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CLOSE About 500km off the coast of West Africa is a scattering of islands that together comprise a fascinating nation. Cape Verde is a challenging place. But if you appreciate the sea, outstanding mountain landscapes with great hiking, and a convivial people with the time to strike up a mournful tune over a glass of thick red wine, then these barren lands pounded by a frothing white ocean are for you.The dozen or so islands that make up this former Portuguese colony have become a popular destination for package holidays over the past few years, being under six hours by charter flight from the UK. Indeed, they are easily accessible for anyone in search of winter sun. But beyond the beach hotels, Cape Verde is fascinating in terms of both culture and scenery.Volcanic islands at various stages of erosion, they range from more than 2,800m high to as low as 390m, and this translates into extremes of landscape between the islands - from brooding volcano to flat desert, and from verdant, mist-strewn mountains to panoramic white and abandoned beaches.The people are a unique race - part African, part Portuguese, part any race with the temerity to land in this isolated, wave-pummelled place since their discovery in the mid 15th-century. Their history, until late last century, was a bleak and moving one, and the people are infused with a poetry and musicality that reflects their melancholy past.The islands are warm and sunny all year, ranging from an average of 24C in January to 30C in September. The rainy season is July to the end of October and during this time there can be flooding, restricting walking and travel, in the ribeiras of Santo Antao (but you can take a chance: some years it doesn't rain at all).The islands are at their greenest from September to January. Music - or party - chasers might go in February for the Sao Vicente carnival; August for the Baia das Gatas music festival; or May for the Gamboa music festival in Sao Tiago.Today, holidaymakers often visit on a package trip to a luxury resort on the main tourist island of Sal. For example, Thomson (0871 231 4787; thomson.co.uk) flies to Sal from Gatwick, Birmingham and Manchester. Prices start at around £400, but typical trips are significantly more expensive. Many have a good time in Sal enjoying its beaches and watersports but some feel short-changed by promotional material from resorts likening Sal to the new Caribbean or the next Gran Canaria. Sal is not green: it's flat and barren and there is little indigenous culture to enjoy.The Cape Verde Experience (0845 330 2047; capeverdeexperience.co.uk) has been devising holidays in West Africa for 20 years, during which it has developed experience in both package holidays and tailor-made trips. It uses charter flights from Bristol, Gatwick, Manchester and Stansted, and has some seat-only availability for independent travellers who want to fly direct rather than via Lisbon.Specialist operators that go all over the islands include Archipelago Cape Verde (01768 775 684; archipelagocapeverde.com). Alternatively book a three- or four-island holiday through a small tour operator such as Cape Verde Travel (01964 536 191; capeverdetravel.com), whose proprietor Ron Hughes knows the islands well and will provide as much or as little organisation as you ask for as well as plenty of advice.Several cruise companies stop at the island of Sao Vicente as part of their world tours, including Cunard (0845 678 0013; cunard.co.uk), P&O (0845 678 0014; pocruises.com) and Celebrity (0844 493 2043; celebritycruises.co.uk). But passengers may be unhappy merely to be taken on a tour of the stony plains of that particular island and then herded back into the ship: you need to disembark for long enough to be taken on the short trip over to Santo Antao, preferably overnight. Noble Caledonian is offering its first trip to Cape Verde, with an eight-island tour, as part of a cruise later this year. The 13-day cruise departs from Morocco on 24 November; prices start at £4,695 (020-7752 0000; noble-caledonia.co.uk).Cape Verde can be quite expensive compared with other tropical destinations: a decent hotel costs the equivalent of £50-£100 a night; a three-course meal in a quality restaurant is around £15; and hiring a vehicle and driver for the day might cost £75. Take a mix of cash (sterling or euros) and travellers cheques for changing into escudo in the main airports or banks (Caixa Economica is the cheapest). Euros are accepted on the main islands but improvised conversion rates mean it's often cheaper to pay in escudo. Credit cards and ATM machines work sometimes but are not to be relied on.In summary, Cape Verde is not a nation for people who expect to be served a dream holiday on a plate. It's for people who have a little bit of the adventurer in them, who are curious about people and place, who will lap up the oddities that island life might throw at them.Aisling Irwin is co-author of The Bradt Guide to the Cape Verde IslandsUncovering the archipelago* The brown terrain of Sal makes Mars look fertile but the southern beach town of Santa Maria has the liveliest tourist scene, with plenty of watersports centres, hotels and restaurants, many of them good local businesses straining for tourist patronage in the shadow of the all-inclusive resorts.