

MADEIRA

In 2002 Margie and I went to Madeira for a week to escape a grey English February. One day we walked across town to Reid's Hotel and as we sipped a cold beer on the balcony overlooking the harbour of Funchal I told her about my other holidays on the island some 50 years before. Madeira was discovered by the Portuguese in 1418. It is a volcanic island about 150 miles out in the Atlantic with a 6,000-foot high summit, is 35 miles long and 15 wide. It is steep sided and boasts of not having a single sandy beach. Off to the north is a smaller island called Porto Santo that does have a five-mile-long beach of golden sand and a legend! Porto Santo claims that Christopher Columbus once lived there with his wife Filipa Moniz, the daughter of Bartolomeu Perestrelo who was the first Commander of the island. If Genoa-born Columbus did reach Porto Santo, I am not surprised that he thought the world was round as there is a lot of sea between Madeira and Italy!

I was 15 years old when I first saw Funchal's harbour. Apart from the mushrooming of huge hotels around the bay the scene has hardly changed. The hillside is still carpeted with little bright red terracotta tiled houses painted a traditional pale yellow with spinach-green window shutters, interspersed with bougainvillea. The town cascades down the side of the mountain into the harbour like a waterfall of scrambled egg.

The scene in front of me brought back many happy memories, but gone were the coal barges that floated like giant black sausages beyond the great stone wall that protects the harbour. Two small islands capped by 15th-century forts joined to the mainland by a wall form a well-protected harbour.

On the evening of our arrival we could see a three-masted brigantine berthed at the wharf. Thousands of these ships must have visited the island in the days of sail, as it was the watering port for the merchant ships on their way to the Caribbean, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa and Australia. The island's main source of income then had been fresh water, vegetables, fruit, sugar cane, wood and a place to repair storm damage. When I was 15 years old the Castle Line steamship company was still running between London and Cape Town.

It was the grape that made Madeira really famous. To begin with the local juice was not very good, but it was then discovered that the technique used with Port wine also worked well for Madeira. The secret of success was to put the wine into old oak brandy casks and ship it to India and back as ballast in a sailing ship. The rolling and pitching of the ship as it sailed the oceans kept the wine moving in the casks and that, along with being heated and chilled as it crossed the Equator and rounded the Cape of Good Hope, turned the contents of the barrel into the beautiful Madeira wine that was so much loved by the English.

When the British warship *Northumberland* called at Madeira to water on its way to St Helena in 1815 Napoleon was given a cask of wine. When he died in 1840 the cask was returned to the island unopened, so in 1950 it was broached and a bottle given to Churchill who drank it with great satisfaction, or so I read. By then the wine must have been at least 140 years old!

The export of sugar, bananas and wine made the islanders prosperous and the population grew. When I first went to Madeira in 1950 nothing much had changed for a century and the English still ran the place. As nearly all the wine was shipped to London a large number of British came to work on the

island and as was typical of the colonial days, they soon established an English Club to cater for their social life.

When steam replaced sail the island became a coaling station and this was the reason for the black barges moored out in the bay. Cargo ships loaded with tons of coal would arrive from Wales and fill them up and when a steamship docked, a barge would be towed alongside so its coalbunkers could be replenished. More and more people got to know about the island from visiting it on their way to South Africa and because of the island's very favourable year-round climate they began to break their voyage for a holiday. It was not long before Mr Reid decided that it would be a good investment to build a luxury hotel for the wealthy travellers. Today the island is dependent on tourism. Madeira now has a land airport and is only a three-hour flight from Britain, which keeps the hotels full of tourists. We were told that there is such a demand for hotel staff they have to be brought in from Ukraine!

For our visit in 2002 we had been recommended by my teenage friend, Jimmy Welch, a native of Madeira, to stay at the Hotel Quinta Bela Sao Taigo. After settling in we went for a walk along the new promenade that has been built around the harbour. It was a wonderful feeling to be back once again on the island that had given me so much as a boy.



The replica of the 'Santa Maria'

One of the benefits of our hotel was that we could look out over the harbour and watch a replica of Columbus's *Santa Maria* sail by. The juxtaposition of the tiny wooden three-masted galleon chugging sedately past the giant tourist cruiser berthed at the quay was one of the most bizarre things we had ever seen.

