From the Travel Desk
Airbnb leaves a Minnesota family sleepless. **G2**

Arizona: Getting close to the stars. **G6**

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Midwest Traveler
In Bayfield, Wis., Lake Superior dominates. **G5**

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TRAVEL

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LINDA NASH • Special to the Star Tribune

At top, the volcanic majesty of Madeira. Above, wicker toboggans have been conveying people on Madeira's steep roads for more than a century.

Wanderers on Madeira

On the Portuguese island, rich history – of the national and natural kinds – fascinates hikers.

STORY BY STEPHEN NASH • Special to the Star Tribune

Feet propped on a balcony rail, I'm gazing at a small vineyard lined with palms, then out over the edge of a thousand-foot seacliff. And on the far Atlantic horizon, a sudden apparition: probing forelegs, followed by a colossal spider.

That was just optics. The spider, a small and ordinary one, had suddenly crawled onto the top rail at eye level, a few inches away. But here on the island of Madeira, west of North Africa and Europe and a long way from either, the traveler's musing question applies to both me and the spider: How did we get here?

Each of the hundreds of species of birds, plants and insects within the rich mantle of rain forest that greens Madeira is a miraculous wanderer. They have drifted in on the wind, or on floating debris, over epic spans of time and ocean, since volcanic convulsions pushed this seamount a mile above the surface, 5 million years ago.

I got here more conventionally, looking for an easy but unfamiliar destination to explore. Madeira, though part of Portugal and only a 90-minute flight from Lisbon, qualifies. It offers some options that may sound zany — a narrated tour in a motorcycle sidecar, for example, or a slaloming ride in an upholstered toboggan, sans snow. The best reason to visit, though, was a week of hiking on remote, high-elevation rain forest paths.

There are a quarter-million permanent residents here now, but Madeira is still in the process of being discovered, at least by Americans. The U.S. accounts for a small fraction of its tourism — most visitors are Europeans. We may figure that with the Caribbean and Hawaii closer by, another tropical island destination would be redundant. But in its venturesome recreations, history and stunning landscape, Madeira is a place quite apart. Its even climate invites travelers year-round. We had come through Madrid and its string of sweltering days in the high 90s prior to our arrival here in late July. Madeira's high 70s occasionally tipped into the low 80s.

See **MADEIRA** on G4 ►

Finding colossal beauty in Big Sur

A drive along Hwy. 1, on California's Central Coast, amazes at every turn.

By GRETCHEN McKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Marked by precipitous cliffs and hairpin curves that leave drivers (and their passengers) white-knuckled and breathless, the rugged stretch of California's Central Coast called Big Sur has enthralled sightseers for decades with its natural beauty. Yet there comes a point on a leisurely afternoon drive on scenic Hwy. 1 when enough is enough. Could Big Sur get any more stunning?

Each turn along its 90-mile stretch of coastline seems to reveal an increasingly spectacular view of volcanic rock hugging deep-blue ocean. Less than an hour in, I'd already snapped dozens of images with my iPhone — some by leaning precariously over the hillside.

