



boa vista: the other cabo verde

Cabo Verde has been firmly on the up of late, those amazing images from the legendary 2007 PWA wave event and the introduction of direct flights has thrust the island of Sal into the windsurfing limelight. But there are other islands in the chain, and Boa Vista is anticipating a bright future. Words: **Flo Soehnchen** and **Chris Hafer**. Photos: Chris Hafer, Flo Soehnchen and **Valerie Luther**...



Spring 2009 – the economic crisis sees the whole world gripped with pessimism. Well, not quite the whole world; just off the African coast, a little independent country stalwartly resists this negative atmosphere. It's refreshing to discover that there are still places where unbridled optimism reigns and the locals exude contagiously high spirits. And this despite the fact that they've got more reason than most to be pessimistic...

BUSINESS TRIP

Before being discovered by Portuguese sailors in the 16th century, the Cabo Verde islands were uninhabited. Today's 'creole' mix of cultures is a result of the slave and salt trades, which brought some prosperity to the Islands. Apart from that, the islands aren't too attractive. A scarcity of raw materials and a very dry climate, which makes farming difficult, means that a sustainable economic boom has never happened. Indeed, famines have been frequent, decimating the population and leading to large-scale emigration.

While the islands have been largely isolated from the economic development enjoyed by much of the world, their separation from the African continent seems to have grown since the declaration of independence in 1975. But neither the economic crisis nor the islands' chequered history has been able to break the optimism of the culturally diverse inhabitants.

Walking through the small villages, you're often approached and asked: "Would you like to have a look at my business?" Expecting a business card or stylish shop, you might be disappointed – 'business' generally refers to pretty basic home-made souvenirs. The real big business on Cabo





Boa Vista

Verde is almost completely in foreign investors' hands. Italians in particular have taken the islands as their own, and run most of the (few) restaurants and hotels. But even this doesn't put the locals off, especially the children who are still curious about the influx of visitors since the opening of the Boa Vista's international airport.

WHY COME?

The average tourist checking Boa Vista on Google Earth probably won't be scrambling to buy a ticket. The satellite picture shows a meagre sandy island, little more than a pile of rocks adrift in the ocean. But, just north of the equator, it's bang in the middle of the winter trade wind zone, constantly and reliably fanning Cabo Verde with a warm north-easterly breeze. Not so tempting to Mr Average, but like a flame to a moth for us windsurfers.

While the world's elite windsurfing destinations for March (Australia, Maui, Caribbean...) are pretty expensive and European spots are cold (Klitmøller) or lack a reliable wind system (the Med), the Cabo Verde islands are easily accessible via non-stop flights from various European airports. Thanks mainly to that epic PWA event back in 2007, interest in the islands as a windsurfing destination has grown massively. A ticket will cost you about £150 more than a trip to the Canaries, and the flight takes about seven hours. But while the Canaries are anything but blessed with wind from October to March, Cabo Verde is perfectly placed to offer great windsurfing conditions – especially from December to March.

But it's not just the stats and conditions that pique our interest during a long, chilly winter – it's that glorious sensation of getting away from it all and having a holiday somewhere a bit different. The holiday feeling really kicks in as the plane approaches Boa Vista International Airport in a long, lazy, left-banking arc, passing the very bay where you'll soon be windsurfing and lying in the sun. The water colours are really amazing, changing from a bright white to dazzling turquoise and finally dark blue, while the entire sea is covered with small whitecaps – from a windsurfer's point of view, this all bodes very well.

DISPARITY...

On landing you'll soon be struck by contrasts, and not just the temperature difference between Northern Europe and Cabo Verde in March. Pristine nature and vast unspoilt beaches alternate with piles of plastic and flotsam-and-jetsam washed ashore from mainland Africa and passing vessels. But then the locals don't seem to treat the environment too well either, often dumping rubbish into the sea or onto the beaches. Open dumps and wrecked cars in the dunes complete the picture. For today's environmentally-aware Europeans, it's unnerving to see the Cabo



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Verdean kids playing with rubbish on the beaches. But it is understandable that, in a country where over 80% of homes don't even have their own toilet, instilling environmental awareness presents something of a challenge.

Beautiful coloured and renovated facades in the small villages clash against ruinous mock colonial houses in the centre of Sal Rei and jar with the nearby shanty towns, home to mainly immigrants from poor African countries. The severe poverty in these slums is hard to reconcile with the building boom and mass tourism, and the first large hotel resorts – all fed by the new direct flight connections. On the few tarmac roads, the scene is dominated by modern American pick-up trucks, purchased by foreign companies. And of course, the vast majority of the Cabo Verdeans don't profit there either.

