

FILIFE D'AVILLEZ



One Thousand Miles to
JAMOR

**A JOURNEY INTO
PORTUGUESE FOOTBALL**

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Road to Jamor

I spent most days in July checking the Portuguese Football Federation's website, trying to figure out when the draw for the first round of the cup was going to be. Nothing. I couldn't even find a list of the clubs that were taking part or the dates of the actual matches.

My goal had been set a few months back, in the final stages of the cup in 2018, when Caldas were making history, progressing to the semi-finals, where they ended up losing to Desportivo das Aves, a small team that would deal Sporting their death blow in the final game of the season, which was ending in despair and total meltdown for the Lisbon-based club, board and team. My idea was to identify the club in the first round of the cup, which was geographically the furthest distance from the national stadium, or Jamor Stadium as it is known, and follow their first game, proceeding then with the winner of that match, and so on, all the way to the final.

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The first and second rounds are the ones that most fans, who usually only follow Portugal's big three, or, at best, the first tier teams, never notice.

But there is a world beyond the top level of football. That is what I was hoping to discover, travelling through a competition which for most of the participants is the most important one they can ever aspire to take part in, let alone win, even if for the actual winners it is often more of an afterthought or a consolation prize for when the main objective, the league, fails.

But there was one difficulty with my plan. Naturally, given Portugal's geography, the most distant club from Jamor would be from the Azores archipelago. With the project only just taking off, and no funding to speak of, it would not be possible to fly to the Azores to cover a game in the first round of the cup.

Finally, the federation announced the date of the draw, 10 August. Around 120 teams would be included, divided into zones according to geography. Fortunately for me, the rules indicate that the clubs from the Azores and Madeira islands play in the Lisbon and Porto series, closer to Portugal's two main airports, making life a little easier for the teams that need to travel. Nevertheless, there was a risk that the club furthest from Jamor would play at home. I would just have to wait for the draw.

When the results of the draw were announced, a couple of other fixtures caught my attention. If all

else failed I could kick the book off with Torreense–Coutada, a Torres Vedras derby that had never been played in official tournaments, or with a 1º de Dezembro–Sintrense, a heated Sintra derby.

The Azores clubs were easy enough to identify. Two of them were from the small island of Graciosa: Graciosa Futebol Clube and Sport Clube Marítimo, known as Marítimo Graciosa, so as not to confuse them with Clube Sport Marítimo from Madeira, possibly the most important of Portugal’s island-based clubs.

Which was the greatest distance from Jamor? I ended up calling it a draw, since both are based in the same town, Santa Cruz da Graciosa, and play in the same stadium, around 1,600 kilometres (1,000 miles) from the national stadium. So the tie-breaker ended up being which was the most practical for me. Whereas Marítimo Graciosa had drawn Angrense, also from the Azores, Graciosa FC would have the ‘luck’ of travelling to the mainland to play Casa Pia, which just happens to be one of the clubs closest to my house, after rivals Belenenses and Atlético Clube de Portugal, and the closest to my workplace.

So it was decided, the first game to follow would be Graciosa FC against Casa Pia, to take place in the Pina Manique stadium on 9 September.

Sons of the volcano

*Casa Pia Atlético Clube–Graciosa
Futebol Clube (9 August 2018)*

‘Volcanoes and earthquakes! You have no idea!’

Over the years of going to football games I have seen many fans yell at opposition players who dive, but this one was something new.

I am surrounded by people who were, indeed, raised amidst earthquakes and were born, as one of the chants sung by Graciosa Futebol Clube fans puts it, ‘in the middle of a volcano’.

With a population of just under 5,000, Graciosa is one of the more distant islands of the Azores archipelago, located about halfway between Europe and America, in the middle of the Atlantic. But the island also has many friends, which helps explain why there are close to 50 people in the stands to watch the game in the first round of the Portuguese Cup.

