



CAPE VERDE, ISLAND BY ISLAND

A guide to the character of nine remarkable islands

SMALL GROUPS · TAILOR-MADE · ISLAND HOPPING

INTRODUCTION

One country. Many different worlds.

Cape Verde is an archipelago of ten volcanic islands, nine of them inhabited, set in the Atlantic several hundred kilometres west of the West African mainland. What surprises most first-time visitors is how little the islands resemble one another.

Within a single small country you will find a harbour city built on music, mountain valleys terraced by hand, an active volcano ringed by vineyards, salt pans worked for centuries, dune fields that run into the open ocean, and beaches where the fishing boats still come in each morning. The distances are short. The differences are not.

Atlas & Aura builds journeys around that variety. We plan around the character of each island — its landscape, its pace, its culture — rather than treating Cape Verde as a single beach destination reached by a single flight.

“Travel slowly. Meet the culture. Discover every island on its own terms.”

10

VOLCANIC
ISLANDS

9

ISLANDS
LIVED ON

2

ISLAND GROUPS
BARLAVENTO &
SOTAVENTO

4,033

SQUARE KILOMETRES
OF LAND IN TOTAL

Two groups, ten islands, one country.

The islands divide into two groups, named for their relationship to the prevailing north-easterly trade winds. The **Barlavento**, or windward, islands lie to the north; the **Sotavento**, or leeward, islands to the south. Nine are inhabited. Santa Luzia, between São Vicente and São Nicolau, is not: it is a protected nature reserve, and the waters around it form a marine protected area.



BARLAVENTO · WINDWARD

Santo Antão

São Vicente

Santa Luzia UNINHABITED

São Nicolau

Sal

Boa Vista

SOTAVENTO · LEEWARD

Maio

Santiago

Fogo

Brava

Schematic map. Island positions and relative areas are plotted to scale from published coordinates and areas; coastlines are simplified, and no routes or connections are shown. Travelling between islands involves a mix of domestic flights and ferries, and the practical options differ from one pair of islands to another. Schedules and operating conditions change, so connections should always be reconfirmed at the time an itinerary is built.

A SHORT WAY IN

Choose by feeling.

Find the idea that appeals, and start there. Every island below has a spread of its own.



MUSIC AND CREATIVE CITY LIFE

São Vicente

p. 5



MOUNTAIN WALKING AND FERTILE VALLEYS

Santo Antão

p. 7



QUIET TRAILS AND HERITAGE

São Nicolau

p. 9



SEA, SALT AND EASY RELAXATION

Sal

p. 11



DUNES AND WILD BEACHES

Boa Vista

p. 13



QUIET SHORES AND LOCAL RHYTHM

Maio

p. 15



HISTORY, MARKETS AND CULTURAL DEPTH

Santiago

p. 17



VOLCANO, WINE AND DRAMATIC GEOLOGY

Fogo

p. 19



FLOWERS, MIST AND SLOW TRAVEL

Brava

p. 21



MUSIC, CULTURE & MINDELO

Colour, salt air, and a street that runs all the way down
to the harbour.

ISLAND 1 OF NINE · BARLAVENTO

São Vicente

Mindelo sits around one of the Atlantic's great natural harbours, and the city has never quite stopped looking outward. Portuguese, British and West African influences settled here across a century of coaling ships, and what emerged is a place that takes its music, its language and its own sense of style seriously. São Vicente is small, dry and largely treeless — and the most culturally confident island in the archipelago.

WHY GO

São Vicente rewards time spent on foot. The colour-washed streets behind the harbour hold cafés, bars, workshops and a covered market; the shoreline opens to viewpoints over Porto Grande and across the channel to Santo Antão. Music here is not staged for visitors — morna and coladeira are living forms, played in small venues and rehearsal rooms by musicians who record and tour. Beyond the city, Monte Verde rises above a dry interior, and the coast at Salamansa, Baía das Gatas and Calhau brings wind, surf and quiet fishing settlements.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Walk the harbour streets and the covered market, with time to stop.
- 02 Hear live morna and coladeira in a small city venue.
- 03 Climb Monte Verde for the view across island and channel.
- 04 Follow the coast to Salamansa, Baía das Gatas and Calhau.

