

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th – 13th August 2023



Breaching Sperm Whale



Common Dolphin



Cory's Shearwater



Loggerhead Turtle

Tour report by Sara Frost, images by Rob English



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Tour Summary

This wonderful whale watching holiday, to the island of Pico, produced fantastic daily sightings of Sperm Whales – many with their calves, and we were even treated to a very curious calf approaching our boat and rolling around multiple times right alongside us! We also saw a mother and calf Bryde's Whale, pods of Atlantic Spotted, Bottlenose and Common Dolphins, Loggerhead Turtles, several Portuguese Man O'War, large rafts of Cory Shearwaters, plus Common and Sandwich Terns. Whale watching excursions were broken up with lunches in sunny cafes, refreshing swims in the hotel pool and delicious ice creams from the local parlour at the harbour!

A day and a half on land also allowed us to explore the unique volcanic vineyards (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), go wine tasting, visit the extensive 'Gruta Das Torres' collapsed lava tube (the largest in Portuguese territory at 5km long) with its walls and ceiling glittering with silver and gold bacteria, visit a lake and marshy habitats where we enjoyed the tame Azorean subspecies of Chaffinch and the day-flying Azorean Noctule Bat at a nearby hillside covered in juniper trees. We also went to Lajes, Pico's first main settlement where we visited a whaling museum and walked along the coastline to explore the lagoons. Finally, on our last night we had a memorable evening on the coast listening to Cory Shearwaters returning to their cliff burrows, with a shooting star from the Perseid Meteor Shower to round it off – a magical way to end a fantastic trip!

Day 1

Monday 7th August

London to Pico

Most of the group travelled today on a flight to Horta from London Heathrow (via Lisbon) which landed at 5pm. From here, we hopped into a taxi and took the 20 minute journey to the ferry terminal where we caught the 7:15pm ferry to Pico, arriving at 7:45pm and getting to the hotel for 8pm. After dropping bags off in our rooms, we met the rest of the group in the lobby and went to Pico Oceana, a restaurant next door to the hotel, for supper and to get to know one another. After a nice meal and a beer, we all went to bed.

Day 2

Tuesday 8th August

Whale-watching from Pico

This morning we had breakfast at 8am (a buffet with a wide variety of things from which to choose, including cooked breakfast, pastries, toast, freshly-made pancakes, fruit salads and cereals) and then met in the lobby to take the 5 minute walk to our whale watching centre for 9am. From here, we were given a briefing and introduction by Marlene on the cetaceans we could expect to see on our holiday. Then, we eagerly donned our waterproof coats and life jackets and headed out on our first trip! It is always exhilarating to be in a small RIB, bouncing over the waves heading out to see what we can find, and today was no exception! The 'vigia' (a lookout on land) had seen whales (yippee!) and so, under his direction via the radio, we headed north.

It wasn't long before we had our first whales of the trip – Sperm Whales – a mother with a calf. We watched them for 20 minutes or so, before leaving them be to look at another two Sperm Whales which had appeared – this time

a juvenile and another adult female. It was lovely to see several females with their young! After a couple of hours, we headed back for lunch (stopping to enroute see two Loggerhead Turtles!), the group choosing one of the nearby cafes for some food and a drink, before meeting again at 2pm to go out again.

For our afternoon trip, we also went north. Directed by the vigia, we headed towards another whale which had been sighted. As we approached, we saw a blow, Sara alerting the group that looked different from the blows of the Sperm Whales (which have a forward blow, angled at 45 degrees). This was a powerful, straight upwards blow – a baleen whale! As we approached, the enormous whale slowly surfaced again, and this time we saw a calf visible with it. It was difficult to tell whether it was a Sei Whale or a Bryde's Whale (the difference being on the top of the head: the Sei Whale had one ridge, the Bryde's has three). Nonetheless, we were elated to spend half an hour or so peacefully watching the enormous mother and calf as they calmly made their way through the waters. What a first day!

