

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 8th July 2026



Loggerhead Turtle



Cory's Shearwater



Risso's Dolphin



Sei Whale

Tour report by Sara Frost



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants - Sara Frost (leader) with 12 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

This holiday to the Azores delivered some truly exceptional whalewatching, and we were blessed with glorious weather and remarkably calm seas. The clear highlight came in the form of two unforgettable encounters with a pod of eight elusive Sowerby's Beaked Whales, which are among the rarest cetaceans in the North Atlantic, which surfaced just metres from our boat, giving us prolonged and privileged views. We also enjoyed daily sightings of Sperm Whales, including females with calves, feeding Sei Whales, playful Long-finned Pilot Whales, and superb close-up encounters with Bottlenose, Common, Atlantic Spotted and Risso's Dolphins, all of which delighted us by swimming alongside or around the boat. Loggerhead Turtles, Cory's Shearwaters and the occasional flying fish added further excitement to our days at sea.

Our time ashore revealed the unique volcanic landscapes and rich culture of Pico. We explored lava tubes adorned with glittering silver and gold bacteria, visited the island's traditional whale lookout (*'vigia'*) to learn how whales are tracked, and discovered Pico's fascinating whaling heritage at Lajes Museum. A leisurely picnic beside a mountain lake, a visit to the UNESCO World Heritage vineyards, and a private wine tasting overlooking Mount Pico showcased the island's outstanding scenery and local produce, while Azores Chaffinches, Atlantic Canaries, the endemic subspecies of Buzzard and the remarkable day-flying Azores Noctule bat added wildlife interest on land.

The holiday concluded in memorable fashion beneath a star-filled sky, listening to the extraordinary nocturnal calls of Cory's Shearwaters as they returned to their nesting colonies. All this, combined with excellent local cuisine, warm hospitality and wonderful company to create a thoroughly memorable week exploring one of the Atlantic's true wildlife treasures.

Day 1

Wednesday 1st July

London to Pico

The group met at Heathrow and flew to Faial via Lisbon. After landing in Horta (on Faial) at 5.00pm, most of the group took a fifteen-minute taxi ride to a pizza restaurant near the ferry terminal, as the next ferry to Pico wasn't until 8.15pm. Sara (and some kind volunteers from the group) took a taxi direct to the ferry terminal and checked in everyone's luggage, before walking to the pizza restaurant, five minutes away. After a very filling meal, we walked back to the ferry terminal to catch the boat to Madalena, on Pico. Before leaving the harbour, we saw several day-flying Azores Noctule bats from the top deck (due to the lack of avian predators, they have no need to fly at night). After watching Cory's Shearwaters on the crossing, we arrived on Pico twenty-five minutes later and, after collecting our bags, went to check in at our hotel just over the road, and headed straight to bed.

Day 2

Thursday 2nd July

Whalewatching – island tour

After breakfast, we met at the hotel reception at 8.40am and headed down to the whale watching centre together, less than five-minutes' walk away. We were welcomed and given a thirty-minute briefing about the whale and

dolphin species that we were likely to see during our time on Pico. We were warned that it was quite windy, and that the spotters on land hadn't found any whales yet today, but we opted to go ahead. It was indeed quite breezy, so there was lots of spray, but it was all met with laughter and smiles: it was exhilarating to be out on the boats, going at high speed trying to find a whale. Although the spotters (*vigias*) on the island hadn't seen any whales that morning, they *had* seen dolphins, so we went to find them and, sure enough, within twenty minutes we had Bottlenose Dolphins at the front of the boat, leaping around, splashing and jumping. We enjoyed watching them for forty-five minutes, before heading closer to the island of Faial, where we saw colonies of Common Terns and feral Rock Dove, plus lots of Red Rock and Marbled Rock Crabs (the latter are dark green, but look almost black in the sun). We then went to the collapsed caldera, where there was a colony of Yellow-legged Gulls.