It is an uneven match. On one side are Casa Pia who play in the Portuguese Championship, the third tier of Portuguese football, and on the other a team that had played in the island championship the previous season, against only two opponents, having been promoted to the Azores Series, which covers the entire archipelago and is equivalent to the mainland's District Leagues, or fourth tier. The Casa Pia players are coached by former Benfica player Ruben Amorim and include among their number the brother of Benfica central-defender Ruben Dias. They are professionals and none of the Graciosans beside me in the stand had any illusions about the difficulty of the task faced by their friends on the field.

My afternoon with the sons of the volcano began earlier. I met the first fans in the locally famous David da Buraca restaurant, some 200 metres from the Pina Manique stadium. João Santos – or Janeko – the first Graciosa fan I made contact with over Facebook, was there with his friend Luís, who is from Porto and supports FC Porto but fell in love with the small island and travelled 300 kilometres just to see the game. I was introduced to Paulo Jorge, the club's treasurer, but also, I soon discover, a former player and island champion for both Graciosa and their arch-rivals Sport Clube Marítimo. And, if that isn't enough, he is also the president of the Town Council of Santa Cruz da Graciosa, the island's capital.

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A little before 3pm we leave the restaurant and head to the stadium, where other Graciosans and friends begin to assemble. Many are wearing the club's characteristic red and yellow stripes. The team had just arrived and headed to the dressing rooms, and soon club chairman André Silva arrived to distribute the free tickets, which the Football Federation gave them.

That's not all the FPF had to give. The island clubs receive 3,000 euros to help with their travel costs, but Paulo, the treasurer, explained that this is not enough to cover all the expenses. The consensus, however, is that the financial sacrifice is worth it.

'It's a big effort, but this is something which will go down in the history of the club, it's only the second time we've played on the mainland for the cup, and there was another tie back home, but it is a big sacrifice for a team our size,' he tells me.

Based out of the town of Santa Cruz da Graciosa, FC Graciosa is, along with its neighbour and rival Sport Clube Marítimo, the team which, in this edition of the Portuguese Cup, hails from furthest away from the national stadium, in the Jamor Valley, known among most fans simply as Jamor, just outside of Lisbon. It's over 1,600 kilometres, but it might as well be on another planet, because the Jamor is little more than a mirage.

Next to the Dom Leitão restaurant, a name which in English could be rendered Sir Suckling Pig, other fans of the yellow and reds start to assemble. André Silva

says he is expecting less than 30 fans to show up, mostly natives of the island who already live on the mainland with some friends. The trip is too expensive for most locals to make to follow their team.

In their team colours, Janeko and his friend Luís couldn't hide their excitement at being able to see their friends play in Lisbon. And this is not an overstatement. They are actually all friends, I am told.

'There might be one or two younger players I don't know, since I moved away from the island 12 years ago, so they would still be very young, but I'd definitely be able to tell who their mother or father is from the look of them,' Janeko insists.

There is a very familiar feel to the whole thing. Sara, at 11 is, at that moment, the only child present. She was born in Lisbon but is the daughter of Duarte, who in turn is the brother of team captain and former club president Pedro Andrade. Their father is also on the board of the club.

Janeko tells me that the rivalry with Sport Clube Marítimo, who on the same day are playing their cup tie against Angrense, also from the Azores, is family based and, although serious, is not as bad as it once was.

'There is a rivalry. You can't say it's as intense as Benfica–Sporting,' he says, in reference to Lisbon's two major clubs, 'but it is close. As the years pass these rivalries tend to become healthier. It may have been greater at one point, but currently it's healthy.'

Does it ever become violent? The mere suggestion makes him laugh. The island is so small that it would be very complicated if that ever happened, he assures me.

As more fans arrive we begin to see that the chairman's guess of less than 30 fans is going to come up short. Beer flows and it is apparent that around half of these fans are not even from the island, just friends, like Luís Barbosa, who was introduced to the club by islander friends who he went to university with. He has visited almost every summer for over a decade. Being such a small island, he also has friends who support Marítimo, but he has no doubt as to where his allegiance lies.

