

Whales and Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 28 August 2016



Loggerhead Turtle



Sperm Whale



Risso's Dolphin



Sperm Whale fluke

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Summary

This cetacean-focussed tour, in the deep waters of the Azores off the volcanic island of Pico, revealed a remarkable range of whales and dolphins. Of the greater whales, we were treated to countless Sperm Whale sightings (including several calves) and two close-up Fin Whale sightings (likely the same individual). The supporting cast included five species of dolphin swimming alongside the boat: Bottlenose, Short-beaked Common, Atlantic Spotted, Striped and Risso's Dolphins. We also enjoyed close views of Loggerhead Turtle, Cory's Shearwater and Common Tern. Meanwhile, a land trip provided the chance to see a nesting shearwater chick, the unique World Heritage Site, volcanic vineyards, a collapsed lava tube, Portugal's highest mountain peak, and the relic laurel and juniper trees on the higher ground. During the tour we also saw the *azorensis* subspecies of Common Blackbird, Azores Chaffinch and a vagrant Glossy Ibis.

Day 1

Tuesday 23rd August

London - Pico

Leaving behind a bright, sunny but cool day in London, our flight headed west across southern England, over north-west France, across the Bay of Biscay, and over sunny mountains of northern Spain and Portugal. We had a quick connection for a further two and a half hour flight west over the calm Atlantic Ocean to the island of Faial, where we transferred by taxi to the town of Horta. At the port we checked in our luggage and boarded the 6pm ferry to Pico Island.

It was a sunny, calm afternoon and the 20-minute sea crossing revealed our first Cory's Shearwaters, Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls and Common Terns. We checked in to our hotel, just two minutes' walk from the ferry port in the town of Madalena, before going to relax at Petisca, a local restaurant. We were given a welcome talk from Sara, who introduced the variety of cetacean species we could hope to see over the coming days, as well as describing the fundamental biology of whales and dolphins. After enjoying some local recipes we headed for bed, looking forward to our first morning on the water the next day.

Day 2

Wednesday 24th August

Boat trips from Pico

After breakfast we headed to CW Azores, our host for the week, providing the boats and further local knowledge and expertise in finding whales and dolphins. Enrico, the manager, spent half an hour briefing us on the marine life of the Azores, giving the group a re-cap from Sara's introduction the night before. We then eagerly got into our life jackets and boarded the boat, heading north from Pico. It wasn't long before we spotted our first cetaceans – Risso's Dolphins! A group of about seven appeared by our boat, their characteristic hockey-stick like dorsal fins gliding through the water as they swam near to the boat to investigate us. Risso's Dolphins have unmistakable white scarring across their bodies from where they interact with one another. Judging from the mostly grey individuals and the presence of a calf, it appeared to be a group of females.

Suddenly, our boat sped up as we travelled further north – a Sperm Whale had been seen! We arrived in time for only for a few of us to see the fluke of a Sperm Whale as it submerged for a deep dive. Sperm Whales can hold

their breath for as long as 90 minutes – so lots of patience is needed when looking for them. However, we weren't waiting long before a group of three more Sperm Whales were seen less than a kilometre away in a different direction – certainly members of the same pod. When we arrived, the whales were 'logging' on the surface, only their splash guards and tops of their backs visible as they floated leisurely in the waves, their characteristic angled blows clearly visible. After watching the group for 20 minutes or so, they also fluked and disappeared from sight. We turned around to sail slowly along the island, and on the horizon the dorsal fins of a pod of (Short-beaked) Common Dolphins could be seen. We made our way over to them quickly, where we were delighted to see the dolphins swimming playfully alongside the boat – their diagnostic yellow hourglass patterns clearly visible as they broke the surface to breathe and investigated the boat. Within a minute, about 70 Common Dolphins in total were swimming in front of us. Common Dolphins are a medium-sized playful dolphin, however today they didn't seem interested in showing off with any acrobatics, eventually losing interest in the boat and making their way out to open water.

As we headed back inshore, we stopped the boat for a brief encounter with two Risso's Dolphins – these were mature adult males – identifiable by their very white heads where they have been interacting and fighting over many years. Passing rafts of Cory's Shearwaters, we made our way back to the harbour for lunch at a nearby café, before joining the boat again an hour later for our afternoon trip.

