

The Madeira Diaries 2024

After a number of years of trips away with Colletts to various mountainous parts of Europe the question arose, where next? We looked at Colletts offerings of Switzerland or Andalucia, both of these involved lengthy transfers from airports and a decision couldn't be reached as to which to go for. Much discussion followed but no decision. Taking the bull by the horns I proposed a trip to Madeira instead and after getting some positive feedback for this began looking for how to do it.

Madeira is well blessed with high mountains and is well known for its levadas, irrigation canals which contour round and sometimes through the mountains. A bit of research soon lead me to Walkers Britain a company specialising in walking holidays in a variety of locations around the world. Due to the nature of the mountains and levadas most walks tend to be linear which poses the problem of how to do them? Walkers Britain offered a 7 day trip to Madeira with a varied selection of walks and the added bonus of shuttles included to the start or finish of the walk. In addition, they included airport collection and return, what could be better? Well they also included 3 evening meals as well.

This information complete with pricing was offered to the BUMS members and resulted in a party of 12 BUMS signing up for a trip in March 2024 to get some warm sunny walking, away from the typical miserable weather in England at that time of year.

Monday March 11th and all twelve of us set off from Manchester Airport on EasyJet to Madeira. Arriving on time we soon found our shuttle driver at the exit who had been told to look for Frederic Morris, why we know not! All loaded up, our mini bus set off for Machico and we were in reception at our first hotel in less than 20 minutes. Booking in complete, it didn't take long for us all to drop bags in our rooms and find the bar/restaurant for some food and drink. The hotel was a typical high rise complex with nice size rooms. After some food I met Eduardo our contact on the ground and he outlined the plan for the week, what walks to do and where and when we would be picked up.

Walkers: Mike and Selina Willis, Steve and Sarah Hammond, Iain and Sue McNeil, Fred and Anne Morris, Richard and Della Calder, Sue Lancaster and Janet Murray.

Walkers Britain: My assessment.

Accommodation: 1 good, 5 very good, 1 excellent.

Transport: Friendly drivers always there at promised times, very good.

Walks: A great selection, from levada doddles to challenging big mountain days.

Food: 2 dinners were very good, 1 not so good but plentiful.

Breakfasts: All plentiful and good with the option to smuggle sandwiches out for our lunches.

Value for money: Very good

Tuesday 12th

Walk One: Machico to Porto da Cruz

Distance: 10.3 miles Long, 7.6 miles Short

Ascent: 600m Long, 280m Short

The plan was to walk from the hotel over Pico Facho then down to the Levada du Canical with an option to take a taxi direct to the start of the levada to avoid the stiff climb up Pico Facho. Mike, Richard, Della, Janet, Steve, Sarah Iain and Sue M opted for the climb and the others taxied to the top to take in the views, including the airport built on stilts! Rambling back down the road we soon came to our first levada and followed it for some distance passing other groups on the way to our turn off.

The way now left the levada and went gradually uphill to the coastal cliff path. Selina decided to avoid this vertigo inducing section and continued on the levada to eventually end up back at the hotel. An exhilarating walk across the wooded face of huge cliffs offered frequent breath-taking views down to the sea through clearings which only served to emphasise the scale of the landscape. Lunch was taken looking out from a promontory part way along where we could see the next section of our route threading its way across the cliffs in the distance.



Across the cliffs

With the cliffs behind us the long descent to Porto da Cruz was mainly down a quiet road with some improbable gradients which tested our legs. Fortunately, the walk ended at a convenient rehydration station and everyone had a drink sitting by the sea we had seen from on high earlier on.

After some wandering round the village and a visit to the Madeiran Rum factory our shuttle bus arrived a few minutes late but in time to prevent us getting wet as it began to rain. We were back at the hotel in 20 minutes for showers and regrouped at 6 for drinks before dinner at 7 arranged by Selina in the local fish restaurant.