* Maio is a flat, desolate brown desert broken by unexpected patches of acacia forest, ringed by stunning beaches and beginning to wake up to the tourist trade.* Santo Antao is a cluster of high peaks cut by steep, lush valleys. Its people live in houses built high up the near-vertical valley sides. Cobbled paths lead you up past sugar cane and banana plantations crowded on to narrow terraces, to the spectacular ridge tops.* Known in the past as the "cinder heap", Sao Vicente has a relentlessly harsh, brown landscape fringed by black lava rock pounded by white surf. But its lively capital has a rich British colonial history. Most importantly, it's the party island, hosting a huge Mardi Gras carnival and an August beach music festival as well as plenty of dancing and music-making the year round.* Menacing Fogo rises sheer from the ocean to a height of 2,829m - a live volcano whose most recent eruption still smokes gently. Hundreds of locals - most of them descended from one fecund French duke - persist in living inside the crater. You can drive up a hairpin, cobbled road into the crater where you can spend a Spartan night in local accommodation, hike up to the rim and quaff some rather good wine that comes from the nearby vineyards.* Brava is an elusive, tiny, mountainous island, with a quiet and pretty capital embedded in its peaks and some stunning walks down to the sea.* One of the least-known islands is Sao Nicolau, another dramatic hiking destination. Its parched flanks hide a verdant and beautiful interior.* Sao Tiago, the "capital island" and the most African, has a lush interior with some good walking and craggy peaks. It is host to Cidade Velha, the first city to be built by Europeans in the tropics and now a World Heritage Site. It was constructed by the Portuguese to oversee the slaving and ship-refuelling trades.* Boa Vista is a flat, bleached land of sharp, white dunes, petrified forests, and unnervingly remote beaches. It's a place to find yourself - and you can do that in some luxury these days.The story so farNothing more advanced than a turtle graced the islands until their discovery by Portuguese sailors between 1455 and 1461. The Portuguese swiftly recognised the importance of owning a spot of land in an ocean that was growing busier by the year - and settled the largest island, Sao Tiago, where there was a safe harbour and a fresh water supply. They began a trading industry and provided passing ships with supplies.In the 16th-century, the Portuguese found another commodity from the African coast: slaves. They fetched them, "seasoned" them (weeded out the unsuitable, baptised them and taught them a few Portuguese words), and sold them on mostly as labourers in the plantations of South America.Some they kept and these and their Portuguese masters interbred to create the nucleus of a new, mestiço people - Cape Verdeans.As the slave trade dwindled in the 19th-century, Cape Verde was neglected by Portugal and suffered droughts and famine. It won independence in 1975, the year democracy prevailed in Portugal.Some 35 years later, Cape Verde has a peaceful democracy and has made the rare step of being elevated from "Lower Income" to "Middle Income" country in the eyes of the UN.Active Cape Verde* Windsurfers come from all over the world to Sal and Boa Vista, especially in the windy months of January and February (wind which can irritate sunbathers and divers). There are numerous surf-rental shops and schools on the islands. Surf Cabo Verde (00 238 997 8904; surfcaboverde.com) offers beginner classes for around £80.* Divers can sample offbeat experiences exploring lava tubes and the shipwreck-strewn ocean floor. There are many good diving companies in Sal (try Scuba Team Cabo Verde, 00 238 991 6543, scubateamcaboverde.com) and on Maio (Sunfish Scuba Diving Academy, 00 238 954 9562, capeverdeiving.com) and Boavista (Dive School Submarine Centre, 00 238 992 4865, atiltros@hotmail.com).* Music-lovers can explore the indigenous offerings, ranging from the mournful to the manic (and which spawned such international names as Cesaria Evora, barefoot diva): cavers head to Cape Verde for the volcanic tubes on Fogo; birders are to be found wedged into obscure cliffs to spot rare species such as the raso lark or the magnificent frigate bird.* Cape Verde offers some serious big-game fishing for blue marlin and other prizes. The main centre is Sao Vicente (five good outfits, try Centro de Desportiva do Mindelo, 00 238 232 6938, biggamecaboverde.com) with one centre on Fogo (see Colonial House, under accommodation). World Sport Fishing has all-inclusive one-week fishing holidays available from £2,875 (01480 403293; worldsportfishing.com).