At 2.30pm we headed south. The Sperm Whales had moved on and were nowhere to be seen, but we found a Loggerhead Turtle bobbing in the waves. We had been watching it for about a minute before it lifted its head above the waves and looked rather surprised to see a boat of people taking photographs of it, and so it dived down and out of sight. As we moved on we had our first sightings of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins when a group of about 40 came to swim alongside us. Young Spotted Dolphins look very much like Bottlenose Dolphins - the individuals only getting their spots as they grow older. It was interesting to see the dark and heavily-spotted adult dolphins swimming alongside their plain, grey calves for a point of comparison. On our way back to the harbour we were joined by Risso's Dolphins again and we had a much longer encounter than earlier in the day. Adult males were present in this group, including an almost all-white male who could be seen extremely easily underwater, even when he swam away from the boat.

Exhilarated, we went back to the hotel to freshen up before meeting in the hotel lounge, where Sara ran through the checklist and showed diagrams to explain how dolphins use echolocation. We then went out for dinner, during which we excitedly discussed our day over wine and local food. Daniel, the owner of Petisca, was very welcoming and insisted on the group trying several complimentary local liqueurs before heading to bed for a good night's sleep.

Day 3

Thursday 25th August

Boat trips from Pico

On another bright, sunny day with little wind, we set out at 9am on the boat. This time we headed south under the direction of Antero Soares, a highly experienced vigia (Portuguese for lookout, pronounced "vi-zjeer") who was observing the sea from a land lookout point. We arrived in the 'whale zone' - the area where some Sperm Whales had been spotted. We didn't have to wait long before a group of five whales were seen a little ahead of our boat. As we slowly approached them, we could see that they were socialising, rolling on their sides, lifting their flukes a little out of the water, and spyhopping - possibly to look at us. Viewing their large, black bulbous

heads bobbing above the waves with Pico as the backdrop made for quite a memorable picture! We watched them for 15 minutes, logging and blowing, and identified at least one male among a group of females. Compared to the females he had a much larger, bulging head and spermaceti organ. Suddenly it was time for them to go, and one at a time they dived under the water, revealing their distinctive tail flukes above the sea's surface as they deep dived. They had gone foraging for at least 40 minutes down to the deep underwater canyons looking for squid.

While waiting on the surface, Sara spotted the distinctive splashing of dolphins a kilometre away, so we set off in that direction to investigate. On approach we saw a large group of around 50 Striped Dolphins, leaping and jumping in the air. We stayed with them for about 15 minutes as they playfully seemed to entice us to follow them. Not wanting to outstay our welcome, we headed back for a refreshing lunch in the shade of a nearby cafe.

Our afternoon trip took us south again. Our first sighting was a pod of about 40 Bottlenose Dolphins; their robust, gun-metal grey shapes powering through the water and alongside our boat. We couldn't stay with them for long, because Antero's voice came blasting over the radio announcing that he had seen a Sperm Whale several kilometres away. Quickly heading in that direction, we arrived in time to see a mother and calf Sperm Whale logging on the surface. The mother did a deep dive, the calf trying to imitate but unable to lift its tail completely out of the water yet. Moments later, Antero radioed again – this time saying he had seen a baleen whale several kilometres away. Powering through the waves, we made our way as quickly as we could to the place where it was last sighted. On arrival, we saw a blow 100 metres off the bow of the boat before the whale dived. Missing a good view of the whale by seconds, we waited for it to surface; the guide and skipper, Arne, promising a beer to anyone who could find it again. Eight minutes later, Sara saw the Fin Whale surface 200 metres behind the boat. Moving quickly towards it, we saw it surface four times before it sounded again. Ten minutes later the whale appeared off the starboard stern. The boat was moved round so we could slowly approach it from the side (so it could clearly see us) and we were treated to a wonderful view of its splash guard and mouth as it blew three more times before deep diving. During the trip we also saw many loafing flocks of Cory's Shearwaters, Common Terns and a flock of Yellow-legged Gulls; the Azorean subspecies with darker heads and wings compared to those on the mainland. Some of the shearwaters glided towards us and over our boat, giving excellent close up views. What a wonderful end to the day!

