INSIDER GUIDE TO SAL, CAPE VERDE

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- Lemon sharks

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Sal is one of ten islands that make up the Cape Verde archipelago, 350 miles off the coast of West Africa in the Atlantic Ocean. More and more visitors are attracted to this undiscovered gem by its year round sunshine, long, sandy beaches and world class watersports. Enjoy Sal’s famous ‘morabeza’ warm welcome during your stay.

A BIT OF HISTORY
Although Arabs and West Africans had been aware of Sal since the 12th century, the island was officially discovered in 1460 by Genoese nobleman and navigator, Antonio da Noli, probably in the company of the Portuguese explorer Diogo Gomes. Sal, or Llana (meaning ‘flat’), as it was originally named, remained deserted for more than 300 years until in 1796 Manuel Antonio Martins, a wealthy merchant living on nearby Boa Vista realised the money-making potential of the Pedra de Lume saltmine. In 1834 he founded the village of Santa Maria next to a salt pan, and Sal, as it became known after the Portuguese for salt, began to export 30,000 tonnes of salt to Brazil every year for the next 50 years.

In 1935, Sal was chosen to host a central Atlantic airport and in 1963 a Belgian couple built a holiday home in Santa Maria, attracted by the climate. The Vinckyers provided accommodation for the visiting airline crew and their home was later renamed Hotel Morabeza – it is still one of the most well-known hotels in Santa Maria.

CULTURAL HERITAGE
The people of Sal come from a mix of African and European heritage, which is reflected in their culture and customs. They have a strong connection to the ocean and begin practicing water sports from a young age, particularly on the beaches of Santa Maria, Ponta Preta and Cabeça de Salinas (also known as Kite Beach).

DISCOVER THE REAL SAL
For an island only 30km long and 12km wide, Sal holds great appeal for the curious traveller. Pedra de Lume saltmine is an essential starting point – discover how Sal earned its name then float effortlessly in the salt lakes and enjoy their revitalising properties. Viewing the sunset is an unforgettable experience in Sal – journey to Lion Mountain ‘Monte Leão’, enjoy a cocktail at one of the many beach side bars in Santa Maria, or climb the dune at Ponta Preta.

For budding photographers, take a trip to Sugar Mound ‘Morrinho de Açúcar’ rising out of the desert, or watch the sun create a magical blue eye in the Buracona lava rock pools.

Life is still natural here. I feel no stress. I feel free. It’s a Cape Verdean feeling.
Neusa Gonçalves, Tour Guide

GET OUT AND ABOUT
Many of the locals use the Hyace, or minibus, to travel between Santa Maria and Espargos – a one-way ticket is 100 escudos. Walking around Santa Maria, Espargos and Palmeira is the best way to take in the culture of Sal. You can hire bicycles from Santa Maria to explore the island, and cycling and walking tours are also widely available.

Hail taxis from the street, or your hotel can call you one. Journeys within Santa Maria should be a maximum of 300 escudos, and you’ll pay 600 escudos from Santa Maria to Ponta Preta or Kite Beach.

If you book a taxi tour to the South of Sal, be sure to agree a price with the driver before you set off, which will depend on the distance and number of stops, and make sure they have a driving license. For more adventurous travellers, hire a car and explore the dusty roads – be sure to ask for directions as some road signs are missing.

FLORA AND FAUNA
Despite its lunar scenery, Sal is rich in biodiversity and has eleven protected landscapes and marine areas. In rocky places along the east coast look out for ospreys - birds of prey which use their expert vision to catch fish. Sixteen species of whales and dolphins inhabit the seas around Cape Verde and in Sal you might spot humpback whales passing the Bay of Murdeira from February to May, as well as small lemon sharks in the Bay of Parda.

ENJOY THE LOCAL CRAFTS
Many crafts on sale are imported from the West African coast and look quite different to Cape Verdean crafts, even though they might have ‘Cape Verde’, ‘Sal’ or ‘No Stress’ painted on them.

If you want to take something home that embodies Cape Verdean culture, venture deeper into the streets of Santa Maria and Espargos for the traditional craft shops, or ask a friendly local to point you the right way.

Look out for jewellery made from shells, wood and coconut carvings, and pottery – many are inspired by the turtles of Sal and make great souvenirs. You will
find wallets and handbags made from a tartan-like fabric called pano-di-terra which comes from the island of Santiago. Or buy a salt rock from Pedra de Lume and benefit from its rumoured protective powers in your home.

