

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 26 August 2018



Loggerhead Turtle



Sperm Whale with calf



Sperm Whales and Pico



Risso's Dolphins

Report & images compiled by Sara Frost



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Summary

This six-day tour, in the deep waters of the Azores off the volcanic island of Pico, revealed a satisfying range of whales and dolphins. We were treated to daily sightings of Sperm Whales with their families (including several individuals breaching near our boat and a wonderful “swim by” from a mother and calf), two unidentified Beaked Whales (likely Sowerby’s) and a supporting cast of three species of dolphin swimming alongside the boat: Bottlenose, Atlantic Spotted and Risso’s Dolphins. We also enjoyed close views of Loggerhead Turtle, Cory’s and Great Shearwaters, and Common and Roseate Terns. Meanwhile, a land-based tour of the island provided the chance to visit the unique volcanic vineyards (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), a collapsed lava tube with its walls and ceiling glittering with silver and gold bacteria, a lake and marshy habitat where we enjoyed Clouded Yellow and Large White butterflies, plus the tame Azorean subspecies of Chaffinch. We also visited Lajes, Pico’s first settlement, where the group had a very informative visit to a whaling museum

Day 1

Tuesday 21st August

London to Pico

We met at Heathrow airport for our 8.10am flight to Lisbon, where we transferred to our connecting flight to Horta on the island of Faial. We landed into Horta at 4.45pm and were swiftly transferred by taxi to the ferry port, where most of us walked to a nearby café to enjoy a relaxed evening meal outside in the warm weather while we waited for our 8.15pm ferry to Pico. The Azores Noctule Bat flew over us while we ate, and there was a Little Egret in the harbour, along with Common and Roseate Terns.

We had a calm 25-minute ferry crossing with a beautiful sunset over Faial, bathing the white houses and church of Horta in a lovely peach evening light. Upon arrival at Madalena (Pico island), we met Jess from CW Azores (our whale-watching partner) and then walked the two minutes to our hotel and checked in at 9pm. We also met Dan and Irene, who had flown out to Pico from the United States a couple of days early to enjoy the delights of the island before our tour commenced (an excellent idea!). The group then went to bed, readying themselves for an early start the next morning for our first whale-watching trip!

Day 2

Wednesday 22nd August

Whale-watching from Pico

We had breakfast at 7am before meeting in the hotel reception at 8am to walk down to CW Azores (just a three-minute walk!). Enrico, the owner, gave us a very informative 45-minute talk, introducing the group to the two main classifications of cetaceans: Mysticetes and Odontocetes. He also gave a detailed explanation into the biology of the whales and dolphins we were likely to see over the next few days.

At 9am we eagerly donned our life jackets and went out on our first boat ride to the north of Pico. The vigia (a whale and dolphin spotter, based on land with powerful binoculars) had seen Sperm Whales that morning and so, with his guidance over the radio, we headed to where they had been seen. It wasn’t long until we saw our first Sperm Whale which was breaching several hundred metres in front of us! Even from that distance, we could see a large animal the size of a bus leaping from the ocean and coming down with a huge splash! We headed in that

direction, eagerly craning our necks to see if it would do it again. Unbelievably, we saw another Sperm Whale further to the starboard side of our boat breach several times as well. This is rare behaviour in Sperm Whales (our crew member who had worked there for six years said he had only seen it three times before in his life) so we were very excited to see this. As we were racing quickly over the water to see the distant breaching Sperm Whale, Sara yelled “STOP!” There was a baby Sperm Whale at the surface only 20 metres from the side of the boat. Sperm Whales can’t dive deeply or for long periods when they are young, and so the mothers will regularly leave them at the surface with other female members of the group nearby to look after them. This baby slowly swam past the boat and we admired it for five minutes before it shallowly dived. We then continued on our way, looking for the adults who had been breaching. We’d only been at full speed again for two minutes before Sara spotted another blow a mere 15 metres from the starboard side of the boat! We stopped immediately and stood, mouths open, as another baby Sperm Whale (smaller and younger than the one we had just seen) swam over towards our boat with its mother. The mother dived and rolled onto her back while swimming alongside the boat, showing her lighter coloured belly as she did so. Sperm Whales use echolocation to detect objects in the water (be it a squid, a rock or a boat!) and they interpret these echoes by vibrations in their lower jaw – easier to do, in this instance, with our boat on the surface and her underneath us, upside down! She inspected our boat and seemed to deem us satisfactory enough to stay in her presence. She slowly bobbed on the surface waiting for her calf, who was eagerly swimming next to her trying to keep up. After a couple of minutes of floating stationary (likely for the calf to get its breath back) they continued on their way. Not wishing to outstay our welcome, we left them in peace and headed in a different direction. It wasn’t long before we were joined by a group of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, who playfully swam around our boat before we headed back to Madalena for lunch. What a great morning!