We made our way back to shore for another evening meal at Petisca. At 9.30pm we were collected by Arne and taken along the shore to listen to Cory Shearwaters as they returned to roost. They return from a day at sea when it is night time; the males and females calling to locate each other, producing a wonderfully unique call that was magical to listen to while sitting in the pitch black! After half an hour we headed back to the hotel for bed.

Day 4

Friday 26th August

Exploring Pico on land

From the beginning of the week the weather forecast had continually shown stronger winds for today compared to the rest of our stay, so we explored Pico Island on land. The early morning was rainy, but by the time we met Arne, our local guide, at 9.30am, it had faded to a drizzle and the sun was already shining through the clouds, although Mount Pico was still hidden from view. Setting off, we first visited the vineyards of Pico, a World Heritage Site. Their unusual design and current use 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 terrain

provides lots of nutrients despite the lack of soil, and as the hot sunshine heats up the black volcanic rocks it creates a natural greenhouse providing warmth for the grapes, allowing them to produce more sugars and so more alcohol – creating rather strong local wines! The air was filled with the song of Atlantic Canaries and Eurasian Blackcaps, despite it being August when most birds back in the UK go quiet. From the top of a windmill Sara pointed out some Common Blackbirds of the *azorensis* subspecies that were also singing from distant vineyard walls, and a small flock of canaries could be seen flying among the vines. On the way back to the vehicle a large bird was spotted, flying in the distance over the island. Upon inspection it turned out to be a vagrant Glossy Ibis!

We then headed beyond the suburbs, continuing past small fields of maize and more vineyards, and passing basalt boulders lining the shore. 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 scurrying Madeiran Wall Lizards. We carefully walked down a narrow path with crunchy, coarse volcanic stones beneath our feet, stopping 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.

We then visited a fascinating cave, entering it from above via an unassuming cow field, and stepping down steep steps that were lush with green ferns, bryophytes (liverworts) and lycophytes (club mosses) which carpeted the rough volcanic walls. The cave was the result of a collapsed lava tube. As the ancient volcano had erupted and the lava cooled more quickly on the outside, a hard rocky ceiling was formed. The remaining lava shrank and collapsed as it cooled further, leaving a large gap or cave. Using torches, we walked through the cave, stooping under the low, dripping roof which glittered with gold and silver bacteria. Under our feet we could make out the lava flows and see where, after settling, the flows had dropped further to form an irregular, pleated surface. The volcanic rock beneath our feet was in fact red as a result of the iron oxides present. We wound our way through a short tunnel before exiting again in the field, a short distance from where we had entered.

After this we stopped at a small lake for a picnic lunch, and were joined by many bold Azores Chaffinches who were clearly used to being fed by picnickers! After lunch we made our way to the town of Lajes where most of us visited the Whaling Museum. The museum displayed boats, tools and weapons that had been used for hunting Sperm Whales which, until 1984, had been a significant part of Azorean lifestyle.

Next we visited Antero Soares, the Vigia, who was looking out for whales and dolphins for the various whale and dolphin watching companies. He was using big binoculars to look for cetaceans and radioed boats with information when he spotted them. His 'office' was a small, basic hide covered in cetacean posters, and Antero was sitting with his large binoculars fixed to a wooden platform from his chair. We stopped to view a Cory Shearwater chick nesting amongst the rocks outside Antero's hide. It will be there, looked after by its parents, until it leaves in October. Up close we could see the special 'tubes' on the bill that help the bird detect smells over the sea such as shoals of fish. Evolving to life on the island before the introduction of cars, Cory Shearwaters show no, or little, fear of roads or humans, and often end up standing in the middle of roads as they start to fledge and leave their nests. The islands have a response programme where the local firefighters will hand out boxes to volunteers, who drive around the island picking up the confused and newly-fledged chicks from the roads and releasing them to the sea. For the winter, these birds migrate to a variety of places over the Atlantic off

the coasts of Africa, North America and Europe, switching sites between years. Most of the world's Cory's Shearwaters are only found in the Azores, and so their success is crucial for the security of the population.

