

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

30th June – 6th July 2025



Short-finned Pilot Whales



Common Dolphin



Sperm Whale



Sei Whale

Tour report by Marcus John



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Day 1

Monday 30th June

London – Lisbon – Horta (Faial) and Madalena (Pico)

People were flying in from three separate locations, but we all rendezvoused successfully at the airport in Lisbon for our connecting flight to Horta, on the island of Faial. After a smooth flight, we landed on time, took a short taxi ride to the port and were soon aboard the ferry to Pico. The sun shone and we stayed out on deck to enjoy the view of the mighty volcano that dominates the island of Pico. We had our first views of Cory's Shearwater, the commonest bird throughout our week of whale-watching. The crossing only took thirty minutes, so we arrived at the hotel with time to unpack before setting out to a local restaurant for dinner. After that, we enjoyed cold drinks in the hotel bar, before heading off to get some much-needed sleep.

Day 2

Tuesday 1st July

Madalena (Pico)

Our first full day included two boat trips out from Madalena. The CW Azores centre is just 400 metres from the hotel and we arrived early for the pre-trip briefing. This was highly informative and outlined the wide range of species that we might expect to encounter. We were given a detailed background to the species that makes Pico such a magnet for cetacean watchers: the extraordinary Sperm Whale.

We donned our life jackets (nice and compact, not the old-style bulky ones) and walked the short distance to the jetty. We had the RHIB (Rigid-hulled Inflatable Boat) to ourselves this morning, so we chose our seats before our skipper expertly guided us out of the harbour. As soon as we were clear of the entrance lights, we raced north, with Faial to our left and São Jorge in the distance ahead. The sun was warm, but the sea was a little choppy as we headed further out. However, it was worth the bouncy ride when we encountered our first Sperm Whales. At least six could be seen around the boat, and we were able to approach quite close to an adult female with her calf. It was the smallest that our skipper and local guide had ever seen, probably only three or four weeks old. Although dwarfed by its mother, this calf was already approximately four metres long, and was estimated to weigh about a tonne!

After spending a lot of time watching the Sperm Whales, we motored back around towards Pico and soon came across the second cetacean species of the trip: a small pod of Bottlenose Dolphins. These were of the oceanic or offshore type, much bigger than the inshore ones we see around the UK: the largest were around four metres in length. They swam remarkably close and breached, making it an exciting encounter. But better still was the much larger pod of (Short-beaked) Common Dolphins that spent at least ten minutes swimming all around the boat. They were riding the bow wave, swimming under the boat and repeatedly leaping clear of the water. It was a fantastic experience, and one that will live long in the memory. We even spotted some tiny youngsters swimming alongside the adults.

We had an excellent lunch at a small café overlooking the old harbour, before heading back out. The afternoon trip was less hectic than the morning, but we had another close encounter with Sperm Whales. A calf was

interacting with an adult female, and we had splendid views of their heads, including the blowhole, offset on the left of their heads. We had another pod of Common Dolphins to complete a wonderful day of whalewatching!

Day 3

Wednesday 2nd July

Madalena (Pico)

Again, the day dawned bright and warm, with light winds, so it was perfect for two more boat trips. We enjoyed an extensive buffet breakfast in the hotel dining room before heading down to CW Azores. We did not need to attend the briefing again, so it was a relaxed start for us.

We had the boat to ourselves again, with ample space. Our skipper took us to the same zone of the sea between Pico and São Jorge, and once again we found a group of Sperm Whales, spread out across a large area. We had been watching them for some time, when our skipper suddenly headed off at speed to catch up with a large pod of Striped Dolphins, which we tracked for several minutes as they swam fast and straight, not feeding but in transit. We all agreed that these were beautiful animals, arguably the most attractive species in these waters. Dynamic and powerful, they made many low, splashy leaps as they swam past.