BEST FOR

Music · Food · Culture · City walking · Coastal scenery

SUGGESTED STAY

3–4 nights is usually enough to settle into the city and see the wider island. Anyone travelling for the music tends to want longer.

COMBINE WITH

Santo Antão, directly across the channel. On a wider northern journey, São Nicolau as well.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

We often open a northern journey here. A few days in Mindelo re-tunes the pace of a trip: you arrive, you walk, you listen, and the rest of the archipelago starts to make sense. It is also the natural cultural gateway to Santo Antão — but it is a destination in its own right, not simply a place to change boats.

Morna was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019.

Santo Antão

The crossing from São Vicente lands at Porto Novo, on a dry, wind-scoured southern coast that gives very little away. Then the road climbs. Somewhere near the rim at Cova the air cools, cloud gathers, and the island turns green on the other side — terraced ribeiras, sugar cane, banana and coffee, with stone paths threading between villages. Santo Antão is Cape Verde's walking island, and that contrast is the whole point of it.

WHY GO

Few places reward walkers so directly. Cobbled paths built for mules and market traffic still link the valleys of Paul and Ribeira Grande, dropping through cultivated terraces towards the sea at Ponta do Sol. Days can be gentle or genuinely demanding, and the scenery changes with altitude and cloud. Agriculture remains central to island life — cane, coffee, fruit, and the distilling of grogue — so much of the pleasure lies in walking between working villages rather than through empty scenery.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Cross the rim at Cova and descend into the Paul Valley on foot.
- 02 Walk a stone path between villages in Ribeira Grande.
- 03 Follow the coastal route towards Ponta do Sol.
- 04 Visit a working farm or small distillery to understand cane and coffee.

BEST FOR

Walking · Landscape · Photography · Rural life
· Slower exploration

SUGGESTED STAY

4–6 nights allows several contrasting walks with proper rest days between them.

COMBINE WITH

São Vicente, which sits directly across the channel.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

We match routes to the walker, rather than the other way round. Paths vary considerably in exposure, surface and length, and conditions shift with weather and maintenance. Planned properly, Santo Antão suits a confident day-walker just as well as a group who want one memorable descent and time in the valleys afterwards.

Walking routes are selected for the traveller's fitness and for conditions at the time. Not every path is easy, and not every path is accessible year-round.



MOUNTAINS, VALLEYS & WALKING

Stone paths built for mules and market days still link one valley to the next.

ISLAND 2 OF NINE · BARLAVENTO



QUIET MOUNTAINS & HERITAGE

Cloud gathers on the high ground most afternoons, and
the valley turns green beneath it.

ISLAND 3 OF NINE • BARLAVENTO

São Nicolau

São Nicolau receives a fraction of the visitors its landscape might suggest, and that is much of the appeal. Long, narrow and mountainous, it holds an old seminary town, a natural park of cloud-fed forest, and a coastline of small harbours and lava rock. Life moves at its own speed. For travellers who already know the better-known islands — or who simply prefer quiet — it is often the stop they remember most clearly.

WHY GO

Ribeira Brava, set in a valley slightly inland, is among the archipelago's most characterful small towns: narrow streets, a church square, and a strong literary and musical tradition. Above it, Monte Gordo Natural Park protects the island's high ground, where frequent cloud and relatively high rainfall support forest and endemic plants. The coast offers a different mood again — the fishing settlement at Tarrafal, the inlet at Porto da Preguiça, and the sea-worn volcanic rock and pools at Juncalinho.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Walk the streets and square of Ribeira Brava at an unhurried pace.
- 02 Hike in Monte Gordo Natural Park, through cloud-fed forest.
- 03 Follow the coast road to Tarrafal and Porto da Preguiça.
- 04 See the lava rock formations and natural pools at Juncalinho.

BEST FOR

Quieter hiking · Heritage · Village life · Returning visitors

SUGGESTED STAY

3–5 nights suits the island's pace. Less than three tends to feel rushed.

COMBINE WITH

São Vicente and Santo Antão, subject to practical connections.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

São Nicolau is a considered addition rather than an automatic one. It asks for a little more planning and a little more time, and it repays both. We tend to suggest it to travellers on a second visit to Cape Verde, or to anyone whose first priority is quiet.

