

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

13 – 18 September 2011



Sunset in Azores by Ian Hunt



Sperm whale by Hugh Madelin



Sperm Whale female & calf by Hugh Madelin



Risso's Dolphin by Christina and Barry Thompson

Report compiled by Catherine Strong
Images courtesy of Ian Hunt, Christina and Barry Thompson and Hugh Madelin



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Summary: This was a most enjoyable 6-day tour – plenty of whales, as well as some dolphins, excellent company and enough pleasant weather to achieve all our wildlife goals. We lost count of how many Sperm Whales we'd seen – we counted 10 in one afternoon alone – and had one superb close encounter with two whales that no one is likely ever to forget!

A bird-watching tour of the island also provided the chance to see Cory's Shearwaters chicks in the nest, some of the local subspecies of common birds, see Pico's unique volcanic landscapes, and to visit world-renowned Sperm Whale biologist Malcolm Clarke at his museum. It was just a shame we couldn't all stay for another week!

Day 1

Tuesday 13th September

After leaving Heathrow we had a good flight across southern England, north-west France and the mountains of Portugal before meeting Hugh and Sarah in sunny Lisbon where we changed flights to the Azores, 1,000 miles west of the Portuguese coastline. On arrival at Horta Airport on Faial, it was sunny, humid and hot – about 25°C – and our taxi driver, Seraphim, transported us straight to the Marina to catch our ferry to Pico Island. While waiting for our ferry connection, we could see the towering Mt Pico across the channel separating the two islands of Pico and Faial. We had our first views of Common Terns and Cory's Shearwaters during the 30-minute crossing to Pico Island as well as a few Yellow-legged Gulls.

At the town of Madalena where we docked we met Enrico, one of our local naturalist guides. After settling in to our rooms we met up in the bar at 6pm and went along to the whale watch centre for a presentation by Enrico on the whales and dolphins of the Azores. After that we had dinner at My Sweet Pico and got an early night, as we had an early start the next day for our first whale-watch trip.

Day 2

Wednesday 14th September

Morning whale-watch trip

We set off at 8.30am on the 12-seat Zodiac for our first whale-watching excursion, and went for an exhilarating trip for 45 minutes along the coastline with good views of Pico, the rich green vegetation and black coastal basalt rocks. Up in the hills we were shown where one of the Vigias called Antero, a whale hunter turned whale watcher, sits during the day. Antero was there spotting whales for various whale-watching boats including ours.

It wasn't long before we came across a small group of about 15-20 Bottlenose Dolphins about 4 miles offshore. The dolphins were all around our boat, bow-riding and we had great views of them underwater as the visibility was superb. We spent about 20 minutes with the Bottlenose Dolphins before we got news that a group of Risso's Dolphins had been seen not far away, so we headed off towards them. We had excellent close views of the Risso's Dolphins, and were able to see about 6 or seven individuals surfacing at any one time. We could see the scarring which is so characteristic of this species on their bodies and, unusually for Risso's we watched as they tail-slapped and bow-rode next to our RIB. One animal breached three times in front of us and then did so again a few minutes later, while another swam under our boat! We were very lucky to get such a close sighting. Arne, our guide for the trip, told us that these were probably part of a much larger group dispersed across the south side of Pico.

We were then joined by a small group of Common Dolphins – their attractive yellow markings clearly visible. They seemed in the mood to stay with us and bow-ride, but after we'd been with them for only a few minutes the call came from Antero, our vigia, that Sperm Whales had been seen, so we accelerated in the direction of the whale sighting, rather reluctantly leaving the Common Dolphins behind; the latter put on an impressive burst of speed to stay with us for a short time longer, but then we lost them. The area the whale had been seen was over the '1000 metre depth line', which occurs quite near the shore, just south of Lajes. When we arrived we saw our first whales of the trip – a mother and calf were swimming together, about 40 metres away from us. We saw the calf dip under the water to suckle fairly frequently and after 6 or 7 minutes the mother deep-dived and it was time to return to shore for lunch.