After two hours on shore for food and coffee in a nearby café, we headed back out on our afternoon trip, which turned out to be a dolphin extravaganza! We sailed next to a group of Spotted Dolphins, before heading across the channel to Faial where we saw a group of Risso’s Dolphins. These unusual-looking dolphins obtain scratches on their skin very easily when they interact with each other (fighting or in play), meaning that the grey appearance they have when they are born becomes whiter and whiter with the more scratches they get. The more mature adult males had very white heads and almost totally white bodies, where they have been interacting and fighting over many years. We could make out the knife-like slashes on their bodies, heads and fins made by the teeth of other fellow dolphins. The younger animals and many females, meanwhile, were grey without the scars. As we were near the coast of Faial, we left the Risso’s Dolphins and ventured into some of the coastal caves. The water lapped gently at the cave entrances, and was a lovely turquoise colour. We peered over the edge of the boat and could see the sea bed through the clear water, along with lots of crabs on the rocks and a bright red starfish!

After looking in three or so caves, we sailed back out across the channel and were joined by Bottlenose Dolphins. The group could now appreciate the size difference between the smaller Atlantic Spotted Dolphins and the much larger Bottlenose Dolphins. They played around our boat for a while before seemingly getting bored (as dolphins so often do when you slow down a boat, leaving no waves for them to play in!) and they left.

Exhilarated, we returned to our hotel for hot showers and had time for Sara to go over the species checklist of things we had seen today, including explanations of some of the behavior, before walking to Petisca, a lovely nearby restaurant. The evening meal was filled with delighted chatter and laughter, discussing our sightings for the day. Dan and Irene ordered a soft cheese and honey starter (a very traditional starter in Pico) which they kindly shared for the group to enjoy, before tucking into our main meals. Daniel, the restaurant owner, gave

those who had managed to finish their main meal a small local liqueur/digestif to reward them for being good eaters! Greatly satisfied with the sheer number of sightings and behavioural encounters we had had today, we left at 9pm and went to bed.

Day 3

Thursday 23rd August

Tour of Pico Island

Today we had a tour of the island. We met at 9.45am and left shortly after 10am in two vehicles to explore the island. Our first stop was to visit a hidden and little-known collapsed lava tube cave, where a small pond outside had many frogs and tadpoles in it, along with a Red-veined Darter dragonfly. The entrance of the caves was covered by thick lush green ferns. The caves themselves were fascinating, and Sara shone her headtorch over the roof of the cave to illuminate the bright glittering gold and silver Actinomycete bacteria that covered the roof, surviving on the minerals that are carried in the surface water that seeps through the rock and drips down from the roof of the cave. As we emerged we had a lovely view over the channel to Faial, and several Clouded Yellow butterflies were flying around in the sun, along with Azores Chaffinches (the Azorean subspecies of Chaffinch), groups of which were flitting between the trees, along with Atlantic Canaries.

We then continued up into the hills, passing bright yellow flowers of the Ginger Lilies, Hydrangeas, and cows, a few of which we had seen on the lower ground. The Hydrangeas were in full blue bloom, forming informal hedgerows and field boundaries in the higher land. The countryside was 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 at a small lake on the north side of the island where it was lovely and sunny, and a Large White and more Clouded Yellow butterflies were flitting about. We walked to a viewpoint where we had a lovely view down over Sao Jorge, which we could only enjoy for five minutes before a mist came in out of nowhere and covered the view – typical Atlantic weather!

