

Madeira in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London for Funchal
Day 2	AM boat trip, PM birding
Day 3	Walk up Pico Ruivo
Day 4	Ribeiro Frio, Balçoes levada walk
Day 5	AM birding, PM boat trip
Day 6	Encumeada levada walk
Day 7	AM boat trip, PM at leisure
Day 8	Fly London

Dates

September/October

Focus

Plants, birds and cetaceans

Grading

B. Moderate day walks with some steep gradients

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PRT16) or brochure

Highlights

- Volcanic Madeira has a unique and fascinating natural history, ideal for the all-round naturalist
- Search for 113 endemic plants amongst the island's 1,163 species
- Look for 3 endemic birds – Zino's Petrel, Trocaz Pigeon & Madeira Firecrest
- Three cetacean-watching boat trips



Madeira coastline, Sperm Whale, Madeira Firecrest



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Introduction

This tour to Madeira, designed for the all-round naturalist, is timed to showcase the island's varied and unique wildlife and landscapes in the warm seasonal sunshine. Situated in the North Atlantic, about 560 kilometres off the north-west coast of Africa, the Madeiran archipelago is very much the Galápagos of Europe, being of volcanic origin and isolated from colonisation from the continent by the predominantly westerly winds.

The Madeiran archipelago comprises five main islands. The largest, Madeira itself, is only about the size of the Isle of Wight but rises to over 1,830 metres. The landscape is rugged and spectacular, with deep ravines, gorges and swathes of lush and pristine Laurissilva forest, home to the rare and endemic Trocaz Pigeon (also known as Madeira Laurel Pigeon). The vast system of levadas – man-made watercourses – which run at a steady gradient along the sides of the mountains and hills throughout the island provides an ideal means of exploring its little-known corners at a gentle pace. An incredible 1,163 plant species have been recorded on the islands, of which 113 are endemic! The island boasts an all-year-round flowering season due to its subtropical climate, and although the spring and earlier summer have more flowering species, we can still expect to see plants in vibrant bloom, unlike other parts of Europe at this time of year.



In particular, in and around Funchal, Kapok trees bloom in October, with their large pink and creamy-white flowers brightening up the city, as does the island's 'national' plant, Bird of Paradise, so named because its brilliant orange sepals and deep blue petals resemble the head of a tropical bird.

The island's stable weather and calm seas offer very good opportunities for cetacean-watching, with a resident population of Short-finned Pilot Whales and, as well as Bottlenose, Striped,

Risso's and Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, there are still Bryde's and Sperm Whales in the waters here.

Across the week, we have three days of walking the levadas at Ribeiro Frio, Encumeada and Pico Ruivo, the tallest peak, at a relaxed pace. These are interspersed with a couple of mornings searching for the island's birds, in particular the endemic races of Blackbird, Blackcap, Chaffinch and Robin, in addition to the true endemics of Trocaz Pigeon and Madeira Firecrest (Zino's Petrel is only a possibility). We will also have three cetacean-watching excursions. To make the most of our time on the water, there is also an evening sailboat cruise where we can enjoy Madeira's sunset. The colours of Madeira, the stunning and varied scenery, and the opportunity to observe some of the extremely localised natural history surely make Madeira a perfect autumnal getaway.

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering 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

Fly Funchal

We depart today on a scheduled flight from Heathrow or Gatwick bound for Funchal Airport on Madeira. Once airport formalities are done, we will drive along the coast road to Funchal, where we will check into the comfortable hotel we will be staying in for the duration of the tour.

Day 2

Funchal

This morning we will walk about 20 minutes from our hotel to Funchal Harbour, where we board a RIB and head out on the first of three cetacean-watching boat trips across the week, which are 2.5 – 3 hours long.

The local team will be assisted in their efforts by keeping in radio contact with keen-eyed look-outs or 'vigias' on land. This will give us the best chances of finding and spending time with the variety of cetacean species to be found around Madeira. Indeed, it is worth being vigilant even near Funchal Harbour – Bottlenose Dolphins and Short-finned Pilot Whales are present in Madeiran waters year-round, and groups of playful bow-riding Bottlenose Dolphins occasionally join boats even as they head out to sea. Pods of Short-finned Pilot Whales, a stocky, medium-sized and highly social cetacean which lives in closely knit family groups, are often seen resting or 'logging' at the surface during the day.



