

Great Whales of the Azores (Pico)

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Lisbon
Day 2	Fly Horta, Faial. Transfer Pico. Afternoon whale-watching
Day 3/4	Morning and afternoon Whale Watching
Day 5	Full-day birdwatching excursion
Day 6	Day at leisure
Day 7/8	Morning and afternoon whale-watching
Day 9	Transfer Horta and fly London (via Lisbon)

Departs

May

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 PRT12)

Highlights

- World class whale-watching – in Europe!
- Look for Blue, Fin and Sei Whales
- Guided by local expert naturalists
- Convenient & comfortable harbourside hotel



From top: Fin Whale, Blue Whale and Common Dolphins,



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Introduction

Far out in the Atlantic Ocean, where the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates meet, the nine islands of the Azores archipelago lie in an arc along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, rising to just over 2,347 metres at their highest point, Mount Pico. The Azores offers the best whale-watching opportunities in Europe, and each spring the resident Sperm Whales are joined by other great whales, including the largest animal thought to have ever lived, the Blue Whale. The islands are also home to many breeding seabirds such as Cory's Shearwater and the endemic Monteiros Storm Petrel, plus a host of island 'races' of familiar birds such as Chaffinch and Goldcrest. All of the islands in the archipelago have volcanic origins. Pico lies in the centre of the archipelago, on the Azores Platform, just to the east of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, and its surrounding seas are a particularly important stopover for migrating whales heading north to their summer feeding grounds.



Sperm Whale and Mount Pico

Based on Pico, which is reached by a flight from London via Lisbon (with an overnight stay in the vibrant Portuguese capital), this tour is well suited to those particularly keen on seeing Blue Whales, as statistically, this iconic species is more frequently recorded in this central part of the Azores than in the east. Fin, Sei and Sperm Whales as well as other cetaceans are also seen regularly off Pico and neighbouring Faial. Several species of large baleen whale migrate annually north and south through the Atlantic Ocean, their journeys taking them across vast areas where food is seldom abundant. The Azores archipelago is thought to provide a convenient 'midway stopover' for populations of Blue, Sei and Fin Whales to refuel during their journey between breeding grounds further south, and their summer feeding sites in eastern Greenland and Iceland to the north. Studies have shown that individuals typically remain around the Azores for between a few days and two months and that the highest number of baleen whale sightings occurs in May. Fin Whales are the most frequently recorded species at this time, although small numbers of Blue, Sei and Minke Whales are also seen each spring. They join the resident Sperm Whales, plus three dolphin species: Bottlenose, Risso's and Short-beaked Common Dolphin, with Striped and Atlantic Spotted Dolphins arriving with the warmer currents during the late spring and early summer.

During our stay in the Azores, we will join expert local marine biologists and guides — on exhilarating RIBs — to search for Blue, Fin and Sei Whales, as well as other species of cetacean, on half-day boat trips (weather permitting). We will scan the ocean for signs of these cetaceans, which are attracted here by the annual spring plankton bloom. Being close to these huge animals is one of life's most moving and exciting experiences. Whale-watching guidelines are strictly adhered to in the Azores, allowing us to only approach within a comfortable distance for the whale. However, feeding animals move quickly and we may find that a whale chooses to swim alongside our vessel; it is an unforgettable thrill to see the vast outline of an animal the length of two school buses end to end just metres away! There will also be an opportunity to explore some of the different birdwatching sites on the island, and there will be a 'free day' during the tour which may be spent at leisure or undertaking optional further whale-watching trips or even swimming with dolphins.

After a week of exciting whale-watching, some gentle birdwatching on land and tasty Azorean cuisine and wine, it will be time to leave our island home and make the short drive back to the airport for our flight to London.

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 an evening flight from London to Lisbon, where we shall spend the night in a comfortable hotel near the airport.

Day 2

Madalena, Pico Island

An early flight from Lisbon, sees us arrive in Horta in the mid-morning, from where a 30-minute ferry ride takes us to our hotel, situated just few minutes' walk from the harbour in the centre of Madalena, Pico Island's main town.

Pico Island is most famous for its imposing volcano from which the island takes its name and, with an altitude of 2,347 metres, Mount Pico is the highest peak in the whole of Portugal. The north coast is 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 put into place by human hand!



Ribeiras Village, Pico Island

and

After checking in to the hotel, we shall have lunch, before venturing the short distance to the offices of our whale watching partners, where they will give us a briefing on the cetacean species that we are likely to see in the up-coming trips, along with information about their behaviour and conservation status.

Briefing complete, we shall head out on to the water, in search of our quarry, guided by our team of spotters, positioned strategically along the coast line.

Once back at the port we will have time to freshen up at the hotel, before heading out to a local restaurant where we have an opportunity to get to know each other and to discuss our itinerary for the week ahead.

Days 3-8

Pico

Over the course of the next 6 days, we will aim to make eight, 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!) With a day set aside to spend at leisure and a day's birdwatching planned, we have the flexibility to change the programme if necessary, allowing us to respond to the latest sightings and utilise the best of the weather conditions available.



Naturetrek group with a Fin Whale

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.

In recent years, a spring phytoplankton bloom, warmed by the temperate waters of the gulf stream around the Azores archipelago has resulted in a gathering of oceanic giants such as Blue, Fin and Sei whales as they take time from their annual migrations to replenish fat reserves and it is these species that we shall specifically be targeting during our visit.

