

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 23 August 2014



Atlantic Spotted Dolphin



False Orca



Great Shearwater



Cuvier's Beaked Whale

Images & Report compiled by Ed Drewitt



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Day 1

Monday 18th August

London to Pico Island

Leaving behind a bright day in London we headed west across southern England, over Dorset's heaths before flying south over north-west France, across the Bay of Biscay, and over sunny mountains of northern Spain and Portugal. In glorious sunshine we waited for our connection to Horta and a further two-hour flight west to the island of Faial where we transferred by coach/taxi to the town of Horta. On the journey Trish spotted an Azorean Noctule Bat and we saw a few more flying over the fields in broad daylight. House Sparrows, Starlings, Cory's Shearwaters (over the sea), and a Common Buzzard were also seen. With a little time before our ferry to the island of Pico we had a chance to walk near the terminal in warm sunshine - Common Terns were flying in small groups chasing each other. We caught the ferry across to Madalena, the main town on Pico, admiring views of Horta behind us and watching Cory's Shearwaters wheeling across the water as they came close to shore towards nightfall. With a pastel red evening sky we booked into Hotel Caravelas for the next five nights before visiting a nearby café/bakery restaurant for some dinner and wine.

Day 2

Tuesday 19th August

Pico

After breakfast we headed just around the corner to those who were providing the boats and giving us further local knowledge and expertise in finding whales and dolphins. Enrico spent the first half an hour briefing us on the Azores and what we would expect to see – as well as the biology of some of the whales, particularly the Sperm Whales. At 9.30am we headed out on our zodiac in glorious sunshine and into the straits towards Horta, stopping at a caldera, a very extinct volcano crater and mainly submerged under the sea. Now it is home to hundreds of Yellow-legged Gulls – today there were 50 plus birds alongside some Common Terns, Feral Pigeons and a single Whimbrel. Between Faial and Pico, rafts of Cory's Shearwaters were resting on the sea's surface – probably after feeding well on fish this morning. Heading further south-east it wasn't long before we encountered some dolphins. We passed a Common Dolphin briefly and soon came across a school of over 100 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, though at any one time we couldn't see more than a dozen. The mixed group comprised adults, immature animals, and females with small calves. Those younger animals are plain grey while the mature adults are peppered with dark spots.

A few were splashing around and others were getting frisky and showing off their pale bellies as they turned over under water to get close to another animal to copulate. We left them to their antics and headed further south-east where we found a small group of Bottlenose Dolphins logging on the surface. They were quietly resting – unlike humans they don't sleep fully but instead switch off half their brain at a time. This group had broken away from a larger group and as we headed on we spotted half a dozen more dolphins, this time more active and splashing around. We stayed with them for a while watching them zooming through the water at fast speeds, surfacing right by the boat, and like the spotted dolphins, twisting and turning against each other to mate. Despite their promiscuity, one or two individuals, probably females, weren't quite so sure and were often swimming away with lots of splashes and commotion. Terns hovered close to the dolphins looking for a quick fishy meal – both Common and Roseate Terns were nearby.

As we headed back to shore we spent some time hugging the coastline, admiring Pico Mountain, the volcanic rocks, and the small villages, fields and vineyards. We could see the layers of hardened lava that have flowed in past events – the last in the 1700s. One area had formed a cave where a blow-hole was on the ceiling. Limpets and barnacles lined the high tide mark. From the boat we could also see the red flag of a hut or watchtower where Antero Soares, known as a 'Vigia', was looking out for whales and dolphins. Originally looking for whales for hunting, today the Vigias look out for whales and dolphins for those wanting to see them alive and well!

We stopped for a few hours to enjoy some local fresh dishes at the nearby café and look around Madalena, meeting together again at 3pm. With Arne, Casper and Mia we headed out south-west towards where Sperm Whales had been spotted earlier. After a 50-minute boat trip at 30 knots we finally saw some other boats and as we closed in saw an incredible site – a huge Sperm Whale lunged out of the sea in a full breach! Two further shallow breaches followed enabling this individual to tell other whales where it is so they can gather together again. We spent the next hour in this area watching up to four Sperm Whales 'blowing' and shallow diving keeping behind them about 50 metres away. Two of these whales were a mother and a large calf. Another whale bowed deeply and with its fluke or tail fin stuck right out of the water it went down into a deep dive for 45 minutes or so. We continued to see various blows of the whales but they were moving fast under water, coming up occasionally for breath. Before we left the area one curious whale came closer to the boat and did some spy hopping, lifting itself above the water's surface to look at us. It edged closer, blowing spray out of its blowhole positioned on the left side of the head.