Wednesday 13th

Walk Two: Ponta de Sao Lourenco Peninsular

Distance: 5.7 miles Ascent: Up and down a lot.

This is a must do walk, although it is very busy the scenery is worth it. I'll let the pictures tell the story.



Ponta de Sao Lourenco and us



Looking the other way

We were collected at 2:30pm and shuttled to Porto Bay Serra Golf Hotel in Santo da Serra. Very nice old boutique type hotel with indoor pool. Good food too.

Thursday 14th

Walk Three: Monte to Camacha

Distance: 7 miles Ascent: one small and one big climb, mostly flat.

Our shuttle picked us up at 9:00am and took us to Monte which is high up in the hills on the edge of Funchal. It is where the famous wicker basket rides begin which slide you down the hill. We didn't go, I'm going downhill fast enough thank you! Sadly, Sue Lancaster was feeling decidedly unwell and stayed at the hotel to convalesce.

This walk began by descending into a valley then climbing back up to join the Levada dos Tornos which caused some confusion as the route notes did not match the gpx route! We followed the gpx and got there in the end.

Pleasant levada walking then a long climb up to an old derelict levada to take us to Camacha for our customary beer before finishing off with a mile of tarmac. Shuttle collected us, as promised and returned us to our hotel for a swim and relax.



Baskets waiting for customers



Lunch stop

P.S. Iain and Sue queued for 1.5hrs for a basket ride on our last day. What a difference two huge cruise ships makes!

Friday 15th

Walk 4: Pico das Pedras to Ilha via Caldeirao Verde

Distance: 9.8 miles Ascent/Descent: 250m/710m

Collected at 9:00am and shuttled up the hill to our start point at Pico das Pedras. This walk proved to be one of the most varied of the whole trip and was particularly enjoyed by all who did it.

Unfortunately, Sue Lancaster was still feeling poorly and threw another sickie and Janet, Selina, Anne and Fred decided they needed to recuperate before the big walk on Saturday. What a pity they missed out on such a lovely walk.

The pictures tell the story but just to say we had a mellow woodland levada, vertiginous cliff hugging levadas hundreds of feet above the river below, two impressive waterfalls, 3 significant tunnels and an unusual sunken path which lead us towards Ilha.

I ought to mention that I banged my head in one of the tunnels and my hat fell off into the levada which quickly carried it away. Della attempted to catch it and promptly banged her head so on it went downstream. Fortunately, Sarah managed to retrieve it when it reached her and I had a very wet hat to keep my head cool thereafter!

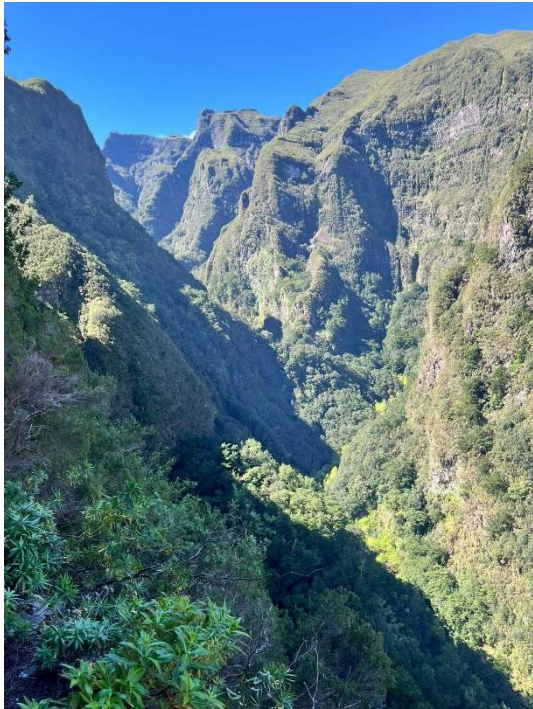
The other notable incident again involved Della. The sunken path finally came out onto a forest road which initially looked innocuous until Della discovered it was like an ice rink and after picking herself up we all kept to the grassy edge for some grip.



