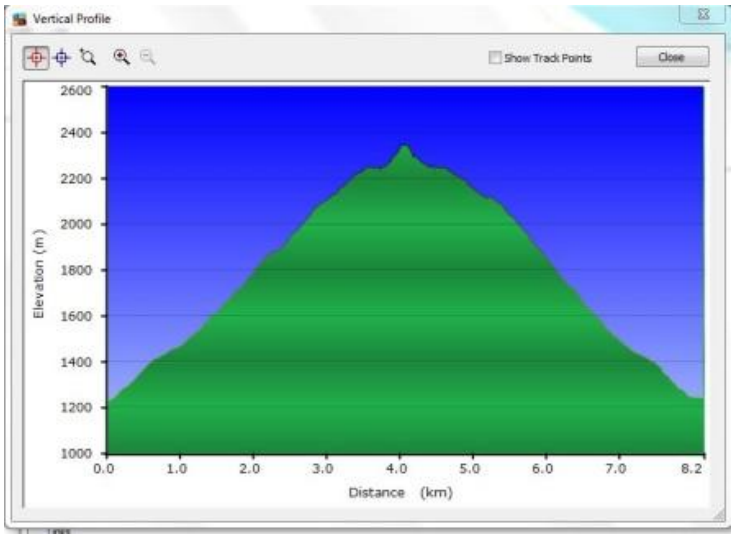
Our GPS Track



The GPS Profile (Height / Distance)
Pico Piquinho as the (not so) â??littleâ?• blip at the top

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Pico by Numbers:

Total height from seabed: 8,450 metres
Height above sea level; 2,350 metres
Total steps for the day: 32,555
Total ascent: 1,200 metres
Total time: 8.5 hours
Distance: 9.7 km





Goodbye to Rocky, Clive and Jaquiâ??s beautiful blind rescue dog that Clive spotted from his fishing boat, abandoned and stuck on a narrow ledge above the sea and Mount Pico taken on my flight back to Lisbon. Note Pico Piquinho, the volcanic cone, that is the final straw for many hikers.

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