By 5pm we had to head back in glorious sunshine and slightly bumpier sea, watching Cory's Shearwaters as they glided across the water or took off from flocks sitting on the sea. We had beautiful views of the west side of Pico island, looking carefully at the textures, habitats and terrain of the dormant volcano and the land that has become vegetated over the time since it last erupted in the 1700s. As we headed for the corner of the island we had a real surprise – a group of 50+ Flying Squid suddenly propelled themselves out of the water and glided many metres over the sea before disappearing back under water!

We arrived back just after 6pm and after a quick break met together for dinner at the Calheta Harbour Restaurant where we sat outside in lovely warm sunshine. As we watched the sun gradually pass behind the island of Faial we enjoyed fresh fish of the day (White Trevally) and other delicious local meals. While eating, Yellow-legged Gulls were loafing up on a nearby derelict shipping warehouse and small flocks of Starlings arrived for the evening to roost inside the building – they came in silently but began to sing once inside.

Day 3

Wednesday 20th August

With higher winds forecast we used this day as our chance to explore the island of Pico. We set off at 9.30am with Justin our guide and first visited the vineyards of Pico, also a World Heritage Site. Their unusual design makes them unique and very special. Volcanic rocks have been built up to make small partitioned walls, and in these the seeds of the vines are planted. The rock provides lots of nutrients despite the lack of soil, and with the hot sunshine and rain, plenty of grapes are produced. A few Canaries were flying around and the air was filled with the song of Blackbirds, despite it being August when most birds back in the UK go quiet. A few Blackcaps, a common warbler here, were also singing.

We then headed just beyond the suburbs where basalt boulders line the shore. In gaps under many of the rocks the fluffy chicks of Cory's Shearwaters were sheltering, visited by their parents (mainly fathers) only under the cover of darkness. Justin briefly took a large chick out from its nest for a quick view and explanation about their survival. This particular chick was around four weeks old and was already getting big and very fluffy. Justin is monitoring many of the nests, including this one, to check on the chicks' survival rates as feral cats pose a real threat to this species. Most of the world's Cory's Shearwaters are only found in the Azores so their success is crucial for the security of the population. Nearby on the road we looked closely at an adult bird that had been hit by a car. We were able to see the long wings up close and the special 'tubes' on the bill that help the bird detect smells over the sea, such as shoals of fishes.

A mile or so down the road we stopped to visit an old settlement. By the side of the road the boulders, walls and a fig tree were teeming with Madeiran Wall Lizards. Some large males were a deep bottle green colour while other smaller individuals were brown with blonde streaks. Some were even feeding on ripe blackberries, though struggling a little! We carefully walked down a narrow path with crunchy, coarse volcanic stones beneath our feet. We then stopped to view the ruined walls of 15th Century Pico. Here lay the remains of buildings which date back to some of the first settlers to arrive on the island. In amongst the rocks bright orange lichens, green ferns and other pioneer species were growing and contrasting with the dark black volcanic scree. Further down the road we stopped on the edge of a village to taste some mineral water from a well – the water is fresh and refreshing and we could taste the minerals.

We moved on to visit Antero Soares, our Vigia, who was looking out for whales and dolphins. We heard Antero's distinctive voice yesterday on the boat radio so it was good to see him in person. He was looking down big binoculars for whales, though none were in sight at this point. His 'office' is a small, basic hide covered in cetacean posters and Antero sitting with his large binoculars fixed to a wooden platform from his chair. Outside the trees were busy with singing Blackcaps, a few Goldcrests and the odd Woodpigeon, while a young Cory's Shearwater was quietly resting in its rocky burrow.

We moved along the coast to Lajes Harbour for lunch, passing a hovering Buzzard and an Azorean Noctule Bat on the way. A few Common Terns were resting by the water or flying by. After a packed lunch, coffee and ice cream we headed up into the hills, passing bright yellow flowers of the Ginger Lilies, *Hydrangeas*, and cows, few of which we had seen on the lower ground. We stopped off at a weedy lake surrounded by cooler air and mist. Azorean Grayling butterflies were zipping past in the breeze and a close look into the sedges and moss revealed quite a few the Citrine Forktails, a very special damselfly.

