

Whales and Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 28 August 2013



Bottlenose Dolphin



Sperm Whale



Young Fin Whale



Azorean Yellow-legged Gull

Images & Report compiled by Ed Drewitt



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Day 1

Saturday 23rd August

London to Pico Island

Everyone met Ed at Horta Airport on Faial Island after flying from London Heathrow and changing at Lisbon. We had a pleasant coach journey to the port at Horta admiring the lush green vegetation and spectacular volcanic coastline in lovely sunshine. We boarded the ferry across to Madalena on Pico Island enjoying the scenery and spotting the odd Cory's Shearwater gliding past over the water - they become almost invisible when they fly with their upper wings against the sea. We booked into Hotel Caravelas with a welcome from Dania, our host for the holiday with regards the boat trips out to sea. After a nice break we popped next door to Calheta Harbour restaurant to enjoy local wines, limpets, fish of the day, and other delicious local dishes before heading to bed for a well earned sleep.

Day 2

Sunday 24th August

Pico

It was a bright, slightly overcast day and we headed out north of Faial to see what we could find. The wind was quite strong and coming from the west so we couldn't go out miles, but it wasn't too long before we encountered our first school of Common Dolphins swimming around the boat. We left them to head a little further north where we found a school of 20 or so Bottlenose Dolphins. They were very cooperative and gave super views as they surfaced close to the boat, revealing just how large they are compared to the Common Dolphins. Bottlenose Dolphins are the size of a large pig while Common Dolphins are closer to the size of a small sheep. They didn't stay too long and seemed to be moving south. Meanwhile, rafts of Cory's Shearwaters sat on the sea - in amongst one group there was a single Great Shearwater, a species migrating through from Canada on its way south to breed on islands in the southern Atlantic. Later, while watching the dolphins, another Great Shearwater was sat on the sea dipping its head under water looking for prey.

We headed further north and west along Faial's coastline where we stopped to see another school of Bottlenose Dolphins. This group were much larger with up to 50 animals, the maximum number for this species and very much unlike the smaller dolphins, which can occur in hundreds (and sometimes thousands). Unlike the earlier Bottlenose Dolphins this group were hanging around, splashing, and riding the waves.

Some were jumping out of the sea showing off their impressive bodies. A few calves were also spotted. With the wind getting up we headed back south to see the Common Dolphins again – they were very playful and coming close to the boat. There were quite a few very young calves surfacing too. We left the dolphins to their antics and headed back to the harbour for lunch in the nearby cafes before our next trip at 3pm.

Despite the sea looking a little choppy we set out this time south of Pico and the sea wasn't quite as bad as we thought. After 45 minutes we had our first dolphins, a school of Risso's Dolphins, perhaps a dozen, happily swimming near the boat and not in any particular hurry. We could see the adults' white bodies when they were submerged, and as they came up for air their scarred bodies were obvious. Risso's Dolphins don't play softly and both male and females end up with distinctive white skin from their battle scars! There were also a few younger animals, grey and smaller.

We then heard on the radio that some other dolphins and a baleen whale had been seen. We dashed out further east along the coast but at first to no avail. Then suddenly a small group of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, our fourth species for the day, came to swim by the boat and like the Risso's were happy to just surface and hang close by. Once they got bored though they disappeared as quickly as they had come! We spent an hour or so searching for the baleen whale after transecting near where it had been seen by our lookout man on land, Antero Soares. He is also called a 'Vigia' and his role dates back to when men like Antero looked out for Sperm Whale for hunting boats in years gone by. Petra, our skipper, decided to head west and when it looked like we weren't going to find anything Casper, one of the crew, suddenly spotted a body surfacing ahead. It surfaced a couple more times and it was soon obvious this was a baleen whale, a rare animal here for this time of the year. But which species was it? As we followed in the direction of the animal we spotted its fluke prints - large, round calm areas of water left behind due to the motion of the tail (or fluke), things went quiet. And then suddenly, just ten metres away, the whale surfaced by the boat giving remarkable views of its whole body as it breathed and went under again. Petra noticed the right lower jaw was white – this could mean only one thing, this was a Fin Whale!! Perhaps a younger animal as it wasn't a huge Fin Whale. It was incredible and we saw it a few times more before it disappeared for another 20 minutes or more. Another boat had joined us in the search and behind them the whale reappeared. We caught up with them to see a shallow blow and the whale surface once more before we lost it.