Afternoon whale-watch trip

After lunch at Platano's we met up back at the whale watch centre at 3pm for our next whale-watch trip. We zipped along straight away at about 25 knots to where we'd seen the mother and calf Sperm Whales in the morning. They were still there, but it took us a while to reach them and no sooner had we arrived than we saw the large whale, the female, lift her flukes for a deep dive! Our guide, Arne, had explained that Sperm Whale females dive for about 45 minutes so we timed her dive and – lo and behold – the female whale surfaced 45 minutes later, right on cue. While we waited we watched a Cory's Shearwater forcing a Common Tern to drop its catch of fish. When the whale surfaced we watched and photographed her, and most managed to get shots of the tail flukes when she dived again.

We enjoyed dinner at My Sweet Pico in the evening, after doing the checklist. Ian had exhausted the veggie options there, but the evening was warm, the food was tasty, and crickets and cicadas serenaded us back to the hotel.

Day 3

Thursday 15th September

We set off at 8.30am for another boat trip off the coast of Pico. It was a little cloudy and the sea a bit choppier than the day before. We heard that there had been no sightings yet by Antero, our vigia, when we arrived at the whale-watch centre, so we waited a little. At 9am the call came that whales had been seen, so we all got into the RIB and headed to the south side of Pico again, off the town of Lajes. 45 minutes after setting off, we saw a Sperm Whale. There was another boat with a woman in it who was writing a book about the Azores – she had a permit to get in the water with the Sperm Whales and when we arrived she was there beside the whale, in a small RIB.

Just as we were getting near the Sperm Whale, we saw the woman jump into the water right next to it; the whale immediately fluked and deep-dived! It wasn't long before we had news of more whale sightings, however, so we headed west to where Antero had told our skipper to go – about half a mile offshore, south of Lajes, where the land shelves steeply to over 1,000 metres under the water. We were treated to an excellent close sighting of a Sperm Whale and calf. We could clearly see the calf surfacing and dipping under the water, as it swam next to the female. There was a diver in the water, but these whales did not seem as bothered by the human presence as the previous two had been. We were able to travel along, only about 10 metres from the two whales at times, while they swam, surfaced to breath and shallow dived. In the distance we could see the massive outline of the female's head as she dived underwater, about 6m below the surface. After remaining with them for about 10-15 minutes, the female deep-dived. We then had another, brief sighting of a female and calf very near to the shore (half a mile at most) followed by a sighting of a group of Risso's Dolphins. This was a large split group of about 20 – 30 individuals about half a mile offshore – we had clear views of the scratches on the surface of their skin. Some of the dolphins swam within about 10m of our boat, while most kept a distance of about 20 – 30m.

It was time for lunch and so we headed back to Madalena, and saw two Bottlenose Dolphins on our way back, as well as Cory's Shearwaters, Common Terns and a juvenile Yellow-legged Gull fishing! During lunch at Platano, Sarah amused us with travel anecdotes and we returned to the whale-watch centre at about 3pm for our afternoon whale-watching session. Everyone was hoping for more dolphin sightings, but once again it was the whales that stole the show!

On our way backout to sea, we went past rafts of Cory's Shearwaters and some Common Terns, then caught up with a male Sperm Whale about 30m ahead of us, which fluked three times in a row and then dived. The action continued fast and thick, however, and a Sperm Whale female and calf were soon spotted. We followed them for a while before finding another group – a female Sperm Whale travelling with a calf, accompanied by a Bottlenose Dolphin. The dolphin appeared to be harassing the calf, causing the calf to swim touching the female whale and stick very close to her at all times, while the dolphin swam so that it was also touching the calf. Most of us managed to get some good photos of this interesting behaviour.

