



Explore the same theme in other islands of the Azores

AZORES ARCHIPELAGO



An itinerary with this theme is available for six islands. Learn about our traditions.



Impérios of Graciosa

Impérios dedicated to the cult of the Divine Holy Spirit marked on the map.

01. Império do Espírito Santo de Santo Amaro
02. Império do Espírito Santo das Almas
03. Império do Espírito Santo de Santo António da Vitória
04. Império do Espírito Santo das Fontes
05. Império de Nossa Senhora das Dores
06. Império do Espírito Santo da Ribeirinha
07. Império do Espírito Santo de Guadalupe
08. Império do Espírito Santo do Rebentão
09. Império do Espírito Santo da Beira-Mar da Vitória
10. Império do Espírito Santo de Nossa Senhora da Guia
11. Império do Espírito Santo de Nossa Senhora dos Remédios
12. Império do Espírito Santo da Luz
13. Império do Espírito Santo das Pedras Brancas
14. Império do Espírito Santo da Fonte do Mato
15. Império do Espírito Santo dos Funchais



Império do Espírito Santo do Rebentão SANTA CRUZ

Império do Espírito Santo da Ribeirinha SANTA CRUZ



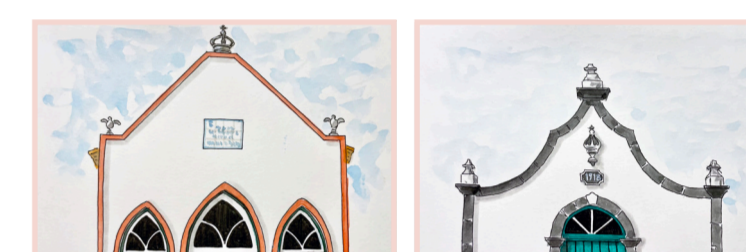
Império do Espírito Santo de Guadalupe SANTA CRUZ

Império do Espírito Santo de Nª Srª das Dores SANTA CRUZ



Império do Espírito Santo de Nª Srª dos Remédios SANTA CRUZ

Império do Espírito Santo de Nª Srª da Guia SANTA CRUZ



Império do Espírito Santo das Pedras Brancas SANTA CRUZ

Império do Espírito Santo de Beira-Mar SANTA CRUZ

Experience the cult of the Divine Holy Spirit

Throughout history, the celebrations in honour of the Divine have always included a clear manifestation of abundance. Whether made in times of distress or as an offering of the highest praise, the caretakers of the Feast, *mordomos* (Butlers) or *imperadores* (Emperors) seek to ensure these moments of opulence, which, in ancient times, truly contrasted with the harshness of daily life.

The island of Graciosa is another example where neither the size of the land nor the size of the communities is relevant. Here we find possibly two particularly significant instances of what the cult of the Lord Holy Spirit has to offer in the Azores.

One of these instances, tied to the more refined arts, involves the panels of the altarpiece in the Main Church of Santa Cruz. The author, whose identity remains undiscovered, is referred to by art scholars as the "Mestre de Arruda dos Vinhos." This renowned Portuguese artist crafted the six oil-painted panels on wood, brought to the island in the 16th century. The one that interests us is at the top of the ensemble, depicting the descent of the Holy Spirit.

The other case is, indeed, if not entirely unique, extremely rare. It is the Império de São Mateus, in Praia da Graciosa, a very peculiar example of an *Império* integrated into the structure of the Mother Church.

If there is one consistent element in all activities and events associated with the celebrations in honour of the Lord Holy Spirit, it is a certain mutual detachment. Although there are moments when the celebrations include the church, such as the *Coroação* (Coronation), the celebrations of the *Império* typically take place outside the temples, centred on the location where the crown is being kept, whether it be the *Império* building or the house of the *Mordomo* (Butler) of the Feast - or *Imperador* (Emperor).

As small communities, those on Graciosa primarily celebrate their festivities during the appropriate season, between Easter and Trinity Sunday, when the island seems to come alive with small, joyful celebrations here and there. The entire island is awake and in celebration, only to return to the daily grind afterward.

During this time, you'll find the *rosquilhas de véspera* (Eve's biscuits), *massa sovada* (traditional sweet bread), meat, rice pudding, wine, *foliões* (revellers), sung rosaries - elements that collectively celebrate the belief that joy exists and sharing happens.

Throughout the rest of the year, even without the formal festivities, some restaurants, if provided with advance notice, will be delighted to offer visitors typical dishes of these days, whether it's the soups, the meat, the rice pudding, or even the biscuits. It's merely a matter of asking whether they make them and placing an order.