We returned at noon, and the group went for lunch at some of the various cafés that Madalena has to offer, before we met again at 2.00pm for an island tour (it was still windy and the spotters still hadn't seen any whales!). We enjoyed being driven in two minibuses to the north side of the island. We went to the Gruta das Torres collapsed lava tube, and learned all about the various volcanic formations. At the entrance to the lava tube were nesting Starlings feeding young, and also the Western Azores Goldcrest (subspecies *inermis*), a juvenile Robin and a specimen of the endemic subspecies of Buzzard. Back in the car park, we saw Madeiran Rock Lizards, Iberian Water Frogs in a small water trough, and Atlantic Canaries flying around the vineyards.

Having hopped back into the minibuses, we went to visit our main spotter, Renato, and saw him in his lookout hide (confusingly, also called a *vigia*). We tried out his superb binoculars, and heard all about how he finds the whales, and has to guess their trajectory to accurately guide the boats into the best positions to see them. His *vigia* overlooked a sunny vineyard, which had groups of Atlantic Canaries flitting among the hot, dry-stone walls. We enjoyed sampling his local moonshine and looking over the beautiful view of the vineyards, before returning to Madalena at 5.00pm. We had two hours to relax, have a beer, swim in the pool or even take a nap, before meeting again at 7.10pm to walk to a local restaurant, Ancoradouro, for a lovely evening meal.

Day 3

Friday 3rd July

Whalewatching

We had a full day of whalewatching today, so met at the centre for 9.30am and headed straight out on a boat, going to the waters north of Pico. The *vigias* had already seen whales that morning (yippee!), so we went straight to the 'whale zone'. Sure enough, we saw a blow just ahead of us, and then a large tail glided sideways about a metre out of the water, showing the whale was on its side! The tails of baleen whales are a different shape to those of Sperm Whales (toothed whales), so we could tell this was a baleen whale, and the fact that it was swimming on its side indicated that it was feeding. Upon closer inspection, we could see it was a Sei Whale: in fact, there were two of them busy feeding! It was a joy to watch them. We stayed with them for about half an hour, before turning around and heading closer to the shore of Pico, where there was a Sperm Whale, which looked like a medium-sized female. It dived fairly quickly (and wouldn't surface again for another forty minutes), but fortunately there was another one nearby, also a medium-sized female! We were then delighted to see a group of four Sperm Whales together, including a calf, which we watched until they dived.

A shout of 'dolphins!' then went up, and we whizzed over to the splashes in the water near us, finding a pod of fifteen or so Risso's Dolphins. This species has the peculiarity of accumulating white scarring with age, particularly

the males, accumulated as they fight or tussle. The pod contained a couple of very white males, and also at least one calf (which was smooth grey), and they played around the boat, showing us their distinctive scars. Then, as a finale, we saw one more Sperm Whale and, because it had a distinctive tailfin, we were able to clearly see that it was the same one that we had first seen earlier.

We went back on shore for two hours for lunch at one of the sunny cafés around the harbour, and then met again at the whalewatching centre, heading back out at 2.30pm. We went north again, and were very pleased to see some more Sperm Whales, including one lone individual, plus a female with a calf. We also had some Common Dolphins playing around the boat, showing us the lovely yellow-and-grey hourglass patterns on their sides, plus incredibly close views of a Loggerhead Turtle, which was unusually confident around the boats and came right up to us! We got back to the harbour at 5.00pm and had two hours to relax in the hotel: some went for a drink before we met again at reception at 7.30pm for a lovely buffet dinner, at Pico Oceano, the restaurant next door to the hotel.

Day 4

Saturday 4th July

Whalewatching

We met at the whalewatching centre at 8.45am for our 9.00am departure, and had the boat to ourselves. Only half an hour into our exploration of the waters north of Pico, we found a group of about thirty Long-finned Pilot Whales. They were very obliging, and eagerly swam alongside our boat, investigating us, swimming on their sides, bow-riding and playing around us. It was a great opportunity for the group to see a different group of cetaceans: these are 'blackfish', in the same group as Orca, Melon-headed, False Killer and Pygmy Killer Whales.

We then got a call over the radio that there were some Sperm Whales a few minutes away, so we raced over to see them: we found a mix of single female Sperm Whales, and also some females with a calf, plus a male on its own. The male was noticeably bigger than the females, and took our total to six Sperm Whales so far. The action was non-stop! We then saw some dolphins, and upon closer investigation we saw that they were Common Dolphins: they bounded over to us and played around the boat. We continued searching for more wildlife, and were delighted to find our first pod of Spotted Dolphins.