AND FOOD...
For a true Sal delicacy, try a giant barnacle (or croca in Creole), and don’t leave Cape Verde without tasting the national dish of cachupa – a slow cooked stew made with corn, beans and meat or fish. Fish and seafood are plentiful in Sal and many of the locals enjoy fried moray eel and mackerel with chilli as an early evening meal.

You can buy fresh fish directly from the fishermen at the pier in Santa Maria, Palmeira or Pedra de Lume between 10.30am and 12.30pm – watching the fishing boats come in is an experience in itself.

For something sweeter, try the papaya jam with local goat’s cheese, or treats made from coconut, peanut, sorrel and guava.

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People love to see the beach and the pier, the boats coming in with tuna and wahoo. Ricardo Lobo, Flight Dispatcher at Cape Verde Express

AND DRINKS
Complement your meal with wine and coffee from the fertile volcanic hills of Fogo, and ask for grogue, a sugar cane spirit, or honey ponche as a digestive. Enjoy a grogue caipirinha at sunset, inspired by the Brazilian cocktail. Fresh juices made from tamarind or the fruit of the baobab tree ‘calabaceira’ are delicious.

PARTY LIKE A LOCAL
Locals start congregating in bars, cafes and pubs in the centre of Santa Maria or along the beachfront from 5pm every evening for happy hour, and there’s live music every night from 10pm. Listen out for the soulful mornas – a Cape Verdean style of singing with Creole lyrics based on love, patriotism and mourning.

Espargos is also well known for its live music scene and some bars specialise in playing traditional music. Cape Verdians flock to Sal from the other islands to party during Carnival in February/March, and for Santa Maria’s Festival in September.

HELP TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT
Water is a scarce resource in Sal – the rainy season is short and all water for domestic use has to be desalinated, using vital energy. Reusing your towels and bed linen in your hotel, rather than changing them every day, helps save water, electricity and chemicals for laundry. Remember to switch off lights and air conditioning units when you leave your room, and don’t leave the TV on standby.

There are no plastic recycling facilities in Cape Verde. Do your bit for the environment by using reusable shopping bags, reusing plastic drinks glasses, and only using straws when really necessary. Remember to take all your rubbish back to the hotel from the beach, including cigarette butts.
DEALING WITH TOURIST HASSLE

Sometimes local communities find it hard to access tourism jobs and income, and so instead find less formal ways to make money, like selling souvenirs on the streets, or by offering unofficial guided tours. These informal approaches can lead to some of the best, off-the-beaten-track experiences of your holiday - but they can lead to scams, or make you feel uncomfortable.

To help you feel confident about interacting with locals, follow our top four tips. You’ll find more tips at: www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk/hassle

1. Walk with purpose so you look like you know where you’re going. If you’re looking lost with a map in your hand, taxi drivers and tour guides might take the chance to intervene. If your hotel wristband is on show some people might get your attention by falsely claiming to work in your hotel. If you’re being followed by persistent hawkers, stop, tell them politely you don’t want to buy anything.

2. Most of the people selling massages and tours on the streets don’t have licenses, so try to find someone who does.

3. Perfect the art of haggling - some market stallholders, taxi drivers and guides will expect you to negotiate on the first price they give you. Think carefully about what’s a fair price, then spend a few minutes politely haggling to that price, rather than going for the lowest price possible. This is a chance to connect with the locals, so relax and get bargaining!

4. Children may ask you for money or sweets. Don’t encourage begging and donate money to a community association or social project instead.

Most parts of Sal are safe – use your common sense and you won’t have any problems.

HELP PROTECT TURTLE POPULATIONS

Cape Verde is the third most important nesting area for loggerhead turtles ‘Caretta Caretta' in the world and hundreds of females come ashore each year between July and September to lay their eggs on the beaches of Sal.

You can do your part in helping to protect these species by...

1. Not shining bright lights onto beaches at night. This confuses turtles as they mistake the lights for the moon shine when making their escape to the sea.

2. Relax on your sunbed close to the sea. Turtles use the soft sand at the back of the beach for nesting, and these nests can be crushed by umbrellas and beds.

3. Many turtles are injured by jet skis and other water sports equipment, so if you plan on having fun in the sea, please drive slowly!

4. Children may ask you for money or sweets. Don’t encourage begging and donate money to a community association or social project instead.

Most parts of Sal are safe – use your common sense and you won’t have any problems.

In Sal people are so kind, so good and it’s such a peaceful place to be and live.
Jerome Haufant, kite surfer and regular visitor to Sal