THE SWEET BREAD AND RICE PUDDING

Each town and island has its own variation for the traditional *massa sovada* (sweet bread), although the basic ingredients are similar. The recipe from Graciosa, for example, includes lemon zest, has a round shape, and is usually well-cooked, resulting in a tasty but firmer bread. Some people brush it with butter on the outside at the end. As for rice pudding, it is prepared to be firm enough to be sliced with a knife and served in strips or pieces. This leads to another custom: in the absence of a plate for the rice, some place their portion on a slice of sweet bread and then eat them together, accompanied by a beverage, usually wine, preferably *verdelho*.



SOPAS DO ESPÍRITO SANTO

In all the islands, the *Sopas do Espírito Santo* (Soups of the Holy Spirit) reign supreme. In the Azores, particularly on islands and lands where wheat was abundant, most of the grain was either sold or used to pay land rents. Consequently, wheat bread became a luxury, rare commodity for decades, as many people primarily consumed cornbread. When paired with meat and some traditional sausages, it becomes the desired celebratory dish, and the Soups of the Holy Spirit provided a strong contrast to the rustic daily meals. These soups, made from wheat and meat, in their simplicity, also evoke the Eucharistic ceremony.



ROSQUILHAS DE VÉSPERA

As the name suggests, *Rosquilhas de Véspera* (Eve's Ring Biscuits), are biscuits given on the eve of the Feast Day. Traditionally, the most sought-after ones come from Império da Luz, in the southeast of the island. They are brought on the eve of the Feast and distributed according to tradition. Often placed onto sticks, they are usually marked with stamps, which feature simpler designs compared to those from São Jorge. While some are still homemade by some people, the majority are produced in bakeries nowadays, based on orders, which fortunately hasn't resulted in a loss of quality.



THE PARACLETE

The term "paraclete" comes from the Greek *paráketos*, meaning the one who helps, comforts, encourages, protects, and intercedes. This is the title of the Third Person of the Christian Holy Trinity: The Lord Holy Spirit (*Senhor Espírito Santo*), as He is referred to by the Azoreans and how He is perceived in these islands.

The Azoreans turn to Him, seeking help and encouragement above all. In the event of illness in the family, hardships, times of war or earthquakes, or when facing so much adversity that they feel as though they have no strength left. It is not an act of surrender, but of asking for help! That is quite a different thing, and it is only natural for those who live in the middle of the ocean, so tempestuous and rough at times.

The festivities can, in short, be considered moments of reunion, sharing, brotherhood, joy, and peace and are celebrated every year between Easter Sunday and Trinity Sunday, eight weeks after, reminding us that, as in mediaeval times, every single one of us is worthy of mercy, is poor and worthy of receiving alms, and is deserving of having, at least once a year, a full, joyful table.

Originating in mediaeval Italy, the festivities and cult in honour of the Divine Spirit arrived in Portugal during the first dynasty, according to tradition, by the influence of the queen Saint Elizabeth of Portugal (*Rainha Santa Isabel*), wife of King Denis of Portugal (*Dom Dinis*). By virtue of the Portuguese maritime expansion, this cult was brought to these islands in the Atlantic and, ever since, has been flourishing here, following the Azorean emigrants to Maranhão and the South of Brazil, the United States, Bermuda, and Canada.

In terms of collective events, all of these Festivities involve collecting donations and goods; a week of praying the Rosary, whether inside the *império* or in the home of a brother who was lucky to receive the Holy Spirit Crown, laid upon an altar in his home; the procession of the Coronation - the greatest moment; a festive meal - called *Função*, and a Bodo, the donation of food alms.

There are dozens and dozens of buildings supporting all these events, where the immaterial domain of the Paraclete centres his physical presence within these communities. There is a diverse meal ritual associated with it, including bread soups, whose recipe differs from island to island, *alcatra* (traditional meat stew), other kinds of stewed meat, rice pudding, *alfeimim* (sugar paste pastry), and a remarkable variety of breads: milk bread, water bread, or the *massa sovada* (traditional sweet bread), *rosquilhas* (ring shaped biscuits), *bolos de véspera* (typical baked biscuit) with beautiful marks, etc.

The tenderness and devotion towards the Lord Holy Spirit (*Senhor Espírito Santo*), as a source of comfort and support, spilled over the centuries into many and various aspects of everyday life in the Azores.

As a result of this strongly communal and supportive way of feeling, there are fortresses, streets, hospitals, sculptures and carvings, silver crowns and adornments, decorative ceramic pieces, vessels and ships, names of places and villages, memories, and stories, told from generation to generation.