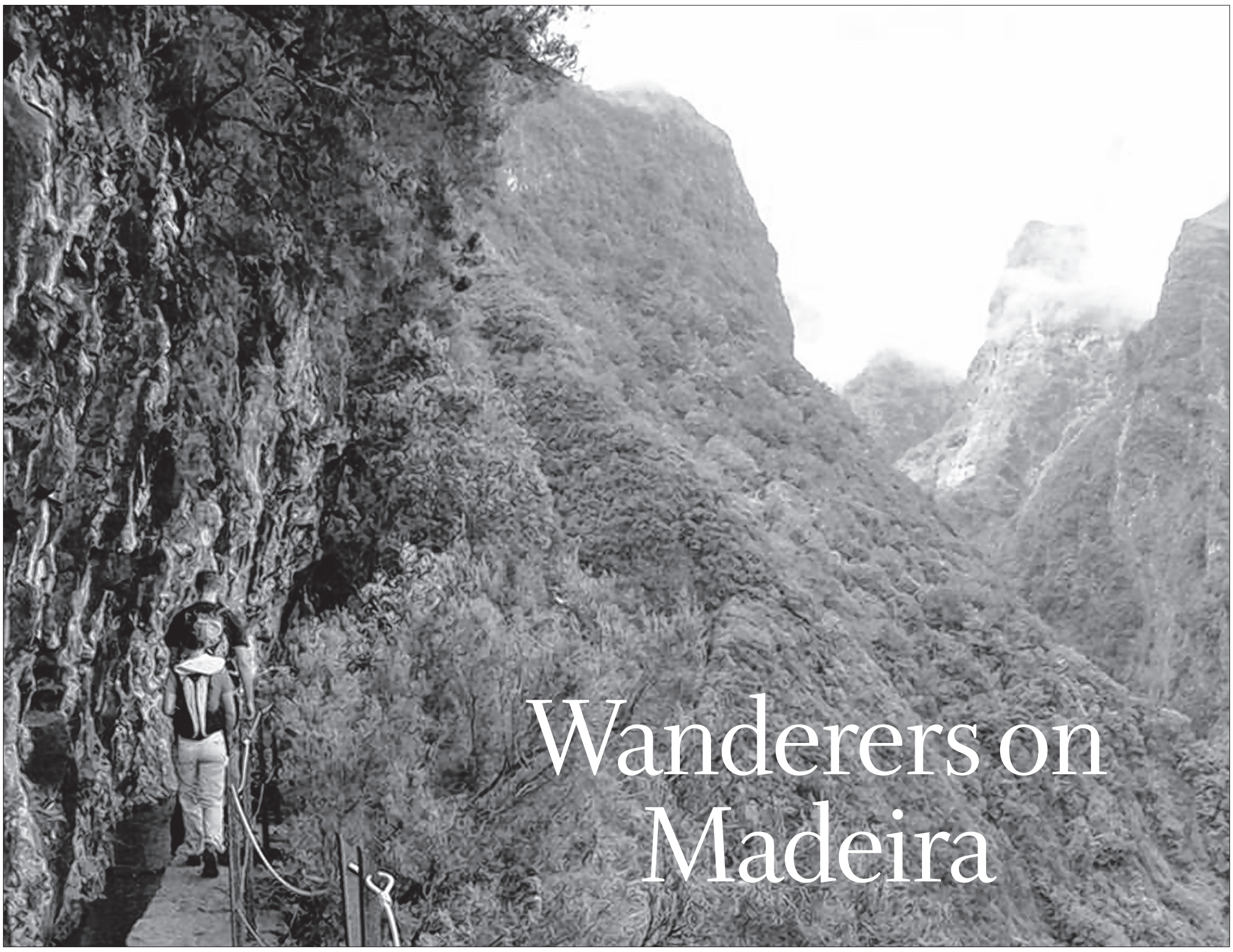
I wasn't the only wild soul. While we rarely encountered bumper-to-bumper traffic during our April visit, expect mini-traffic jams anytime the road widens enough for drivers to pull off for an impromptu photo session. It's especially crowded just north of Bixby Bridge, one of the world's tallest (260 feet) single-span concrete bridges. A stunning piece of architecture that blends seamlessly into the craggy terrain, it's one of the most photographed structures along the Pacific Coast. (Don't expect to Instagram your view in real time, because there's no cell service.)

Before the bridge's construction over a steep-sided valley in 1932, the drive from the Monterey peninsula to Big Sur Valley took three days by wagon because of a 30-mile one-lane dirt "detour" through a thick redwood forest. These days, it's an easy

See **BIG SUR** on G5 ►

GRETCHEN McKAY • Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Painters capture the beauty of the Big Sur coastline at Monastery Beach.



Wanderers on Madeira

Photos by LINDA NASH • Special to the Star Tribune

On Madeira, a volcanic island that juts from the Atlantic Ocean between Europe and Africa, hikers along the levadas, or canals, encounter drops — and views — that are steep and long.

◂ **MADEIRA** from G1

This island was among the first encounters of the agile Portuguese when their Age of Discovery gathered conquests in the 1400s.

It was a rarity: a big green fertile island, completely uninhabited. By people, anyway.

On the much smaller neighboring island of Porto Santo, settlers let loose a litter of rabbits to multiply, and they soon ate everything but the geology. That island is now a desert that has persisted 500 years.

Madeira's fate was gentler, though it was set on fire to clear land for farming, and the southern districts burned for years. The steep, wet, lush north was spared, and its water was coveted for the drier south. But from the rugged shore up to a skyline of tall, barren crags, most of this island is a landscape of near-vertical rock. So slaves were suspended by ropes to etch a tracery of hundreds of miles of narrow levadas, or canals, onto cliffs and canyon walls to move the water. That often sacrificial form of labor lasted centuries.

