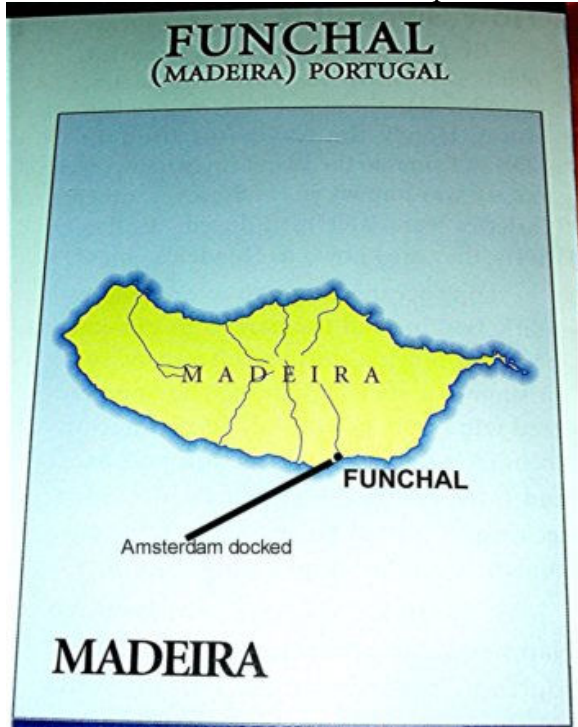


4/19/07 Day 94 – Madeira, Portugal - Thursday, 19 April, 2007: We cruised into the port of Funchal on the island of Madeira at about daybreak. It was overcast and a light mist was falling. We have been blessed with perfect weather for most of the cruise. Our best guess was that since we were here a day earlier than planned the weather Gods just hadn't had time to shut off the moisture. As it turned out the mist came and went and never really had any impact on our visit.

Here is where we were on the map.



According to information provided by the Amsterdam staff, the island of Madeira was originally inhabited by tribes related to Celts. The Romans conquered and dominated the islands in the second century BC. It was later overtaken by Visigoths and Moors and in more modern times the British, Dutch and Portuguese have all played a part in the history of the island.



The volcanic mountains and red roofed white houses of Funchal city made for a beautiful picture, just like had been described in the port lecture yesterday. Funchal city is famous for the lush flowers that grow in the region. Funchal is the Portuguese word for the flowering plant known in English as fennel. It was growing in abundance on the hillsides when the first explorers arrived.

These are some views from around the ship after we docked.





We were at the end of the Pontinha Pier where the buses were already lining up for the first tours. We had arrived a day earlier than originally planned and the tour operators were able to cope very well with the last minute change in plans by the Amsterdam.

We boarded our tour bus about 9:00am and headed off into the city. Here are some views of the city on the way to the mountain summit where we could view a village in an area called Nun's Valley.

The sidewalks of Madeira are paved with white limestone and black lava rock. The patterns vary through the town and provide an interesting sight.



Like many places we have visited there was construction going on with modern tools.

As we climbed the mountain the red roofed white houses of Madeira spread out before us.



The bus wound its way up narrow twisting roads along the steep sides of a volcanic peak. Often we passed through thick groves of very tall eucalyptus trees. The guide told us the following story behind the Nun's Valley name. Back in the 1600's pirate raids on Madeira were common. In order to avoid the raids some Catholic nuns led a group of followers into the interior of Madeira Island where they settled in a deep valley that was unknown to the pirates. That valley came to be called Nun's Valley and there is a flourishing community there today. Finally we arrived at the summit where there was a nice building where tourists could find souvenirs, refreshments, Madeira wine for sale along with free samples of wine and well cared for toilets.

The path up to a platform for viewing the Nun's Valley village led out of the parking lot. We took the 5 minute walk up to the lookout place and were rewarded with a magnificent view of the surrounding mountains and deep valley.

Barbara decided to tempt fate by hanging over the railing while we took this picture of the Nun's Valley village far below. The soil of Madeira Island is volcanic and rich in nutrients that support vigorous farming activity. If you look carefully in this picture you can see the terracing of the Nun's Valley hillsides in order to grow produce that is sold in the nearby Funchal city.

We got back on the bus and took the exciting ride back down the mountainside. The buses and cars had a protocol that was observed to allow traffic in opposing directions to pass by each other. Apparently where the road was a bit wider they painted the cliff wall next to the road a bright yellow. The vehicle coming up the hill would park as close to the yellow cliff as possible while the vehicle going down the hill crept by. We thought the bus driver really earned his tip on this tour.