Waterfall one



Edgy cliff clinging levada



The scenery



Not all tunnels were this spacious!



Waterfall two, 100m high



Sunken path with well-worn steps

From Ilha (after the essential beer) we took a taxi to a new hotel in Santana and enjoyed a good meal and more good wine.

Saturday 16th

Walk 5: Achada do Teixeira to Encumeada, including Pico Ruivo 1862m

Distance: 10 miles Ascent/Descent: 260m/800m

The BIG mountain walk. As usual we were collected at 9:00am and driven up to the start, a large car park at 1600m. This is a very popular start point as it is the closest road to Pico Ruivo, consequently the path to the summit was pretty busy. The views on both sides of the ridge were spectacular. Near the summit there is a mountain café with WCs which was handy for some. Pico Ruivo was soon reached where we jostled for space with the multitude to take in the extensive views in all directions.

A short descent from the summit brought us to a path heading away from the crowds towards Encumeada with a sign, 7.3 miles to go. Not so popular this way as only three lads came our way and soon passed us never to be seen again. Peace at last.

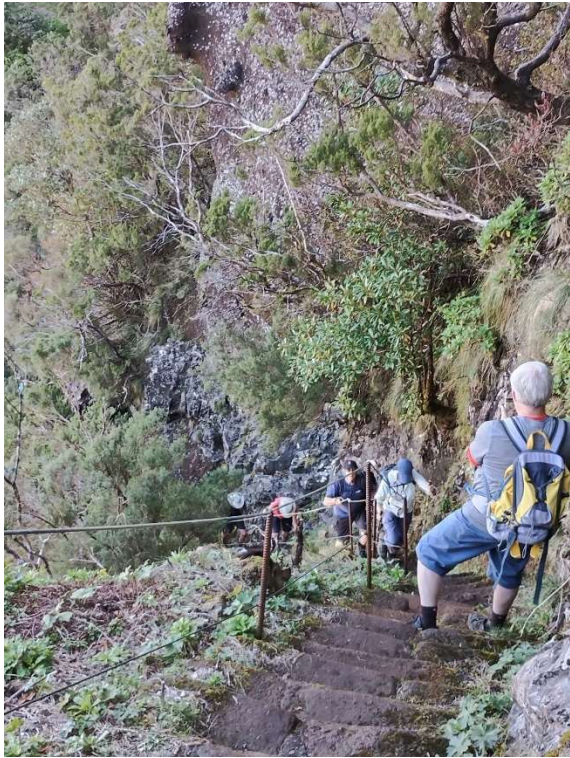
What a trail! We descended a reasonably well made track for a long way before contouring around a mountain then ascending again and descending and so on through constantly changing scenery. It seemed like we would soon be in the village visible below us but it never got any closer. The further we went the rougher the trail became, there was still some paving and steps but not much.



Extensive view



Mountain café



Steps up



Sky and steps down



We can't call it a Dyke!



Iain reluctantly leaving his favourite Dyke!

The trail stayed high for a long way until eventually we could see the road we were aiming for hundreds of metres below. As the trail snaked down there was the occasional section of steps but mostly badly worn path ravaged by heavy rain and footfall. Nonetheless we gradually got nearer to the road where the most welcome beer of the week was waiting for us.

Following the usual refreshment, we wandered wearily down the tarmac road for the last mile where we reunited with Selina who had decided to sit this one out. The walk had been as tough as predicted by Walkers Britain and we were all glad to be back, some more than others! Hats off to Anne and Fred who freely admitted it had been on their limit and also to Sue Lancaster who had recovered enough to enjoy it (she said!)

One interesting fact emerged from this walk. The leader neglected to wear any sun screen, nothing new there. As the walk was linear and from due east to due west the leader suffered sunburn only on the left side of his face! The perils of linear walks!