Then, the moment of the trip happened: something unusual popped up behind the Spotted Dolphins. They were medium-sized cetaceans, of small whale size, and were rolling through the mirror calm water. One lifted its head and showed a protruding beak: they were Sowerby's Beaked Whales! Energy (mainly from Sara and the couple of crew) exploded on the boat as we carefully made our way closer to these rarely-seen animals. 'Elusive' is the word most often used to describe beaked whales: they are a group of deep-diving cetaceans, which spend much of their lives in the deep trenches and canyons of the sea at 1000m – 2000m below the surface. If they didn't need to breathe air, they simply wouldn't surface: they are so infrequently seen that no population estimate exists. And here they were, a pod of eight of them, just fifty metres in front of us! They surfaced incredibly close to the boat, giving us remarkably privileged views of these rarely-seen animals. We watched them for five minutes, before they did a final dive: we were staggered!

Somewhat speechless, we then saw a Loggerhead Turtle, before seeing fins popping out of the water ahead of us, which we quickly went to examine. It was the Pilot Whales again, and they rejoined us, mixed in with Bottlenose and Spotted Dolphins. It was time for us to turn back, so we headed back to shore with salt-encrusted grins on

our faces, quivering with a mix of excitement and exhaustion, and wondering what on earth we could possibly see this afternoon that could top that!

We met again at 2.00pm to go out again, and headed south, seeing another four or five Sperm Whales, plus a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins. What a day! We were back on shore for 5.00pm, and met again at 7.15pm to walk to Café O'Luis for dinner, during which many of the day's sightings were relived over good food and delicious local wine!

Day 5

Sunday 5th July

Island tour on Pico

Today we had planned a tour of the island, so at 9.30am we headed inland to a little-known collapsed lava tube. It was a glorious sunny day with a blue sky, not a single cloud, and the mountain of Pico providing a wonderful backdrop. The entrance to the lava tube was extremely verdant, with a protrusion of lush green ferns bursting from all possible crevices, all dripping with moisture, and the cave air was filled with water droplets. We explored a cave, and saw the glittering silver and gold actinomycete bacteria on the ceiling and walls, as well as 'rope lava': there were distinct wrinkles in the solid (once liquid lava) floor.

Outside the lava tube a couple of Azores Chaffinches were flitting about. We headed to San Antonio to see a Common Tern colony, positioned on a sea stack very close to shore. We stood watching the terns for half an hour or so, seeing them frequently bringing back fish for their squawking chicks, which wolfed the catch down in a millisecond, before begging for more. While we were watching, Amy had a snorkel around the stack and enjoyed seeing lots of lovely fish around the rocks.

We then drove through the coastal town of Sao Roche, before ascending high up the hillsides to a lovely lake: it was the perfect spot for a picnic lunch! There were several Azores Chaffinches next to us, which were very obliging in allowing their photographs to be taken as they eagerly hopped about, trying to steal a crumb or two from peoples' sandwiches or crisps. After lunch, some of us popped a hundred metres or so further up the hill, to enjoy the spectacular view over the gorgeous mirror-calm sea several hundred metres below, and the view over to São Jorge.

Despite the two islands looking fairly close together, the water between the two islands reaches a whopping 2000m in depth: perfect Sperm Whale territory! Despite enthusiastically scanning the waters for a whale, we couldn't see any, but we could see many rafts of Cory's Shearwaters, all sitting on the water as there was no wind, nor waves to be playing on. There were also Azores Noctule bats and Buzzards flying about, along with a few dragonflies, butterflies and bees.

We descended to Lajes, the main town on Pico, where we visited the whaling museum and our local guide explained the history, even pointing out a photo of his great-great-grandfather, one of the whalers. Some also had time for a coffee or a cold drink at the local café, before we went onto our private wine tasting session. This was in the most gorgeous, stunning setting: a beautiful courtyard with table and chairs, surrounded by the old building of the terracotta-roofed house and winery, with a view over to Mount Pico. The group sampled four different wines, each explained in detail by the sommelier, and accompanied by local cheeses, jam, apple, bread and olives. After

this we went (swaying slightly) to the famous Criação Velha vineyard, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and enjoyed climbing the red windmill to have a view over the hundreds of plots, before we returned to the hotel at 6.00pm.