Only females are found on the island and originate from North America. They reproduce by parthenogenesis whereby the eggs of the damselfly are still able to develop without the need for fertilisation by a male. With the help of a light butterfly net we managed to see both the butterfly and damselfly up close for those who were unable to venture into the tussock field. Marsh Frogs could be heard in the background while the bushes revealed the darker and blue-grey Chaffinches and the odd Blackbird. A Goldcrest was also calling.

We headed back across the island surrounded by parasitic cones that form a line east of Pico Mountain. Pico itself was in good form and unusually completely clear of any cloud. We stopped to take photos and could see the dark volcanic rock that remained from when it last erupted in the 1700s. To our north we could see the neighbouring island of Sao Jorge, and as we ventured back along the island we saw hedgerows or wind breaks made from rows of white and blue flowering *Hydrangeas*. The fields were scattered with copses of old, ancient forests of heathers, laurel, and juniper. At this stopping point we also saw a flock of Chaffinches, a few Blackbirds and a Grey Wagtail.

We headed back along a straight road and stopped at a lava tube where the ceilings had collapsed. It was amazing being inside something that would have once been so hot and dynamic. As the lava had cooled a hard rocky ceiling was formed. And, as when you open the oven on a cake too early, the remaining lava shrank and collapsed as it cooled further, leaving a large gap or cave. At the entrance the greenest of green ferns and bryophytes (liverworts) were carpeting the rough volcanic walls. Under our feet you could make out the lava flows, and see where after settling the flows had dropped further to form an irregular, pleated surface. With a flash of the camera we could make out the rock was in fact iron-red and not black. Meanwhile outside Blackbirds, Chaffinches, and the odd Grey Wagtail were feeding in the fields. A nearby water trough for cows had some large tadpoles, froglets and an adult Marsh Frog inside. We travelled back down hill towards Madalena slowing down for a herd of cows in the road off for milking, arrived back at 4pm in good time to have a rest before dinner at 7pm.

Day 4

Thursday 21st August

After a night of heavy rain the morning was looking a little gloomy. After breakfast we headed over to the boat and waited for the heavy rain to clear. By 9.30am we were headed out across the straits towards Faial and apart from a few squalls the rain cleared up. While the weather decided what it would do we hugged the coastline, which has just become a marine nature reserve. Colourful Red Rock Crabs were clinging onto the rocks and as we headed into some large caves the water turned a deep navy blue. At the high tide mark a multitude of colours resulted from the different types of algae growing.

We looked at the remarkable volcanic geology where younger black lava balls had been catapulted into the older, creamy-coloured volcanic rock. As the lava had spewed up it had mixed with sand to form layers, which were now eroded away with the effects of the waves. Further round the corner we popped into a bay to see an old Sperm Whale factory, which has been closed since 1987. The last commercial whales were killed in 1984, but three were subsequently killed for a documentary film three years later. On nearby cliffs Common Terns were completing their breeding and at least three well-grown chicks were spotted with their parents. Meanwhile, three or four Turnstones were feeding along the volcanic sloping rocks.

With the weather improving we headed out to sea in the sunshine – while the sea was not calm, there were no white horses so we still had good opportunities to see dolphins. It wasn't long before we came across a school of Common Dolphins busily feeding so less interested in us – their yellow, hour-glass flanks were easy to spot and there were some young calves with their mothers in amongst the group. Close by were rafts of Cory's Shearwaters. As we cruised further we saw a Great Shearwater, and during the whole morning we saw three or four more. Searching further out where the Vigia couldn't see due to visibility we came across a very large school of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, probably a few hundred in total. There were very well spread out with a mix of adults and young but there was often a dozen by the boat swimming just under the water's surface. They were more interested in the boat and riding the waves, so we had prolonged views of them before moving on.

While out on the sea, we came across a buoy that we took away with us which was covered in goose barnacles. And as we searched for Bottlenose Dolphins to no avail we stopped in order for Michael to show us a huge 5-foot long dying Conger Eel, which had been attacked by a shark. It had a huge lump taken out of it. Conger Eels normally hide in rocks so perhaps this one had been attracted to a long fishing line.

