

# The Azores

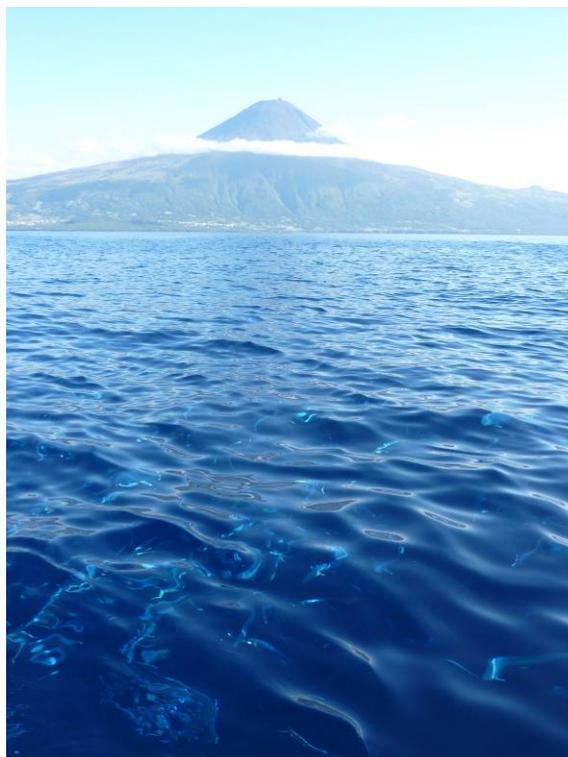
Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 19 September 2010

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Sperm Whale



School of Dolphin Fish



Striped Dolphins



Fin Whale

Report and photos compiled by Toby Abrehart

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## Day 1

Tuesday 14th September

LHR to Madalena on Pico island, Azores

Weather – very pleasant in the Azores, 25°C broken cloud

We all met up on the flight over to Lisbon, which arrived twenty minutes early, which was fantastic but, then we had a longer wait before our next flight over to Faial in the Azores. As we landed at Lisbon, there were three Black Kites over the airfield, a nice start to the trip! Our next flight went very smoothly and we arrived at Horta airport on time. We were whisked down to the harbour, given our tickets and then spent a little time watching the Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls around the boats. The ferry left at 3pm on the dot and we headed over to Madalena - on the way we started to have not very close views of Cory's Shearwaters. This was to improve.

In Madalena we were met off the ferry by Dania and our bags were taken the 100yds to the hotel. After a chat with Dania we checked into our rooms, all very nice, we then felt it time to have a little explore...we wandered up towards the supermarket and found a mixed flock of Atlantic Canaries, House Sparrows and Azorean Chaffinches. Then it was definitely time for a beer, enjoyed looking over the harbour, watching Common Terns and more Gulls. After meeting up with Helen and Tony we headed into the square for a meal, simple but very well cooked fish dishes were enjoyed, followed by another beer then bed.

## Day 2

Wednesday 15th September

Madalena

Weather – NE wind, 25 °C, light cloud, sea state 3/4

After breakfast we set off the short distance to the Whale Centre where we were met by Dania and Enrico (local ground agents), Enrico sat us down for a short talk about what we were to expect over the next four days. We were then kitted out with life jackets and set out in the RIB to the north of Faial Island. Here we had our first close views of Cory's Shearwaters and then we were in amongst an extended group of Sperm Whales. Here we watched a mother and calf for some time as the calf suckled and then surfaced very calmly - a very lovely bit of behaviour to watch in such a stunning setting. We were told that the pod here at this time probably consisted of twenty or so animals and we were able to see the blows of several other animals around us. Guy was able to watch a Sperm Whale breach which was very lucky as the rest of us only heard the splash and saw some spray. We constantly had Cory's Shearwaters passing the boat and giving us wonderful close views, this was to continue the whole time we were out here. After a while we started heading back to the harbour and headed for lunch. The square was our destination again, for very good food and custard tarts.

In the afternoon session we set off south this time around the bottom of Pico Island, and not long out we abruptly stopped to be shown a Loggerhead Turtle at the water's surface. Once this dived, we set off fast to the south, we were going a long way out, and forty minutes later we were there, with several other boats. A blow and then there was a Fin Whale very close to a boat in-front of us, then another blow, there were two. We were very happy to enjoy this spectacle for the next hour, they were getting as close as twenty metres from the boat, and watching them rising and feeding around us was great. After a while we set off back to the harbour when we intersected a small pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins, a good first day and bode well for the rest of our time here.