'The people in whose house I stay are traditional Graciosa fans, so ever since I first visited, it's always been the club for me. I am blue and white for Porto, but also red and yellow for Graciosa.'

Ângelo Silva comes from Santarém, just north of Lisbon. This year his neighbour Duarte Nuno convinced him to visit the island during the holidays and he fell in love with the place. He proudly shows us his club member card, which has just been handed to him, and which doesn't have a number, although nobody seems able to explain why. He is a Benfica fan originally, but he admits that this is a different experience altogether. For Graciosa this first cup tie is one of the most important games of the whole season.

Ângelo is by far one of the livelier of the crowd today and chats happily to some elderly Casa Pia fans who are nearby. Returning to the group, he says he was scouting for clients. Everybody laughs and, when they see the blank look on my face, explain that he owns a funeral home. Business must be good, because it was he who rented the bus which brought the Graciosa fans to the game today.

Just before 5pm the last beers are downed as people prepare to make their way to the stands when we begin to hear excited noises, and a group of Azorean fans emerges from the restaurant surrounding a black employee. It turns out that Gil Quintas, former Casa Pia player and team captain, also played with Graciosa for a season. He was on the team at the same time as Jorge Paulo. The fans gather around him as if he was a rare but valuable trophy. What are the odds? Fate seems to be smiling upon them, and Gil is generous in his praise of the Graciosa fans who, he says, treated him so well during his season on the island.

‘I am so grateful for what they did for me when I was there, and one day I’ll return to visit them, as I’m sure I will be as welcome as I was when I was first there. It’s great to see them here today, playing in this competition, which is the joy of the people,’ he says.

Today, he admits, his heart is divided.

A few of the fans are wearing official club jerseys, some nicer than others, but most are wearing yellow

or red t-shirts stamped with 'Two Times Champions 2017/18'. This is a reference to the island league, and is therefore an achievement of the same scale as the island which, despite being so small, boasts five football clubs.

There is arch-rival Marítimo, of course – not to be confused with the far more successful Marítimo from the island of Madeira, a constant presence in the top tier – with which Graciosa shares a ground, but there is also Guadalupe, only five kilometres away. The remaining two teams are Luzense and Praiense. Guadalupe and Marítimo, my friends explain, have many benefactors among the large Azorean community in the USA and a budget several times that of Graciosa. To illustrate, they decline a regional government grant of almost 10,000 euros by not drawing enough players from their youth squads, whereas Graciosa fans are proud of the fact that their whole team is composed of Azores natives, and most are actually from the island. From what they tell me, some of their island rivals pay players up to 1,500 euros a month, more than many teams in the third tier.

Last season the island league was played between only Graciosa, Luzense and Praiense, but with Graciosa now promoted to the Azores Series, in which Marítimo already play, and to which Guadalupe were relegated, there will no longer be an island league as there needs to be at least three teams to have a competition.

‘It’s a shame,’ says André Silva, ‘they made some big investments to have competitive teams, and now they won’t be able to compete.’

‘Couldn’t they join a neighbouring island’s league?’ I ask. ‘They could play in the Terceira island, but they can’t afford the travel costs,’ he replies.

From hope to resignation

Kick-off time arrives and I count 60 fans in our stand, although at least seven are clearly foreign. More on that later.

The players take to the field and a minute’s silence is observed in honour of the death of one of the founders of Graciosa. Proper silence, not the modern trend of clapping. As soon as the ref’s whistle is heard someone calls out the inevitable ‘win it for him!’

The players take up their positions and Janeko, sporting a tattoo of the outline of the island of Graciosa on his calf, says, ‘You know we’re going to win this, don’t you?’ But he’s wrong.

The support is incessant, players are called by name, by fans who have known them since childhood. Goalkeeper Leandro Benjamim, only 17, puts on a fantastic show and a few balls bounce off the woodwork, but they can’t stop the home team from returning to the dressing room with a 3-0 advantage. There was a lot of effort from Graciosa, but not a single shot on goal.