Monte Gordo, the island's highest ground at 1,312 m, has been protected as a natural park since 2003. Conditions at the coastal pools depend entirely on the state of the sea.

Sal

Sal is flat, dry and almost lunar inland — and then the coast delivers water of a clarity that explains why so many journeys begin here. Santa Maria's long beach still works as a fishing beach as much as a holiday one, and the island's older story is written into the salt pans at Pedra de Lume. It is the easiest island to arrive on, and a good deal more interesting than its reputation allows.

WHY GO

The appeal is straightforward: warm, clear Atlantic water, dependable wind, and a long stretch of sand at Santa Maria where boats are still landed and the catch sold in the morning. Diving, kitesurfing, windsurfing and boat trips are all well established here. Inland, the island is a study in dry volcanic geology — low, pale and open. At Pedra de Lume, salt was extracted from a flooded crater for well over a century, and what remains sits in a landscape unlike anywhere else in the archipelago.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Watch the morning catch come in at the pier at Santa Maria.
- 02 Walk into the flooded salt crater at Pedra de Lume.
- 03 Take to the water — diving, kitesurfing or a boat along the coast.
- 04 Cross the pale interior towards the north-eastern shore.

BEST FOR

Relaxation · Swimming · Water sports · First-time visitors · Journey extensions

SUGGESTED STAY

4–7 nights as a stay in its own right; three or four is often enough as part of a wider route.

COMBINE WITH

Another island, chosen according to available connections and your own priorities.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

We rarely present Sal as the whole trip, and never as only a resort. Used well it is a comfortable start or finish — a few unhurried days by the water on either side of the harder-working parts of a journey — and the salt landscape at Pedra de Lume would justify the crossing on its own.



SEA, SALT & EASY ESCAPES

The morning catch, landed and sold where the boats come in.

ISLAND 4 OF NINE · BARLAVENTO



DUNES, WILD BEACHES & OPEN SPACE

Where the dune field stops, the Atlantic begins — and
very little else intervenes.

ISLAND 5 OF NINE • BARLAVENTO

Boa Vista

Boa Vista is the archipelago's great open space. Sand carried on the wind has built dune fields inland, and the coastline runs for kilometres with little on it but water, light and the sound of surf. Sal Rei, the main town, keeps the island grounded in ordinary daily life — a square, a market, boats drawn up on the shore. The scale is the attraction. Few places let you feel the Atlantic quite so plainly, or so quietly.

WHY GO

Two landscapes meet here. The Deserto de Viana is a genuine inland dune field, pale and shifting, reached across stony plain; the beaches, including the long sweep at Santa Mónica, are among the emptiest in the country. Between them lie low scrub, salt flats and the occasional stand of palms. Sal Rei provides the slower counterpoint, with older colonial-era buildings, working fishing boats and a rhythm quite unlike Sal's. The island suits travellers who want space and light more than a full itinerary.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Cross the dunes of the Deserto de Viana with a local guide.
- 02 Walk a long, empty stretch of the Santa Mónica coast.
- 03 Spend a morning in Sal Rei — market, waterfront and square.
- 04 Follow the shoreline to where desert meets Atlantic.

BEST FOR

Open landscape · Beach time · Gentle exploration · Photography · Nature

SUGGESTED STAY

4–7 nights, with time deliberately built in for doing very little.

COMBINE WITH

Sal, or Santiago, where connections make sense.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

Boa Vista's beaches matter for nesting turtles, and whales pass through the surrounding waters at certain times of year. Any wildlife experience must run under local regulation and at a proper distance. We arrange these only with operators who work to those rules — and we say plainly that nature does not perform to schedule.

Wildlife activity is seasonal, regulated, and never guaranteed. We do not promise sightings, and we would be wary of anyone who does.

Maio

Maio lies a short distance from Santiago and keeps a noticeably different pace. Porto Inglês, the main town, sits beside salt pans that have shaped the island's economy for centuries; beyond it run long, pale beaches, dry woodland and small communities where the working week is easy to observe and easier to join. This is an island for travellers content to slow down and let the days find their own shape.

