

# Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Fly Faial; transfer Pico
<b>Day 2/6</b>	Whale and dolphin-watching trips; some birding and sightseeing on Pico
<b>Day 7</b>	Transfer Faial; fly London

### Departs

August

### Focus

Whales and dolphins; some birding opportunities.

### Grading

Grade A. Zodiac-style boat trips, plus some easy birding walks.

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PRT05) or brochure

### Highlights

- World class whale-watching – in Europe!
- Look for family groups of Sperm Whales in August & September
- Guided by local expert naturalists
- Convenient & comfortable 4-star harbourside hotel
- A chance to see Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, plus more unusual cetaceans such as Beaked Whales



Images: Atlantic Striped Dolphins (top), Sperm Whale courtesy of Justin Hart and Common Dolphin (bottom), Ed Drewitt



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## Introduction

In the Atlantic Ocean, half way between Europe and North America, the Azores are the westernmost frontier of the European Community. Viewed by some as the legendary Atlantis, these nine islands sweep in a long arch along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, all are of volcanic origin and still active. They are split into three groups, the western islands of Flores and Corvo, the central and largest group comprising Faial, Pico, São Jorge, Graciosa and Terceira and the eastern islands of São Miguel and Santa Maria. The highest point on the islands (and of Portugal) is Mount Pico which rises to just over 2,351 metres (7,700 feet).

The climate throughout the Azores is generally mild due to the influence of the Gulf Stream. The scenery on the islands is delightful and each island has its own distinctive features, despite being relatively close to one another. The islands' combination of mountains, sparkling seas, jewel-coloured crater lakes, green pastures, black rocks and myriad of brightly coloured flowers is quite magical, and leaves visitors wanting to return again and again. A visit to the Azores archipelago is like stepping back in time, with old and new juxtaposed; the hectic pace of life on mainland Europe has no place here as farmers still take their wares to market by horse or donkey-drawn carts.

Our base for this holiday is the island of Pico, around which up to 24 different species of cetacean have been recorded. Our target species is Sperm Whales, which are present in Azorean waters all year round, as well as an array of dolphin species. In August and September, the numbers of Sperm Whales increase and there are mothers with calves present, often visible for extended periods at the surface before they make their deep foraging dives to underwater canyons and contours far below the surface. In May, Sperm Whales and dolphins are present and there is also a chance of encountering baleen whales on passage such as Fin, Sei and even Blue Whales, though it must be stressed that during a short tour such as this, a sighting would be an unexpected bonus!

The success of a whale-watching trip largely depends on the 'vigia', or 'spotter', an experienced look-out based on land, who will use binoculars to scan the ocean and spot whales. After a whale has been sighted, the vigia will contact us by radio to help guide the boats to the animals. Vigias were the traditional way of finding whales in Azorean waters during the old whaling days, but since 1987, when the last Sperm Whale was hunted in the Azores, most vigias and many of their attendants have been employed by the local whale-watching industry and we will benefit greatly from their expertise.

Whales and dolphins will certainly be our main focus during this 7-day holiday; however, we will also be able to observe and hear the island's breeding colonies of Cory's Shearwaters, and there is a variety of other seabirds to be seen year-round. Pico has a fascinating natural heritage and it is well worthwhile taking the time to appreciate, and familiarise ourselves with the island on which we are staying. As such, we will spend 2 days (which may be broken up into several half days, depending upon the weather conditions) based on land. This will allow time for birdwatching, paying a visit to our Vigia, exploring local vineyards (and, of course, sampling the famous volcanic wines) and learning about Pico's geology by visiting 'Gruta das Torres', an impressive lava cave.

Please note that whale-watching trips are weather and sea-state dependent and are not run in extremely harsh conditions. If the weather is not conducive for operating boat trips, land-based activities will be suggested by the local tour leader.

**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

### London

Our Atlantic adventure will begin with a morning flight from London to Horta via Lisbon. A 30-minute ferry ride will take us to our hotel, situated just few minutes' walk from the harbour in the centre of Madalena, Pico Island's main town.

The evening meal in a local restaurant will give us the chance to meet and get to know each other, as well as to discuss our itinerary for the next few days.