We returned at 5:30pm and re-met in the lobby for dinner at 6:30pm, before we walked to Ancoradouro, our restaurant for the evening. Over dinner we discussed the days sightings with excited chatter and sharing images and video we'd managed to capture during the day, and headed back to the hotel at 9pm (although some opted to go to a bustling shore-side bar for a nightcap!).

Day 3

Wednesday 9th August

Land Day on Pico

We chose to make today one of our 'land days', as the weather was very windy at sea. So we started the morning by going to the UNESCO World Heritage Site vineyards, only 10-15 minutes drive along the coast from our hotel. A bright red windmill added a wonderful splash of colour to the grey and green palate of the volcanic landscape. The unusual design of the vineyards, and current use, makes them unique and very special. Volcanic rocks have been stacked upwards to make small, partitioned dry-stone walls and it is 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. As we climbed to the top of the windmill, a Blackbird was calling loudly (with a slightly different song from their British counterparts) and we enjoyed an elevated view over the vineyard. As we did so, a local lady came along with a bag heaving with grapes to sell. She was 76, and climbed up the steps to the windmill with seemingly little effort and kindly offered us a bunch of grapes to taste – they were delicious! Warm, sweet and intensely juicy, with bitter skins. We stood, happily gobbling the rest of the bunch, whilst admiring the scenery.

Bidding the lady adieu, we continued along the road, stopping at the abandoned ruins 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 building (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.

After this, we continued east, along the south coast, arriving into Lajes, the biggest town on Pico, at noon. Here, we scanned the lagoons by the shore for birds – but apart from a Little Egret and a couple of Common Terns, nothing else was about! We had lunch in a nice café, and then most of us visited the whaling museum next door, where we watched a 25 minute film from the '70s about the history of whaling on the island. After exploring the artefacts in the museum, including replica boats and tales from the whalers and their families, we headed north up the mountain. Once fairly high up we stopped at another lake, where the endemic Azores race of the Chaffinch was abundant, with 10 or so individuals hopping about on the lake shore and nearby grass. There were also some Muscovy Ducks in the water.

We walked from the lagoon to a hilltop where we had a marvellous view over the north of the island and onto São Jorge. Sara pointed out two Azores Noctule Bats (day flying bats) which were frantically flapping about over some juniper trees, going about their business. We also saw the endemic race of the Goldcrest and Sue (a keen botanist) pointed out some fabulous ferns and (what transpired to be) an endemic dwarf mistletoe, endemic to the Azores (*Arceuthobium azoricum*) growing on the trunk of a juniper.

We then made our way down to the north side of the island, through to town of São Roque and onto São Vicente to see a Common Tern colony on some nearby cliffs very close to the shore. And – probably the highlight of the day for many – we stopped to meet our vigia, Marcelo! We climbed up into Marcelos' viewing platform (also called a vigia) and tried out his binoculars to see if we could see any whales. He hadn't seen any all day due to the windy weather (just as well we wisely chose it as a land day!) and we enjoyed chatting to him for half an hour, asking him many questions about his job which he happily answered. He also offered us some local honey-flavoured alcohol to try which was lovely (if rather strong!).

We arrived back at the hotel at 6:30pm, with just enough time for a quick turn around before meeting again at 7:10pm to walk 15 minutes to Petisca, our restaurant for tonight.

Day 4

Thursday 10th August

AM: whale watching PM: caving and wine tasting

Although this day was also allocated to be another 'land day', the weather looked good all day and so we were offered an extra boat trip in the morning! So, at 9am most of us set off for another boat trip. This time we went south and it wasn't long before we saw a large male Sperm Whale! We could clearly see the ridge at the back of its head, the main diagnostic feature to separate males from females, which is much more pronounced in males. After watching him for a short while, he deep dived, to whoops and cheers from the group as we photographed his enormous tail.