We then caught sight of some distant lob-tailing – between three and five very deliberate slaps on the water's surface. With two more whales coming into the picture it then became difficult to decide which whales to follow and by this time we were all starting to lose count of how many whales we'd seen, there were so many! We'd seen at least one male, five females, two calves (Sperm Whales) and a Bottlenose Dolphin ... but the best was yet to come! Within a short time we came across another two Sperm Whales – later, when we watched the underwater footage Catherine had taken, it was clear that they were a female and subadult male. We were very lucky with the position of our RIB: the two whales drew alongside us, only about 3m away at their nearest point, and we motored along by the side of them as they travelled very slowly together in the same direction as us. We had awesome views for about 20mins – at first we could see two whales clearly, one slightly behind the other. After a few minutes the second whale (slightly behind) dipped under the water and from then on we could only see one whale – the larger of the two – above water., and we could see just the outline of the second whale (which later turned out to be the subadult male). It was very impressive to be so close to these enormous mammals and to have such superb close and prolonged views. We could clearly hear the huge volume of air, and the power of it, as the whale at the surface blew. We could see her markings very clearly all down her back and on the snout including small round white scars – the result, we assumed, of encounters with squid at depth.

At one point the adult at the surface appeared to be almost stationary – our footage later revealed that the subadult male was nuzzling the female’s belly at this point, and we all came up with various theories for what might be happening, including suckling or making a tentative sexual approach. We can’t be sure which, but Sperm Whales are highly social and do engage in a great deal of touching when they are together at the surface. Shortly after the male made his approach, the adult dived and we could see on the underwater footage that the young male did appear to follow her at least at first! Our guide on the boat, Arne, said it was one of the two best encounters he’d had with Sperm Whales ever! He apologised for not having shown us any dolphins that day, but I don’t think any of us minded, as we were all very excited by our proximity to these awesome whales.

Still on a bit of a high, we met up in the bar to exchange and view footage and photos and to re-live the day’s main sighting before heading to Ankorodouro’s for an excellent supper.

Day 4

Sunday 15th August

Today, the weather had changed and there was more wind, so our first trip of the day was cancelled. Fortified with pizza, octopus salad and various other snacks and drinks, we went out at 3pm, but the wind was still up and we had to divert to the south side of Faial. Our skipper, Michael, showed us some impressive cliffs, with circling terns and gulls. We admired the little crabs living on the rocks, saw where the old whaling station had been.

We met up in the bar at the hotel at 7pm for more footage reviewing and swapping photos. We had a very enjoyable evening at O Luis’s. The leisurely pace of service meant time for plenty of wine to flow and to ponder the unique menu – at last Ian had found a veggie option that Heston Blumenthal himself might have been proud of, a lettuce crepe with mulberry yoghurt sauce. To our amazement, Ian said it was delicious.

Day 5

Monday 16th August

Today was a chance to explore Pico Island itself, in particular the birdlife. The weather was clear and it was pleasantly warm. We joined locally based ornithologist, Justin Hart, and ventured along the southern coast. We first stopped just beyond the suburbs where basalt boulders lined the shore. As we looked closer not only could we see plants such as sea campion finding enough nutrients and moisture to survive but white bird droppings coating some of the rocks. These were the telltale signs of bird activity – Cory’s Shearwaters. In gaps between or under many of the boulders the fluffy chicks were sheltering, visited by their parents only under the cover of darkness. Justin briefly took a large chick out from its nest for a quick view while he gave us a short talk about the species on Pico. Justin is researching the Cory’s Shearwaters on Pico. 75% of the world’s population of Cory’s Shearwaters nest on Pico, but Justin has found that many are under threat from cats and rodents on the island.

We then moved on to a quiet lane full of vineyards and maize fields with woodland beyond. They were full of the Azorean subspecies of blackbirds, chaffinches (which sounded very different to the UK subspecies) and woodpigeons. Canaries were abundant including a few yellow males, although less bright than in the spring. We drove on past rural houses and beautiful landscapes before visiting the vigia where Antero is stationed. The area is covered in the alien species *Pittosporum undulatum*. We walked up a narrow path lined by a lava wall. Antero showed us his hut, and where he sits on look-out each day.