### Madalena, Pico Island

Pico Island is most famous for its imposing volcano from which the island takes its name and, with an altitude of 2,351 metres, Mount Pico is the highest peak in the whole of Portugal. The north coast is very volcanic in appearance with great lumps of black rock standing out starkly against the blue and white of the sea. The houses and walls are made of blocks of black lava, some of them lightened by the striking use of white paint around the black stones. However, even here there are splashes of colour, with brightly coloured flowers in the gardens and tubs surrounding the houses. The centre of the island appears green and lush, with views nearly always dominated (providing the weather is clear) by the presence of Mount Pico. In the south of the island there are pine trees and vineyards producing some of the best wines in the region; the tiny 'fields' of vines spill over the walls of black stone that enclose them and protect them from the winds. This is a truly remarkable sight when you consider that each of these lumps of volcanic rock was lifted and put into place by human hand!

## Days 2-6

### Pico

On the morning of Day 2 we will meet the whale-watch team at their base just a 5-minute walk from our hotel. They will give us a briefing on the cetacean species we are likely to see in the up-coming trips, along with information about their behaviour and conservation status.

Our spotters will, meanwhile, be busy scanning the horizon and ocean for cetaceans and, as soon as a whale is spotted, we will get ready and head out to sea. We will aim to make six half-day whale-watching trips during the tour, in 7.5 metre-long semi-rigid (Zodiac-style) inflatable boats which allow us to move quickly to the area where whales and dolphins are spotted. Each boat trip lasts between three and four hours. (Please note that the boats we use for this trip require passengers to sit astride. It is not possible to sit in them any other way.) Once

back at the port we will go for lunch. Depending on weather and sea conditions, another whale-watching trip will be run in the afternoon, or an alternative land activity such as birdwatching.

At the end of each day we will meet to discuss the day's sightings, and then head for dinner in one of Madalena's restaurants to enjoy the delicious local cuisine (a particular favorite being the local Pico white cheese, traditionally served as a starter with runny honey)!

Our target whale species is the Sperm Whale – a master of deep diving, and an animal that has become the subject of many stories and legends. But this is an animal where fact is more fascinating and, perhaps, stranger than anything fiction could invent and which luckily is now no longer a target for hunting, but instead the focus of people who are passionate about watching whales and who want to learn more about their behaviour, distribution and habits.

The Sperm Whale is the largest of the toothed whales or 'odontocetes' and, though it has a very wide distribution worldwide, it is most reliably found where waters reach a depth of over 1,000 metres. It is at depths of between 450 and over 1,000 metres where it feeds – its favourite food is squid and some real giants have been recovered from the bellies of dead Sperm Whales; indeed, many whales carry scars on their skin made by squid suckers. Male Sperm Whales typically grow to about 16 metres in length and females are much smaller, growing to about 11 metres. Its head is its most distinctive feature, shaped by the huge bulbous spermaceti organ which contains the oil which was so prized by whalers in the past. It has the largest brain of any animal, makes the loudest sounds (it is said that if a scuba diver is 'clicked at' by a Sperm Whale's echolocation, it is like being kicked in the chest by a horse!) and is one of the deepest diving animals on the planet, able to descend to staggering depths at a rate of 3 metres per second! Truly amazing animals, it is a privilege to spend time among the family groups which live in the waters here, watching social interactions at the surface, and listening to their 'click' sounds as they dive and begin foraging down to almost unimaginable depths.

We'll also hope to see quite a number of other cetacean species during our outings such as Short-finned Pilot Whales and dolphin species such as Common, Spotted, Bottlenose, Striped and Risso's. Atlantic Spotted Dolphins are only present in the Azores during late spring and summer, and we'll be hoping to get some good views of this attractive species during our boat excursions during August and September. Atlantic Spotted Dolphins are a medium-sized dolphin found in the warm waters of the Gulf Stream, and the Azores is a particularly good place to see them during the summer. Calves are born with no spots, and as they mature these markings gradually develop, with juveniles typically having a few spots on their bellies; adults can be heavily 'spotted' with the patterning which makes the species distinctive. Northern Bottlenose Whales and Sowerby's Beaked Whale are also seen from time to time and when the seas are calm we also have a good chance of seeing Loggerhead Turtles.

Our vessel will follow responsible codes of practice for wildlife-watching and we will typically approach animals to within 50 metres, at which point the skipper will wait to see what the animal chooses to do next – it may continue whatever behaviour it was doing, such as travelling or surfacing, or it may decide to approach us. Sometimes more curious individuals come very close to the vessel, which not only affords some superb views, but is extremely exciting.