At one point a Graciosa official points to the field. Number 14, Tomás, used to play for Marítimo, but he returned to Graciosa, where he had played as a boy, when the team were promoted. He gave up a 1,300-euro salary to play for the club he loves. The story is confirmed by other fans. This is the sort of devotion from a player that captures the heart of any proper football fan, and I begin to feel that the ten euros I paid for one of the yellow t-shirts André Silva carries in his backpack was worth it. I'd rather have bought an official jersey, but I didn't have the extra 15 euros on me at the time.

Players' passion doesn't necessarily bring results, though. During a phone conversation a few days earlier, André Silva had complained to me that many of their players were absent. I imagined he meant injuries, but apparently not. Two are sitting important school exams on another island, and their best central-defender, Tomás, is in Canada for the wedding of a relative.

I use the half-time break to chat to some of the foreigners I had spotted earlier. A group of five young Germans seemed unsure about how they'd ended up here in the first place. They were visiting Lisbon, and had wanted to take in a game. This was the closest fixture. Before the final whistle they were well on their way. But Per and Peter from Sweden are proper football fans and always use their holidays to visit new grounds and watch new teams. The quality of the football is underwhelming – although they are impressed by a

couple of the Casa Pia players – but the fact that they can buy beer for one euro wins them over. So does the enthusiasm of the Graciosa fans, which leads to André Silva reaching into his backpack again. He went to pull out a t-shirt, but I told him in Portuguese to go straight for the jerseys, what is 25 euros to a Swede? That's another 50 euros to help towards the travel costs, and two new Swedish fans.

No one expects the boys to turn the score around in the second half, but they at least dream of celebrating a goal. The closest they get to celebration, though, is when Casa Pia sends their second penalty of the game screaming over the bar, following the sending off of a Graciosa player by a rather over-zealous referee. Three more shots do find the back of the net though, for a harsh final score of 6-0.

If the fans at the ground are resigned to the loss, on the island hope lives on. The game is not being televised and there isn't even radio or online commentary, so when Jorge Paulo gets a call from home to ask how things are going he tells the person on the other end of the line that Graciosa are 2-0 up, although Casa Pia are really pressing hard. He hangs up and laughs: 'For the next ten minutes the island will be on fire!'

Nothing like a good sense of humour to deal with defeat and elimination.

In fact, in terms of humour, it's the Azoreans who are in the lead. One fan comments that because of the

time difference (the archipelago is one hour behind Lisbon time), they still have time to turn the score around, and another says that since the VAT is lower in the Azores they might be able to have some of the goals deducted.

And then, of course, there are the constant references to the volcano, which clearly occupies an important place in the imagination of the inhabitants of the white island, as Graciosa is called, due to the light tone taken on by the fields in the summer, when there is less water.

'At this, we are unbeatable'

The final whistle blows and it's as if they didn't lose. The players come over to the sideline to thank the fans and the applause and support carries on for several minutes, with the supporters, led by Janeko, erupting into the official club anthem, an apparently endless song with complicated lyrics and folkloric tune, though everybody seems to know it off by heart. The party will go on outside.

We gather near a car in the parking lot which has its boot open, and there are coolers full of beers. After showering, the players come out as well, to mingle with their friends. Everybody drinks, except the goalkeeper, who looks even younger here than on the pitch, and who is busy with his phone. I make a point of congratulating him for his performance; he doesn't seem too put out. I am not, nor have I ever pretended to be, a scout or a

sofa manager, but something tells me that this kid could dream bigger than the limits of the beautiful 'white island' on which he was born.

The captain, Pedro Andrade, has no doubt that despite the result the experience was worth it. 'This is a dream we have always had. We finally managed to play in the Portuguese Cup this year, we came and did our best, aware of the difficulties, but I think we did our best and dignified the club.'