We talked with Antero for about 45 minutes. He was keen to show us the Cory's Shearwater nests near his hut; it was clear that Antero takes a great interest in the chicks' welfare and he described how a cat had killed one of the chicks on a nearby nest, and his idea was to make wooden doors to put across the nest entranceways during the day to protect them! We went to see one chick on the nest. Antero told us that he used to work for whaling companies, but now he works for the whale-watch companies, and that his passion is for Blue Whales in particular. He showed us the invasive 'ginger lily' and the sweet-smelling flowers around his hut which he makes honey from.

We moved along the coast to Lajes harbour for coffee and to do some birdwatching. A Whimbrel was feeding in amongst some rocks. On the other side of the town we explored a boulder beach and saltmarsh after a packed lunch. We added Greenshank, Turnstone, a juvenile Knot and Common Tern to our day's finds. Then four of the group followed Justin to investigate a pool over the otherside of some rather impenetrable-looking grasses. They saw a Least Sandpiper. Leaving Lajes we crossed over the central high part of the island, passing cream-coloured cows, and some of Pico's native tree-heathers and laurels. Having crossed over to the north side of the island we had good views of the island São Jorge and Faial. We stopped to go inside a collapsed cave admiring the ferns and taking scenic photos. We returned mid-afternoon to the whale-watch centre, where we met Enrico, who then drove us to see Dr Malcolm Clarke at his Sperm Whale and squid museum. Dr Clarke kindly took us around his museum, which will be moving to Madalena in the autumn, and gave us a fascinating guided tour.

We ate at O Luis's again for our last night. Ian chose his lettuce crepes again and this time they came with a blackberry and yoghurt sauce, but apparently were just as good. A few of us tried the island's Amora (blackberry) liquor, which Antero had recommended highly. After some wonderful food and a very convivial evening (minus the footballers!), we walked back to our hotel. We extended the evening in the bar back at the Caravelas, eventually being forced to our beds as the barman had to go home!

Day 6

Tuesday 17th August

Ian, Chris and Barry took the ferry back to Faial as they were leaving today. Sarah and Hugh were staying on for another week in the Azores, but came to wave goodbye. We said our goodbyes and headed for our various destinations, all with happy memories of our encounters with the whales and dolphins of the Azores over the last six days ...

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Species Lists

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			13	14	15	16	17	18
1	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		✓	✓			
2	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓	✓			
3	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓				
4	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		✓	✓			

Birds (✓ = recorded; H = heard only)

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					✓	
3	Least Sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>					✓	
4	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			✓			
5	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					✓	
6	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>					✓	
7	Greenshank	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					✓	
8	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>					✓	
9	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus phaeopus</i>					✓	
10	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>			✓			
11	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>		✓		✓		
14	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	(Common) Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>	✓			✓	✓	
17	(Common) Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>			✓		✓	
18	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>					H	
19	Goldcrest (Pico)	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>					H	
20	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>			✓			
21	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>					✓	
23	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓		
24	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>			✓		✓	

Marine

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			13	14	15	16	17	18
1	Marbled Shore Crab	<i>Eriphia verrucosa</i>				✓		
2	Rockpool Prawn	<i>Palaemon elegans</i>				✓		
3	Limpet	<i>Patella piperata</i>				✓		
4	Rock Goby	<i>Gobius paganellus</i>				✓		
5	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>			✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			13	14	15	16	17	18
6	Swordfish	<i>Xiphias gladius</i>			✓			
7	Goose Barnacles	<i>Lepas anatifera</i>		✓	✓	✓		
8	Thick-lipped Grey Mullet	<i>Chelon labrosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	

Butterflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓				
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea failiae</i>					✓	

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>		✓		✓	✓	
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