We then drove back to Madalena, admiring the many flowers along the hillsides such as Hydrangeas which were in full blue bloom, forming informal hedgerows and field boundaries in the higher land. Many areas were also full of ancient juniper and laurel trees left over from the last ice age. Although severely fragmented by farming and forestry, the remaining stands are protected and give some insight into how the island would have looked thousands of years ago. We arrived back at Madalena at 4.15pm, in good time for a relaxed beer in the sun before going to Alma Do Pico, a lovely Italian restaurant with views over the island, for dinner. We sat outside in the sun for an aperitif before moving inside for a meal and surprising Tracy (whose birthday was today) with a rendition of happy birthday and some enthusiastic 'relighting candles' in her dessert.

Day 5

Saturday 27th August

Boat trips from Pico

Today was our last day of whale watching and we set off at 9am on our morning trip. Venturing far off shore, we responded to a call from Antero who had seen a baleen whale several minutes earlier. When we arrived in the 'whale zone' we were delighted to see a Fin Whale surface 200 metres from the boat. As it dived under the water, the distinctive white markings on the right hand side of its face were still visible from the surface as it swam along just two metres or so below the waves. It surfaced several more times, its powerful blow clearly visible and its back glinting in the dazzling sunlight. As we bobbed on the waves, a huge cloud of red, powdery water suddenly surrounded the boat – the whale had done a poo! Bright red in colour due to the krill upon which it feeds, whale faeces are vital for marine ecosystems. Just as on land, most life in the ocean is supported by plants and photosynthesis. In the ocean, the plants (phytoplankton) are microscopic. The whole ocean ecosystem is driven by these plants that grow on the surface, and as phytoplankton produce half of the oxygen in our atmosphere, we rely on them too. When phytoplankton use up all the nutrients in the water, this vital growth goes into decline. However, nature provides an unexpected lifeline in the form of whale excrement! Whales excrete near the surface, releasing huge amounts of nutrients. This is the perfect place to release fertiliser and grow phytoplankton at the level where there's the most amount of sun and oxygen. It was quite a pleasant surprise to momentarily find ourselves gliding through 'marine manure'! After watching the Fin Whale for half an hour, we made our way back to shore. Our journey was pleasantly interrupted by a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins which playfully came to investigate our boat for 20 minutes before we headed back for lunch.

Our afternoon trip departed at 3pm. Again, we headed south, this time responding to a sighting of a beaked whale (likely a Northern Bottlenose Whale) that Antero had seen from his hide. Unfortunately, as is the nature of the shy beaked whales, when we arrived it was nowhere to be seen. However, we were treated to an hour-long encounter with a large pod of Risso's Dolphins who swam around the boat and demonstrated a variety of jumping and tail-slapping behaviours. Tail-slapping (also known as lob-tailing) is used mainly in a social context as few animals do it when they are alone. It has been suggested by scientists that it could be to signal that food has been found, a sign of aggression or simply a form of play – but the fact is we are still unsure. We then made our way back to port (after a minor mishap with the boat breaking down and needing a tow from skipper Mike for the last stretch of the journey!) and had our final meal at Petisca before packing for our departure the next morning.

Day 6

Sunday 28th August

Pico - London

Half the group met at 7.45am to catch the 8.15am ferry to Horta, while the rest of the group stayed in Madalena as they were catching later flights or staying on Pico for several days after the tour. We caught our 10.30am plane from Horta to Lisbon, and on from Lisbon to Heathrow with wonderful memories of a fantastic holiday spent with some of the most magnificent creatures on our planet!

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	August					
			23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Azores Noctule Bat*	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>				P		
2	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		30			✓	
3	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			c.12		50	
4	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		c.70	3			
5	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>			20			
6	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		✓				
7	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>			1		✓	
8	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		15	✓			
9	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				E		

Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Bulwers Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>			✓			
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				✓		
4	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>				✓	✓	
5	Azorean Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
8	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		✓	✓			
10	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>			✓	✓		
11	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>			✓			
12	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓					
13	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
14	Azores Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>			✓			
15	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>			✓			
16	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			✓			

Reptiles

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	1	1				
2	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta dugesii</i>				✓	✓	

Fish

1	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>		✓				
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