Back in the harbour we tried another restaurant for a beer then later met up to go to the 'posh' restaurant for more great fish, only to find it was closed on Wednesday night so found a place around the corner, then bed.

## Day 3

Thursday 16th September

### Madalena

Weather - NE wind, 25 °C, light cloud, sea state 2-3.

After breakfast we met up as usual and headed out in the boat. This morning we set out south of Pico again. We suspected to see the Fin Whales again and were right, but on the way we were stopped twice, once for a very large school of Dolphin Fish and then by a fantastic pod of over 200 Risso's Dolphins. This pod had many young with them and it was fascinating to see the variation in the markings across their bodies. We sadly had to leave these to go to the Fin Whale, which considering the views we then had was fine. Even on this section of the journey we saw a raft of Cory's Shearwaters having a small fishing frenzy all at close quarters we were able to watch them diving and feeding on the small silver fish here. Once we arrived at the spot we spent some time watching these two whales at very close quarters. They were estimated at a bit over 20 metres long, a substantial mammal in anyones book. They were very actively feeding in this area about 12 miles off the coast, this feeding made it difficult to predict where they would appear next so several boats had unexpectedly close views. After a while we set off back towards Madalena and re-visited the Risso's Dolphins on the way, a surprise when we got there was a small pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales mixed in with them. Unfortunately as we arrived we saw them rise out of the water showing their distinctive head shape, then they dived not to be seen again. But, the Risso's were still there and we just spent some time enjoying these beautiful animals. We were a long way from the harbour out here so set off back for lunch.

The afternoon followed the same pattern of going south to visit the Fin Whales again, having the opportunity to see these wonderful animals at such close quarters and that they were apparently not concerned by our appearance was a credit to the discipline of the tour operators in the Azores. They have a code of conduct that insists on maintaining the well-being of the animals; any signs of stress and all the boats backed off and left them alone, there were never more than four boats near the animals at any time too. This gave the animals' space and the customers stunning views of all animals encountered. The Fin Whales were very comfortable in our presence this afternoon and at one point one of them was visible going under the back of our small RIB; this was as close as you want to get to these enormous animals. We headed to the north a little way to watch a pod of Sperm Whales - these six animals were logging on the surface, then diving for a short while to communicate/chat with each other then re-surface for a while allowing us stunningly close views of these classic mammals.

Again it was time to return to the harbour and on this return journey we came across a small family pod of about 10 Bottle-nosed Dolphins, including a female with a distinctive surfacing position that Enrico noticed, it was the female of a pod that is resident in the area. They gave us a good display at close quarters, (as everything had so far), then it was back to the harbour. Supper was had and three of us set out to the nesting area for Cory's Shearwater along the coast. The sun was setting and the weather warm, a nice way to spend a couple of hours. We had a little wait until we started to hear their weird and wonderful calls, we were early in the evening so we only heard a few and watched a couple in the headlights of a couple of passing cars. Having enjoyed this for a while we wandered back. We were distracted by moths at a light where we heard and saw briefly, a couple of Greater Mouse-eared Bats and heard some Pipistrelles too. Then bed.

## Day 4

Friday 17th September

### Madalena

Weather - NE wind, 25 °C, light cloud, sea state 2-3.

Today we set off as usual to the whale centre, before breakfast though, Tony had been out and found two Spotted Sandpipers along the coast, our first American waders. We geared up for our trip to sea. We set off out to the south of Pico, on our way we encountered a very agile pod of Striped Dolphins, these 30 or so animals seemed to be exploding out of the water, the amount of spray was tremendous and it was very hard to keep up with these dynamic mammals that were feeding fast and in every direction, stunning to watch and very rewarding. We left them to feed and headed out to the Sperm Whales, which were still in this extended family group, behaving in a very relaxed way, logging and communicating. We listened to them using the hydrophone, hearing their clicks gave us a small insight into their watery world.

After this we headed directly to the base of Pico - this stunning volcano is a constant part of the view here and a truly stunning backdrop to any trip. As we approached the cliffs we saw a Spotted Sandpiper fly by then were shown some Azorean Noctule Bats flying around the caves here. An Azorean Buzzard (Ssp) buzzed by scattering the bats for a while, they returned a later. The rocks held a number of brightly coloured crabs and I am sure the underwater fauna here would be spectacular. As we zipped along the coast a Great-White Egret was briefly seen in one of the UNESCO site vineyards, the views here are always spectacular, but then again we had good weather.