Despite the diversity of customs between the islands, there is a definite common thread that emphasises a deeply unifying and striking feeling, very evident in the identity of the Azoreans, and that is worth following by exploring these islands and places.

Explore
GRACIOSA
AZORES



NEG NÚCLEO EMPRESARIAL Graciosa



Holy Spirit Altar. Main Church. Santa Cruz.

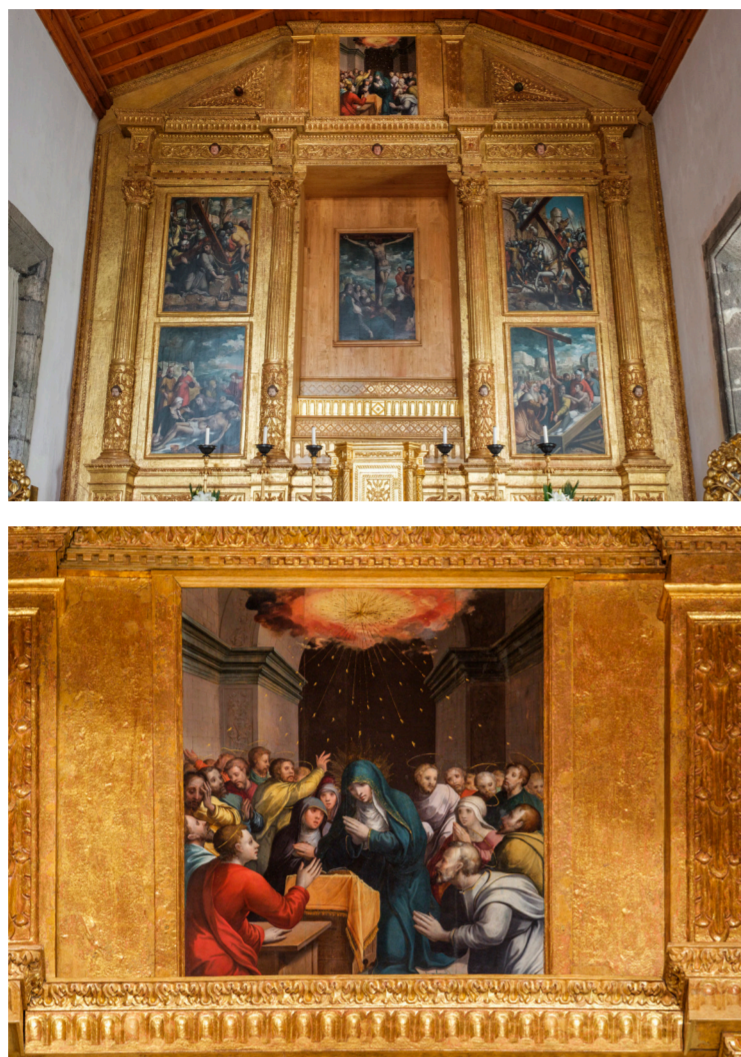
On the Gospel side, the left side as you enter the church, there is a depiction of the descent of the Holy Spirit. It is a simple but very important representation for understanding the essence of this devotion in the Azores.

In the centre, there is a painted panel depicting the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, not only upon Virgin Mary and the 12 Apostles but also upon over 20 individuals present in the Upper Room. Above this group, the Holy Trinity is portrayed, with Christ on one side, God the Father on the other, and the classic radiant dove of the Holy Spirit in the centre. Finally, in a central medallion near the ceiling, there is the crowning element, which is well-known in the Azores: a white dove above a silver crown. If there are three Holy Spirit crowns on the altar table, adorned with a sceptre and salver, as is customary, it's worth examining them closely because each one has a unique design, and demonstrates how the art of representing the "Empire" of the Divine has evolved in our region.



The Panel of the Holy Spirit. Main Church. Santa Cruz.

Attributed to "Mestre de Arruda dos Vinhos," a Portuguese painter from the mid-16th century whose name has not been definitively confirmed, the quality of the painting in these six panels is well worth a visit. These panels significantly enhance the beauty of the main altar with their distinct Renaissance style, leaning towards Mannerism. According to Hipólito Raposo, the work was commissioned around 1550 by D. Álvaro Coutinho, the 4th Donatary Captain of Graciosa Island, and intended for the Main Church, considering the church's own invocation. The panel that is emphasised here is at the top and centre, with a distinct theme compared to the others, which all depict the Holy Cross, from the Road to Calvary to the remembrance of its exaltation by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. In this panel, however, we see the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.



The Revival of Verdelho in Santa Cruz.

