



Opposite: south of Ribeiro Frio, at 1,500m
This photo: above Porto de Funchal

Photos: Rui Sousa/Freeride Madeira



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Madeira rises like a mountain range from the Atlantic. As your plane swoops around the island, you get a good view of its peaks and gradients. There's so little flat land that the airport runway stretches out into the sea on concrete pillars, and the hotel transfer involves one of the twistiest, most elevated journeys you'll ever make by coach. So you can image what the biking trails are like.

Next day I was ready to reacquaint myself with them. I was sitting on a cling-film-covered seat in VW minibus owned by Freeride Madeira, with whom I'd booked a couple of days' riding. Having been here before, I was enjoying the expressions of companions who hadn't as they began to realise that the previous day's coach trip was nothing compared to the bike shuttle that was taking us to the top of the island. The roads are so narrow, so steep, and so twisty. Our driver, Andre, revved the van into first gear as he took a hard right up a road like a ramp. Imagine Hardknott Pass, double everything about it, then add some exposure...

TRAILS THAT TAKE THE CAKE

We bundled out of the van and took in the view. It was like being on top of the world. Mountain scenery lay below us, surrounded by sea. I could tell what the other riders were thinking: if that was the drive up, what about the trails down?



The top section was a dusty flow-trail through scrub. After rain the surface is affectionately named 'Madeiran ice' but even dry it was challenging. A few corners in, after some berms and small drops, I realised that this much dust demanded new techniques. It needed to be treated more like a wet trail in the Highlands. And it was best to keep some distance from rider in front. Too close and it was like being on a plane descending into cloud: you couldn't see a thing.

Some lovely, technical boulder sections, rollable step-downs, and more steep berms delivered us onto a mountain road. Andre was waiting with the van and showed us how to load the bikes onto the trailer. Six dust-covered riders climbed into the van for a short shuttle back up, laughing and talking up the descent.

Disembarking, we tweaked the setup of our hire bikes and dropped into a forest. It was like being back in the UK on a perfect summer's day: Dunkeld but with 27-degree heat. On this more familiar terrain of rooty singletrack, everything started to come together and I felt like I could ride full tilt.

The first time I rode in Madeira was on the trails used for the Enduro World Series. I'd never ridden anything so steep. Trail development in the UK has caught up in recent years, and this time I felt more at home. I tried to lay off the brakes, stay

smooth, and keep up with the younger riders in front. Technical singletrack led us through different habitats – pine woods, breezy meadows, Australian-style gum tree forests – beneath crystal blue skies. I was already plotting how I could return next year. ▶

Getting there

The Madeira archipelago sits a long way off the coast of Portugal – it's nearer Africa. I flew direct from Edinburgh with Jet2, which took about four hours. There are flights from most major airports in the UK. The ferry service between Portimão (mainland Portugal) and Funchal (Madeira) stopped running a while ago. If you want an off-season mountain biking getaway without flying, southern Spain, the Balearic Islands, and (for the really dedicated, well-heeled traveller) the Canaries are accessible by train and ferry. Details on how to get there are on seat61.com.