After an amazing afternoon we headed back to Madalena feeling on top of the world after seeing the dolphins and this wonderful Fin Whale so close. After a quick freshen up we met at the restaurant next to the hotel for dinner at 7pm to celebrate.

Day 3

Monday 25th August

Despite a still breezy forecast we were soon out on the sea at just after 8.30am and headed towards Horta where we encountered a school of Common Dolphins coming from the south. They weren't for stopping and while some came close to the boat to say hello most continued north on their journey. A few Great Shearwaters also flew past. We headed south in their direction where a few whale blows had been seen far out to sea by the Vigia. Some miles out we suddenly came across a school of 30 – 50 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins heading west. Spotted dolphins couldn't resist the urge to come and see us and play for short while and we had lovely views of them surfacing close to the boat.

They then suddenly continued their journey and unusually for this species began porpoising at fast speed. Michael, our skipper, managed to keep up with them and we had remarkable views of often 20 dolphins 'swimming' through the air all at the same time before going back into the water again. The 'spots' peppered across their bodies were clear to see on the adults, as well as their pale bellies – often pink in the females. After lots of fun watching them we left them to continue their journey west.

As we travelled south a group of at least 30 Flying Squid suddenly ejected themselves out of the sea and travelled some metres before going back into the water. Their siphons squirted out a jet of water to give them their propulsion and we had nice views before they disappeared. A Common Tern was intent on catching a fish and hovered continuously over a patch of sea as we sailed past. We spent some time in the 'zone', the area where the whales had been seen blowing, but to no avail. We headed back north to the coastline, spotting the odd single Flying Squid and the odd raft of Cory's Shearwater, before admiring the black, volcanic coastline. We arrived back at 11.30am with a few hours to relax before our next trip at 2pm.

No whales had been sighted for the afternoon so we headed over to Horta and explored the coastline and harbour. 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 softer layers, which have been eroding 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.

Some dolphins had been sighted so we headed north and found a school of 20 plus Bottlenose Dolphins. Some other boats were close, however, the dolphins had other ideas and swam closer to our boat and we had beautiful views as they surfaced, often all together! After 15 – 20 minutes of watching them we pulled away and headed north of Pico to look out for any further cetaceans and explore the coastline. Cory's Shearwaters often flew past and at one point we even had a single Sooty Shearwater, a first for the holiday. The wind was really whipping up the waves and producing lots of 'white horses'. We hugged the coastline and passed the villages of Ponta Negra Cabrito and Ponta de Baixo, which have been built by the steep volcanic sea cliffs.

Heading back west and then south we arrived back at 5.15pm to shower and freshen up ready for our 15-minute evening walk to the restaurant Ancoradouro where we enjoyed a variety of local dishes.

Day 4

Tuesday 26th August

With stronger winds and rain forecast we used this day as our chance to explore the island of Pico. We set off at 9.30am with Justin and Casper as our guides and first visited the vineyards of Pico, a World Heritage Site. Despite the heavy rain we were able to admire their unusual design. 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. We visited a windmill by the vineyard and learnt a little more about the grapes used to make the local wine as well as the exchange of wine from Pico, with wheat from Faial to make bread on the island. A flock of Canaries were flying around and a few Blackbirds were singing but before the next downpour we headed on.

We stopped 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. In a break between the rain Justin briefly took a large chick out from its nest for a quick view and explanation about their survival. This particular chick was now around five 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.

Continuing on a few Buzzards took off from the road while Blackbirds and House Sparrows were feeding in some of the small fields. A mile or so down the road we stopped to visit an old settlement and despite the sudden deluge 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. We quickly headed back to the vehicles and popped back to the hotel to change and grab more waterproofs!

