

"Corvo, the Lilliputian Island," by Victor Rui Does. Translated into

English by Katharine F. Baker and Bobby J. Chamberlain, Ph.D.:

<http://www.rtp.pt/icmblogs/rtp/comunidades/index.php?k=%93Corvo-the-Lilliputian-Island%94-Translation-by-Katharine-F-Baker-and-Bobby-J-Chamberlain.rtp&post=47775>

(with photo)

We are crossing the 15 mile strait that separates Flores from Corvo, traveling in one of Elisiário Cristino's semi-rigid Zodiac craft - and it is as if I were taking off in search of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

At least this is what I am thinking as I admire the sheer-cut cliffs on the north coast of the island of Flores - navigating close to caves, caverns and grottoes that once served as pirate hideouts. I wonder, will there be skeletons of sunken ships nearby? Swollen planks from shipwrecks? And perhaps some hidden treasure?

Instead, we cross paths with dolphins that seem to be daring us to dive along with them. Enthusiasm builds on our boat as everyone is shooting videos and photographs of the spectacular acrobatics of the bottlenose dolphins.

Now we are hurtling like a harpoon toward the island of Corvo, which from the distance looms as a black cliff at whose base stands the town of Vila Nova do Corvo, chartered by King Pedro IV in 1832.

At various times called Crow, Cormorant, Marco, Statue, Lighthouse, St. Thomas or Black Island, it is the smallest island in the Azorean archipelago and the last to be settled. It is 4 miles long and 2.5 miles wide, harboring a community of just over 400 souls. "But we have more than a thousand head of cattle," says the van driver who awaits us at the pier.

Cliffs on the island's west coast (on the site today called Ponta do Marco) gave rise to the legend of an equestrian statue in the middle of the ocean. Several chroniclers, among them Damião de Góis, spoke of a knight guiding the way to sail to the New World.

We disembark and find reality is otherwise. Comprising just one concelho [county] and village, it is in Vila where all the dwellings are concentrated. The streets are narrow (for both reasons of solidarity and defense against enemies of old) and paved with cobblestones, and the houses - white and arranged in amphitheater formation, some made of masonry - retain the old architectural style.

Up until the 19th century, Corvo was doomed to be a feudal regime. Mouzinho da Silveira, then Minister and Secretary of State for Financial Affairs, freed the island from political, administrative

and economic oppression. He also elevated it to vila [village] status as a municipality independent of Flores. Since then, life on Corvo has come to be organized rather independent of political, religious, economic and military powers. Or it may be that, owing to centuries of isolation, Corvinos have simply figured out how to create their own way of life.

I enter the Igreja de Nossa Senhora dos Milagres [Church of Our Lady of Miracles], the island's patron saint, and pause before the image - a 16th century Flemish sculpture found at sea. According to legend it performed an extraordinary miracle: when Turkish pirates were bombarding the island in June of 1632 in hopes of conquering the populace, the latter went to the church in order to fetch the image and place it on the Canada da Rocha [Cliff Road], facing their attackers. The saint then opened her hands and when bullets struck them they ricocheted back at the shooters. The pirates beat a retreat, and some chroniclers claim that the account of this miracle reached the ears of the rulers of the Kingdom.

I continue wandering through Vila. The airport runway lies there in its full length, and in stark contrast to the beautiful stone mills. I visit the city hall and the public library (with its 10,000 volumes), and they assure me there is no illiteracy on Corvo. And there is the Casa do Povo, a pre-school, an elementary school, a health clinic, a pharmacy, a gas station, two stores, a restaurant, a café-deli, notary services, a civil registration and building tax office, a finance division, a post office, volunteer firefighters, a marching band, a folclórico [folk song and dance] group - and, more recently, a spacious semi-covered structure and an imposing multi-purpose building have lent a touch of modernity to Vila. I pass by the Holy Spirit Home (built in 1775) on Largo do Outeiro plaza, founded in 1871, once the center of all decision-making. In order to acquire local products (a wooden lock and some cheese), I go up to the crafts house and the cheesemaker's.

But I am not a tourist, I am a traveler - and the time has come to visit that volcanic epiphany by the name of Caldeirão [large caldeira], located on the island's highest point. You can get there via a steep and winding road that rises to a maximum elevation of 2,356 feet. It takes my breath away, for I am in the presence of an overwhelming discovery. A spectacle of light and magic, transparency and serenity takes hold of my senses. Ringed by hydrangeas, the Caldeirão encompasses a perimeter of 3 miles and is 1,000 feet deep. A fog slowly descends from the rim, caressing this colossal landscape that assumes every shade of green and changes with every passing moment. On the water's surface small elevations are visible that are generally considered a representation of the archipelago. That can only be the Lago dos Sonhos [Lake of Dreams]. Its silence weighs heavily, and all this beauty rushes in through my eyes.

Just like Flores, Corvo has also been incorporated into the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, by decision of UNESCO on September 20, 2007.

This island (which survives on agriculture, livestock husbandry and subsistence fishing) resounds with solidarity, community spirit, affection, dignity and delicacy. Raul Brandão knew whereof he spoke when he wrote in his book *As Ilhas Desconhecidas* [The Unknown Islands], "I have never seen a sense of equality so extraordinary as on this island. Corvo is a Christian democracy made up of farmers."

We go down to Vila, for it is time to return to Flores. An unexpected shower falls and the sky has turned overcast in surreal clouds. From the top of the pier Mr. Fraga wrinkles his nose and tells me, "The sea is getting choppy."

The Corvino was right. In mid-channel we are surprised by a strong swell and a wind atypical for August. But I surrender myself to the trip because I am a mariner and I know that "sailing is necessary." And I reach Santa Cruz happy but... drenched in sea water.