* Hikers will have the trip of a lifetime on Santo Antao, Fogo and Sao Tiago and Sao Nicolau; Ramblers Worldwide (01707 331133; ramblersholidays.co.uk) provides walking holidays for £1,849, flights and accommodation included.Independent island-hopping?Some enterprising travellers have noted the easy availability of charter flights to Cape Verde and decided to fly out for some unplanned island hopping. Be warned, though, that the concept is not nearly so flexible as, say, Greece. This is not the Aegean, it's the mid Atlantic and it's hard to do spontaneous travel between the islands whether by ferry or air. For those on holidays of two weeks or less, don't risk your time on the ferries that toil across the ocean connecting the archipelago, except to travel between Sao Vicente and Santo Antao (reliable, several times a day, one hour, €4); and between Fogo and Brava (on a fishing boat that connects the two virtually every day). Ferries between the other islands fall victim to a soap opera of breakdowns, sinkings, delays, stormy weather and the improbable Cape Verdean propensity to sea sickness.Only four aircraft journey the hundreds of kilometres of stormy ocean on regular flights between the islands. Three belong to TACV; one to Halcyonair. CaboVerde (00 238 241 2360; flyhalcyonair.com). Domestic flights are usually heavily booked and, if you haven't booked beforehand your only option may be expensive day trips from Sal to Fogo or Sao Tiago, aimed at a captive audience of package tourists (bookable at many venues on Sal).Instead, plan well in advance to make sure you give your connections for the following adventurous trip. Fly to the islands of Sao Vicente, Sal or Sao Tiago with the national airline TACV, which is bookable through a code-share agreement with TAP Air Portugal (0845 601 0932; flytap.com) or a TACV agent in the UK such as Cape Verde Travel.Travelling out with TACV means you qualify for a Cape Verde airpass, which gives substantial reductions on internal air travel. You should book these connections when you book your international flight. Flights between the islands take between 15 and 40 minutes and cost about €85 per journey, cheaper with a domestic airpass.Here's a suggested itinerary: spend a night in Sao Vicente enjoying the music scene and promenading on the old colonial front. Next day take the short ferry trip to neighbouring Santo Antao and spend a few days exploring the valleys (on foot is best, though you can see quite a bit by vehicle). Return by ferry to Sao Vicente and fly to Fogo to enjoy the 18th-century Portuguese colonial architecture and ocean proximity of its capital town, and then to see the spectacle of its crater (and spend the night there if you like). Finally, fly from Fogo to Sao Tiago to see the plateau capital and to spend half a day at Cidade Velha, a sombre reminder of the evils of the slave trade.From Sao Tiago you can fly straight home. Alternatively, if the idea of a day of sun and sand appeals, head for Sal and check into the Morabeza (00 238 242 1020; hotelmorabeza.com) - a top notch, well-established hotel on the seafont with rooms starting at the equivalent of just over £100.Where to stayThere are international-standard luxury hotels on Sal, Boavista, Sao Tiago, Sao Vicente, Santo Antao and Fogo. All the islands also have comfortable and characterful mid-range accommodation. In Fogo, try the spectacularly positioned Hotel Xagiate (00 238 281 5000; hotelsxaguate.comor absorb the distinctive local architecture with a stay in a restored sobrado house such as the Colonial House (00 238 991 4566, zebratravel.net).For a memorable stay in Fogo's crater, try the basic but tasteful, lava-brick guest house of Pedra Brabo (00 238 282 1521; pedrabrabo.net) - or spend a night with a local family in one of the many houses that have opened up to passing trade.In Santo Antao, stay at the heart of one of its most spectacular ribeiras - Paul - in a guest house such as Casa das Ilhas (00 238 223 1832; casadasilhas@yahoo.fr)or Cavoquinho (cavoquinho.com). Alternatively, you can retire to one of the many sparkling, mid-range pousadas at the wave-lashed coastal town of Ponta do Sol (for cracking proximity to the ocean, stay at Cecilio, 00 238 992 3634).Across the water in Sao Vicente's Mindelo, there's an abundance of options to suit every taste and pocket. A lovingly restored town house in the centre is Casa Café Mindelo (casacafemindelo.com), or try Casa Comba (00 238 994 4130; comba@cvtelecom.cv), on a terrace overlooking the port.On the tourist islands, for options combining luxury with local attractions try the Morabeza (00 238 242 1020; hotelmorabeza.com) on Sal or Spinguera (00 238 251 1941; spinguera.com) on Boavista, for a desolately beautiful experience; rooms from €120 per person, per night.Click here to view African Tours and Holidays, with Independent Holidays.

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