After lunch and another heavy deluge, the rain stopped and we headed back out on the boat. We spent the first hour cruising along the deep canyon north of Pico where the sea dropped down to 2,700 metres. We saw nothing until we headed towards another dolphin-watching boat. As this one peeled away we could suddenly see a light form just under the water and then a few more. These were beaked whales, but which species? At first we thought Sowerby's Beaked Whales but they were too lightly coloured – we realised they were Cuvier's Beaked Whales, named after the French naturalist George Cuvier. Unusually one sidled up close to the boat just six to eight metres away. This is very unusual behaviour for beaked whales. They slipped away and we waited as they were surely due to surface for air at some point...

Then suddenly behind us they did and with Pico Island in the background we watched as the three animals surfaced several times before disappearing again. We waited and before we knew it, could see their pale bodies anywhere between eight and 25 metres away. They kept getting closer and closer to the water's surface until they began surfacing again giving us incredible views near the boat. There was one male whale with a very snub-nosed head, which was very pale in colour compared to the dirty grey-brown body. And he was covered in scars from interactions with other whales. The other two animals were darker overall with limited scarring and most probably females. After surfacing they spent a short while underwater again before coming up for air, and then as quickly as they came they swam away from us, swimming high out of the water as they went giving excellent views of their head and bodies. While they are one of the more common species of beaked whales they are seen very infrequently in the Azores and usually disappear very quickly. Such behaviour we saw today helps to understand this species in more detail – and their location, like other whales and dolphins seen, is recorded for data and research purposes.

We headed away towards Faial where we found some Common Dolphins, which were feeding and having lots of sex! These promiscuous marine mammals were chasing each other, splashing, twisting, and turning under water. There were also lots of Great Shearwaters alongside the Cory's – we must have seen 30 plus in total, if not more. They were absent two days ago and the recent low-pressure weather conditions may have pushed them closer to the islands. Many were flying past us while others were mixed amongst loafing groups of Cory's Shearwaters. They are much whiter than the Cory's with a dark cap, white nape, and wings feathers that contrast between the inner and outer feathers rather being than just plain brown.

They breed mainly in the Tristan da Cunha group of islands in the South Atlantic (west to south-west of South Africa) where over a million pairs nest. Up to 3 million pairs also nest on Gough Island and smaller numbers on the Falkland Islands. The birds we saw were on their way to their breeding, which starts in September and continues through to May. They undertake long trans-equatorial migrations, congregating to feed on rich feeding grounds off the coasts of New England and southeast Canada between June-August before heading south. Recent satellite tracking research shows that most birds then return south via waters around the Azores and down the west side of the southern Atlantic. This time of the year is therefore a good period to see them passing off the coastlines of Pico and Faial.

After an amazing adventure we arrived back at 5.15pm for a rest before meeting for dinner again at 7pm. We then headed back out with Casper at 9.15pm back to the coast near the vineyards to watch and hear the Cory's Shearwaters come to visit their nests amongst the volcanic boulders. The strange, eerie calls were mesmerising and a sound you wouldn't perhaps expect to hear coming from these birds! When we stopped we could immediately hear the weird and unexpected calls of the males as they flew low over the breeding colony while females 'growled' from the vegetation. Some of the group described it as sounding a little like a didgeridoo!

Day 5

Friday 22nd August

With a brighter and less windy day ahead we sailed out on our penultimate trip into the straits to pick up our first group of dolphins, Common Dolphins. We stayed with them for a short while before heading south of Pico but hugging the coastline where we saw our first school of Risso's Dolphins. They were on a mission and heading west and we slowly pootled along with them, watching as they surfaced. The adults with their much whiter heads and bodies were very obvious against the darker and smaller juveniles. The white skin is scarring from both the teeth of males and females interacting and fighting with each other. We left the school and headed out south looking for more dolphins as no whales had been spotted. Further out we encountered a group of 20 – 30 plus Bottlenose Dolphins that had some small calves and were surfacing at regular intervals. Cory's Shearwaters were gliding around as usual plus the odd Great Shearwater. A slight surprise though was a dark petrel taking off from the sea – it was a Bulwer's Petrel and looked like a Swift or a long-winged bat flapping and gliding over the water. It also had a big lump of food in its bill, and on close examination of photos was in fact a lump of fish (probably from a fishing boat).