We then drove down towards Lajes on the south side of the island, stopping en route at another viewpoint where we had a lovely view of the sunny town of Lajes below, the white buildings topped with orange roof tops providing a splash of colour against the lush green mountainside and the blue calm ocean. We had lunch at a lovely woodland park/picnic area, where we sat on benches enjoying the Azores Noctule Bat occasionally flitting around us, and the Azorean subspecies of Common Buzzard calling above. Sara entertained group with her repertoire of birdcalls, mimicking the Buzzard, and also performing her best Common Coot and Common Pheasant impression – others joined in with Cory's Shearwater and Tawny Owl, which made for a rather amusing lunch break!

We then went to Lajes and visited the whaling museum, just in a nick of time as it started to pour down with rain! Lajes is Pico's first settlement, and the visit to the whaling museum provided a fascinating insight into the history of whaling on Pico. Afterwards, most of the group stopped at a café next door and had hot drinks and cakes, and looked around some of the local shops before getting back into the vehicles to visit the ancient settlement of Mingato.

Upon arrival, we carefully walked down a narrow path with crunchy, coarse volcanic stones beneath our feet, emerging out onto sea cliffs with the sea in front of us, and standing amongst the ruined walls of 15th century

Pico. Here lay the remains of buildings which dated back to some of the first settlers to arrive on the island. It is really a testament to the skills used to build these dry-stone buildings (not a single bit of cement or mortar was used) that they are still standing on the harsh, exposed shoreline 500 years later. In amongst the rocks, bright orange lichens, green ferns and other pioneer species were growing and contrasting with the dark black volcanic scree. Scanning over the waves we could see Cory's Shearwaters gliding effortlessly over the rough foaming water.

We continued a few minutes down the road to the UNESCO World Heritage Site vineyards. Their unusual design and current use makes them unique and very special. Volcanic rocks have been stacked upwards to make small, partitioned dry-stone walls, and in these walls the seeds of the vines are planted. The terrain provides lots of nutrients despite the lack of soil, and with the hot sunshine and rain, plenty of grapes are produced. Atlantic Canaries were flying about and plenty of Blackbirds were calling loudly.

We were back at hotel for 6.35pm, giving us time for a quick shower and change of clothes before we were picked up from reception to go to Atmosfera, a lovely Italian restaurant up in the hills with marvellous views over the island. We had aperitifs out in the sunshine looking down over the sea before enjoying a delicious meal. We returned to the hotel at 9.15pm and headed to bed.

Day 4

Friday 24th August

Whale-watching from Pico

We met at 9.20am this morning for our next boat trip. We headed north on the lovely calm sunny waters. On this trip we saw several Sperm Whales, which seemed to be a family group of three adults and a calf. They kept diving, frequently leaving the calf at the surface. However, a neighbouring boat was listening in on a hydrophone (an underwater microphone) and they informed us they could hear the clicks of two Sperm Whales close by. These individuals would be keeping an eye on the calf while the mother was feeding in the depths. When the mother re-surfaced we were lucky enough to see the calf suckling from her! It repeatedly went underneath her for a minute or so before coming back up for air, and then returning for more. It was a real privilege to witness this behaviour, and very special that the mother felt so relaxed by our presence that she had no problem suckling her baby with us nearby. We returned to shore for lunch, and the group went to try different cafes, most going to Atlantico, a lovely tea house about 20 minutes' walk away.

On our afternoon boat trip we enjoyed watching the same family of Sperm Whales as they surfaced, dived, and took turns looking after the calf. We also saw two Loggerhead Turtles which came by the boat.

For our evening meal we went back to Petisca and were joined by Jess. After dinner, at 9.30pm Jess and Alice (also from CW Azores) drove us to a nesting spot where hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters return to their burrows from their day out at sea. We could listen to their bizarre, digeridoo-like sounds as the males called to the females who were sitting in the burrows with the chicks. Jupiter and its moons were also visible through binoculars, as were Venus and Mars. After 20 minutes of listening to these wonderfully bizarre calls in the dark, and to the gentle background noise of the waves of the shore, we returned to the hotel for the night.