WHY GO

The pleasures here are unhurried and specific. The salt pans around Porto Inglês still define the landscape at the southern end of the island, and their geometry is striking in low light. Beaches run for long stretches with few people on them. Inland, the dunes near Morrinho give way to dry woodland and scrub, the result of both climate and generations of planting. Craft, music and small-scale fishing remain part of ordinary life, and the towns are lived-in rather than arranged for visitors.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Walk the salt pans and waterfront at Porto Inglês.
- 02 Spend a long, quiet morning on one of the island's beaches.
- 03 Cross to the dunes and dry woodland near Morrinho.
- 04 Take an unplanned afternoon in a village, at village speed.

BEST FOR

Quiet beaches · Slow travel · Local life · Nature · Repeat visitors

SUGGESTED STAY

3–5 nights, and the island generally suits the longer end of that.

COMBINE WITH

Santiago, subject to current connections.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

Maio works best when it is not asked to do very much. We suggest it to travellers who have already worked out that the point of a small island is not the list of things to see on it. Paired with Santiago, the contrast — capital city, then quiet shore — becomes the shape of the whole trip.



QUIET SHORES & LOCAL RHYTHM

Salt pans, a church tower, and a shoreline that carries on well past the town.

ISLAND 6 OF NINE · SOTAVENTO



HISTORY, MARKETS & CULTURAL DEPTH

Shade, conversation and the day's trading, a few streets
back from the sea.

ISLAND 7 OF NINE · SOTAVENTO

Santiago

Santiago is the largest island and the country's centre of gravity. It holds Praia, the capital, more than half of Cape Verde's population, and the place where European settlement in the tropics first took organised form. It is also mountainous, agricultural and musically rich, with a coastline that changes character entirely between south and north. No island gives a fuller sense of what Cape Verde is, or of how it came to be.

WHY GO

Praia's Plateau — the old town on its flat-topped rise — remains the centre of the city, with markets, institutions and a street life worth several unhurried hours. West of the capital, Cidade Velha was the first European colonial settlement in the tropics, and for a period a hub of the transatlantic slave trade; it was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2009. Inland, the road climbs through farmland towards Serra Malagueta, and the north coast at Tarrafal is a different island again.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Spend a morning in the markets and streets of Praia's Plateau.
- 02 Visit Cidade Velha with a guide who sets out its history properly.
- 03 Cross the interior through farmland towards Serra Malagueta.
- 04 Continue north to the bay at Tarrafal.

BEST FOR

History · Contemporary culture · Food · Markets · Road journeys · Varied landscape

SUGGESTED STAY

4–6 nights, allowing at least one full day outside Praia.

COMBINE WITH

Fogo, or Maio, subject to current connections.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

Cidade Velha is not a scenic stop. It is the site of the first European colonial settlement in the tropics, and its wealth was built on the enslavement and trafficking of African people; the pillory still standing in the square is part of that record. We work with guides who explain it clearly and without euphemism, and we leave enough time for it to be understood rather than simply photographed.

Fogo

Fogo is a single volcano rising straight out of the sea, and everything on the island relates to it. Inside the caldera at Chã das Caldeiras, vines and fruit trees grow from black lava at altitude; down on the coast, São Filipe holds one of the finest collections of colonial townhouses in the archipelago. The peak has erupted within living memory, most recently in 2014–15, and the communities here have rebuilt more than once.

WHY GO

The caldera is the reason to come. Chã das Caldeiras sits high on a floor of black lava, ringed by the wall of the Bordeira, with Pico do Fogo rising from the middle of it. Vines grow in volcanic soil here, and the island produces wine and coffee of real local importance. Walking ranges from short crater-floor routes to the full ascent of the peak, which is demanding. On the coast, São Filipe's sobrados — two-storey merchant houses built around interior courtyards — face the Atlantic and Brava beyond.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Stay a night at Chã das Caldeiras, inside the caldera itself.
- 02 Walk the lava fields and vineyards with a local guide.
- 03 Taste Fogo wine and coffee where they are grown and made.
- 04 Explore São Filipe's sobrados and its black-sand shore.

BEST FOR

Dramatic landscape · Guided walking · Geology · Wine · Coffee · Architecture

SUGGESTED STAY

3–5 nights, including at least one night at altitude in the caldera.