The BIG walk team

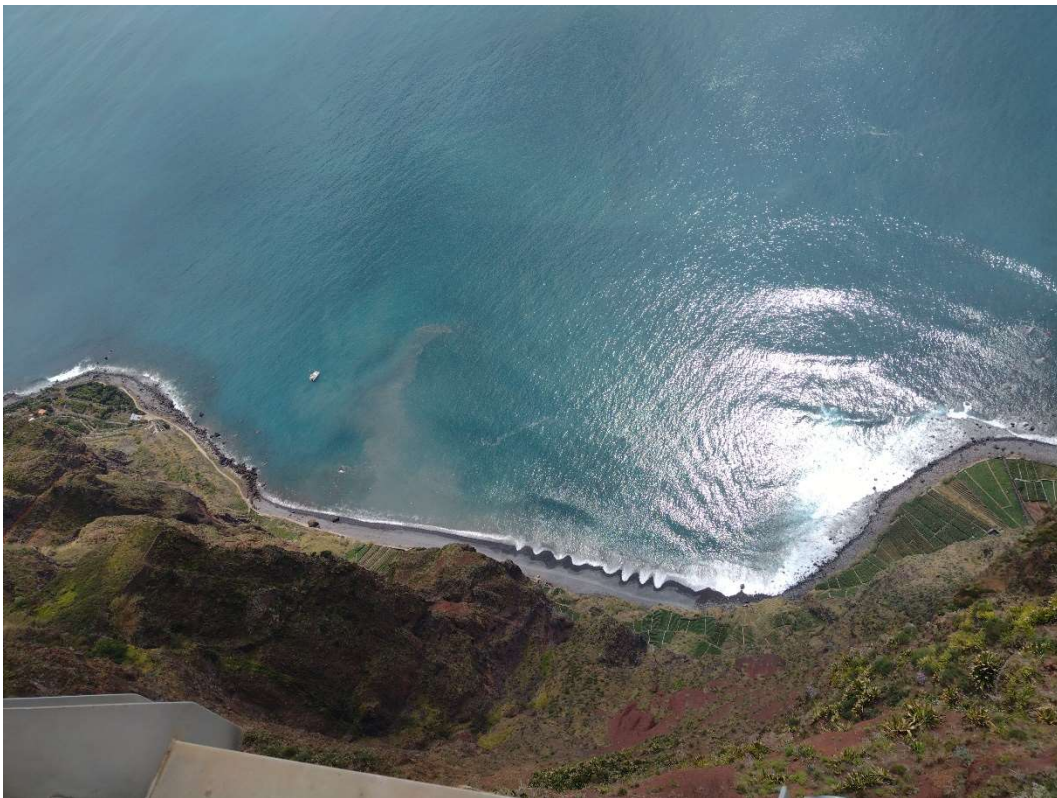
Our baggage was safely delivered to our new hotel and after showering we all regrouped in the hotel's wine library for more rehydration. The hotel was in a stunning location but unfortunately the rooms were a little tired and the evening buffet barely warm. Upside of the buffet was there was plenty for hungry walkers. Can't win 'em all!

Sunday 17th

Walk 6: Boa Morte to Cabo Girao

Distance: 7 miles Ascent: 6 mile flat 1 mile bit uphill

Collection at 9:00am as usual and a 20 minute ride to Boa Morte where we joined the Levada do Norte. After the previous day no one was complaining about walking along a flat levada even though it passed through a quite built up area for most of the way. The final mile uphill to Cabo Girao soon passed and we all piled into the café there for coffee/beer before some chose to experience the sensation of standing on a glass floor 580m above the beach below!



What 580m looks like, note large catamaran at 9 o'clock

After looking at the drop and the views along the coast to east and west it was time to head for Funchal and our final night on Madeira. When we arrived at Cabo Girao, a popular place, there were taxis waiting. Rather than waiting an hour or more for the service bus we all decided a taxi would be a good way to go.