One evening we walked down to inspect the *Santa Maria* at close quarters. Margie thought the tiny galleon looked like a floating walnut shell. When the ship cleared the harbour wall we watched the white canvas being

unfurled and were amazed to think that such a ship had sailed to America and back. One of the fun things about living in Agecroft is that the house is 500 years old so was built around the time of Columbus's voyage!

My first visit to Reid's was when the island was just beginning to recover from WWII. As the two of us were on our own my mother decided that she would take me back to her old teenage haunt for the summer holidays. My two elder brothers had been drafted into the forces to do their National Service and my father was away in Australia on business.

School holidays were not long enough to include a week's trip out and back by boat, so we took to the sky and used the new Sunderland Flying Boat service from Southampton. It was a wonderful adventure and one I shall never forget. Our journey started very early in the morning just before sunrise. We were ferried out by launch to the giant silver seaplane, climbed on board and were shown to our seats in the belly of the whale. The water level was only just below the tiny portholes. The engines started up and we taxied across the bay watching the water streaming back from the float under the wing.



Sunderland Flying Boat

The roar from the engines got louder and louder making the whale groan. As we gathered speed the rushing water blocked out the world. The plane broke free of the ink-black sea and rose into the first hint of dawn on the horizon. As we climbed, the temperature dropped rapidly so we wrapped ourselves up in the blankets provided while swallowing hard, for the plane wasn't pressurised.

After a six-hour flight we arrived over Lisbon and started our approach to the River Tagus. Slowly we sank towards the water and when we touched down the whole world turned muddy yellow. It was a relief to climb out into the launch and be taken to the terminal, where we could walk and stretch our legs while the seaplane was refuelled for the two-hour flight to Madeira. Landing in the Funchal harbour was totally different as this time it was crystal-clear seawater that went swishing by.

That was 52 years ago and now, looking down from the Reid's balcony, memories of when I was a shy 15-year-old teenager came flooding back and I started to tell Margie about my summer of happiness.

Starting in 1920 my grandmother, Nell Freeland, used to go to Madeira every year with her monkey, Jacko, to avoid the English winter. She left England at the end of October and rented Quinta Vista Allegro, (Villa with the Beautiful View), that now looks onto the back of a giant hotel. She stayed there passing the time gambling at the Casino until her eldest son telegraphed to say that the first cuckoo had been reported in *The Times*, around the beginning of April. My mother said the house was very damp and the only heating came from burning charcoal in three-foot-wide brass dishes that used up all the oxygen and caused everyone to fall asleep at the dining table!

Because my mother was an afterthought and 18 years younger than her elder sister, she was brought up at home as an only child until Granny Nell could leave her in an English boarding school. For some odd reason the school chosen was a Roman Catholic convent and my mother said she had loathed every moment of her time there, as she was the only Anglican. The thing she most hated was laying the table at mealtime. Because the Great War had only just ended food was still rationed and one of the items in short supply was sugar. Each girl was only allowed one lump at teatime so the exact number of lumps necessary for each table were put into a bowl every evening. One day, when my mother was feeling exceptionally rebellious, and it was her turn to lay table, she decided to show her resentment by eating all the lumps allocated to her table. When the empty bowl was discovered my mother was dragged off to the Mother Superior who immediately expelled her.

My mother was delighted and as far as I can make out that was the end of her education, although at the age of 18 she and a friend were sent to the Sorbonne in Paris to learn French. That hadn't worked, as her French, like mine, was only adequate to read menus, which was not surprising, as she and her friend never attended lectures. Their chaperone had the wonderful name of Miss Gabitas and according to my mother she spent most of the time ill in bed. The two girls would set off each morning pretending that they were going to the university, but instead they went window-shopping, unless it was raining, when they took shelter in a museum.



'Nan with Jacko' in Madeira

Immediately after her expulsion she was loaded onto the next ship bound for Madeira by her married sister, Habby, and so began one of the happiest times of her life, judging by her oft-repeated stories. My mother would hark back to those days and tell me about how she and George, the father of my friend Jimmy Welch, had won the tennis tournament at the English Club, as well as how they had performed on the dance floor doing the Charleston. Jimmy and I worked out that his father must have been about 25 and my mother a highly spirited 18-year-old. What a dashing young couple they must have made, a sporty young blade with a dance-mad girl on his arm. According to my mother they had a ball!

