

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Driven to distraction

Year-round sunshine, spectacular golf courses and a vibrant cultural and social scene makes Madeira a great choice, writes **Kevan Christie**

There's a perception to the islands of Madeira that it's all Jesus sandal-wearing pensioners taking a break from the garden centre while enjoying a large G&T in the sunshine.

This could not be further from the truth, although a cooler class of discerning older person is certainly on show – the type you'd find in an Agatha Christie novel – *Evil Under the Sun* perhaps.

After touching down at Cristiano Ronaldo International Airport (apparently he's a footballer) I made my way to the stunning Quinta da Bela Vista Hotel in Funchal for a week of golf, culture in the form of the Madeira Film Festival, great food and fine wine – if Carlsberg did press trips...

The archipelago of Madeira is made up of four islands 750 miles southwest of Lisbon and 544 miles due west of Casablanca, Morocco in the Atlantic Ocean. It was officially discovered in July 1419 by two Portuguese Captains, João Gonçalves

Zarco and Tristão Vaz under the orders of Prince Henry the Navigator.

This autonomous region of Portugal has proved popular over the decades, with notable visitors including Sir Winston Churchill who came to the islands to paint in 1950 and stayed at the prestigious Belmond Reid's Palace Hotel.

One of the first things that strikes you is the climate, ideal for Brits abroad in that it's not too hot with a cooling breeze, but you'll still get burnt if you don't slap on the sunscreen.

Our first night we met for dinner at the Design Centre Nini Andrade Silva Restaurant at the site of the Fortress of Our Lady of the Conception in the harbour area of Funchal. The old girl has certainly done us proud with this postmodern masterpiece and you'll be hard pressed to find a more filmic location; think the last episode of an

The panoramic views made searching for my ball a veritable joy



Santo da Serra golf course, main; a Funchal street, above

edgy Scandi Noir or a scene from the Sky Atlantic series *Gomorra* set in the docklands.

Ideal, as the centre was used as one of the main hubs and closing venue for the 'Festa do Cinema' party for the Madeira Film Festival now in its seventh year. The festival, which runs from 14-20 May next year, punches above its weight in attracting top class independent films from around the world. This year organisers chose to focus on the best of Eastern European cinema with the Hungarian movie – *The Butcher, The Whore and the One-Eyed Man* kicking off proceedings.

The official opening of the film

festival required one's best bib and tucker for a short ride in a classic 1920s Fiat through downtown Funchal to the Teatro Baltazar Dias – a luxurious municipal theatre built in 1888 as a tribute to the blind playwright from Madeira Island, Baltazar Dias, whose works were performed in popular theatres in Europe, Africa and Brazil.

On arrival we were greeted by the Borracheiros, carriers of Old Madeira Wine who came armed to the teeth with a selection of their fine produce which got the night off to a great start.

A quick word about the alcohol – everyone's heard of Madeira wine and a trip to the Blandy Wine Lodge at Avenida Arriaga in the centre of Funchal, followed by a tasting and a nice slither of Madeira cake is well worthwhile. A highlight was seeing the letters from various dignitaries including famous tipplers Churchill and Princess Margaret asking for a readily available supply of fine wine to keep their stocks replenished.

However, the real bad boy in the bevvie stakes is the ubiquitous Poncha – a benign looking traditional fisherman's rum that will, to not put too fine a point on it – blow your head off.

So, having limited myself to no more than eight of these the night