Today, hikers are the beneficiaries. You can stroll along the easy gradients of that network of levadas for days, much of it through a rare native laurel forest, a United Nations World Heritage natural feature.

Paths lead to shreds of cloud at the edge of yawning canyons, occasional tunnels, spectacular waterfalls and views out to the breakers battering distant coastal cliffs.

These narrow watercourses were "of vital importance," British traveler W.H. Koebel wrote back in 1909. "They are the arteries that nourish the land."

It's true now, too: They still supply water to Funchal, the capital, for instance. That port city, a cruise ship destination during the October-May season, accounts for more than half the island's population. The rest of the Madeirenses inhabit a thin scatter of villages, with centuries-old churches and tiny cafes.

Gliding into the capital

To descend from the levadas into Funchal, there is one conveyance that is available nowhere else on the planet that I know of: You can slide down the steep, curvy, cobbled streets into town on the runners of a big wicker toboggan.

These popular rigs were invented more than a century ago for the citizens of the hilltop suburb of Monte. Each is steered by two men in vintage white uniforms and boater hats. They hop on for the ride down the fast, straight portions, and nimbly alight to run alongside and nudge you around corners or over slower spots. We opted to come down from the mountains instead via a long, exquisite glide in a *teleferico* — an overhead cable car.

We found another piquant way of making our way around the island on our last full day: a tour in the sidecar of a shiny blood-red motorcycle. This service is offered by a native Madeiran who is a former corporate finance officer, Filipe Freitas.

Freitas is one of a wavelet of entrepreneurs who, with the help of loans from the European Union, are staying afloat in what Portuguese call their crisis economy — bad enough that it is sometimes compared to that of Greece. Precariously high unemployment drives many educated Portuguese to emigrate. Visitors, however, will find that the shaky economy keeps prices low, especially out beyond the most crowded tourist destinations.

Freitas picked us up at our hotel on one of his fleet of Russian-made Ural bikes. It hauled my wife in the sidecar and me on the rear pillion seat over narrow, steep roads along the western coastline. We were comfortable through the entire four-hour ride on this stable vehicle — especially since the safety-conscious Filipe rarely broke 30 miles an hour. Through telecoms built into our helmets, he narrated the cultural and natural history of the passing panorama.

We looked out over tile-roofed homes strung out along the steep hillsides far below, where cane, beans, corn and garden vegetables had been sown for the first time in a long while. "The work and the food are probably healthy for us," he said. "But those people are doing it because they are unemployed and their families must eat."

Inn-to-inn hiking

The reign of dictator Antonio Salazar from 1932 to 1968 remains vivid for some Portuguese, including residents of Madeira. Salazar used secret police to enforce his grim view of the cultural values that should define national life, several guides had told us. Portuguese still joke ruefully about "the three F's" that Salazar preached to distract them from their privations: Fatima, futbol and fado — miracle-religion, sports and the mournful national folk music.

Source: maps4news.com/HERE

"My wife is a schoolteacher," Freitas said. "Under Salazar, she would not have been allowed to marry me unless I made more money than she did. Women, especially the few working women, had to be seen as subordinated." Part of the impetus for ending that brutally repressive era were the ruinous wars that Salazar waged to try to hang onto Portugal's African colonial possessions, Mozambique and Angola.

During our ride along the undulant coastal road to the 2,000-foot-high headland of Cabo Girao, we saw remnants of that national history. Some of the abandoned houses we passed were hideouts for young men evading conscription.

In 1974, army officers led a nearly bloodless coup, freed the colonies and established the current democracy, but a chaotic period of adjustment followed.

Learning this somber history had the effect of heightening our appreciation for the island's beauty. It was good to know, too, that the economy on enterprising Madeira is showing signs of revival.

We alighted at a 1950s-era venda, an all-purpose neighborhood store, bar and gathering place that is now something like a small museum, full of old wares, remedies and notions. Filipe's friend Maria Jose made my wife and I ponchos — lemon and orange juice, honey and rum.

Avoiding thoughts of our pending departure, we traded stories about our rich week of exploration on Madeira. The drink, lush and layered like the island itself, eased our pre-departure distress, and left us wondering just how and when we could arrive at Madeira again.

