

Madeira & The Desertas Islands - A Seabird Extravaganza

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Fly Funchal
Day 2	Birding, Madeira
Day 3	Desertas Islands overnight trip
Day 4	Desertas Islands & return Funchal
Day 5	Fly London

Departs

June and August

Focus

Birds & marine mammals

Grading

A/B. Mainly easy day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PRT02) or brochure

Highlights

- Unique overnight stay on Desertas Grande - ultimate Western Palearctic destination for the seabird enthusiast
- Privately chartered sailing boat for inter-island crossings, seabird and cetacean watching
- Nesting colonies of Bulwer's Petrel, Madeiran Storm-petrel and Cory's Shearwater
- Night-time walk to Zino's Petrel colony
- Trocaz Pigeon, Madeiran Firecrest plus other regional endemics and subspecies
- Common, Bottlenose & Atlantic Spotted Dolphins; Short-finned Pilot, Bryde's and even Sperm and Fin Whales



Fea's Petrel by Luis Dias



Sperm Whale by Luis Dias



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Introduction

Madeira is a special place. Its golden light, dramatic scenery and ubiquitous exotic-looking flowers offer the visitor a visual feast from the moment of arrival. Less well-known, perhaps, is that Madeira is an island of true wildlife gems, in particular its birdlife, and it is some of these which we will be taking you to enjoy on this new tour.

The Madeiran archipelago is a seabird watcher's paradise and we will begin our exploration of Madeiran birds with a night visit to the breeding site of Zino's Petrel – a Madeiran endemic and one of Europe's most threatened species. This excursion provides a very atmospheric start to our tour – listening to the petrels' eerie calls at dusk as they return to their colonies is an unforgettable experience. Next, we focus on Madeira's special land birds, with a full day spent going in search of the endemic Trocaz Pigeon and Madeiran Firecrest. We'll also be searching for Berthelot's Pipit, Pallid and Plain Swifts, and a range of other island and regional endemic species and subspecies. Madeira has so much to offer that we will take our time enjoying its flowers and insect life too, as we go in search of our target bird species.

Considering its relative isolation, it is not surprising that Madeira has so much unusual wildlife. Located in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean, some 560 kilometres off the north-west coast of Africa, the Madeiran archipelago consists of five larger islands and a few small islets. The Desertas Islands, 25 kilometres south-east of Madeira, are designated as a Special Protection Area for their internationally important seabird populations and it is to these islands we will head next, by boat, going in search of the seabirds, marine mammals and endangered Monk Seals for which these remote rocky islands are a sanctuary.

A boat ride on these clear, Prussian blue waters is a joy in itself. The sea here is home to many species of whale and dolphin, and boats setting off from Funchal harbour are frequently joined by bow-riding Bottlenose Dolphins and pods of Pilot Whales as well as a variety of other larger cetacean species, such as Sperm Whales and Bryde's (pronounced 'broo-dess') Whales. This is arguably the ultimate destination for anyone with an interest in the seabirds of the Western Palearctic and we'll be keeping watch as we cruise for Cory's, Great and Manx Shearwaters and, with luck, Bulwer's Petrel, Madeiran Storm-petrel and the two much sought-after petrels, Fea's and Zino's!

Madeira has a way of captivating visitors in a way that few other places do. It offers a variety of interesting endemic land and seabird species, as well as vivid year-round blooms and insect life. It is home to an internationally significant population of endangered Mediterranean Monk Seals and, despite offering some very good whale and dolphin-watching, is relatively undiscovered as a destination for seeing marine mammals. Why not come and see for yourselves!



Cory's Shearwater and Ventura do Mar by Luis Dias and Madeiran Firecrest by Paul Marshall

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some reordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Funchal

We depart today on a flight to Funchal Airport on Madeira. We are due to arrive in the evening and we'll transfer directly to our hotel from where you will be free to wander down the hill in to Funchal to sample a local restaurant. If morning flights happen to be scheduled between the UK and Funchal then this opens up the possibility of an additional, optional pelagic boat trip, details for which we'd provide nearer the time (the cost being extra).

Day 2

Birdwatching, Madeira

We will make an early start today in order to coincide with the morning activities of several bird species. In particular we will be hoping to see the endemic Trocaz Pigeon (*Columba trocaz*) and the endemic subspecies of Madeira Firecrest (*Regulus madeirensis*). The island is home to a variety of other interesting birdlife, such as Pallid Swift (*Apus pallidus*), Spectacled Warbler (*Sylvia conspicillata bella*) and several local races of more familiar species such as Buzzard (*Buteo buteo harterti*), Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla heineken*) and Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs maderensis*).