Day 5

Saturday 25th August

Whale-watching from Pico

We met once again at 9.20am for our morning boat trip. We went north again as the vigia had seen Sperm Whales only minutes earlier. They were quite far out this morning (15 miles) so we had an hour's travel in the boat to get to where they were, which we spent admiring the numerous Cory's and occasional Great Shearwaters flying around. Upon arriving, there was one Sperm Whale at the surface which did a deep dive as we came within 200 metres of it. As the whale had done a deep dive it wouldn't be surfacing again for half an hour or more so we patrolled the area looking for another, which we found after about 20 minutes. It was resting at the surface, taking lots of deep breaths and large blows, replenishing the oxygen supplies in its blood and muscles after a long dive. About 10 minutes later, another surfaced behind it – possibly the one we had seen deep dive half an hour earlier. We bobbed gently on the waves admiring them as they floated gently on the surface. Our vigia then told us there were Bottlenose Dolphins nearer to the shore of Faial, so we headed in that direction and found them. They came to play around the boat, leaping around us in the waves. We then headed back for lunch, returning at 12.45pm.

We had time for a quick lunch at one of the nearby cafes before departing again at 1.45pm for our afternoon trip. This time we went south as the weather there was better, which would improve our chances of seeing something. While waiting for the vigia to find any signs of cetaceans we hugged the shoreline, looking into the caves along the south of the coast. We could also see Lajes nearby, the town we had visited two days earlier. As we looked in caves we saw bats flying in and out of crevices in the rocks, and Yellow-legged Gulls and Feral Pigeons standing on the rocks or cliff face. We continued to patrol the shoreline, admiring the clear water and seabed, but sadly the vigia could not find any cetaceans for us on this trip – that is the way of wildlife, and it wasn't as though we hadn't been spoiled enough already!

We arrived back at 4.45pm and went to see Marcos, the vigia on the north coast who had been directing us for most of the week. We were welcomed by his excitable old collie 'Ozzie' who ran around greeting us all with whimpers and a furiously wagging tail. We climbed up into Marcos' viewing platform (also called a vigia) and tried out his binoculars to see if we could see any whales. While we were there he spotted Bottlenose Dolphins and we watched him "at work" as he directed a boat over to them. He also offered us some local brandy to try (blackberry or peppermint flavour), and Sara picked fresh figs from the orchard for the group to enjoy – they were ripe, succulent and totally delicious!

We then made our way back to Madalena for 6pm, and some of the group enjoyed a refreshing swim in the pool before we left for dinner. We had our final dinner at Atmosfera, where we enjoyed a delicious meal watching a beautiful sunset over the island and the full moon rise over Mount Pico – what a memorable last evening! We left at 9.30pm and went to pack our bags as, sadly, we would be leaving tomorrow morning.

Day 6

Sunday 26th August

Pico to London

At breakfast we said goodbye to Dan and Irene who would be flying back to the US later that day, and we got the 8.15am ferry over to Horta, where we transferred to the airport for our flight to Lisbon. We flew over the

island of Sao Jorge with Graciosa in the background, and then over Terceira, before heading west to Lisbon. After a two-hour stop in Lisbon where we had a cup of tea and lunch, we boarded our plane to Heathrow.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only; * = endemic; Prob = probable; Poss = possible)

	Common name	Scientific name	August					
			21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Azores Noctule Bat*	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>	✓		✓		✓	
2	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		✓				
3	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓				
4	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		✓		✓		
5	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		✓		✓		
6	Sowerby's Beaked Whale	<i>Mesoplodon bidens</i>				Prob		

Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>		✓		✓	✓	
3	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>		✓				
4	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓					
5	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo insularum</i>			✓		✓	
6	Azorean Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>			✓			
11	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>					✓	
12	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>			✓			
13	Western Azores Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>			H			
14	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>						✓
15	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Azores Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>			✓			
17	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>			✓			

Butterflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓	✓		
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea faillae</i>			✓			
3	Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>			Poss			

Dragonflies

1	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>			✓			
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Moths

1	Humming-bird Hawk-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>	✓					
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Amphibians & Reptiles

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>				✓		
2	Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis sp.</i>			✓	✓		
3	Perez's Frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>			Prob			

Marine

1	Marbled Shore Crab	<i>Eriphia verrucosa</i>		✓		✓	✓	
2	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>		✓		✓	✓	
3	Tuna sp.	<i>Thunnus sp.</i>		✓				