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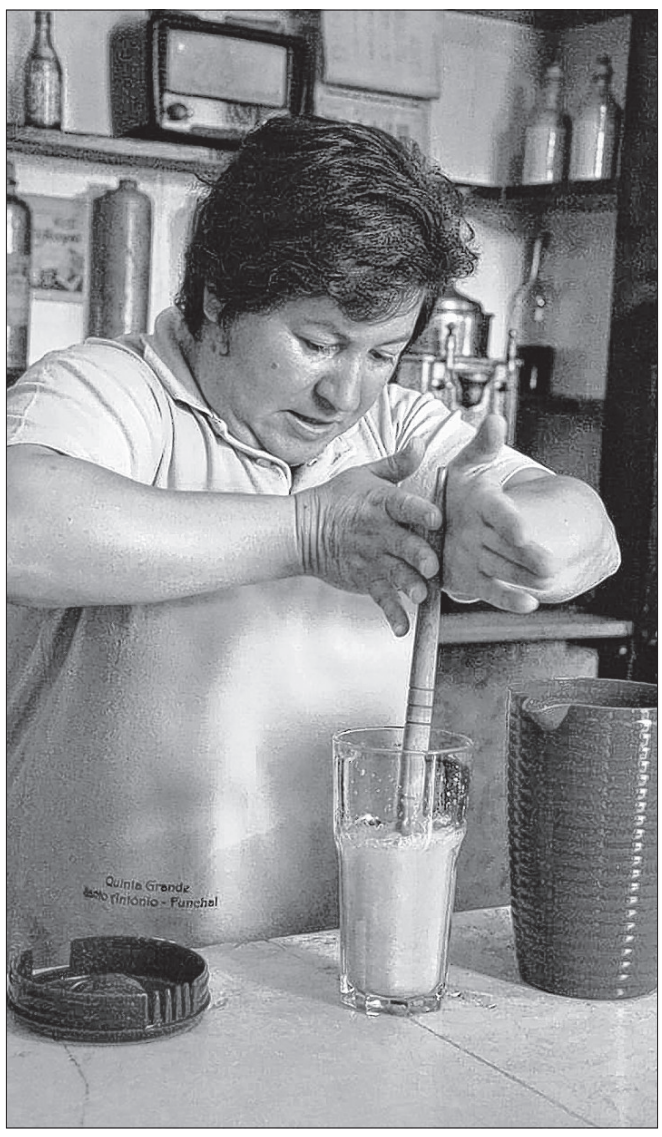
Filipe Freitas, a native of Madeira, gives tours of the island's highlands and capital, Funchal, on his shiny motorcycle and its cozy sidecar.



A poncho, Madeira's tangy signature cocktail, includes fresh lemon and orange juice, honey and a hit of rum.

MADEIRA OFFERED LESSONS ON INN-TO-INN HIKING

On Madeira, we took our third inn-to-inn hiking trip in as many years. The tour operator supplies maps, directions, lodging, breakfast and dinner, and moves our luggage when we change hotels. Several companies offer a Madeira package.

The travel industry is a shape-shifting landscape. If you make this choice, ask who is really responsible for the local arrangements.We planned to use a tour company we'd used before. We were told, though, that the Madeira trip was now offered by another American packager instead. So we booked through that outfit, which is really only a pass-through marketer for a British company that has recently been sold to a German firm that handed us off to a Madeira-based operator. We would have saved money just using the real guys, the Madeirans, to begin with.

There were distracting glitches — nothing calamitous — which surprised us after our prior trouble-free trips. The person at the "24-hour emergency number" was actually on vacation, for example. There were mix-ups about the hotel bookings. The Madeiran personnel who cleared things up were uniformly genial and conscientious, and English is spoken widely.

Ask your prospective inn-to-inn hiking planner for references you can talk with by phone — people who have used the same tour operator for the same trip in the past year. You'll want to know how well the transfers were handled, the quality of the hotels and meals and, crucially, that the point-by-point hiking instructions were perfect, or nearly so.

If you have time to do your own planning instead, I suggest these guidebooks for hiking the levadas (only some of them are safe routes). "Madeira Walks," by Shirley and Mike Whitehead, offers lots of nature lore and has a nice map. The e-book "Landscapes of Madeira," by John and Pat Underwood, is the seminal introduction to levada walking.

The hotels you choose can routinely arrange for luggage transfers. Many of them know the trailheads and pickup locations quite well. Madeira has surprisingly good cellphone service, and many hotels can easily get you to and from the hikes by cab. Happy trails!

STEPHEN NASH