Wine production on Graciosa Island has been a longstanding tradition since its settlement. Square-shaped *curraletas* (basalt stone walls) have been used as the foundation for vineyard cultivation, serving to shield the vines from wind and salt spray while retaining the sun's warmth. Thanks to the island's favourable geomorphological and climatic conditions, wines produced here have earned praise from locals and visitors alike over the years. However, times haven't always been kind. Wine production declined with the outbreak of the phylloxera pest in the 19th century, leading to the introduction of American wines, often referred to as "*de cheiro*" (aromatic wines). Despite these challenges, the island's traditional grape varieties endured, more out of stubbornness and commitment to the island's winemaking heritage than for any other reason. The current resurgence of quality wines on Graciosa assures that traditional wines, particularly Verdelho, will once again grace the festivities' tables, much to everyone's delight.



The Divine crafted from Flanders Sheet. Graciosa Museum. Santa Cruz.

In all the islands, the memory is preserved of times when the crowns were crafted from Flanders sheet, in other words, tin, rather than silver. Poverty was rampant, and the religious worship and festivities, rooted in the local community, were not always well-received by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. There might have been reasons for this, as the revelry was perceived as excessive during a period when the strictness of the Council of Trent recommended more sacrifices. However, it's likely that there was also a lack of tact in seeking solutions. The fact remains that, since the priests themselves came from the local communities and were confronted with the demand for silver crowns to uphold the dignity of worship, they found a way to provide the committees overseeing the *impérios* with crowns made of this noble metal, using images that had fallen out of use. Today, all the crowns are made of silver and have evolved from four royal sceptres to six, including imperial ones. Some of the old ones are now in museums, reminding us of a more difficult time when the joy of the Divine presence was almost the only moment of relief throughout the year.



Império de São Mateus, Praia

While the worship of the Holy Spirit is rooted in Catholic and Christian traditions, the ceremonies and activities related to the celebrations in honour of the Divine always tend to maintain a certain distance from the church itself, preserving a distinct character. The Império de São Mateus, however, is the exception to this norm. It is the only example in the Azores of an império integrated into the very structure of the temple, contributing to the overall architectural balance of the whole, as the sacristy is on the opposite side. There are no known recent festivities associated with it, but its distinctive form and desire to be different endure. This can be seen, for example, in the pointed arches of the windows, which have no parallel elsewhere in the rest of the building.



Porto das Vacas. Praia.

Reaching the viewpoint near the islet of Praia may result from the desire to explore one of the many protected areas integrated into the Azores' natural parks. However, among the many tales that these islands hold, there's one connected to the Holy Spirit and involving that islet. It is said that on a certain occasion, the appointed caretaker for the Feast, the mordomo, placed several cows on the lush pastures of the islet, as was customary, with the intention of fattening them up for the meat offerings he would give during the Feast. Unexpectedly, bad weather suddenly arose, making it impossible to retrieve the cows on the appointed day. Lacking alternatives but determined to fulfil his commitment, he managed to find replacement cows. To everyone's astonishment, the original cows swam back to the shore just in time to be slaughtered, and their meat was distributed. As a result, some now refer to the nearby area as Porto das Vacas, meaning Cow's Port, where according to tradition the animals miraculously arrived.



The Império of Simplicity.

Beira Mar da Vitória. Guadalupe

It's important emphasizing the extent to which the concept of immateriality, inherent in all these festivities and manifestations in honour of the Holy Spirit, influences the architecture itself. While the celebrations imply joy and opulence, the building itself can be remarkably simple. Such is the case with this Império, known as "Beira Mar" (Seaside), a modest structure without windows, reflecting the simplicity of the space in contrast to the exuberance of the festivities. Nevertheless, the essential element is present: a stone-carved, high-relief crown, a meaningful and unifying symbol of all this joy and celebrations.



The Holy Spirit in Cobblestone. Ribeirinha

The fascination and passion for stonework, whether in decorative cobblestone or in walls, both dressed and dry stone, have a deep-rooted tradition on the island of Graciosa. Throughout the island, you can find several examples of exceptional craftsmanship. The cobblestone pavement in front of the church of Ribeirinha could have been made simply of black, basaltic stone. However, the appreciation for meticulous work and the desire to continually add a touch of quality led to the inclusion of a limestone dove here, representing the Divine Holy Spirit, as if to connect and enhance the path between the church building and the império. The white stones, precisely levelled and tightly fitted, irregularly faceted without gaps between them and perfectly aligned, create a distinct representation of the Divine and offer a small lesson in Portuguese cobblestone craftsmanship.

