



FRANCES LINZEE GORDON / LONELY PLANET IMAGES

Out of Africa?

While only 400 miles of Atlantic Ocean separate Cape Verde from the shores of Senegal, the archipelago's unique landscapes, culture and mood make it truly feel a world apart from Africa. Despite increasing numbers of direct flights from the UK and property agents touting it as the planet's hottest new destination, most of its beautiful beaches are still blissfully yours to enjoy in peace. Will this remain the case? Follow **Emma Gregg** as she hops through this fascinating island nation that's clearly on the move.

Above: The tiny town of Paul, perched on the tip of Santo Antão



On a cool, mellow evening in the mountains of Santiago, the largest island in the Cape Verde archipelago, Lindorfo, our host, was rhapsodising about hot tubs.

"I've been looking them up on the internet," he said. "I think my guests would love relaxing in one, under a sky like this. Just look at all those stars!"

Lindorfo, a trained agronomist and self-taught wine expert and astronomer, was born in these mountains. Having worked in Bulgaria, Belgium and Italy, he recently came back to Santiago to build a *pousada* (a Portuguese-style hotel). It's proving so popular that he has big plans for the place.

For someone from a nation whose residents are far outnumbered by their relatives abroad, Lindorfo has gone against the flow by returning to his roots. But it's easy to see why rural Santiago drew him home. Looking for all the world like the haunt of giants, dragons and trolls, the landscape is a dramatic, vertiginous collage of pinnacles and ridges, made lush by banana plants, maize and wild aloe vera. Winding

their way between the crags are perilous-looking donkey paths, some with a sheer drop on either side.

To be honest, I hadn't expected this. I'd imagined sun-baked remnants of Portuguese colonial buildings, hot, dimly lit front-room bars with scrubbed tables and grizzled guitarists playing deliciously melancholy *morna* ballads. And I'd been looking forward to the huge, empty beaches, endless sunshine and laid-back Afro-Brazilian vibe promised so seductively by tour operators and property agents who tout the islands as the planet's hottest new destination. But cool, green mountains, coronary-inducing donkey paths and hot tubs bought over the internet?

Cape Verde is full of surprises. Scattered like pebbles 400 miles west of Dakar, this island cluster has a topography, climate and mood that is utterly unlike anywhere else in Africa. Its fiercely volcanic landscapes – some long-eroded, some still bubbling with sulphur and fire – seem worlds apart from the flat, arid scrub of the Sahel. Some compare the islands to their northern neighbours, the Canaries, as they were before the cement

mixers moved in. So far, development has been patchy and slow, though it's set to change.

First colonised in the 1500s, Cape Verde has been a travellers' stopover for centuries: slavers serviced their galleys here in the 18th Century, the British came here in the 19th Century to run coaling stations for the Atlantic steamships, and during the apartheid era South African pilots, for want of other options, used the islands as a refuelling stop. In the 1990s, Cape Verde began to feature on holiday itineraries, with young European windsurfers leading the way.

Culturally, Cape Verde is unique. While most West African lives are underpinned by a distinctively African blend of Islam and animism, the majority of Cape Verdeans are Catholic mestizos with an outlook that's as focused on Europe as on the mainland. Krioulo, the language of the southern islands and Crioulo, spoken in the north, are based on colonial-era Portuguese with a few English and West African words thrown in; both are powerful indicators of national identity. But hard as we try to define what most sets Cape Verde apart from its neighbours, this nation defies generalisations, so different is each island from the next.