We then took a 20-minute journey to visit our Vigia, Antero Soares, who, based in his hut or watchtower, looks out for whales and dolphins for the various whale and dolphin watching companies. We heard Antero's distinctive voice yesterday on the boat radio so it was good to see him in person. With today's rough sea Antero didn't have any whales to spot today so he was waiting for us when we arrived to say hello. His 'office' is a small, basic hide covered in cetacean posters, and Antero sits with his large binoculars fixed to a wooden platform which also forms his chair. He spent a little time explaining what he does and impressing us with a photo of a Sperm Whale breaching right by a zodiac! Outside the trees were busy with singing Blackcaps.

We moved along the coast to Lajes Harbour for lunch passing lots of purple flowered vines known as Morning Glory and yellow Ginger Lilies. We spent an hour enjoying some sunshine, visiting the café, and enjoying the ambience of this town, one of the first to be inhabited on Pico. After lunch we headed up into the hills, passing blue *Hydrangeas*, and cows, few of which we had seen on the lower ground. Some of the island's original stands of laurel, giant heather and juniper are also hanging on here – before the last Ice Age they existed all across Europe.

We stopped off at a weedy lake surrounded by cooler air and mist. Andy spotted an Azorean Noctule Bat flying above the stunted trees. A few Azorean Grayling butterflies were flying amongst the tussocks and a close look into the sedges and moss revealed quite a few 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. A Marsh Frog could be heard in the background alongside a Goldcrest and the odd Chaffinch.

We headed back across the island surrounded by parasitic cones that form a line east of Pico Mountain. One or two Grey Wagtails flew across the road. As we crossed the higher ground we suddenly found ourselves in thick fog where the low cloud had moved in. 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, like 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. Rocky shelves had formed where the lava had begun to flow faster again taking the crust that had begun to form with it and leaving just the sides of the crust, now shelves, behind. With a flash of the camera we could make out the rock was in fact iron-red and not black. Back outside, nearby a water trough for cows had small numbers of Marsh Frogs inside and a Grey Wagtail could be heard in the mist!

We travelled back down hill towards Madalena where the fog had cleared and were dropped back at the hotel around 3pm for the afternoon. We met back at 6.45pm for the checklist before eating at the restaurant next door at 7pm. We then headed back out with Casper and Chris 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. Rod described it as sounding a like the voice of Mr Punch and the use of a 'swazzle'. When we arrived back around 10pm a live band was playing in the town square and some walked along to listen for an hour or so.

Day 5

Wednesday 27th August

Our penultimate boat trip set off at 9am and with good weather in the offering, Sperm Whales had already been seen by the Vigia. We didn't waste any time heading south-east near Lajes, on the way stopping to see a school of Common Dolphins and then Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. Both were on a journey somewhere and didn't stop to play. We needed to continue south-east and after an hour or so we had a whale! A massive male Sperm Whale surfacing before taking a plunge and shallow diving for 10 to 15 minutes. Unlike the females we see more frequently here, the male is larger and has a bump on the head which is missing in the ladies – this is an extension of the spermaceti organ used for communicating and detecting prey. Males are much more nomadic, spending time with other bachelor males before taking time out alone looking for females to mate with, sometimes travelling up towards the Arctic to feed and changing their diet to fishes such as sharks and rays. This male was a little shy this morning and although he surfaced a few times further, he spent most of his time shallow diving before doing a deep dive and showing off his fluke or tail fin. We headed further south-east where we found a second male Sperm Whale also surfacing and re-oxygenating his blood. It wasn't too long before he also did a deep dive, giving a better opportunity to see and photograph the fluke as he went under.

Heading back north towards Madalena we were almost amongst a school of Risso's Dolphin when Arne, who was in another boat nearby, was pointing 9 o'clock. What at first looked like a surfacing young Risso's Dolphin turned out to be a Leatherback Turtle coming up for air! It surfaced up to six times with 10 – 15 second intervals before finally disappearing. A pale diamond-shape mark on its head, typical of leatherbacks, was easily visible as it surfaced. At the same time the dolphins had disappeared. Why was everything so skittish and disappearing?