As we headed further south-west we saw over half a dozen more of these petrels, a species we've not seen on this holiday before. They are thought to nest on some of the Azorean islands further away but may also nest on Faial or Pico. As we headed back in towards Pico we encountered our fourth species of dolphin for the day, Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. There was a large group spread out across the sea and for a while we had 20 plus following alongside the boat, many with small calves. Meanwhile, while on our journey we went past a rug-sized Mobula Ray, although it was missed by most; a dying Trigger Fish (perhaps attacked by a dolphin); and a dead Cory's Shearwater which we examined for any leg rings or data loggers. We headed back to harbour for 12.15pm for lunch before meeting again at 2.30pm.

Our last trip out was awesome. The wind coming from the north was whipping up the waves a bit and meant there was a real energy in the sea. And as we headed to the north side of Faial it wasn't long before we were cruising along at eight knots with a species of oceanic dolphins that isn't often seen – the False Orca (more often known as the False Killer Whale although it isn't related to the Orca).

These are large cetaceans, up to six metres long and fast! There was a school of 60 and we saw up to ten or more where we were, perhaps more. Some rose right out of the water while porpoising as they headed along the coastline chasing the fishes until they tired. The dolphins then stopped and swam in all directions with lots of splashing to catch and eat their food – some came out of the water with a fish in their mouth. They have distinctive sharp conical teeth ideal for catching fishes and even other whales and dolphins. The Cory's Shearwaters soon picked up any leftovers. These black dolphins are a little like a pilot whale (also a dolphin) but with a more pointed face.

After all this excitement we headed further north to look for some Sperm Whales that had been sighted. We were soon looking at two whales; one soon did a deep dive and the other shortly followed suit. While we were watching them, a school of Common Dolphins came out of nowhere and at fast speed porpoised past us continuing north. We continued to search a little more and in total we saw up to five or six Sperm Whales. As the first two were due to surface, we watched a mother and a calf at the surface before they did a few shallow dives. Finally, after 45 minutes the first whales reappeared and we watched as they logged on the surface re-oxygenating their blood before deep diving once again showing off their spectacular flukes.

We headed back for 5pm and had a few hours rest before meeting together for our final meal at the restaurant next door where we celebrated with wine, limpets, and other delicious dishes. After dinner some visited the nearby ice cream shop near the waterfront followed by listening and watching some traditional singing and dancing in the town square.

Day 6

Saturday 23rd August

We left Madalena on the 8.15am ferry leaving behind Pico and watching some Cory's Shearwaters gliding over the sea. We had a quick transfer to the airport spotting a few Buzzards, and said our goodbyes as Ed was staying in the Azores to lead another group arriving later in the day.

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Species List

Mammals (✓ = recorded but not counted; * = endemic)

	Common name	Scientific name	August					
			18	19	20	21	22	23
1	Azores Noctule Bat*	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>	2+		1			
2	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>					30+	
3	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		20+			30+	
4	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		1		50+	50+	
5	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		100+		50+	100+	
6	False Killer Whale	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>					60+	
7	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		4			6	
8	Cuvier's Beaked Whale	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>				3		

Birds (h = heard only)

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>					6+	
3	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>				30+	✓	
4	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>	1		1			
5	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				5		
6	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus phaeopus</i>		1				
7	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>		1			1	
10	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	(Common) Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>			2+			
12	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>			2+		1	
13	(Common) Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>		✓	✓			✓
14	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>			h			
15	Goldcrest (Pico)	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>			h			
16	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>			✓			
19	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>			✓			

Butterflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓			
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea failiae</i>		✓	✓			
3	Azores Grayling*	<i>Hipparchia azorina</i>			✓			
4	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>		1				

Other Invertebrates

1	Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax imperator</i>			✓			
2	Citrine Forktail	<i>Ishnura hastata</i>			✓			
3	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>			✓			

Amphibians & Reptiles

1	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>		✓	✓			
2	Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>			✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	August					
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Marine

1	Red Rock Crab	<i>Cancer bellianus</i>			✓			
2	Limpet	<i>Patella piperata</i>		✓		✓		
3	Grey Triggerfish	<i>Balisten capriscus</i>					✓	
4	Goose Barnacles	<i>Lepas anatifera</i>				✓		
5	Flying Squid sp			✓				
6	Conger Eel	<i>Conger conger</i>				1		



2014 Naturetrek Group in Zodiac



Pico Island