The next event on our tour was the famous basket ride down the steep streets of Funchal. Our dinner table mates had told us about the ride they had taken when in Funchal on a previous trip. It sounded like fun so we signed up along with them for the ride. The story behind the ride is that years ago some people living high on the mountainside in Funchal didn't want to walk the steep hillside. To solve the problem they adapted the sleds used to haul grapes so that they could carry people up and down the hillside. Here on the right is a memorial plaque erected in memory of the sled pushers of olden days.



With motorized traffic the sleds aren't needed anymore for the residents but they have evolved into a nice feature for the tourist industry of Funchal. A hundred or so of the wicker sleds with wooden runners have been assembled, the runners are greased, and two young men in good physical condition guide the sled containing two tourists as it careens about a mile down one of the steep asphalt streets of Funchal. In the old days the guide men would have to haul the sleds by hand back up the mountain, presumably with passengers on board. Nowadays the empty sleds are piled onto a large flatbed truck and hauled up the mountain to the starting point.

Our friends Roy and Gayle Brown bravely climbed into one of the sleds. They were just ahead of our other friends Bob and Esther Robbins who have their backs to us in this photo shown on the right. The guiding men have to pull the sled to get it to the place where it is steep enough to slide on its own.



Bob and Esther were next to launch.

We followed Bob and Esther in our sled. The next few photos show the Robbin's sled making it down the street to the landing below. It was like a downhill ride on a mild roller coaster.



The only braking mechanism is the soles of the men's shoes and their leg muscles. Note in the photo on the left that the man on the right has wisely used tire tread rubber on the soles of his shoes.

The guides really had to work in order to get around the curves.





Sometimes the sleds got in a sideways position that took some effort to correct.

It was amazing to us that the downhill sledding street is shared with cars and there is no apparent problem with that.



The runners of these sleds must be lubricated with some marvelous material because they appeared to have no problems with heating or excessive wear. We finally arrived at the landing where we could thank our lucky stars and climb out.

After catching our breath from the sled ride the bus took us to a store that sold embroidered items that are a hallmark of Madeira. Much is made of the individual effort

and skill that women working in their homes put in to each of the embroidered items such as table cloths, blouses and handkerchiefs. Our guide said that most young women are not learning the craft and she expected that in 20 years the embroidery story will be a museum for the craft rather than a market. We browsed through the embroidery store and saw the official linen cord with lead seal of authenticity attached to the items. The lead seal is an attempt to prevent cheap copies from being sold as authentic. We looked at the price of the goods for sale and were taken aback by the prices. A handkerchief sold for \$30 USD, a table runner was selling for \$175 USD, and table cloths started at about \$700 USD and went up. We decided to leave purchase of these items to people with more appreciation for the embroidering craft.

Downstairs in the same building was a store selling another icon of the island and that was Madeira wine. It was available in Sweet, Medium, and Dry. We thought the Madeira wine had a taste similar to what we might get from wine that is opened and then stored too long. It had that oxidized flavor but some people acquire a taste for it and that supports the market. Later we had a conversation with a fellow passenger who had also tried the Madeira tasting in Funchal. She said it was a wonderful experience because the unique flavor and aroma of the Madeira brought back some wonderful memories of sipping Madeira with her husband long ago.

The history of Madeira wine making and the slightly oxidized flavor we detected made some sense. The story we got was that early wine merchants in Madeira shipped their wine in barrels on long sea voyages across the equator to Asian ports. In the process the wine was subjected to extreme heat and motion. The treatment was declared to be surprisingly beneficial. Madeira wine merchants soon discovered that wine "abused" in this manner was actually superior to their wine that had not been subjected to high heat and long storage. They started purposely shipping their wine back and forth across the equator. In 1794, a new technique placed young wine in ovens and the effect of long ocean voyages across the equator could be more efficiently duplicated in a factory. At the end of the 1700s shipments to and from Madeira were blockaded



by the French. In reaction to this situation people began to add distilled spirits and brandy to prevent spoilage as the wine was stored for later shipment. The emergency measure was refined to produce Madeira's unique vinho generoso that is available today.

This stop in the city of Funchal finished the tour and we returned to the Amsterdam. The ship got underway about 6pm bound for the city of Ponta Delgada on Sao Miguel Island in the Azores island group. We were at our dinner table at the back of the dining room and had a wonderful view as the city of Funchal receded and the southern coast of Madeira Island streamed past us.

We were surprised by the density of the bright red roofed white houses all along the southern coast and half way up the steep mountainsides. At one point the sun and clouds created a beautiful rainbow. We got the photo shown on the right with the proverbial "pot of gold" somewhere in a Madeira community along the island coast.