We discovered after lunch that a group of False Orcas (or False Killer Whales), a type of predatory dolphin, had moved through south just offshore. They will attack and eat other dolphins and even whales. So we suspect that the quiet, less playful behaviour of the dolphins, and the shy nature of the whales were down to the False Orcas.

Even the turtle didn't hang around (and normally they are more approachable). Cory's Shearwaters were a little thin on the ground, though Andy and Jean did see a Sooty Shearwater. A Flying Squid was also seen by some. Despite this we did encounter a second group of Risso's Dolphins that were very dark – they were mainly younger, immature or young adults that had far less scarring. And a more playful school of spotted dolphins also came to join us and were surfacing right by the Zodiac. So not everything was concerned or knew about the False Orcas!

After a pleasant lunch trying out different places to eat we met together again at 2.30pm and headed out for our final trip. After stopping briefly to see a school of Risso's Dolphins and a group of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, we continued south-east towards Lajes where a whale had been spotted. We saw a blow and followed the fluke prints – despite the animal behaving like a baleen whale it surfaced again and revealed itself to be one of the bull Sperm Whales. We suspect the other one continued south ahead of the False Orcas. We had super views of the male blowing and logging on the surface, its head bump and wrinkly, prune-like olive-coloured skin sometimes visible when the swell and waves allowed. He did a shallow dive and spent just over 10 minutes underwater. After a short time on the surface he shallow dived again and after 20 minutes we decided to leave him be as some other boats had joined us.

We headed back north-west and stopped close to the coastline and the caves, admiring the layers of lava rock and waves bursting into the caves and coming back out like fireworks, as the water was pushed through blow holes and shot back out as explosions of dense spray. Above the cliffs one or two Azorean Noctule Bats were spotted while Feral Pigeons and Yellow-legged Gulls perched on the rocks. We headed back, not before stopping for 15 minutes or so with a school of Risso's Dolphins, a mix of adults and young calves. They came very close to the boat offering some lovely views and photo opportunities. Leaving them behind we followed the coastline back for the last time, admiring the vineyards, volcanic cliffs, and the lush green fields and trees. Terns were frequently sitting on the rocks or fishing just offshore. The sea's surface had a mix of white bubbles from the waves crashing against the rocks and decaying phytoplankton that had drifted in from afar. As they decompose gases are given off and produce a brownish slick of bubbles. The earlier Leatherback Turtle may have drifted over on the same current that sent the phytoplankton over this way. We arrived back at sunny Madalena at 5.30pm ready for a little time to pack and rest before our final dinner together at 7pm and bright sunshine over Faial.

Day 6

Thursday 28th August

This morning after an early breakfast we met at 7.45am and headed over to the ferry port for the 8.15am ferry. We enjoyed a pleasant sailing across and spotted a few Cory's Shearwaters flying low over the water. A quick transfer to the airport and after checking in we were on the plane and heading back to Lisbon. For those on the left of the plane beautiful views of Pico Island were had, while on the right-side some looking out may have spotted three whale-watching boats and in front three Sperm Whales, two females and probably a calf...all looking tiny from the plane! We transferred to London Heathrow and said our farewells in arrivals.

Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	August					
			23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Azores Noctule Bat*	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>			1	1	2	
2	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		20+			30+	
3	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		50+	20+			
4	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		100+	50+		50+	
5	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		20+	20+		50+	
6	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>		1				
7	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>					2	

Birds (h = heard only)

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

Butterflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>				✓		
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea faillae</i>				✓		
3	Azores Grayling*	<i>Hipparchia azorina</i>				✓		

Other Invertebrates

1	Citrine Forktail	<i>Ishnura hastata</i>				✓		
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Amphibians & Reptiles

1

1	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>				✓		
2	Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>					1	
3	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>						

Marine

1	Limpet	<i>Patella piperata</i>			✓		✓	
2	Flying Squid sp				30+		1	

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Visiting Horta by boat



Young Cory's Shearwater