Another relaxed lunch in our favourite café was followed by an afternoon boat trip to the waters off the south coast of Pico. After three boat trips in quick succession, some of us opted to spend a quiet afternoon on land. The others were rewarded with a new species of cetacean, in the form of Short-finned Pilot Whales. Usually slow and approachable, they surfaced near our boat several times, coming within thirty metres: it was a memorable encounter. Next, we came across an adult Sperm Whale (presumably a female) which was lying still, just under the surface but upside down, with her pale underparts showing blue/white through the translucent water. She rolled around several times, but continued to adopt this posture; the pale colour was particularly obvious through polarized sunglasses! Even the local guide and skipper were unsure of the purpose of this odd conduct, but we found out later that several others had behaved similarly that day. A small pod of Common Dolphins completed our trip before a motor failure added a bit of drama. However, as we had two outboards, it was not an emergency and, in any case, a second boat came out to take those in a hurry straight back to the harbour. We were all back in plenty of time for dinner.

Day 4

Thursday 3rd July

Madalena – Lajes (Pico)

This morning, we had another private trip and headed north-east, back towards São Jorge. We travelled quickly across the calm waters, getting good views of a couple of Flying Fish and hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters. Once again, we spent time among a group of female and young Sperm Whales, which were resting at the surface and displayed interesting behaviour. We watched as calves swam under their mothers, to feed on their highly nutritious milk. They nudge their mother's genital area which stimulates the release of milk, which has the consistency of cottage cheese. Sperm Whale calves will also feed from females other than their mother, which is known as allosuckling. A couple of females were spinning slowly, just under the surface, and others were spy-hopping. Then the skipper spotted a breaching whale and raced across in time of us to witness three more breaches at close quarters. It was an amazing spectacle, and a highlight of the whole tour.

On the return leg, our skipper found not one but two pods of Spotted Dolphins, in total around 150 animals! Once again, they came close to the boat; most were immature, and therefore did not show the spotting which gives this species its name.

In the afternoon we visited Lajes, on the south coast, which was the main town until Madalena grew in importance after the ferry link to Faial was established. It is a quaint old port, and hosts an interesting museum dedicated to the whalers of the town. The beautiful old whaling boats (an enhanced version of the famous boats of Nantucket) were most impressive, and we were left with the impression that apart from its economic importance, whaling had given a sense of purpose and cohesion to the whole community. The numbers of Sperm Whales killed were miniscule in comparison to the total across the globe, but nonetheless it is heartening to know that the old traditions have now been adapted to the demands of modern ecotourism. We also had time to visit one of the old windmills and the unique vineyards of this part of Pico, which constitute a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Day 5

Friday 4th July

Madalena – Cais de Mourato – Cachorro – Lajido – Lagoa de Capitão

Today was our opportunity to travel around the north coast and visit several iconic sites of this charming island. Our first stop was at the Vigia (or look-out), a short tower where the spotter spends the entire day looking out for whales and guiding the boats via radio. We had a fascinating chat with him and were impressed with his ability to find whales as far as 25km away, and to identify them to species level at such huge distances! His father had been a Vigia for the whalers, and here he was, earning a living from whalewatchers, and clearly taking immense pride in his work.

The next stop on our travels was Cais de Mourato, one of the places where the Adeegas still produce the wines and distill the spirits for which Pico became well-known around the world. Cachorro was a similar settlement, also built around a rocky harbour, and surrounded by the jagged, black volcanic rocks that typify the whole coastline. It is well known for one particular rock formation which resembles a dog's head!

The larger town on this section of the coast is Lajido, where the traditional communal sea-well is situated in the middle of the road! Here we visited the volcano museum, where we enjoyed (if that is the right word) the immersive volcano and earthquake experience. The latter consists of a moving platform which precisely simulates the quakes of 1980 and 1998. The rocky coast along which we had driven was the result of the last big eruption on Pico in 1718. The local name for these laval formations is very evocative: “mysterios.”

After a picnic lunch in the shade, during which we fed and photographed the local Wall Lizards, we headed up into the highlands, close to the peak of Pico itself. Here we were at 800m, and it was surprisingly cool. We spent an enjoyable half hour at the small lake of Lagoa de Capitão, where we finally had close views of the endemic Azores Chaffinch, found an Azores Noctule bat, and saw our only dragonfly of the tour: a Red-veined Darter.

On the way back, we stopped for a wine tasting session at the Cooperativa Vitivinícola Pico Wines. Mainly known for its white wines, we tried four distinct types, as well as a red and a fortified wine. We were in particularly good spirits (pun intended) as we headed back to our hotel.