We met for dinner at 7.10pm, walking to a restaurant twenty minutes along the coast. At 9.00pm, we were picked up by our whalewatching crew to go along the coast and wait for the Cory's Shearwaters to return to their nests (which they only do after dark). We took up position on some rocky boulders, and waited patiently for half an hour or so, at which point they started coming in from the sea in numbers, while we sat in silence under the stars, listening to their bizarre calls. Reminiscent of a digeridoo, the males are relatively high-pitched, with the calls of the females comically deep and masculine (causing much giggling among some members of the group). At 10.40pm, we got back into the van and returned to our hotel, with big smiles of delight on our faces!

Day 6

Monday 6th July

Morning at leisure, whalewatching

We had this morning at leisure, and clients opted for a lie in, a coastal walk, a swim or a visit to the local shops to buy some souvenirs. We then met at 1.45pm for our final whalewatching trip, and what an outing it was! The water was mirror-calm, and after half an hour or so of using the hydrophone to listen for Sperm Whales (we could hear them, but couldn't see them) we eventually tracked down three or four (including a female with a calf), which we were able to approach very closely. We were also absolutely delighted to have another encounter with (presumably) the same pod of Sowerby's Beaked Whales, which again rolled at the surface very close to the boat, giving us outstanding views of this exciting cetacean. What a privilege! We also encountered an energetic group of Spotted Dolphins leaping out of the water: they came to bow-ride alongside our boat, along with a pod of Common Dolphins. We also saw four Loggerhead Turtles.

We returned to Madalena at 5.00pm, and most of the group opted for a drink in the sun at the local bar next door to the whalewatching centre, before heading back to the hotel for a swim and to freshen up for dinner. We met at 7.10pm to walk to another local restaurant, with lovely views over the sea, for our final evening meal.

Day 7

Tuesday 7th July

Pico – Lisbon

We had the morning at leisure before our afternoon ferry, so we enjoyed a relaxed breakfast, a walk along the shore, and a potter round the shops before a lunch at one of the local cafés. We collected our bags from the hotel at 2.30pm, and headed over to the ferry terminal for our 3.15pm ferry to Horta, on Faial. The sea was gorgeously calm and tempting: it was with great reluctance that we were leaving this magical place! We taxied to the airport, and departed for Lisbon at 5.50pm, with the flight taking in stunning views of Faial, Pico and São George. These islands really are gems in the Atlantic!

We landed in Lisbon at 9.30pm, and stayed overnight at the lovely Melia Hotel, only a five-minute walk from the terminal.

Day 8

Wednesday 8th July

Lisbon – London

We met in the hotel lobby at 7.00am for our 10.00am flight to London, filled with memories of a truly fantastic trip!

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Species lists

Mammals

E=Endemic		July 2026						
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Azores Noctule - E	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>	5						
Sei Whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>			2				
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>			9	~10		5	
Sowerby's Beaked Whale	<i>Mesoplodon bidens</i>				8		~8	
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>			~15				
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>				✓			
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		~10		✓			
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>				50+		✓	
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			30	15		✓	

Birds (H=heard only)

E=Endemic, I=Introduced		July 2026						
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix conturbans</i>					H		
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>					✓		
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓		✓	✓		
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Azorean Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>			?				
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>	✓				✓		
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>		✓					
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>		✓			✓		
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2					
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		1		1		1	
Azores Chaffinch - E	<i>Fringilla moreletti</i>		2			✓		
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>		✓			✓		

Amphibians & reptiles

I=Introduced		July 2026						
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Iberian Water Frog - I	<i>Pelophylax perezi</i>		4					
Madeiran Rock Lizard - I	<i>Teira dugesii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>		2	3	4		4	

Fishes

		July 2026						
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>		✓				✓	
a mackerel	Scombridae sp.				1			

Butterflies

		July 2026						
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
American Lady	<i>Vanessa virginiensis</i>					✓		
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓			✓		

Crustaceans

		July 2026						
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Marbled Shore Crab	<i>Eriphia verrucosa</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red Rock Crab	<i>Grapsus adscensionis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Hydrozoans

		July 2026						
Common name	Scientific name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalia</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	