The club could be more successful if it signed players from outside the island, but that would be a betrayal of its principles. 'Our policy is to invest in the youth teams, 80 per cent of our team comes from the youth teams, myself included. Youth teams, Azoreans and preferably Graciosans,' he says, as his niece Sara, bursting with pride, collects autographs on her red t-shirt.

Chairman André Silva is a quiet man, but he can't hide his emotion at having been able to lead the club for this opportunity. For a small side like Graciosa, playing in the Portuguese Cup is an historic achievement, regardless of the score.

With a beer in his hand he relaxes a little before getting on the bus back to the hostel where the team is staying. 'At this,' he says, raising the bottle, 'we are unbeatable,' and he takes another swig.

The home fans have long gone, so by now there are only Graciosa fans around the stadium. We hear calls from a taxi that is about to leave and look around to see

Per and Peter waving goodbye. Everybody yells back, 'farewell'.

'We lost 6-0, but we won two Swedes,' someone says.

I ask everybody to gather so that I can take a group photograph, but they insist I join them. Players, fans, even the infiltrated journalist, all friends, beers in hand and the beautiful blue and white Azorean flag laid out in front of us.

It's getting late, and I have to leave. Some embrace me, others wave. I wish those who are returning to the white island a good trip and before I leave another beer bottle is pressed into my hand.

As I walk the 500 metres or so between the stadium and the head office of Renascença where I work, I watch as the Portuguese national side's bus drives along a nearby road, most likely returning from Benfica's Estádio da Luz, where Portugal will play Italy the next day for the first game of the newly created UEFA Nations League, and I am suddenly struck by the abyss separating the reality from which I am just emerging and that represented by this bus, decorated with images of Portugal players lifting the European Champions Cup.

It's 1,600 kilometres from Graciosa to Jamor, but in football terms the distance seems infinite.

Other noteworthy results

Graciosa's dream lasted only 90 minutes, and so I will be following Casa Pia in the next round.

But the 6-0 scoreline was not the worst defeat of this first round; that record goes to Vila Flor Sport Clube, from the district of Bragança, who lost 9-0 to Felgueiras. Gafetense lost at home to Santa Iria 8-0.

At least the Graciosa fans will not have to deal with the mockery of their rivals, since Marítimo were also knocked out, losing 3-0 away to Angrense, also from the Azores. Meanwhile Vale Formoso, another Azorean team, also came to the mainland to play against Pinhalnovense. The home team were unable to translate their dominance into goals and at the end of the 90 minutes the score was still 0-0, with Pinhalnovense reduced to ten players. However, only ten minutes into extra time the locals finally scored, and after that Vale Formoso, who like Graciosa have still to play an official game in their home league, collapsed on the field, losing 5-0.

The two derbies which had attracted my attention seem to have been interesting, with Torreense defeating Coutada, as was expected, 2-0 and Sintrense winning away against 1º de Dezembro 2-1.

In a game which had completely escaped my attention, União de Leiria defeated Benfica e Castelo Branco 2-1, even though one of their players, Nailson, was sent off during the game.

Sertanense, Loures and Vila Real also make it through, defeating Beditense, Portalegrense and

Sanjoanense respectively. Loures crush their opponents 6-1, but Vila Real need a penalty shoot-out.

The first round saw a total of 175 goals in 56 games, with an average of three goals a game. The big wins made up for the six 0-0 draws which, naturally, were decided by a penalty shoot-out. Home teams won in 25 of the games, and the away teams triumphed in 31.

The next draw is scheduled for Tuesday of the following week. For 22 of the teams that were eliminated, there is the chance of continuing in the competition from the '*repechage*', but neither Graciosa nor Marítimo are so lucky. Vale Formoso however, despite their 5-0 defeat in extra time, will get the chance to play in the cup again.

I am hoping that Casa Pia will play at home because I am working that weekend and wasn't able to swap, so it would be handy to be just half a kilometre from the action. I am working in Fátima when the news comes in. Casa Pia, at home, against Olímpico de Montijo. The celebration of the cup continues.