

HOTEL REVIEW

ESTALGEM DA PONTA DO SOL

| BY CHRISTOPHER KANAL

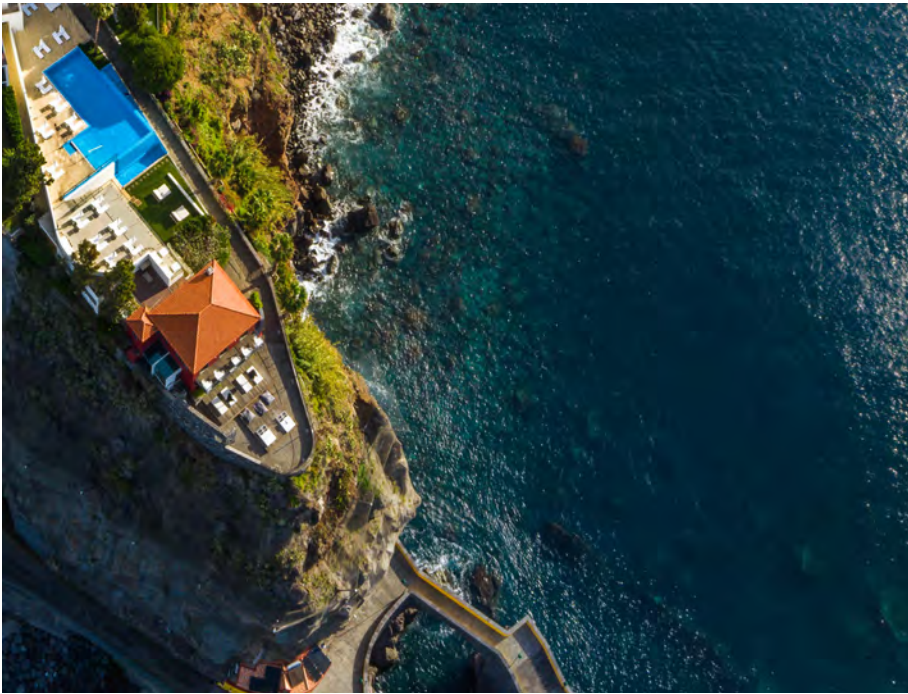
A sub-tropical island unlike any other, Madeira is unique. A land that stimulates the imagination like the low-hanging clouds, pierced by sunlight, that moodily cloak the knife-edge mountains here. In some parts, it feels like one is nestled deep in a Hawaiian rainforest; trees are heavy with tropical fruit. In other areas, one could be viewing the final mountainous point of a great unknown continent where dark azure waves pull against a long deserted beach of ochre-colored sand. Madeira is a magical paradise for the senses.

Located on the southwest coast of Madeira, the pretty, friendly seaside town of Ponta do Sol has a reputation for being one of the warmest and sunniest places on the island. A mere 30-minute drive from the island's capital Funchal this 15th-century town arose out of the flourishing sugarcane industry. Today, it is a draw for its pebble-beached seafront enveloped by cliffs, a beautiful church Nossa Senhora da Luz, and a small fistful of excellent restaurants and vibrant bars.

BOND-ESQUE LAIR

Perched above the town is the hotel Estalgem da Ponta do Sol. An unmissable landmark given its minimalist architecture; a cloud-grey concrete pillar grips the side of the mountain and stretches a few hundred feet into the sky—and that is merely the elevator shaft that wizzes you from sea level to the hotel. It is a dramatic entrance worthy of a Bond set, and what follows in terms of design, sophistication, and atmosphere does not disappoint. Emerging from the red-lit elevator car, another lovely cinematic touch, you arrive at the property and are first welcomed by the hotel's two dogs, Stella and Poncha. The latter is named after the revered Madeiran tippale made from citrus juice, honey, and local rum or 'aguardente.'

Originally a 'quinta' or manor house, today it holds the hotel's reception area, a lively bar, a cozy library, a stunning terrace, and a garden where tiny gold and emerald speckled lizards laze in the winter sun. The



terrace overlooks Ponta do Sol and the expansive Atlantic beyond—we were told whales are often spotted from this vantage point. The seas off Madeira are unimaginably deep and are a popular highway for cetaceans. The modern part of the hotel, designed by celebrated architect Tiago Oliveira, was built on the surrounding land. The stark swan-white buildings, with large panoramic windows extend to the cliff's edge and flood the interiors with light.

There are 54 rooms. We stayed in a standard sea-view-facing room with a sun terrace. Garden view rooms overlook Ponta do Sol and the banana plantations on the mountainside. We enjoyed stunning ocean views, the rocky coast directly beneath us, and the cliffs to our east. At night, dots of light from the villages in the hills above us lit up like fireflies as the crashing waves below lulled us to sleep.

The room was simple and spacious with light wood flooring, white walls decked out with black and white art photographs, and a comfy bed with striped linen sheets. The large bathroom came with a shower, while other rooms have bathtubs. All feature air conditioning, satellite television, and a minibar.

MADEIRAN CUISINE

The hotel's restaurant has a dining room that overlooks the town and the bay. It opens onto a small outdoor garden terrace surrounded

by verdant tropical plants where you can eat. The dining room serves lunch and dinner; the cuisine is local Madeiran and European. The food is well-priced and tasty, particularly the steak and the scabbard fish; despite its satanic appearance, the latter is a delicious meaty Madeiran specialty. After dinner, many guests head to the snug Lobby & Lounge Bar, which is open late and is a great place to relax and meet others. Two roaring fireplaces and the incredible balcony view only add to its charm. The breakfast buffet serves continental-style freshly baked breads, pastries, yogurts, and mouthwatering tropical fruits, from ruby red pomegranates to golden mangoes. There are German and Scandinavian delicatessen favorites in a nod to the hotel's prominent guests. The breakfast also has a first-class à la carte menu that changes daily.

WILD ATLANTIC, WHALES, AND MORE

The hotel's centerpiece is undoubtedly the infinity pool set in a cliff-side garden that drops in rocky layers to the sea. The view is absolutely spectacular, and there is an outdoor hot tub, an indoor pool, a hammam, and a sauna. Massages can be booked in-house. Right at the cliff edge in the pool area is the Poolside Kabo Bar, where you can serve yourself a cocktail or pull a cool Super Bock on draught. On weekends there are regular sunset parties here with live music and DJs from as far afield as Lisbon and Berlin.

Nearer to the reception among the hotel rooms is a gym. The very accommodating and knowledgeable staff can organize hikes, including complimentary transfers to various trails you can choose from, whether you want to see 'levadas' (canals), canyons, mountains, or waterfalls. Other activities include whale watching, paragliding, diving, and snorkeling.

In summer, you can go on the hotel's catamaran off the coast to go seal, dolphin, and whale watching. A private beach, Faja dos Padres, has black volcanic sands and a restaurant. The hotel provides a free daily shuttle service to Funchal and to the airport.

The breathtaking location, stylish design, and relaxed vibes easily make Estalagem da Ponta do Sol one of Madeira's top boutique hotels. It is a fabulous place for a romantic break, yet close enough to Funchal to see more action.

Rooms start from \$130 and are bookable via the hotel's website. Breakfast included. ◆

Address: Caminho do Passo, 6 Ponta do Sol, 9360 529 Madeira, Portugal
 Telephone: 00351 291 970200
 Email: info@pontadosol.com
 Website: www.pontadosol.com
