



## Pioneering project transforms the nature of the Azores into an outdoor hospital

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# The Forest That Heals: the journey of renewal for Belgian patients in the nature of the Azores

**About two dozen patients from a Belgian hospital chose the Azores for a pioneering project that uses nature to promote healing**

**By Sara Sousa Oliveira**

In the heart of the Atlantic, where the green of the cryptomerias touches the gray of the volcanic rocks, a group of Belgian citizens traverse trails that are simultaneously physical paths and routes of in-

trospection. What brings them to the Azores is not conventional tourism of contemplação, but a pioneering scientific and therapeutic project that unites the University of the Azores with the Belgian hospital AZ Monica. Under the concept of Forest Mind (Conscious Forest), this

nature therapy program is transforming how patients with brain injuries, burnout and severe traumas view their recovery process.

The mentor of this initiative, Professor Eduardo Marques, of the University of the Azores, describes the week as much more than an academic exchange. 'We have a moment of human connection, of interculturality,' he says. 'We have here a group of patients who came from a Belgian hospital to the Azores for a program of reconnection with nature and therapies to find paths and strategies to increase their psychological well-being.'

### THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE "FOREST MIND"

The choice of the Azores was not a geographic accident but a clinical decision. Greet Dierckx, Belgian neuropsychologist who works with patients with brain injuries, explains the importance of removing patients from the hospital environment. "It is very important for them to learn tools to keep the brain as healthy and strong as possible. The therapy based



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in nature is a very strong method to keep the body and brain healthy," says the specialist. Greet also notes that the bad weather that battered the archipelago during the week ended up being an unexpected therapeutic tool: "Life is challenging. And this week was very challenging regarding the weather. But we learned a lot. When done in a group, it is even stronger because we exchange experiences and knowledge," she says.

For the participants, the exercises served as mirrors of their own lives. Ann Willems, who joined the project inspired by a friend, used natural elements to draw her "line of life." For her, nature brought a necessary clarity: "This represents me. They are reminders for myself that, in life, we must come first. You have

of being healthy, strong and grounded. If you are safe, everything else interacts and life becomes a harmony," she notes.

That same search for harmony is shared by Nadia Makrache, a businesswoman who faced two episodes of burnout. For Nadia, the surprise was the effectiveness of the dynamics: "made us creative, tor-nourished we calm. We were-we were conscious. It was good to connect with locals and new people, it felt light for sharing."

### OVERCOME THE TRAUMA AND THE INJURY

For those dealing with severe physical and neurological sequelae, the forest offered a new perspective on their abilities. Romelia Schwarzkchel traveled as a guide for a friend who suffered a car accident with brain injuries, but ended up getting deeply involved-

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find a new way of living after what happened.” Helene confesses prefer physical activities: “the surprise of nature here is something I really like. I feel that we don’t just have the four seasons in one day, but all types of nature in the world in one place. It looks like Scotland, then it looks like Hawaii,” he says, referring to the Azores.

The effectiveness of the therapy is measured by what patients take back in their luggage to Belgium. Peter Plusquin, who suffers from symptoms like “brain fog” and lack of concentration, found in the Azores a way to reframe his condition. “The nature of this island helps us connect with ourselves. It’s like a jungle, but

a fresh jungle,” he describes. Peter carries with him mental anchors from the exercises performed: “I found four or five resources that I can use to feel better, they are key elements that I will never

forget. Still have the same symptoms, but I think I have more ways to relate to them.”

**A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE AZORES**

Professor Eduardo Marques believes this is just the beginning of a path that can transform the region into a Health and Wellness Tourism destination. “We can use nature, a resource we have spread across all the islands, as an important asset in providing new

strategies at the health level,” he argues. More than that, the project redefines the role of the modern social worker: “the social worker can also take on a therapist role. I step out of my role as a teacher and assume my role as a social worker and therapist, leading sessions that induce re-

individual rebirth.” Although the path is new and may generate distrust, Eduardo is categorical: “the results prove that this experience is being extremely positive and rewarding.” In the Azores, between the mist and the absolute green, it has been proven that nature is not just a backdrop, but can be an essential part of human healing.

recovery process

ly in the process. “It’s a journey, of course. We had beautiful nature and all kinds of new exercises like using binoculars to witness nature in a different way and see how the brain responds to looking physically in a distinct way,” she explains. Helene Van Der Linden su-

ffered a cerebral hemorrhage a year and a half ago. She admits that initially she hesitated to participate because she didn’t want to be in a “group of patients.” However, the experience changed her view: “as you can see, we are not really a group of patients. We are just people finding



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Patients from AZ Monica Hospital in Antwerp traveled to the Azores

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