

# Whales & Dolphins of Madeira

Naturetrek Tour Report

26th May – 1st June 2023

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Spotted Dolphin



Portuguese Man O' War



Madeiran interior



Madeiran Wall Lizard

Tour report and images by Su Gough



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour participants: Su Gough (leader) and local guides with four Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Friday 26th May

Our flight from London Gatwick was slightly delayed taking off but a smooth flight ensured that we landed pretty much on time. We were quickly through the airport and picked up, enjoying our first glimpse of this attractive island on the drive to our hotel where we settled into our lovely rooms before reconvening for lunch on the terrace. There were no formal activities planned for this afternoon, but we all enjoyed exploring the grounds of the hotel in the sun and pleasant temperatures, coming across fantastic sightings of Monarch butterfly (and a handsome caterpillar) and watching the antics of the characterful Madeiran Wall Lizards. Blackcaps and Blackbirds sang in the gardens and Plain Swifts flew overhead; we even spotted a distinctive endemic Madeiran Banded Bee on the marigolds!

Mid-afternoon our local agent Carla met us and showed us the route down to the marina and to meet the various boats we would be going out on. As we strolled along the seafront, Canaries sang and Long-tailed Blue butterflies flitted high over the many colourful shrubs and plants. We spent some time watching the brightly coloured and very distinctive Sally Lightfoot crabs at the marina before a gentle walk back to the hotel. We had a brief meet up before dinner to discuss tomorrow's plans and we then all sampled some of the wonderful fish available, with most opting for Madeira's own special and delicious Black Scabbard fish. After a long day of travelling, we retired soon after to be fresh for our first day at sea.

## Day 2

Saturday 27th May

A wonderful breakfast and prompt start saw us down at the marina ready for our small, exclusive boat ran by Carlos of *Nauticlobos*. Common Terns dived around us as we headed out of the harbour, turning west along the coast. Our first sightings were of some Cory's Shearwaters 'shearing' past the boat and then we came upon a pod of about 70-100 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins feeding alongside attendant birds. The pod had a few adult females and many calves and although this species is normally a summer visitor these particular animals had calved late last year and the unusually warm water temperatures had meant that they had stayed over the winter. The calves were curious and came close to boat, their grey bodies visible even below the surface in the clear waters, contrasting with their mothers' spotted sides.

Groups of Cory's Shearwaters lounged on the water and one group had three Macronesian Shearwaters with them (previously known as Little or Baroli's Shearwaters, but recently recognised as a separate species). Further along another group of Cory's Shearwaters had a number of Manx Shearwaters with them. All this was accompanied by the unexpected sight of a galleon in full sail coming along the coast – the *Santa Maria de Colombo*, a locally built replica of Columbus' ship – under the towering cliff west of Funchal.

As we headed back into harbour, we saw a Turnstone and then returned to the hotel for a freshen up and lunch before we spent the afternoon exploring the Santa Catalina gardens. These gardens are above the harbour and we had close-up views of a Long-tailed Blue and a Madeiran Bumblebee, before stopping for a coffee under a large specimen of Babirusa Laurel – one of the Madeiran endemic 'laurisilva' trees, albeit a planted one. (Laurisilva is the name of the critically endangered endemic Madeiran forest habitat). Sadly, our adventure was cut short by a

heavy rain shower, so we headed back to the hotel, and met in the bar before deciding to eat in the hotel again, rather than venturing out in the rain.

## Day 3

## Sunday 28th May

Another wonderful breakfast was enlivened by watching the last of the very 'enthusiastic' overnight showers. Thankfully, our walk along to the offices of *Rota dos Cetaceos*, and the rest of the morning stayed dry. Today we went out on the 20-man RIB (Rigid Inflatable Boat) and we had an enjoyable and exhilarating ride as we headed east along the coast and then out directly towards the Desertas Islands. Cory's Shearwaters were seen in a constant stream and a small dark petrel with a paler 'W' across the wings was the group's first Bulwer's Petrel. Passing the amazing airport with much of the runway supported on concrete pillars we reached almost the end of the island before having to return to harbour. Another Bulwer's Petrel and a *Pterodroma* (most likely Desertas – the three *Pterodroma* species are impossible to tell apart at sea) were seen amongst the Cory's but sadly no whales or dolphins were seen and so we were able to arrange an additional outing to the programme.