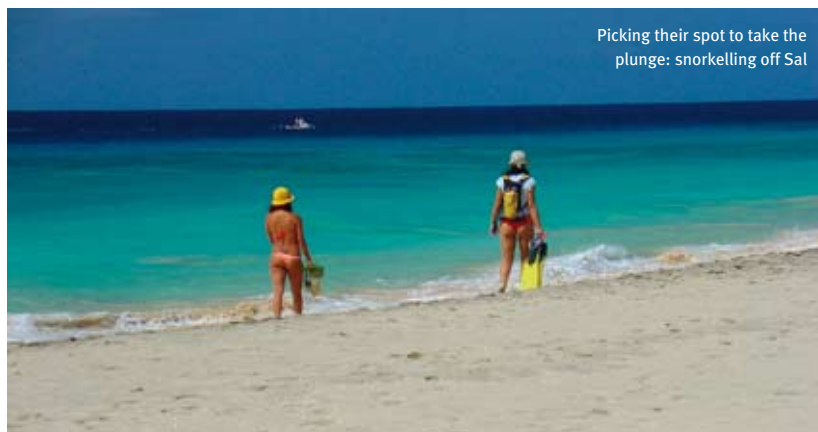
Many visitors to Cape Verde stick to the island of Sal, basing themselves in Santa Maria, the country's only real resort. It's rarely love at first sight. From the air, Sal looks like a barren slab, and it's scarcely more appealing at ground level. Nothing seems to grow in the salty, rubble-strewn interior apart from withered acacias, bent double by the wind. The weathered cones of long-dead volcanoes define the landscape. But the fine beaches to the south are great for watersports, and developers view Sal not as desert, but as a blank canvas.

In Santa Maria, you're never far from the rumble of a construction site. Once little more than a shantytown, the area is changing as the shiny new villas and apartments advertised at European property shows make the transition from artist's impression into reality. In the Italian restaurants and Irish bars, you're as likely to bump into second-home buyers as tourists. Now that you can fly direct to Sal from Gatwick and Manchester, many are British. Some, aroused by rumours of easy profits, have a dose of gold rush fever.

"Friends of ours who saw Cape Verde on *A Place in the Sun* on Channel 4 went right ahead and bought an apartment off-plan. Prices have doubled since then," said one young couple from Cheshire. "We've heard of people buying from a brochure without realising that the apartment is miles from town, has a tank instead of mains water and could easily have its sea view blocked by some other developer."

For all the hype about Cape Verde being 'the new Caribbean' – but with lower prices and no jet lag – or 'the Canaries minus the concrete', there's some doubt in the air as to whether Sal will measure up. The locals seem baffled by their newfound transitional state – half Third World backwater, half emerging international resort. Crime levels, once negligible, are beginning to creep up and the drugs-related murder of two Italian women in early 2007, though widely considered an isolated case, has brought worries about the darker sides of tourism.

I dropped in at Santa Maria's mega-hotel, the Garopa-Funana, which shimmers like a fortress on the edge of town. The Spanish-owned



Picking their spot to take the plunge: snorkelling off Sal



Sitting pretty: local boats on one of Sal's beaches



Diving into Cape Verde's deep blue: a hawksbill turtle off the island of Sal

THE CAPE VERDE EXPERIENCE

Cape Verde



THE CAPE VERDE EXPERIENCE

Above left: Blissfully bleak: Boa Vista beaches

Above right: Plant seller in Praia, Santiago

Below: Fresh fruit for sale with a smile in Praia, Santiago

Riu hotel chain poured millions into turning a stretch of wind-stripped coast into this giant all-inclusive complex designed on the 'more is more' principle. By the pool, the sunloungers were packed with well-oiled Europeans. Some guests stay put until it's time for their flight home. But to leave Cape Verde without exploring beyond Sal's energy-sapping desert seems, to me, a crime.

As someone for whom the words 'archipelago' and 'island-hopping' have a magical ring, I needed no persuasion to sign up for a tour that would give me a taste of five more islands. All connected by a network of internal flights and ferry crossings, a little planning enables you to squeeze a good deal of the country into a visit lasting two or three weeks.

Fistful of flight coupons at the ready, we set off for stop number one, Boa Vista. "Ours is the most beautiful island," said Fernando, our local guide,

We arrived at Praia de Santa Mónica, a five-mile stretch of gorgeous, immaculate sand. We looked left, looked right, and saw nobody. It was rather overwhelming

with a serious expression. I predicted, correctly, that island pride would be a recurring theme. But Fernando's promise that we'd be amazed by Boa Vista's southern beaches held true. After a long, bumpy drive through palm groves and scrub, we arrived at Praia de Santa Mónica, a five-mile stretch of gorgeous, immaculate sand. We looked left, looked right, and saw nobody. It was rather overwhelming.