We will pass through several typical Madeiran habitats today, and we will be looking for the characteristic bird species in each one we visit. One of the most distinctive of these is the island's native laurisilva forest. Laurisilva is a forest type found only in Macaronesia and on Madeira once covered some 60 per cent of the land area. Deforestation has, however, meant that it is now reduced to about 10,000 hectares, or 16 per cent of the land area. The climate of the north slope of Madeira is much wetter than the southern slope and it is here that the majority of the remaining evergreen laurisilva forest is to be found. The laurisilva forest of Madeira is characterised by the presence of the Lily-of-the-valley Tree (*Clethra arborica*) and is also the only place in the world where the rare Madeiran Trocaz Pigeon (*Columba trocaz*) can be found. We should get glimpses of these birds as they fly swiftly over the forest canopy and we'll be hoping to see one or two perched in the open as well.

We will also visit some of Madeira's spectacular mountainous scenery today. The deep ravines and gorges and fascinating rock formations reflect the island's volcanic origin. We'll be hoping to see Buzzards (*Buteo buteo harterti*) here, and regular stops as we cross various different landscapes today should give us views of Plain Swift (*Apus unicolor*), Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus granti*) and Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus canariensis*). We'll also be searching for one of Madeira's few breeding land species, Berthelot's Pipit (*Anthus berthelotii madeirensis*). We may also encounter Rock Sparrows. These birds were formerly widespread on Madeira but have declined dramatically in numbers in the last few years, probably due to competition with House Sparrows, which are recent colonists.

Madeira has 113 species of plants that are endemic to the archipelago and, though our focus will be on birds today, we may spot some of its attractive flora, such as the Madeiran Marsh Orchid, Anemone-leaved Stork's-bill and

Madeira Stock. We are also likely to come across a number of butterflies during our wanderings, such as the endemic Madeiran Speckled Wood.

Most of today will be concerned with looking for Madeira's special land bird species. However, we'll make time to stop and look out to sea at various viewing points, such as at Porto Moniz, which will give us a chance to start looking for the diverse seabirds of the region – a taste of what our cruise to the Desertas Islands will bring!

In the evening we will be free once again to stroll in to Funchal to sample one of the local restaurants.

Day 3

Desertas Islands

Today we will be picked up at the hotel and driven to Funchal harbour for our guided cruise to the Desertas Islands, a delightful journey of about 3½ hours. It is well worthwhile beginning to watch for interesting wildlife immediately, even before we have left the harbour. Despite the visiting cruise ships and other traffic in this small port, Monk Seals are occasionally spotted here, as well as pods of dolphins or Pilot Whales! The views back towards Madeira as we head out to sea are beautiful, too.

The Desertas Islands belong to the Madeiran archipelago and are located 21 nautical miles from Funchal harbour. In 1990 the Desertas became a Nature Reserve, comprising the islands themselves and the surrounding sea to a depth of 100 metres. The reserve is divided into two protected zones of which the southern half of Deserta Grande and Bugio are strictly forbidden to visitors even by boat. On Deserta Grande there is a permanent research station with three wardens, who are the only human inhabitants of the islands today. In 1992 Desertas became part of the European Biogenetic Reserves, to protect its breeding populations of seabirds and the Monk Seals which use the islands as a sanctuary and for breeding.

This tour really is an extravaganza for birdwatchers, and as we make our way towards the Desertas Islands, we'll be on the look-out for a range of species, including Cory's, Manx and Great Shearwater, Bulwer's and Fea's Petrel and, with much luck, Zino's Petrels, too.

We are likely to be joined by a range of marine mammals. Bottlenose Dolphins are common and frequently make use of the sub-surface pressure wave, bow-riding, leaping and diving in front of the boat. Common Dolphins are also often seen and it is exciting to watch as their sleek bodies shoot through the water in groups to accompany the boat. Look out for the tell-tale hourglass patterning on the flanks of this attractive species of dolphin as they clear the water. Another species commonly seen here is the Pilot Whale – they can often be seen 'logging', or resting, at the surface in small pods. It's worth listening out for vocalizations whenever dolphins or Pilot Whales are spotted as these can sometimes be heard or felt through the boat. Larger cetaceans are seen in these waters, too – Sperm Whales are present at this time of year, feeding in the deep water canyons and trenches that surround the island of Madeira. Bryde's Whales, a relative of the Fin and Blue Whale, are also a possibility.