PEACE, LABOUR, FATHERLAND

Yet still, wandering through Sal Rei, you'll only encounter open-minded, good-humoured, friendly people. The Cabo Verde Islands' motto is 'Paz, Trabalho, Pátria' (Peace, Labour, Fatherland), and this sits well with the population. Those who haven't started their own small souvenir business often still fish, as their ancestors did. Although they can't compete with foreign fleets' commercial fishing, the islanders sometimes spend a whole week at sea in primitive little wooden boats. It's a real back-breaking job, but they're always smiling, and apparently no-one ever complains. The weekly arrival of the fishing boats is celebrated like a public fair. Everyone who can walk joins in, and the women's florid clothes almost lend a Caribbean flavour. The show starts as soon as the catch comes off the boat to be carried to market by the fishwives.

Later that evening you might encounter those same fish again. Boa Vista's ramshackle little restaurants all serve fresh fish, almost always served grilled (as is the meat) and always with the same side dishes – rice and chips. The reason is simple: staple foods are cheap as they're state-subsidised. Anything else is a luxury and at least as expensive as in Europe – yet the average salary here is no more than €150 to €250 a month, so even in restaurants vegetables are only served in very small rations.

GETTING OUT

Away from the troubles of Sal Rei, there's a lot to be seen and done on Boa Vista. Some excursions really are worth the effort. On the long, sandy beaches surrounding the island, you'll often come across rugged shipwrecks – evidence of the navigational demands of local waters. The reefs are so numerous that the former harbour on the east side of the island had to be closed as far too many ships failed to reach it. But even in the bay beside Sal Rei there are a number of wrecks, which make for good scuba diving or a snorkelling.



Keep your eyes open and you might find giant shells in the dunes. Ocean turtles come ashore on Boa Vista's beautiful beaches to lay their eggs – or to die. Sharing the ocean with these peaceful animals is an unforgettable experience. Whether surfing or windsurfing, the turtles come quite close. Although collisions are very occasionally reported, there's generally no need to worry about hitting one at full speed – they tend to dive surprisingly fast if you get too close.

THE WINDSURFING

Boa Vista offers some really gorgeous spots, all roughly in the same large bay, south of Sal Rei. Freeriders, freestylers, speed-freaks, beginners and even wave aspirants can find perfect playgrounds. Only hardcore wave-heads might find Boa Vista a bit dull. There are a few reef-breaks that produce fun little wave conditions, but you can forget about finding Ponta Preta's little sister on Boa Vista. Also, be aware that large sails around and above 6.0m will score you maximum time on the water. In return, the north-easterly is really consistent, great for blowing away the winter blues.

CONDITIONS

The best centre is 'Rod's Surfzone', straight in front of the recently built Riu Hotel Resort, which offers the latest Fanatic / North equipment for 20 to 30 guests and very comfortable surroundings. The wind blows cross-shore from the right and access to freeride / freestyle conditions from the sandy beach is easy enough with a small swell. But as the swell increases slightly it creates a heavy shorebreak, which can exceed two metres! It's a real challenge for body and kit.

The second centre is Planet-Station (formerly Happy Station), about 4km north of Riu and a few metres downwind of Sal Rei village, also offering the latest Fanatic / North kit for around 30 guests, plus storage. The wind blows cross-off from the right, and is much gustier than at Rod's Surfzone. There's a beach-bar and toilets, but no freshwater showers. Manager Peter and his team are ready to assist at any time and really will do anything to make their guests happy.

THE SPOTS

There are three different spots in front of the Planet Station. Bang in front of the comfortably sandy beach there's an easy freeride venue with a few clearly marked rocks and coral blocks. Thanks to the Sal Rei upwind cross-offshore wind is a bit gusty, especially near the beach. Nevertheless, the spot's well suited for beginners as there's never any shorebreak even in a really big swell.

The reef-break on Funana is easy to sail to, just downwind from Sal Rei's industrial harbour. It's about 600m offshore and about 1.5 to 2.0m deep, depending on tide. In the right swell direction, the waves can get impressively big yet stay very forgiving. Unfortunately, with a harbour so close the wind's extremely gusty. You should get some very nice waves and a few fantastic rides with a big waveboard.

Halfway between the centres, the famous Turtle Bay is Boa Vista's most beautiful spot. The bay is easily accessible from the water and offers fantastic water colours, stronger and more constant wind than at Planet Station, loads of turtles and perfect freeride and freestyle conditions. Harmless, soft little waves produce a small shorebreak at the beach, which gets bigger towards Riu Hotel in the south. And close inshore the water's shallow enough to stand. Paradise!

At the northern end of Turtle Bay there's another shallow little reef that offers small clean waves for surfing when it's calm. With the wind blowing cross-offshore, it's superb for gentle down-the-line wavesailing. It's a perfect playground for first forays into the waves, although experts might be disappointed. But be careful, the reef's really shallow at low tide – long freeride fins often mean spectacularly heavy impacts!



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