After lunch we headed to the minibus for an afternoon of bird-watching and other wildlife spotting. We set off to Lajes do Pico a large old whaling town on the south coast, once here we started looking near the marina, where a Semi-palmated Plover was found, a good start. Then off to the pools to the west we started off with a Semi-palmated Sandpiper at a very close range of only a few metres. We followed it towards the other pools where we found a Least Sandpiper, some more Semi-palmated Sandpipers and a few White-rumped Sandpipers. After a bit of searching a juvenile Short-billed Dowitcher was found too. All the American peeps were behaving in a very classic way of having little fear of people giving us all the opportunity to watch them at astonishingly close ranges. A couple of Little Egrets were nearby but the Belted Kingfisher was not forthcoming. We searched a few more pools and found more Semi-palmated and White-rumped Sandpipers. A descent tally for an hour or so of watching. It was hot so a little refreshment was required, ice cool drinks went down well, then back off again this time up into the foothills of the volcano. This drive gave us an excellent opportunity to enjoy the island, full of great views and a very attractive though rugged landscape. Once on the central ridge we stopped in the road as we saw some Azorean Noctule Bats hawking over heaths.

A little further on we stopped at a small wetland where I wanted to find a damselfly; the Citrine Forktail *Ischnura hastata* is the only North American species of dragonfly that breeds in the Western Palearctic, in the Azores there are no males and the females 'breed' through parthenogenesis. Finding this species was lucky as they are thought to be around only until early August so a month on must mean they have not been searched for much here. These very delicate damselflies were found wherever we looked around this pool.

We got back to the minibus and started on our way to the lakes when a Grayling was seen, this turned out to be the endemic Azorean Grayling. Eventually we got to the first crater lake here there were two female Teal and a moulting male Tufted Duck, but, the best sighting was an Azorean Noctule hawking in front of us enabling us to see every detail and colour on this mammal, this species has taken over the role of insect feeder on the island, no bird competition, and is the only diurnal species of bat in Europe. A bit further on we stopped to look at Atlantic Canaries and Chaffinches, then our last stop at another crater lake here we saw two Coots. Once back it was time for a beer and supper at the end of another great day.

## Day 5

Saturday 18th September

### Madalena

Weather - NE wind, 22 °C, light cloud, sea state 4 morning, 2-3 afternoon.

Our last full day on Pico started off with an additional boat trip out this morning, this extra trip was to try and be a bit of a pelagic as we headed a long way to the north, on the way we came across a small pod of Striped Dolphins. We were heading into the wind and the choppy water made it a long slow trip that was a bit bumpy. We came across a load of Cory's Shearwater feeding behind a fishing vessel, a bit further on we saw a couple of Great Shearwaters as they glided past us. We had hoped to find some petrels out here but the weather was against us, it was difficult to see larger birds let alone a small petrel. We headed back and saw a Loggerhead Turtle being mobbed by some Cory's and a feeding Great Shearwater at about three metres from the boat. On both legs of the journey we had several Flying Fish, going a fair distance away from us, also a surprise was a floating bucket which had a resident Trigger Fish hiding underneath it. Apparently when these fish feel threatened they will jump into the bucket to avoid detection, bizarre!

A long morning on the boat was followed by lunch. After this we had our last trip out. This time to the south again, we set off to the south of Faial this time, it was a bumpy ride, described as "like being dragged down a very long set of stairs on your bottom". We got to a site where there had been Sperm Whales; we heard them on the hydrophone and after a while set off into the calmer waters. Here we whizzed about for a while and eventually found a pod of 20-30 Common Dolphins these stayed around us, bow riding, jumping and generally being dolphins, our seventh species for the trip, fabulous! A mid-sized splash was seen in the distance but it didn't do it again, apparently we just missed a Sowerby's Beaked Whale...a good reason to come back to this beautiful location. It was getting late as we headed back then a blow was seen off our bow we were hoping for something good and were not disappointed as a pod of 20 plus Short-finned Pilot Whales were feeding all around us, a great end to a wonder wildlife watching trip. We were tired but happy as we had our supper and then bed.

## Day 6

Sunday 19th September

Madalena

Weather - NE wind, 25 °C, light cloud sea state 2-3.

Up early'ish, for our boat at 0815, this was all on time and then back over to Faial for our flight home. We had a couple of hours to kill so had a look around outside where Helen heard a Quail and some of us had a pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins in front of the airport. We had coffee and cake and began our wonderfully un-eventful trip back to the UK, via Lisbon. A very good trip was had. Seven species of cetacean and six species of North American wader - not bad for four days in the field!

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