San Miguel: Hiking in the land of swollen udders Col. #6

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I spent some time in the Azores last week. Located Mid-Atlantic San Miguel is thought by some scholars to be the last remnant of the lost continent of Atlantis. This tiny bit of Portuguese paradise, 2,000 kilometres from the mainland, is a land of lush, green mountains on semi-tropic earth with a crashing white and turquoise surf and black volcanic rock formations.

Safe, serene and simply spectacular, with the cleanest air on earth, the Azores may be the best place in the world for serious walkers and curious hikers. Where else can you climb down into the crater of a volcano and have a fresh, clear lake all to yourself? Where else can you watch a local chef cram a canvas sack full of meat, vegetables and spices and then drop it down a volcanic hole, only to have it come back up an hour later as your lunch - a stew cooked by natural thermal steam? Where else can you strike out each day for a new town, always assured of finding a clean room with breakfast for about $40?

Fascinating in the simplicity of its lifestyle and in its natural splendour, sunny and seductive San Miguel is nothing less than glorious. There are however two pressing problems you'll encounter as you ramble around these islands.

First and I'm not exaggerating, the people are so friendly, walking along the roads is difficult. Spotting walkers, Azorean drivers constantly stop to offer them rides. On the other hand, should the weather turn bad, all you have to do is accept a lift from the first or second vehicle passing by. Having hiked six of its nine islands, I've seen a lot of the Azores from the back of a pickup truck and through rain-spotted sunglasses.

Second, there are way, **way**, WAY, WAY, **WAY** too many cows.

There are 900,000 cows on the island of San Miguel. That's five cows for every man, woman and child. Think about it - 900,000 cows and one, very, very busy bull. His name is Lo Velho Vaca, which in English means "The Old Cowpoke."

There are cow on the sides of mountains, cows in fields, cows in pens, cows in barns, big cows in the backs of trucks, calves in the front of trucks, cows on trailers pulled by motorcycles, small cows in cars, big cows in downtown backyards, cows in city parks, cows on ferries, uniformed cows checking passports at the airport and looking for foreign cows trying to come into the country using phony cow ID. I saw a small cow strapped to the back of a motorcycle. Honest.

Walking in the constant gaze of 1.8 million doe-like eyes changes a man. You get a little paranoid and start to think cow humour.

First cow: "Geez Louise, have you looked at yourself lately? You're saggin', baby."

Second cow: "Erma, go sit on a salt lick and rotate."

Don't' get me wrong, they're fine specimens, bred by the very latest in agri-biological techniques. In fact, they're so sophisticated, some of these cows have done away with the traditional cow bells and can now be seen operating cell phones ... but never ever while driving.

Cow talking on a cell phone: "Ida? There's a geek wearing a tan backpack and a Toronto Blue Jays cap headed your way. Can you get up on the overpass and drop the brown bomb on him? Ida? You're breaking up, honey."

Yes cow humour is *meo vida.* I'm serious, when it's just you and them, you get a little psycowtic after a while. They stare at you as you as you walk by, from a vast sea of sad eyes. Once you've passed, they make those low mooing noises, and you know, oh yeah, you know very well they're talking about you. And those ears! They all look like parked pick-up trucks with the front doors open.

It's troubling to walk by a field of two hundred cows with four hundred stomachs and know that while they're standing silent, perfectly still and seemingly happy they're actually roiling and regurgitating on the inside. Scientists estimate that livestock are responsible for almost 20% of the world's greenhouse gas, so yeah they're rippin' em even as you stand there making fun of them. Let's see ... 900,000 cows time 130 kilos of methane a year equals ... wow! That's 4.9 million metric tons of Beano to take care of this problem! I mean it makes you wonder if it was the volcanoes or the cows that erupted to form these nine islands.

The farmers have so many cows to milk, they don't always get to some herds on time and some udders are dragged along in such a way that they look like they require a separate licence plate or at least go "Beep! Beep! Beep!" when they're backing up.

After a week they're making me crazy, I tell you, crazy. I'm doing stand-up comedy alone beside a farmer's field. *Vaca humoristico*: "What do you call a cow that tried to jump over the moon but forgot about the barbed wire fence at the far end of the field? *Una completo castrofio*. In English, an udder catastrophe."

Two cows are sitting by the hotel pool wearing sunglasses, smoking cigarettes and drinking vodka tonics from glasses with tiny umbrellas There's no joke here; I'm telling you they're everywhere! Don't talk to me about mad cow disease - I'm still seeing cattle in my sleep.

San Miguel, a beautiful verdurous sanctum in the middle of the Atlantic, where sweet and simple people are outnumbered and surrounded by way, way too many cows.

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