



A taste of paradise



Leave all your cares and worries behind and head for Cape Verde for the most relaxing holiday ever, suggests Bridget McGrouther.

It is increasingly rare to visit somewhere different and unexplored so we were buoyed by a pioneering spirit heading to Cape Verde, where no-one we knew had gone before. If, like many of our family and friends, you are asking: “Where?” then search for a necklace of islands in your

atlas, just off the west coast of Senegal and south of the Canaries.

The archipelago of 10 islands was first colonised by the Portuguese, which is still the official language, although Creole is more widely spoken. Some islands are mountainous and lush such as the largest,

Santiago, as well as pretty Fogo, where coffee plantations and vineyards flourish on the volcanic slopes. Our destinations — Sal and Boa Vista — are, by contrast, barren, red rock, flattened over time by the strong winds that whip sandstorms across the dunes. ►



◀ Sal, one of the most visited islands, is famous for its salt pans, and unsuspecting tourists could be forgiven for thinking they have landed on the moon when the strange, lunar landscape looms below after a six-hour flight from the UK. Yet the sandy shores and azure seas of Santa Maria are soon much more welcoming beach holiday attractions.

For sun worshippers, this is quite simply paradise with constant year-round temperatures of around 25 degrees C. Scots in particular may appreciate the fact that it hardly ever rains here — water is supplied by desalination or in bottles.

The sea is turquoise, warm and clear, while the strong, cooling breezes provide plenty of action for adventurous kite and wind surfers. Their stunts provide hours of endless entertainment, as do the acrobatics of local boys who cartwheel and flip gymnastically into the waves. It took all my strength to turn over on my sunbed.

Local fishermen sell their catches on the wooden pier — some fish have been speared under the boardwalk just moments before or lured by lines dangling from the jetty as shoals shimmer in and out of the shadows below. Big game fishing is as popular with tourists as the mouth-watering seafood delicacies including wahoo and tuna steaks.

The islands have been nicknamed the African Caribbean, and many of the vivid pastel houses in Santa Maria are reminiscent of chattel houses. Live music also plays in the handful of bars and restaurants — although it's uniquely Cape Verdean rather than Bob Marley.

"No stress" is the logo emblazoned on the few souvenir T-shirts and caps for sale and patience is a virtue on these islands where residents wait in long queues for everyday necessities without complaint.

If you don't want to spend precious sun-kissed hours in the bank, take euros in cash, which are widely accepted rather

than traveller cheques and credit cards. Change will be given in CV escudos, the local currency that is indicated by a dollar sign.

Cape Verde has more than its fair share of poverty, but the people are friendly and the hawkers are, on the whole, not too aggressive. Yet beware of anyone who tries to 'give' you a gift of a necklace — you could end up in a long and unwelcome bartering process.

Most of the hotels are situated out of town, behind the sandy bay. Our simply furnished bungalows with all-inclusive buffet meals, drinks and entertainment were popular with families, although there are hotels available where you don't need to wear an identity bracelet!

It's an established resort for Italians and Portuguese, but Polish and Brazilian holidaymakers are also evident and the Brits are beginning to trickle in on new direct flights from the UK. Island hopping is by plane rather than boat, but it's good to visit more than one if you can, particularly if you are spending over a week in Cape Verde.

We escaped the cranes of the fast-developing Sal on a five-minute flight to the quieter, neighbouring Boa Vista. A four-night stay was ideal at the friendly and relaxed Parque das Dunas, a hotel with an enviable setting on one of the most beautiful beaches — the Praia de Chaves.

Honeymooners will love the romantic, palm-fringed swimming pool and bar area, while evening meals are enjoyed on the outdoor terrace. We were glad of our half-board option as it's an expensive taxi ride to Sal Rei — where stray dogs are more commonplace than restaurants in this sleepy harbour town.

No stress is an understatement if you follow our lazy example of lying by your beach bungalow or on the tiny cluster of sunbeds around the hotel. Only a chimney from the deserted brickworks

breaks the unending view of miles and miles of shifting sand dunes.

Although it looks fun and there are quad bikes for hire, most islanders don't like them to be driven on the undisturbed beaches. Boa Vista is, after all, one of the world's most important breeding grounds for turtles. Lights and engine noise are likely to frighten off turtles or add confusing hazards to hatchlings struggling to reach the sea.

Whales also come to breed during December to April, nursing their calves in the sheltered shallows, while colourful fish (and sometimes sharks!) explore reefs and shipwrecks. We will never forget the breathtaking sight of around a hundred dolphins swimming close to the shore, in view of our hotel.

Yet a walk around the bay shows the shape of things to come — huge hotels and numerous apartments affordable only to overseas buyers are being built as you read this — while the brand new airport is welcoming increasing flights. If you relish unspoilt destinations, now is the time to visit Cape Verde — but can you please leave it as untouched as you found it?

● **Bridget travelled with leading independent specialist The Cape Verde Experience (call Reservations 0845 330 2071 or visit www.capeverdeexperience.com).**

Tailor-made island-hopping packages including transfers, taxes and visas are available as well as direct flights from Manchester and Gatwick.