Adam Blandy, the son of another of my mother's companions of the past, used to come down to Reid's in the morning to swim with Jimmy and me. The hotel's raft was moored fifty yards out from the rocks and acted as a private island for us boys. The water was crystal clear, about twenty feet deep, and you could see the bottom as clear as day, but we were never able to reach it.

Sometimes my mother used to borrow the hotel dinghy and row out to the coal barges in the bay with me swimming along behind. As we got further out the bottom would disappear and I felt as though I was suspended in space surrounded by a ball of sunrays that reached down into the black depths. I remember worrying about being swallowed by a whale, as in those days we often saw whales spouting as they swam past the island. Madeira had been a commercial whaling station until the great beasts vanished at the end of the 19th century. A taxi driver told us that the last whale sighting was in 1985, nearly 20-years-ago!

One day my mother decided that we would send Jimmy home in a bullock sledge and that we would go with him. These sledges used to compete with the horse-drawn carriages for passengers between Reid's and the cathedral down in Funchal. The bullock driver must have been surprised when we asked him to take us all the way up to Jimmy's beautiful home of Quinta Palmeira, a journey that would take well over an hour. We thought it was great fun, but Jimmy's father was not amused when we arrived in front of his house drawn by two lovely white oxen.

After lunch Reid's became as silent as a morgue as everyone retired for a siesta. Ever since those days I have been a great fan of siestas when on holiday. Shutting the eyes for ten minutes after lunch on a hot sunny afternoon is one of the great pleasures of life. The glory of Reid's was that after the siesta they served tea and patisseries on a trolley from which we were allowed to choose two cakes each. This ritual started at half past four and it was important to be there on time to get the first choice. I have never come across such succulent cakes anywhere else in the world, especially the *mille-feuille*, or is that just a greedy childhood memory?

Also staying at Reid's that first summer was the de Stoop family, consisting of four children and their mother. Ann-Françoise was the eldest and seventeen, followed by Ivan, then Martine and lastly a younger brother. Being a close family they always moved around in a group, swimming or playing table tennis under the trees.

In those days I was very shy, especially with girls. One day when I was sitting with my mother Ann-Françoise came over and asked me to join the family and play table tennis. I remember saying, "No thank you very much," in a shy English way, only, much to my surprise, to hear my mother say, "Yes, he

would love to and thank you very much for asking him,” while at the same time giving me a sharp kick under the table.

So began my second relationship with a girl if you count hugging Sally on the toboggan aged 12. Ann-Françoise was one of the kindest and nicest people I have ever met. She invited me into her family and made me feel one with them when we played games, swam, or walked around the hotel gardens. Never having had a sister I knew absolutely nothing about girls so to have Ann-Françoise as a friend was an amazing experience.

One evening Madame de Stoop organised a teenage dinner party and Ann-Françoise invited me to join them. After dinner we walked in the gardens under the full moon and for the first time in my life I became aware of the magic mixture of moonlight and a girl. The gardens are criss-crossed with paths, one of which led out to the headland on which the hotel is built. On this first visit to Madeira my mother’s sister, Habby, and her husband were also staying in the hotel and one night Uncle Joe took me down to the headland to see a flowering cactus that blooms for one night a year when the moon is full. The magnificent flower was about six inches across and a mass of soft yellowish white stamen. Next morning when I went to look at the flower it had wilted into a heap of brown mush.



The 'Moon Flower' was on the point of Reid's gardens

Leaning out over the terrace railings I showed Margie the balcony room the two sisters had shared looking out over the garden. After the de Stoop dinner and the unforgettable walk in the moonlight, the girls retired to bed as they were due to leave on the flying boat next day. I was much too excited to think of going to sleep so went back into the garden. I was extremely sorry my new friend was leaving and already missing her company. Of course I ended up in the shadows beneath the girl’s balcony where I unashamedly began singing

Some enchanted evening from the musical *South Pacific*! When I told Margie this she nearly fell over the railing laughing, but that night my singing had the desired effect and the two giggling sisters came to the balcony and told me to go away or they would get into trouble.