As we approach the Desertas Islands they appear much larger and higher than they appeared when seen from Madeira, and their ruggedness and scale is impressive. The Mediterranean Monk Seal is one of the planet's most critically endangered mammals, and there are only thought to be about 600 left in the world. A tiny colony of about 20 individuals inhabits the beaches on Desertas and since 1990 they have been protected. We may be lucky enough

to see one swimming in the water – they have a broad snout, extremely long whiskers, and make a distinctive puffing noise which may be heard if conditions are sufficiently quiet and still.

We will drop anchor in Doca Bay on arrival, in front of the warden's research station belonging to Madeira Natural Park. After an opportunity to swim, snorkel and fish spot in the tantalisingly clear water, we will undertake a guided walking tour of the island, visiting nesting areas of Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters. We may then undertake a short pelagic before dusk falls, when rafts of birds congregate on the sea offshore. As darkness descends, Bulwer's Petrels are normally the first birds ashore; their dog-like barking being heard all around! Some fly so close that their wings almost slap you, before they thud clumsily ashore. Cory's Shearwaters will also be heard (they breed higher up the cliff) and, a little later in the night, the Madeiran storm-petrels will arrive, their squeaky calls calling our attention. For those that wish to do so, it is possible to sit up on deck, and even sleep on deck, listening to the calls and looking at the moonlit silhouettes of shearwaters, petrels and storm-petrels! This is nighttime birding at its best!

Conditions on the boat are basic; the 'beds' (narrow mattresses) are crammed into a small communal space. Those who require more privacy and comfort need to question whether they are prepared to 'do what it takes' to visit this special place. We can email some photos of the accommodation on the boat for those who require a further inspection – please contact us. You are also free to sleep up on deck or on dry land next to the warden's refuge where there are simple facilities for overnighting. In either case a light sleeping bag will be required. If you do not want to bring one from home a lightweight bag can be bought inexpensively from one of the sports shops around Funchal harbour.

Day 4

Desertas Islands to Funchal

From 5am the Cory's will begin to file away for a day out at sea. By 6 o'clock most will have left and by daylight, the show is usually over. During the daytime Desertas is a very peaceful place; a few terns, Canaries and Berthelot's Pipits going about their business, as well as an important, but small, population of Monk Seals. If we see one of the 20 or so individuals which live here, we will be very lucky!

We leave our island hideaway for Madeira after breakfast today, and are due to arrive back in Funchal by 1.30pm. The 3½-hour return trip will provide opportunities to look for any species we didn't manage to see the day before, and to spend more time admiring Madeira's diverse seabirds and marine mammals.

After an afternoon of relaxation and an early meal, we'll head out for our night-time visit to the breeding site of one of Europe's most endangered birds, the Zino's Petrel (*Pterodroma madeira*). There are an estimated 65 to 80 breeding pairs on the island, mostly confined to the mountainous central massif, which is part of the Madeira Natural Park. Led by an experienced local guide we will aim to arrive in time to hear the birds' eerie cries as they return to their breeding site. This species was considered extinct by the middle of the last century, then re-discovered in 1969! Access to the breeding site is allowed only with a certified guide in order to minimize impact on these very special endemic seabirds at their breeding site and we will be some of the privileged few! Waiting in silence for the birds' calls in this splendid location is an unforgettable experience! After enjoying this rare spectacle we will head back to our hotel for our last night on Madeira.

Day 5

This morning, after a leisurely breakfast, you will have free time before a transfer to the airport to catch your flight home.

Grading

This tour is graded A/B with mainly easy (and optional) day walks. The night-time walk to the Zino's Petrel breeding site involves a 25-minute trek across moderate terrain. Anyone reasonably fit will easily be able to manage this. The path and scenery are spectacular here but there are steep drop offs (although railings are present) so this outing is not suitable for those who suffer from vertigo. Bring a torch or head torch for this excursion.

Food & accommodation

We will be staying at a comfortable, family-run hotel in the outskirts of the capital, Funchal. All food is included in the price of this tour, except for three evening meals in Funchal, for which you should allow approximately £100. You will need to bring a sleeping bag for the night spent on the boat at the Desertas Islands.

Extra nights

We can book extra nights at our hotel so please enquire about prices if you are interested in extending your stay. We are also able to provide car rental if required.

Flights

We will be choosing from the schedules offered by TAP Air Portugal and Easyjet. We advise early booking to secure seats on the limited direct flights between the UK and Funchal.

Clothing

You will be sent a full clothing list in your pre-departure information, sent upon booking. For the night-time Zino's Petrel excursion you will need warm clothing, a raincoat and comfortable walking shoes.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