Our hotel was on a beach called Praia de Chaves. Whatever the name might suggest, this is a chav-free zone, but it's earmarked for development: direct flights from the UK will be landing on Boa Vista from July. Sipping head-spinning *caipirinhas* made from *grogue*, sugar cane rum, we asked a local restaurateur whether the islanders welcomed the changes. "Italians have already been coming here for a long time," he said, "and business is OK. But now a lot more people want to build apartments, and they don't all realise that Boa Vista is fragile. We have perfect sand dunes, and perfect beaches. Turtles nest here, and rare birds. There's plenty to gain from people coming here, but also plenty to lose."

Another day, another island. Landing on Santiago, we headed into Praia, the Cape Verdean capital, a



EMMA GREGG

substantial town that heaves with traffic and heat. A trip to the quiet northern town of Tarrafal for a lunch of *cachupa* – corn and bean stew, an island speciality – was a welcome escape, as was our visit to the glorious mountains where Lindorfo has his pousada. But even those jagged peaks little prepared us for the drama of our next island stop, Fogo.

Beneath the surface, Cape Verde's 'fire island' is still aflame. Fogo is a volcano of which only the tip, iceberg-like, breaks the surface of the Atlantic. Its cone, the Pico de Fogo, sprouted a new, highly active offshoot in 1995, engulfing a village in lava and forcing the evacuation of 4000 people. Thankfully, no lives were lost.

While the little coastal town of São Filipe is charming, it's the Pico and its caldera that are Fogo's main draw. By taking the giddingly steep mountain road that leads you, eventually, past eerily quiet expanses of worryingly fresh-looking lava, you arrive at the hamlet of Chã das Caldeiras, which is tucked inside a monumental crater dating from the dawn of the island's history. Here, there's a tiny guest house arranged around a courtyard garden with stunning views. The opportunity to spend the night in the crater of a volcano is an eccentric but romantic prospect, and there's something irresistibly daring about climbing the forty-degree incline to the lip of the cone, a guided hike which anybody of above-average fitness can attempt.

We chose a less challenging option, a moderate trek up a cinder path to a lower caldera. Fine scree



THE CAPE VERDE EXPERIENCE

THE CAPE VERDE EXPERIENCE



crunched like black snow under our boots as we hiked through the heat haze. Near the edge of the crater, the haze thickened and we were mugged by powerfully sulphurous vapours that smelt, as someone remarked, “like the devil having a barbecue”.

After the exertions of the climb, we took the downhill leg at a bound, leaping past pits sheltering tomato plants and vines. Like the volcano-dwellers of Lanzarote, Fogo’s farmers have discovered that volcanic gravel is excellent for viticulture, its pores trapping just enough dew to keep the vines alive. We dropped into the wine cooperative for a tasting and the winemaker, Sr Monteiro, brought out a large tray of glasses. “This,” he announced with a flourish over a rich and delicious red, “we made just four months ago. Perhaps we should call it Fogo Nouveau!”

Our next hop took us to São Vicente, home of Cesária Evora, Cape Verde’s unofficial cultural ambassador. The islanders love their musicians with a passion – not just Evora, but her contemporaries and rivals too. Their songs – the *mornas*, the merengue-style *funanas* and the raunchy, hip-crunching dance numbers – pour out of cafés, shops and car windows. Hearing a song I particularly liked float through the open doors of a tiny bar in the pleasant city of Mindelo, I stopped to listen, and was ushered in. A pair of impeccably dressed octogenarians with matching smiles moved along their bench to make room for me and recommended a glass of *pontche*, the local



EMMA GREGG



THE CAPE VERDE EXPERIENCE

liqueur. The Cape Verdeans have a word for this kind of friendliness: *morabeza*, meaning natural, unaffected hospitality, and it’s a matter of national pride.

I loved Mindelo’s faded colonial elegance but the last island on our circuit, Santo Antão, was nothing short of astounding. It certainly appealed to my appreciation of the theatrical. Approaching by ferry, it looked mountainous but bleak, a barren rock. As we drove uphill from the ferry port of Porto Novo this assessment seemed confirmed – but then we reached the top, and everything changed. With the speed of a party trick, the climate shifted from hot to moist and misty and we found ourselves in a dripping pine forest. Further on, the ground seemed to fall away and we looked down onto a patchwork of smallholdings, spread like a quilt over a vast caldera. The road continued north along breathtakingly scenic passes and ridges that made Santiago’s mountain roads seem like pale imitators.