COMBINE WITH

Santiago, or Brava, subject to transport conditions.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

We plan Fogo around what the conditions actually allow, and there is a great deal to do at lower altitude if the summit is not sensible on the day. The caldera itself — the vines, the lava, the villages that have rebuilt after eruption — is the substance of the island, not a consolation for missing the top.

Pico do Fogo rises to 2,829 m. The ascent is long and steep on loose volcanic ground, and requires an appropriate local guide, genuine fitness and favourable conditions. Fogo is an active volcano: no part of the crater landscape should be approached independently.



VOLCANO, WINE & RESILIENCE

Vines rooted in black lava, and the cone standing over everything.

ISLAND 8 OF NINE · SOTAVENTO



FLOWERS, MIST & SLOW TRAVEL

Cool air, cloud on the ridge, and gardens kept against
the wind.

ISLAND 9 OF NINE · SOTAVENTO

Brava

The smallest inhabited island, and the hardest to reach. Brava is high, green and often under cloud — stone-walled gardens, hydrangeas and bougainvillea, deep valleys and a coastline that drops sharply into the sea. Nova Sintra, the main town, was named by settlers who recognised something of the Portuguese hill town in its mist. Almost everyone who gets here says the same thing afterwards: they wish they had stayed longer.

WHY GO

Brava's scale is intimate and its atmosphere quite distinct. Nova Sintra's cobbled streets, gardens and square sit high above the coast, cool and frequently damp; paths lead down through valleys to villages and to Fajã d'Água, a small settlement along a curved bay beneath steep slopes. The island carries an unusually strong literary and musical inheritance — Eugénio Tavares, born here in 1867, remains among the most important writers of morna lyrics — and that heritage is still audible.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- 01 Walk Nova Sintra's streets and gardens without an agenda.
- 02 Descend a valley path towards the coast.
- 03 Spend a day at Fajã d'Água, on the bay beneath the cliffs.
- 04 Seek out the island's poetry and music, and the memory of Eugénio Tavares.

BEST FOR

Tranquillity · Walking · Gardens · Heritage · A less conventional route

SUGGESTED STAY

3–4 nights, allowing for the realities of the crossing.

COMBINE WITH

Fogo, with all ferry arrangements reconfirmed before travel.

THE ATLAS & AURA PERSPECTIVE

Brava asks for flexibility, and rewards it. We build margin into the days on either side rather than assume a tight connection, and we are honest with travellers about what a small, remote island can and cannot promise. Those who accept that tend to be the ones who love it most.

Access is by sea from Fogo. The channel can be rough, and sailings are subject to weather and operating conditions. Coastal features, including any natural pools, depend entirely on the state of the sea and are not always usable.

Your Cape Verde, your way.

The strongest itinerary is rarely the one with the most islands on it. Every additional hop costs time, adds a transfer, and introduces another point at which a schedule can move. A journey built around two or three islands, chosen for genuine contrast, almost always reads better than one that tries to cover everything. We start from what draws you — music, mountains, history, water, quiet — and work outward to what current logistics will comfortably support.

ROUTE ONE

Culture & Mountains

São Vicente + Santo Antão

A harbour city built on music, then the terraced valleys directly across the channel. The most complete short introduction to the north of the country.

ROUTE TWO

History & Volcano

Santiago + Fogo

The capital, its markets and Cidade Velha, followed by the caldera at Chã das Caldeiras. Cultural depth first, then landscape at its most dramatic.

ROUTE THREE

Sea & Space

Sal + Boa Vista

Clear water and salt heritage, then dune fields and long, empty coast. The gentlest of the pairings, and the most restful.

ROUTE FOUR

The Quieter Route

São Nicolau or Maio

Added carefully to a wider journey, either island rewards travellers who value quiet over coverage. Both need extra planning time and a flexible frame of mind.

Island combinations are illustrative. Domestic flights, ferry schedules and operating conditions can change, so every journey must be checked and built around current logistics.

Tell us what draws you to Cape Verde, and we will help shape the right journey.



Thoughtful journeys across Cape Verde

SMALL GROUPS · TAILOR-MADE · ISLAND HOPPING

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY AT

atlasandaura.co.uk

Selected imagery in this guide is illustrative. Experiences, landscapes and local conditions may vary.

Travel information and suggested combinations are subject to confirmation at the time of enquiry.

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