With a heart the size of a small car and a lung capacity in excess of 5,000 litres, Blue Whales produce a distinctive strong vertical blow that can reach up to 12 metres in height, providing us with a clear indication that they are in the area. Under bright sunlight this species can appear blueish, but usually they are more greyish and this can cause them to be mistaken with other baleen whales. It is in such close quarters that one must look to the relatively small dorsal fin and broad U-shaped head to aid identification. Blue whales feed almost exclusively on krill in polar waters during summer months, travelling to warmer waters in winter to breed and give birth.

A few metres smaller than the Blue Whale, the Fin Whale is the second largest animal in the world. Their most distinguishing feature is the asymmetrical markings on the head: on the right side, the lower lip, mouth cavity, and baleen plates are white, whereas on the left these features are dark. The dorsal fin is smaller and more falcate than that of the Sei whale, and they have only one ridge on the head, unlike the Bryde's whale which has three. Fin whales are among the fastest of the whales, reaching speeds up to 47 km/hr and because of this they have gained the nickname,

the "greyhounds of the sea"! They are also amongst the longest lived mammals on the planet, with the oldest individual recorded believed to be 111 years old!



Sei Whale

Sei Whales, measuring up to 20 metres in length, are the least known of the Rorqual family and can easily be confused with other species. Their relatively large dorsal fin can be used to distinguish them from other baleen whales and unlike the Bryde's Whale, which has three parallel ridges at the top of the head, Sei Whales have a single ridge on the top of their heads. Sei Whales also lack the asymmetrical white lower jaw found in Fin whales, proving further assistance in identification at close range. Upon surfacing, the back of the Sei Whale is usually visible on the surface for a relatively long time.

They typically travel alone or in small groups, but can be seen in larger numbers in areas where food is plentiful. Interestingly they are known to breed with fin whales, producing at least first generation young.

In addition to the migrating baleen whales, we can also hope to see the largest of the toothed whales, the Sperm Whale, a year round resident of the Azores and a master of the deep. Though having a very wide distribution worldwide, Sperm Whales are most reliably found where waters reach a depth of over 1,000 metres and the deep waters of around the Azores provide excellent feeding grounds for this incredible animal. Feeding at depths of over 1,000 metres – 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 and dives the deepest. It is able to descend to staggering depths at a rate of 3 metres per second! It is an amazing animal and it is a privilege to spend time among groups that 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, Bottlenose and Risso's. The abundance of dolphins is a true delight and watching them ride in the bow wave of the boat and leaping from the water, for many, is one of the highlights of the trip.

We will spend one day on land birdwatching with a locally based ornithologist guide. The local races of Chaffinch, Goldcrest, Grey Wagtail and Canary, as well as seabirds such as Yellow-legged Gulls and



Risso's Dolphin

Cory's Shearwater are abundant. In May the breeding colonies of Common and Roseate Terns should be gathering,

as will the breeding colonies of Cory's Shearwater. May is also a good time to see birds on passage as well as North American vagrants such as Least Sandpiper and Semi-palmated Plover. Some of the inland lava lakes may harbour North American waterfowl such as Ringed-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 Yellow Legs 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.

Throughout the tour, 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 it is 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.

With a day at leisure, you have the opportunity to kick back and relax and explore the island at your own pace, alternatively, you can take to the seas once more, for more whale watching or even the opportunity to swim with dolphins (at additional cost). Unlike many other destinations in the world, the Azores, offers a truly natural experience with the dolphins and they are neither attracted with tricks, nor with food. They can swim much faster than humans and therefore, decisions, such as 'how close we get' and 'how long for' are entirely up to them. That said, being very



Bottlenose Dolphins

curious animals, they do frequently come very close to the swimmers and the success rate with swimming with dolphins is greater than 97%. Swimming with wild dolphins is very different to swimming with captive ones, the latter being confined and rewarded with food whenever they complete the tasks given by the trainers. It may be possible to arrange this on an ad-hoc basis once you are out there, but if you are particularly keen to swim with dolphins, please let us know in advance of travel and we will put the appropriate arrangements in place.

Day 6

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 the weather could be cold and wet so adequate warm and waterproof clothing is essential! Even in the late spring, 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. At the time of our spring tour, the average daily temperature should be around 20°C, though the weather can be unpredictable at this time of year. Rainfall can occur at any time.

In the case of an extended period of poor weather 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, general sightseeing, sites of geological interest, a visit to a whale museum or the ‘vigia’.

Boats

We will be in a Zodiac-style rigid inflatable boat (RIB) for this tour. The particular design of the RIB used on these whale-watching excursions means you will be sitting astride the seat; 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, there may be non-Naturetrek clients in the boat too. You will be accompanied by a Naturetrek tour leader as well as local guides.

Food & accommodation included in the price

Flights, accommodation, breakfasts, boat trips, transfers to and from Pico Island and naturalist guiding are all included in the cost of this tour. Lunches and evening meals in Lisbon and Pico are not included.

Focus

The Azores offers some of, if not, the best whale-watching opportunities in Europe. We will be looking primarily for baleen whales, as well as dolphins and Sperm Whales on our spring tour.

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 a day 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 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, 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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