As Ann-Françoise seemed to have enjoyed the friendship as much as I had we kept in touch by letter over the winter months. When the next summer holidays came around and my mother suggested that we should go to Madeira again, I immediately wrote and asked Ann-Françoise if she and her family would be there. She wrote back and told me that they unfortunately were not, but asked if I would like to come and stay with them for a week on the way home at their farm outside Lisbon. I was delighted and luckily my mother also thought it was a good idea.

My second summer in Madeira was quite different. I remember playing a lot of tennis with several island boys and being included in their mixed parties, but not having Ann-Françoise there meant it was not nearly as much fun and I couldn't wait to leave for Lisbon. When it was time to go little did I think that within six months I would be sailing past Madeira aboard *Port Napier* as a deckhand on my way round the world via Australia, my English school days over and a lifetime of adventure ahead of me.

The day of departure from the island finally arrived and three hours later we settled into the yellow waters of the Tagus where Ann-Françoise met me. I was so excited I didn't even wait to wave goodbye when the plane took off. The de Stoop family lived on a beautiful estancia surrounded by olive trees a little way out of Lisbon.

Ann-Françoise and I immediately picked up our friendship and I vividly remember our going to the cinema one night. When she suggested it I was really excited as I thought we would be alone, as she had a driving licence. As we were about to leave I was very surprised when a little old lady, dressed in black, climbed into the back seat of the car. It was her old nanny acting as a chaperone! Fortunately the old lady could not speak English so at least our conversation was private, but sitting in the dark with her beside us was pretty daunting as we couldn't even hold hands!

One hot afternoon after the siesta Ann-Françoise and I went for a walk. I was leaving the next day and this would be our last time alone. We strolled down a dusty farm track and came to an old ruined windmill. The roof had fallen in and all that remained was the circular wall with an opening that had once been a door. We went inside to explore and while there we shared our one and only kiss. It was only a light brush of the lips but it was the very first time I had kissed a girl. Thinking about it now I suppose Ann-Françoise must have intended it to happen or we would not have been standing in a ruined windmill, quite out of sight from prying eyes and chaperones. She must have chosen the spot for which I can only thank her as the kiss was a milestone in my life. Male horses might pull the chariot but female hands hold the reins!

Ann-Françoise and I wrote to each other over the next six months during which time I passed my exams and persuaded my parents that it would be better for everyone if I left school. Ann-Françoise, who was an extremely clever student, had arrived in London to study at a college. My mother had seen her several times during my last school term and when holiday time came she suggested that I should ask two of my friends to a theatre party in London and take Ann-Françoise as my partner. The evening arrived and I collected Ann-Françoise looking very sophisticated with her hair up and wearing a long

dress as in those days the men wore black tie to the theatre. I can't recall anything else about the evening except dropping her off at her lodgings and there being *no goodnight kiss*. I guess we had both outgrown those two summers of happiness. For me it turned out to be Australia and for Ann-Françoise it was married life in Luxembourg.

In 1998 I was looking through a magazine in the dentist's waiting room and happened to see an article praising a book about Portuguese architecture written by Martine de Stoop, a name that of course immediately caught my attention. I wondered could this be Ann-Françoise's little sister?

I wrote a letter and addressed it to the publishers asking for it to be forwarded. Weeks later I received a letter telling me that, no, it was not the Martine that I had known, but the wife of Ann-Françoise's younger brother who had married a girl with the same name. The letter also gave me an address in Luxembourg. I wrote off again and soon received an answer from my friend of long ago, telling me that she was happily married to a lawyer with children and grandchildren. When I asked her if she would like to meet again if Margie and I ever passed through Belgium, she bravely agreed.

The following year when we drove down to Italy I decided to go via Luxembourg and call on her. The plan fell into place and we arrived one evening to stay the night with her and her older brother Ivan, who happened to be staying with her. We took them both out to dinner and talked about the past but sadly it was not a success as all we had in common was the past.

All along the Funchal breakwater in 2002 I saw 16-year-old students locked together in passionate embraces. How things have changed over the 50 years since my first kiss when we had to be chaperoned to the cinema!