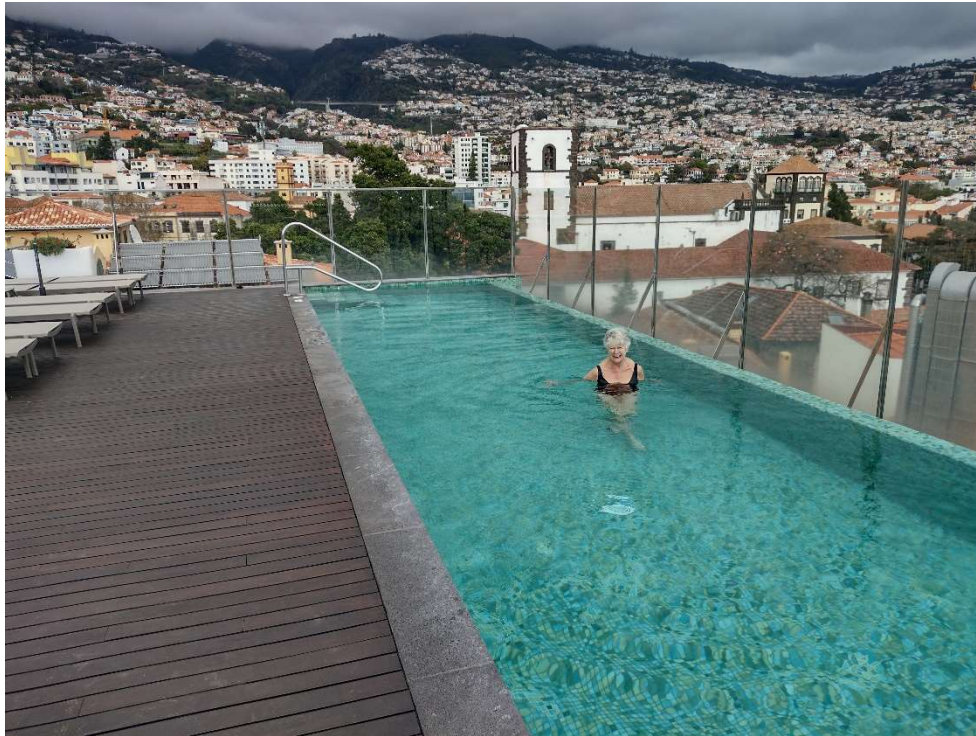
The first four headed back to the taxi rank and jumped into a waiting taxi. So far so good, only problem was it was the only taxi! They told the driver to send his mates to pick up more but this message must have got lost in translation as no more taxis were seen! We waited and waited until finally the bus came and we all piled in for our last white knuckle ride around the Madeiran switchbacks to our last hotel.

Monday 17th

Walk 7: Funchal to Manchester

Distance: 1,602 miles Ascent/Descent: 10,980 m/ 10,960 m

Today's account begins the night before. New hotel again and what a great surprise was in store for us. Castanheiro Boutique Hotel pampered us with luxurious rooms and a wealth of in house facilities. Swimming in the rooftop pool after we arrived was a treat for some as was the rooftop bar for others.



The aquatic Della on the roof

Finding somewhere to eat on Sunday night proved to be not so easy but Sarah threw herself into the task of finding a venue able to seat 12 and offer edible food and drink. Sarah, as expected, finally came up trumps and found a lovely restaurant which had a cosy niche in one corner to accommodate us all on one table. A great final evening was enjoyed by all and was rounded off by an entertaining speech from our new chairman Mr. Iain McNeil during which we were all given geological nicknames, obviously he had been deeply affected by meeting a real Dyke!

The next day we were asked to check out by 12:00 but were free to carry on using the facilities in the hotel until we were collected by our airport shuttle. People did their own thing that morning with some visiting Monte again and yours truly having his holiday haircut!

Unfortunately, EasyJet were an hour late which made for a long day and early to bed the next morning.

Summary: Excellent week with great friends walking a varied selection of walks in great weather.