Trocaz Pigeon

After returning to dry land and walking back to the hotel in time for lunch, we will then take to the mountains in search of the island's endemic avifauna. We will be seeking the endemic Trocaz Pigeon (also known as Madeira Laurel Pigeon) and we should get good views of these birds perched in the open or glimpses as they fly swiftly over the forest canopy. Also on the list is the Madeira Firecrest, whilst we also hope to see a number of near-endemic species or sub-species, including Berthelot's Pipit, Spectacled Warbler, Rock Sparrow and Plain Swift.

Day 3

Pico Ruivo

Today we will endeavour to walk up Pico Ruivo, at 1,862 metres (6,105 feet), the highest peak on the island. The landscape is truly spectacular and rugged with deep ravines and gorges and fascinating rock formations which reflect the island's volcanic origin. We will in fact be starting the walk from quite high up and the trail to the top is fairly easy walking but we will have to be wary of the weather, which is notoriously unpredictable especially here in the mountains.

The vegetation of Madeira's high peaks is very different from anything we will see during our trip. A number of the plant species we are likely to encounter during the walk are restricted to the high-altitude zones and a number are true alpiners. At this time of year the vegetation shifts toward high-altitude



heathers and late-season survivors, with Madeira Grey Heather one of the most dominant species at the summit, as its evergreen, needle-like foliage remains a permanent fixture of the landscape. There are also sporadic blooms of buttercups in damp rocky crevices and tall thistles poking up above other vegetation that add colour to the volcanic slopes here. A species not in bloom, yet still a distinctive feature of the environment, is Madeira Kidney, a low-growing, silver-leaved plant that clings to the volcanic rock faces. Lower down Tree Heather and Madeira

Besom Heather are evergreens that litter the slopes, as do many species of hydrangea with blue and purple flowers that make up roadside hedges on the way to Pico Ruivo and on the rest of the island.

There will be enough to see here to keep us amused for much of the day and we will aim to keep going as long as the weather stays fine. There are relatively few bird species able to tolerate the high altitudes on Madeira but those we are most likely to see include Berthelot's Pipit, Buzzard, Kestrel, Linnet and Blackbird. The butterfly species are similarly few in number but we should see Clouded Yellows flitting over the grassy areas, plus the endemic Madeiran Grayling.

During the afternoon, or earlier if the weather turns against us, we will retrace our steps and either descend to lower altitudes for a little more botanising or return to Funchal.

In the early evening we will head out into the open water on a delightful sailboat cruise to witness Madeira's sunset, as well as keeping an eye out for any cetacean activity and seabirds. With the vessel chartered on an exclusive basis, with drinks and snacks included, this is sure to be a relaxing and special way to end the day.

Day 4

Ribeiro Frio

After breakfast we journey high into the mountains to Poiso, where we may stop briefly for refreshments, and then drive down the northern slope of the island until we reach Ribeiro Frio (which translates as 'cold river' in Portuguese). We will be stopping here and there en route to admire the stunning scenery and to spend some time botanising and looking for birds. Once at Ribeiro Frio, however, we will leave our transport and begin to explore the 'real' Madeira by walking some of the levadas for which Madeira is well known. Levadas are man-made watercourses which run at a steady gradient along the sides of the mountains and hills throughout the island and provide an ideal way of exploring its forests and remote corners at a gentle pace.

The climate of the northern slope of Madeira is much wetter than the southern slope and it is here that the majority of the remaining evergreen Laurissilva forest is to be found. Laurissilva is a forest type found only in Macaronesia and on Madeira it once covered some 60% of the land area. Deforestation has, however, meant that it is now reduced to about 10,000 hectares or 16% of the land area. Laurissilva forest is comprised of four dominant tree species, all of which are members of the family Lauraceae (or laurels), and all but one are endemic to Macaronesia. The Laurissilva forest of Madeira is characterised by the presence of the Lily-of-the-valley Tree, which in late summer and into autumn produces large, showy panicles of fragrant, white bell-shaped flowers that resemble lily-of-the-valley, which are followed by attractive auburn seed heads.



Walking a levada

Weather permitting, we will spend most of the day in this area familiarising ourselves with some of the plants. There will be plenty to choose from, including a good number of the 113 species endemic to the archipelago. Although difficult to find, as it likes shady mossy areas, we will look for the rare Madeira Orchid, also known as Madeiran Lady's Tresses, which produces a terminal, erect spike up to 20cm long, with a dense, near-cylindrical inflorescence featuring up to 60 small, white flowers. We will also hope to see Madeira Squill, an endemic bulb which begins to bloom in October, sending up dense spikes of amethyst-blue flowers from the forest floor. Other species of plant include Madeira Stock, Everlasting Helichrysum and White Everlasting Helichrysum to mention but a few.