Day 6

Saturday 5th July

Madalena

After another leisurely breakfast in the hotel, we met up at CW Azores for our last scheduled boat trip. The weather remained sunny and warm with a light breeze, as it had been throughout our stay on Pico. We boarded the RHIB and headed out to sea for the last time (or so we thought).

We had our last close encounter with the resident Sperm Whales, which are without doubt the star attraction for Pico. It is worth noting that we saw only adult females and youngsters, because the much larger males are away feeding in cooler waters in northern latitudes. The females remain in Azorean waters all year. This is possible because the steep volcanic islands that we see above water continue to plunge downwards, creating an underwater topography of steep slopes, narrow shelves and plunging ravines that drop to a depth of three kilometres. These provide hunting opportunities for the Sperm Whales, which typically dive to depths of up to 1200m to find deepwater squid. Amazingly, they stay under for an average of thirty to fifty minutes, though the longest recorded dive is over two hours!

We also saw another pod of Bottlenose Dolphins, and were again impressed by the sheer size of this offshore variety. Birds included Cory's Shearwaters and Common Terns, both species flying remarkably close to the boat. When we stopped to retrieve a piece of ocean plastic (the remains of a bucket), we were surprised to see a large fish swimming in the shade beneath.

As it was our last full day, we had a relaxed afternoon, during which we enjoyed a slow lunch, and had time to relax at the hotel or to explore the town. We had become regulars at the little café by the old harbour, called Via Bar & Grill. This serves excellent burgers, including local tuna, and beers brewed on the island. With views across to the jetty where our boats were moored, it is a beautiful place to watch the world go by, enjoying the laid-back atmosphere of Pico.

Day 7

Sunday 6th July

Final boat trip – departure

CW Azores had realised that over the week, some of our group had missed one or two trips, and so they offered us the chance to take an extra RHIB trip. Three of us took up the offer and joined a large group on the bigger RHIB, which turned left out of the harbour and motored along the south coast.

It turned out to be an excellent trip. We saw another pod of Spotted Dolphins, but this time there were lots of adults with the spotted flanks that are typical of this species. Another pod of Bottlenose Dolphins swam rapidly past, and came quite close to the boat. However, the undoubted highlight was spending several minutes following a fast-swimming Sei Whale, the seventh cetacean species of the tour. It swam to within thirty metres of us, and we gained a real sense of its immense size and power. We estimated that it was sixteen metres long; it was certainly the largest whale seen on the tour, and was an amazing way to complete our whalewatching week!

We returned to harbour with plenty of time to finish packing and to catch the 3.00pm ferry over to Horta (Faial). Our flight to Lisbon was smooth and on time, and we caught the shuttle bus to our airport hotel. Here, it was time to say our goodbyes, as some had extremely early flights in the morning.

Everyone had greatly enjoyed our time on Pico, with a wide variety of cetaceans, wonderful weather, and the best of company! Highlights included a breaching Sperm Whale and incredibly close views of four different species of dolphin. We had eaten a series of superb dinners at six different restaurants, and we had relished each other's company throughout the week. What an awesome tour!

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Species lists

Mammals

E = endemic		June-July 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	30	1	2	3	4	5	6
Azores Noctule - E	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>					1		2
Sei Whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>							1
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		6	7	5		4	4
Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>			12				
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		10				12	20
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>				150			70
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>			50				
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		100	30				

Birds (H = Heard only)

E = endemic		June-July 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	30	1	2	3	4	5	6
"Mule Duck"	<i>Anas platyrhynchos x Cairina moschata</i>	✓				✓		
Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>							2
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>							1
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>					H	H	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>		H	H	H	H		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Azores Chaffinch - E	<i>Fringilla moreletti</i>			✓		✓		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>							✓
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>			✓		✓	✓	

Reptiles

Common name	Scientific name
Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>

Fishes

Common name	Scientific name
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>
Carp sp.	Cyprinidae sp.

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus faillae</i>

Damselflies & dragonflies

Common name	Scientific name
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>

Hydrozoans

Common name	Scientific name
Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalia</i>