A while later, we came across an adult female which seemed fairly curious about our boat. We switched our engines off and bobbed gently on the surface, allowing her to go where she pleased, and were delighted that she came alongside the boat, about 15 metres away, to investigate us! Then, after this we saw yet another female, and after heading in a different direction we saw a tiny calf – only about 4-5 metres long. They are born at around ~4 metres in length, so we estimated this one to be only 1-2 weeks old. Astonishingly, to the shock of all of us onboard (including Sara, the local guide and skipper!) the calf made a bee line for the boat and, when right alongside us, it rolled around on its side several times, looking up at us, as we laughed and sat, jaws on the floor in shock. Then,

it quickly turned and swam back towards the island, as if summoned by a family member, and sure enough, a minute or so later a large female surfaced not far away – likely either its mother, or a babysitter. Well, whale watching really doesn't get better than that!

We headed back via the Madalena Islets, which are two uninhabited islands in the Faial-Pico Channel about 0.58 miles away from Madalena harbor. Locally, the smaller of the two islets is known as Ilhéu Deitado ("Lying Down" Islet), while the taller islet is known as Ilhéu em Pé ("Standing Up" Islet). They are the remains of a caldera, and we could clearly imagine the rest of the ring of island once standing here before it crumbled into the sea long ago. On top of the cliffs were many nesting Yellow-legged Gulls.

Once back on shore, we had an hour and a half for a leisurely lunch in the square at one of the local cafes. We re-met at 13:20 to go to the Gruta Das Torres caves. After watching an education video about the formation of the caves (the longest in Portugal at 5km long!) we donned hard hats, collected torches and walked to the entrance of the caves, which was surrounded by lush trees, ferns and soft mosses. Steps led steeply down into the cave and we commenced our submersion into this ancient underground world – the temperature dropping by 10 degrees as we did so!

Once inside we started walking over rivers of lava which had solidified to become rock: frozen in time. Scanning our torches over the huge cave roof, 15 metres high, Sara pointed out the glittering gold and silver actinomycete bacteria covering the dripping walls and ceiling. Continuing our journey into the earth, we climbed over fallen lava boulders, ducked under low-hanging roofs and wound our way through tunnels, never failing to be amazed by the fascinating patterns of once-molten rock upon which we were now walking.

We emerged an hour later into dazzling bright sunlight and made our way back to Madalena for 4pm where several of us opted for an ice cream and a swim back at the hotel. Those of us going wine tasting re-met at 5:15pm, to go to a local winery. Our tasting lasted an hour and our five different glasses of white wine were accompanied by delicious local bread and cheeses.

At 6:45pm we then had a casual walk to dinner at the Atlantic Tea House, with Michelle and Chris, who had stayed at the hotel, being dropped off by Renardo, one of our local guides. We had another lovely evening meal and walked back along the coastline, with some of the group stopping for a post-dinner drink again at a bar.

Day 5

Friday 11th August

Whale (dolphin) watching from Pico

This morning we met at 8:45am and went north, again under the guidance of the vigia. We found our first dolphins of the trip; Atlantic Spotted Dolphins! They energetically bounded through the water and came alongside our boat, and we could admire their dark backs (with white spots) and white bellies (complete with dark spots) clearly from the boat. After 20 minutes of watching them, we moved on and found a group of Bottlenose Dolphins! This was a larger group, and we could clearly see the size difference – these were noticeably bigger than the Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. They played and bounded about around our boat, leaping from the water, jumping on top of each other and we even saw some mating behaviour. We also had our first Sandwich Terns of the trip, a group of five or so

flew above our boat for five minutes. We also saw a Loggerhead Turtle, which came close enough to the boat that we could film it on an underwater camera.

After this, we needed to head back, so returned for some lunch before going back out again at 2:30pm. On the afternoon trip, we went north again, in search of more dolphins. We saw Atlantic Spotted Dolphins again (possibly the same group we'd seen that morning), and they bow rode along with our boat so we had superb views as they were only a metre or so away. Then, shortly after, we saw a pod of Common Dolphins and went and joined them for 20 minutes, clearly able to see the hour glass pattern down their sides.