In addition to 3 days at sea, we will spend 2 days on land exploring the wonderful island of Pico which will include meeting our 'vigia' in their hillside lookout, visiting the UNESCO World Heritage Site Vineyards and birdwatching. The local races of Chaffinch, Goldcrest, Grey Wagtail and Canary as well as seabirds such as Yellow-legged Gulls and Cory's Shearwater are abundant. In August, it may still be possible to see breeding colonies of Common and Roseate Terns with young, but by September only the breeding colonies of Cory's Shearwater will be active. Nevertheless, August is a good time to see birds on passage as well as North American vagrants such as Least Sandpiper and Semipalmated Plover. Some of the inland lava lakes may harbour North American waterfowl such as Ring-necked Duck, American Wigeon and Pied-billed Grebe. Along the coast, waterbirds from Europe and North America mix and species such as Whimbrel, Turnstone, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Lesser Yellowlegs and Double-crested Cormorant can be seen. At sea the most regularly seen seabird is Cory's Shearwater, but Great Shearwater is also common. Further offshore, Wilson's Storm-petrel are also regularly encountered, while there's a chance that real rarities like Fea's Petrel, White-faced Storm-petrel, Black-capped Petrel and Trindade Petrel could turn up at any time.

One morning or afternoon will be spent at the famous 'Gruta das Torres', the longest lava tube in Portugal, with a length of 5150m. This natural geological spectacle is well-worth a visit and should not be missed during a stay on Pico! It is estimated to have been formed about 1,500 years ago during an eruption which originated in Cabeço Bravo. An hour-long visit over a length of 450m will allow us to observe various types of lava and several geological formations, almost in their natural state! Make sure you don't forget to shine your torch upwards – the cave ceiling and walls glitter with gold and silver *Actinomyces bacteria*, which survive on microscopic nutrients seeping through the porous rock.

The Azores are also famous for their volcanic wines, and we couldn't leave Pico without enjoying a wine-tasting at a local cooperative winery. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, these vineyards are unusual in that they are surrounded by hand-made walls of black volcanic rock, and are planted inside holes of solid lava. These dense, volcanic rocks absorb the heat from the sun's rays during the day, and continue to emit heat during the night, warming the grapes and allowing them to produce lots of sugars (and consequently, delicious wines, such as "Lajido Pico Dop").

## Day 7

### London

After a last look at Pico Island we will transfer to Faial ready to catch the scheduled flight back to Lisbon and our connection to London.

## Clothing & equipment

You will need stout shoes or trainers, and during our whale-watching excursions we would expect the weather to be warm, calm and sunny, however, if it were to rain you may get cool while on board the moving vessel, and so adequate warm and waterproof clothing is essential (i.e. a light fleece and waterproofs). Despite it being summer, temperatures can be much cooler at sea; it is also advisable to bring sun cream and a hat. A dry bag is a recommended for protecting cameras etc. from getting splashed on boat trips.

## Weather

The Azores has a mild climate with temperatures rarely falling much below 16°C even in winter. During August, the average daily temperature should be about 22°C. Rainfall can occur at any time.

In the case of an extended period of poor weather (not likely in August, but a possibility) preventing us getting out to sea, please note that there is limited other wildlife to see on Pico; there is, however, much of general interest on Pico and Faial, and we may also offer such activities as exploring Pico or Faial and general sightseeing.

## Boats

We will be in a Zodiac-style rigid inflatable boats (RIBs) for this tour. The particular design of the RIB used on these whale-watch excursions means you will be sitting astride; it is not possible to sit any other way on these boats. For full Naturetrek groups (11 clients) the boat will be exclusively chartered by Naturetrek. If the group is not full, then there may be non-Naturetrek clients in the boat too. You will be accompanied by a Naturetrek tour leader at all times, as well as local guides.

## Food & accommodation

Flights, accommodation, breakfasts, boat trips, ferry transfers to and from Pico Island, wine-tasting, visiting the lava caves, entry to the museum in Lajes and naturalist guiding are all included in the cost of this tour. Lunches and evening meals in Pico are not included. Your tour leader knows the local cuisine well, and will book tables at several different restaurants over the week for the group to enjoy evening meals together.

## Focus

The Azores offers some of, if not, the best whale-watching opportunities in Europe. During our August tour we will be aiming to spend time among groups of resident Sperm Whales, as well as looking for other whale and dolphin species, including the Atlantic Spotted Dolphins found here during the summer months.

The resident bird list is not extensive, but unusual or rare vagrants do occur and Pico does offer some interesting, though limited, birding opportunities. We'll spend part of our time on land in search of some of the birds found here; indeed the birdlife of the Azores is generally not well studied in comparison with many other European destinations and some unusual species can 'turn up'. All this, combined with stunning scenery, a pleasant climate, friendly people, unspoilt islands, good wines and a fascinating history ensure that this is a tour not to be missed!

## Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to the Azores. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – [www.fco.gov.uk/travel](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel) or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly prior to travel.

## 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](http://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.

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