Cool, green mountains, coronary-inducing donkey paths and hot tubs bought over the internet? Those hadn’t featured in my mental picture

Thanks partly to its isolation, Santo Antão is grindingly poor. While Cape Verdean villagers with a little money to spend splash out on cement blocks to extend their homes, many Santo Antãoans live extremely simply. The fertile northern slopes make self-sufficiency easy enough, but selling produce for a profit is more challenging. In the small town of Ribeira Grande, Chinese shops selling cheap imports have given some people access to basic possessions for the first time. “I used to go to school barefoot,” explained Paulino, our guide, “but now more children have shoes. Things are changing.”

Property investors are already eyeing Santo Antão with interest. That evening, I shared a table with an estate agent who was checking out potential renovation projects, suitable for those who want more from their island foothold than a new-build with a view. “I’m not totally comfortable with the idea that the islands are up for sale,” she admitted, “but I’m sure there are plenty of people who would like a little slice of an island as lovely as this one.” And as the waiter poured us an extra glass of *pontche*, we drank to *morabeza*, the spirit that will, no doubt, lure us back to these intriguing islands – just to see what will happen next. □

Above left: Cape Town or Cape Verde? Bay of Mindelo, São Vicente

Above right: Fresh lava fields and the formidable Pico de Fogo

Below: One Cape Verdean with his hands on the beat of the nation

Cape Verde

Plan your trip

Direct flights to Cape Verde

Astraeus (www.flyastraeus.com) London Gatwick to Sal twice weekly. New weekly service to Boa Vista commencing July 2007. Weekly flights from Manchester.

TAP (www.flytap.com) Lisbon to Sal daily and to Praia four times a week.

TACV (www.tacv.cv) Boston, USA, to Sal, weekly.

Thomsonfly (www.thomsonfly.com) Sal from London Gatwick and Manchester, weekly.

Specialist tour operators

The Cape Verde Experience (www.capeverdeexperience.com)

Cape Verde Travel (www.capeverdetravel.com)