We then headed back for the evening and reconvened in the lobby at 6:25pm where Sara gave a brief summary and overview of some of the key aspects of behaviour we'd see that day, along with broader marine biology – touching on Sperm Whale physiology, how dolphins sleep and the importance of whale poo! We then got a taxi to Alma do Pico, a restaurant up the mountain with a lovely view over the island and ocean. We sat outside for an aperitif enjoying the view before enjoying a lovely 3 course meal.

Day 6

Saturday 12th August

Whale watching from Pico

This morning it was raining out at sea and visibility not good, so those who wanted to go out (some decided to stay on shore for some R&R at the hotel or souvenir shopping), waited on shore until about 10am when the vigias had managed to spot a blow, albeit distant and they weren't easily able to keep track of it due to the moving rain. We headed south (through driving, although warm, rain!), and whilst looking for whales, Sara found some Atlantic Spotted Dolphins towards the island, which we went to 'greet' for 15 minutes, enjoying watching their frolics and jumps. Then, the vigia radioed to say he'd seen a distant blow, so we quickly headed west towards Faial in that direction. Whilst scanning, Sara saw the blow of baleen whale far off, we continued travelling in the right direction and, despite the vigia telling us it must be very close to where we were and us searching the area for 45 minutes, we couldn't locate it again (although did see a Loggerhead Turtle). Nevermind! We made our way back to Pico, via a diversion to some wonderful caves on the coast of Faial, seeing crabs on the rocks and Common Terns squawking above.

After lunch at one of the nearby cafés, we once again headed south through the rain. This time we had to travel around 25 miles(!) east along the south coast of Pico, passing the coastal town of Lajes where we'd been three days earlier. We saw Atlantic Spotted Dolphins again, and then a female Sperm Whale with a calf. The adult deep-dived, leaving the calf at the surface. We enjoyed watching it for 10 minutes or so, and then it started breaching! It leaped clear from the water four times, to whoops and cheers from the group. Just as Sara was explaining a possible reason for breaching can be to notify other pod members of an individual's location, an adult (either the same female, or another adult coming to babysit) surfaced not far away – it's quite possible that the calf had heard the whale surfacing and had been communicating to it its location (although it did look like the calf was having good fun too, getting used to using its tail muscles!).

After being out for several hours, we then headed back at 5:30pm, seeing both Bottlenose and Atlantic Spotted Dolphins on the hour-long return journey, which were a delight as always!

Once back on shore at 6:30pm, we headed to a lovely bar for dinner, and were picked up at 9pm to go along the shore to wait for the Cory Shearwaters to return to their nests (which they only do when dark). We waited patiently for half an hour or so, but then they started coming in from the sea in their numbers, whilst we sat in silence under the stars listening to their unusual calls. Tonight also happened to be the peak of the Perseid Meteor Shower and we saw a lovely bright shooting star streak across the sky – what a special moment! We also counted six satellites moving across the heavens above us. At 10:30pm we got back into the van and returned to our hotel (passing a large orchestral performance by the square which some of our members hopped out to enjoy!).

Day 7

Sunday 13th August

Pico to London

This morning we went down to the ferry at 7:50am to catch the 8:15am ferry back to Horta. After a taxi transfer to the airport, we caught our plane to Lisbon (and onto Heathrow) and had marvellous views of Pico mountain as we sadly said goodbye to the Azores, with wonderful memories of a fantastic trip!

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Species lists

Mammals

E = endemic		August 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Azores Noctule Bat - E	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>			✓				
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					✓	✓	
Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>					✓		
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>					✓	✓	
Bryde's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>		2					
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		✓		✓	✓		

Birds (H = Heard only)

		August 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓				
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓				
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>	✓		✓				
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>					✓		
Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
(Common) Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>			✓				
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus azoricus</i>			✓				
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓				H	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>			✓				
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>			✓				

Invertebrates

		August 2023						
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
BUTTERFLIES:								
Painted Lady	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>					✓		
AMPHIBIANS & REPTILES:								
Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>		✓			✓	✓	
Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>			✓		✓		
MARINE:								
Marbled Shore Crab	<i>Eriphia verrucosa</i>				✓	✓		✓
Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalia</i>		✓			✓		
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>		✓				✓	