As if the plants were not enough, we should also come across a number of butterfly species during our wanderings. These are likely to include the endemic Madeiran Speckled Wood which, once we get our 'eye in', we should be able to separate from the mainland European form of the Speckled Wood. Both species are widespread and quite common in suitable habitats on Madeira and should still be on the wing at this time of year. Amongst the other butterflies we could see today are the endemics Madeiran Cleopatra and Madeiran Small Copper, plus Long-tailed Blue, and over the course of the week we are likely to see Monarch, Indian Red Admiral and Geranium Bronze.

Day 5

Funchal



Bryde's Whale

This morning we will head out to another location in the mountains for some birdwatching, hoping to find anything that we have not seen already.

After lunch we will make our way back to Funchal Harbour for the second of our RIB excursions. One of the special whales found around Madeira from May through to December is Bryde's Whale

and we will be looking for this species in particular. This is a member of the rorqual group of baleen whales, which also includes some of the ocean's true giants – Blue, Fin and Sei Whales, the latter of which we also have a chance of seeing. Reaching a maximum of 15 metres in length, Bryde's Whale is similar in appearance to Sei Whale (max length 21 metres) but a little smaller. Identification at sea is not easy but, unlike other rorqual whales, Bryde's has three distinct rostrum ridges on the top of the snout (other rorquals only have one).

The autumn is a good time to see Sperm Whales in the waters of Madeira, which live in groups of adult females with juveniles and babies, while the enormous adult males live alone and migrate long distances to feed and mate. The novice can spot this whale relatively easily, as it has a distinctive low and bushy off-centre (to the left) blow which comes out at an angle of 45°. The deep underwater canyons and troughs near Madeira are ideal for these deep divers which seek their prey at enormous depths, typically foraging at between 400 and 1,000 metres for squid and small copepods.

We return to shore and walk back to our hotel.

Day 6

Cabo Girão, Encumeada, São Vicente

Today we head west to take a quick look at Cabo Girão, the second-highest sea cliff in the world at 581 metres. We should see a good selection of plants and the odd butterfly plus the usual Buzzard, Kestrel, Blackbird, Chaffinch, Blackcap and Robin.

We then head up to Encumeada and probably into the clouds, as it is this area of Madeira which has the highest rainfall but walking the paths here, we will see some flora in bloom, including Lily-of-the-valley Tree and Mandon's Chrysanthemum, a white flowering endemic that is found in good numbers here. Although its iconic purple spikes are usually finished by autumn, the large, silvery-green rosettes of Pride of Madeira are a constant feature of the rocky escarpments around the Encumeada viewpoint, plus Madeira Blueberry is laden with its dark purple berries.



Madeira Chaffinch

We then descend to the north coast to São Vicente, where we have the option of visiting a complex of lava tubes over 700 metres long. These are very impressive and interesting, giving a vivid impression of the island's birth. We then take a short drive along the impressively sheer north coast, west of São Vicente, where we will see, amongst other plants, the endemic Disc Houseleek which is abundant in this part of the island.

Day 7

Funchal

This morning is our final RIB boat trip, and other species that we have a good chance of seeing at this time of year include Atlantic Spotted Dolphin and, with a bit of luck, Rough-toothed, Striped and Risso's

Dolphins as well. There is also the likelihood of seeing some larger fish in the waters including Striped Barracuda, Atlantic Flying Fish and even a grandiose Sunfish floating near the surface to recharge before diving to the depths.

We should also keep an eye open on the skies above as Cory's Shearwater fledglings take flight and



resident Madeiran Storm-petrels patrol the seas. If extremely fortunate, we might also see a Zino's Petrel, which is endemic to Madeira and one of the rarest seabirds in the world. At this time of year their young also start to fledge, whilst the adults spend their days offshore out at sea.

On our return to Funchal, we will have a free afternoon in which you can choose to explore the town centre at your leisure, visit one of the botanical gardens, or simply relax by the hotel pool.

Day 8

Fly London

This morning after a leisurely breakfast, we travel back along the coast to the airport to catch our flight home.

Tour Grading

This tour is graded B with moderate (and optional) day walks with some steep gradients. The terrain, being volcanic, can be uneven.

Food & Accommodation

We will be staying throughout at a comfortable hotel in Funchal, close to the harbour. All food is included in the price of this tour, except for evening meals in Funchal, for which you should allow approximately £150 – £200 per person, depending on your tastes and appetite.

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.