

HOW MY AZOREAN ANCESTORS
AND TRAVELS AROUND THE WORLD
LED ME TO DISCOVER MY CONNECTION TO
RAINHA SANTA ISABEL

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PHOTO: MONASTERY OF SANTA CLARA-AZENHOVA / MAY 2016



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WHAT DO THESE HAVE IN COMMON?

What do these have in common? A trip to Vietnam, a Queen of Portugal, an original settler of the Azores islands, a DNA test, Spain and San Diego, California.

No – it's not a trick question, but surely still has you stumped! And looking back, it sometimes has me baffled – how my travels around the world, spurred by my curiosity of my ancestry led me to meet new people and hear new stories, and visit new places I could never have imagined. Which sounds pretty common, I know. I mean, for some, travelling can be a journey of self-discovery, breaking out of shells and experiencing new things.

But for me, the unexpected journey led me to learn about my 20th great-grandmother, Rainha Santa Isabel – also known as Queen Elizabeth of Portugal, or Elizabeth of Aragon. Now I don't know about you, but the fact that I'm connected to a Queen is pretty cool! Not just any Queen. THE Queen.

Do you know who you're connected to? Take a moment to even imagine how far back your family ties go ...

Well, all it took was that one question to get me started.

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HANOI, VIETNAM AND COIMBRA, PORTUGAL



Tam Coc, Vietnam

In the fall of 2014, I took my very first solo trip from Toronto, Canada to Southeast Asia. It was a rainy morning in Hanoi, Vietnam, when I got on a tour bus to explore Tam Coc for the day. Admittedly, I hate group tours – they’re so monochromatic – but decided I’d suck it up and go anyway. I was travelling alone, after all.

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HANOI, VIETNAM AND COIMBRA, PORTUGAL



Jorge and Alexandra / Tam Coc, Vietnam / Oct 2014

And if I hadn't gone, I wouldn't have met a lovely couple, Alexandra and Jorge. We chatted on the bus ride back to Hanoi about our respective travels, and I don't even remember how it came up but it turned out all three of us were Portuguese! They were from Coimbra, on the mainland of Portugal, and my parents originated from the Azores islands. When we returned to Hanoi, we exchanged social media info and said our goodbyes. I wondered if I would ever see them again.

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GENEALOGY AND NANCY DREW



Sete Cidades, Sao Miguel, Azores / September 2015

How many of us really know where we come from? I've always been interested in learning about my ancestors, but I never really meant to dig too deep into the roots of my family tree. But late one night I came across the Azorean church records online - and it wasn't long before I found myself scrolling through baptism, marriage and death records for over 6 generations of my Azorean ancestors, back into the 1700s.

The 1700s!!! How cool is that?! I wanted to go back even further, 600 years ago to the first settlers of the Azores in the 1400s. Who knew records that far back even existed! And once those sleuth seeds were planted, I couldn't help myself. Channeling my inner Nancy Drew, I travelled to Benavente and Toledo, Spain, in search of finding evidence of my 13th great-grandfather, Joao Afonso das Grotas Fundas, an original settler of Sao Miguel, Azores.

Remember this man!



*click here for:
Azorean church records*

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FOLLOWING MY DNA TO THE AZORES



Azorean Genealogy books at the Ponta Delgada library / Sep 2015

Did you know you can test your DNA for genealogical purposes? Me neither. Well I ended up doing it in the spring of 2015, and it connected me to some confirmed DNA cousins – so I was able to add a few more branches to my family tree!

In September, 2015, I travelled to the Azores on a “follow-my-DNA” trip. Yes, turns out that also exists. Who knew? I wanted to do some research because I’ve been mulling over the idea of producing a documentary of the Azores. I spent most of my time in the library in Ponta Delgada, buried deep in Azorean genealogy books.

I stopped by Lisbon for a few days to do a bit more research on the mainland, when I remembered that Alexandra and Jorge (that lovely couple I met almost a year earlier in Vietnam) lived in Coimbra, Portugal. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to visit my new friends before returning to Toronto.

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THE MIRACLE OF THE ROSES



me and Alexandra at Portugal dos Pequenitos



Alexandra telling me the story of Rainha Santa Isabel

Alexandra met me at the train station and suggested we visit Portugal dos Pequenitos, a theme park with miniature versions of Portuguese houses and monuments. Alexandra stopped to admire a particular doll, and started telling me a story about Rainha Santa Isabel – who, at the age of 17, married King Denis of Portugal in 1288.

Named after her great-aunt, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, Rainha Santa Isabel was quite charitable toward the poor, establishing orphanages and providing shelter for the homeless. However, her husband, King Denis, forbid her to give to the poor. One day, having hid bread in her apron to give away, she encountered her husband, who asked her what she was carrying. Hesitantly, she responded that they were roses, and when she opened her apron to show the King, the bread had miraculously transformed into roses. King Denis couldn't understand how she could be in possession of fresh roses in January, and did not punish his wife

This was the first time I ever heard of Rainha Santa Isabel, and instantly fell in love with this captivating woman. I wouldn't know in that moment, but 6 months later I would make a connection to this story.

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A ROYAL TRIP TO CALIFORNIA



*Meeting Cheri, my distant cousin /
San Diego, California / March 2016*

In March, 2016, I took a research trip to San Diego, California for my Azorean documentary, and while there I was able to take advantage of finally meeting my cousin, Cheri, who I had connected with via DNA testing and matching. Cheri kindly showed me around the UPSES Hall & Chapel, home to many of San Diego's Portuguese social & civic organizations.

While wandering through the hall, I came across a statue of Rainha Santa Isabel, and when Cheri saw my excitement she responded that we are related to her.

What?!!!!

I needed to know more! I asked Cheri to send me information on how we were connected. Remember that original settler, Joao Afonso das Grotas Fundas? He was my gateway ancestor!

I'm sure you can imagine my excitement! In fact, I couldn't wait to get home to tell my mother that we're connected to a Queen! Not just any Queen. THE Queen.



*click here for:
details of the connection*

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SPOILER ALERT: I CAN'T STOP NOW!

I'm heading to Portugal in a few weeks (May 7th, 2016) where I'll begin my 100km pilgrimage to Fatima. I've decided to start in Coimbra instead of Lisbon. I might be motivated to go and properly acknowledge someone very special and inspiring to me.

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