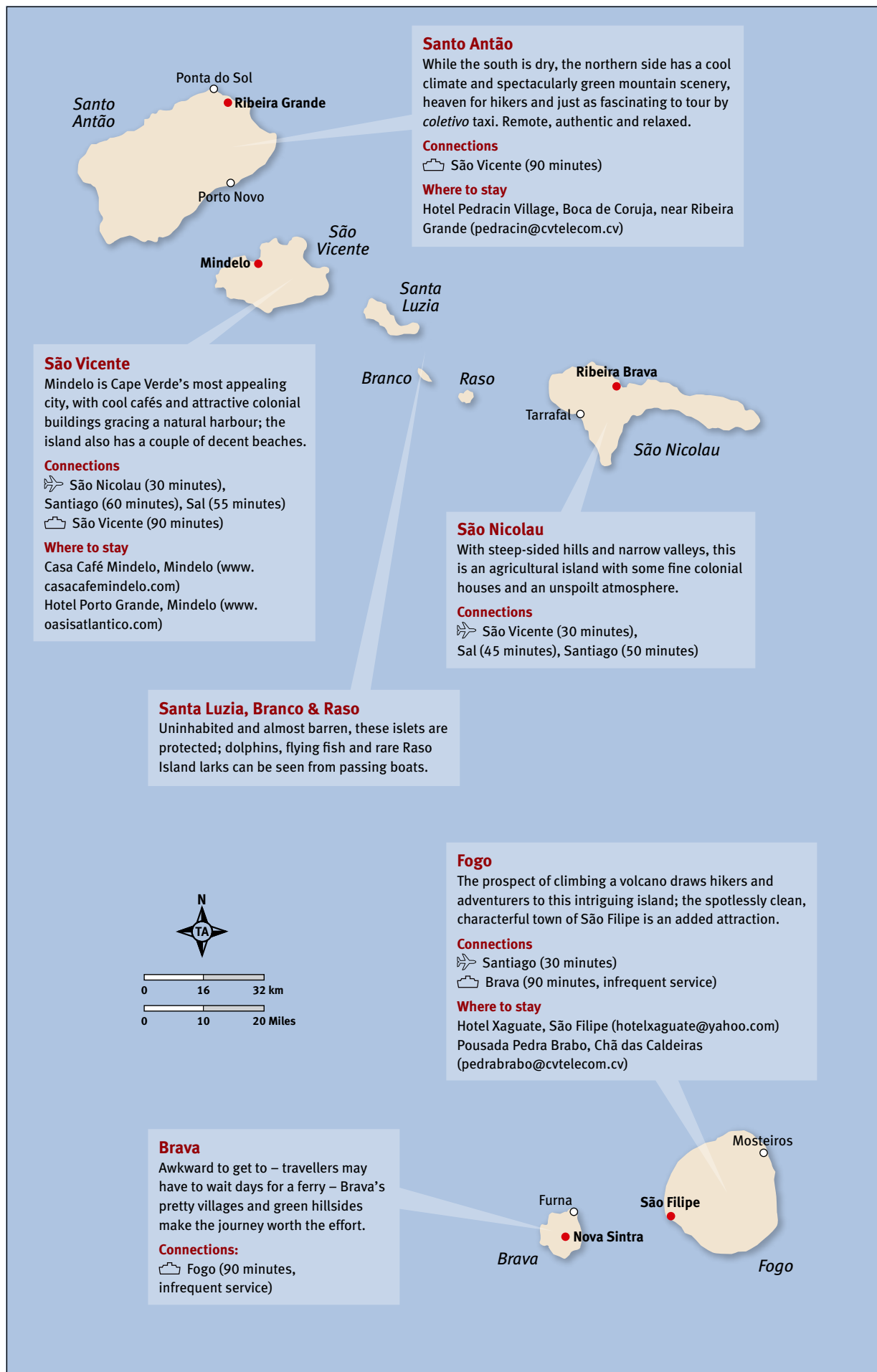
Internal flights and tours

TACV (www.tacv.cv)

Barracuda Tours, Santa Maria (www.barracudatours.com)



Dramatic coastlines aplenty



Property shopping in Cape Verde

There are plenty of agents cashing in on Cape Verde's investment property boom; the better ones will readily offer informed advice. However comprehensive their literature may appear, though, there's no substitute for visiting a property or development site in person. Some agents offer guided inspection trips including flights and accommodation, with part of the costs refunded if you put down a deposit on a property.

Find out more

A Place in the World (www.aplaceintheworld.com)

Cape Verde Property (www.capeverdeproperty.co.uk)

Cape Verde TOPA (www.topa.co.uk)

Horizon Property Group (www.cape-verde-island-property.com)

Your Cape Verde (www.yourcapeverde.com)



THE CAPEVERDE EXPERIENCE

Your next home under the sun?

■ Emma Gregg travelled with The Cape Verde Experience (www.capeverdeexperience.com).

Sal

You'll find few traces of authentic Cape Verdean culture in Santa Maria, the islands' tourist hub, but there's a good choice of beach hotels, bars and restaurants here. It's also the hub of the archipelago's scuba diving industry.

Connections

✈️ São Vicente (55 minutes), São Nicolau (45 minutes), Boa Vista (30 minutes), Santiago (50 minutes)

Where to stay

Odjo d'Água Hotel, Santa Maria (www.odjodagua.net)
Hotel Dunas de Sal, Santa Maria (www.hoteldunasdesal.com)



Boa Vista

With a tiny population, vast clotted-cream-coloured dunes, empty beaches and miles of open scrubland, this is, for now, a place to get away from it all.

Connections

✈️ Sal (30 minutes), Santiago (55 minutes)

Where to stay

Parque das Dunas, Praia de Chaves (www.parquedasdunas.com)
Migrante Guesthouse, Sal Rei (www.migrante-guesthouse.com)



ATLANTIC OCEAN

Santiago

While Praia, the capital, is a dignified city with animated markets, the interior has real drama, with steep-sided volcanic crags and lush banana plantations.

Connections

✈️ Fogo (30 minutes), São Vicente (60 minutes), São Nicolau (50 minutes), Sal (50 minutes), Boa Vista (55 minutes), Maio (20 minutes)

Where to stay

Pestana Trópico Hotel, Praia (www.pestanatropico.com)
Quinta da Montanha, near São Domingos (quintamontanha@cvtelecom.cv)



Maio

Flat, arid, quiet and served by only three internal flights a week, Maio is one of the least-visited of the populated islands, but it has some fine, empty beaches.

Connections

✈️ Santiago (20 minutes)