After disembarking, we enjoyed watching the varied and beautiful fish in the surface waters of the marina before heading into the lovely old town to have lunch at 'The Ritz' whilst watching Monarchs and a Vagrant Emperor Dragonfly in the neighbouring parkland. A relaxing afternoon - with some of the group taking advantage of the pool - was followed by a spectacular exclusive evening cruise onboard a catamaran: Atlantic Pearl. We were made to feel very welcome as the captain and crew took us out of the harbour before turning eastwards along the coast. We soon started spotting birds passing, mostly Cory's Shearwaters with a few Manx Shearwaters accompanying them, before Paul in the group spotted a fin close to the boat. We slowed and turned and enjoyed a while with a small group of Common Dolphins, usually a winter species here, summering further north. On leaving them - and celebrating our sighting by opening a bottle of wine - we quickly encountered a large pod of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins and spent some time at the rear of the catamaran getting videos and photos of this amazing spectacle, with the dolphins playing around the boat for a long while. Thrilled with our sightings we turned back towards Funchal, coming in close to the immense towering cliff (the highest in Europe) and enjoying the sights and birds along the coast at a leisurely speed before finally returning in the sunset at 9.30pm. A super evening.

## Day 4

## Monday 29th May

Heavy showers overnight cleared, and we were met after breakfast by Stefano and a driver to take us into the interior of the island on our birding and wildlife tour. We quickly headed up into the mountains via the old road into the western part of the island, Serra de Agua. Stopping just below the ever-present cloud along a 'levada' we enjoyed getting to know some of the natural Madeiran flowers including Madeiran Rose and the iconic Pride of Madeira. A Grey Wagtail flitted around a waterfall and Robins joined the Blackbirds and Blackcaps in song. We also heard a Spectacled Warbler.

Moving on we started to see Madeiran Orchids along the roadside before coming out onto the surprising and flat plain at the top of the western massif, Paul da Serra. A couple of stops allowed us to see the astonishing views as well as Tree Heath, Madeiran Chaffinches, the endemic Madeiran Firecrest and also a small flock of Siskins which are recent colonists. Berthelot's Pipits proved elusive but we did hear several singing. Clouded Yellows and Buzzards, Madeiran Speckled Woods, a Rabbit and a Linnet completed the cast.

Heading north towards the coast at Sao Vicente we first drove through some laurisilva, spotting different species including the distinctive Madeiran Mahogany with its hanging red leaves. Then we dropped down into the village and were lucky to see a number of the endemic Trocaz Pigeons before returning to Funchal via the main road.

We had an hour's break for lunch before embarking on the afternoon RIB whale watch. Heading initially east we quickly received news of cetaceans to the west, so we turned and sped far past the usual limits of the outings. We eventually connected with a small pod of Common Dolphins including a female and a small calf. Birds were few but a group of Cory's Shearwaters were sitting on the water with one Manx Shearwater while two Bulwer's Petrels flew rapidly past. We eventually returned to shore more than an hour later than scheduled but we had time to return to the hotel, relax and freshen up before meeting up and walking a tiny way along the road for a super meal at Restaurante Dona Amelia.

## Day 5

**Tuesday 30th May**

The day dawned overcast but quickly cleared. The group split, with one half going on a private pre-arranged trip to the skywalk and its glass floor on the highest cliff in Europe. The others took advantage of the complementary RIB trip. Setting off over calm seas the boat soon found a large pod of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins which played around the boat for ages before following and chasing when the boat tried to move away. The presence of the dolphins led to a shoal of Flying Fish taking to the air, with one flying right over the boat!

After lunch the group reconvened to head out on Nauticlobos's exclusive boat once more. A wonderful four hours with captain Carlos and his brother sadly failed to locate any cetaceans despite spending some time at an earlier Blainville's Beaked Whale sighting in the hope they may resurface. We did, however, have superb sighting of Flying Fish, lots of nearby Cory's Shearwaters and a stunning Portuguese Man O'War – a colonial jellyfish-like animal. The cream of the trip was several passing Bulwer's Petrels.

Getting back to harbour past 6pm, we decided to revisit The Ritz in the old town, where we sat outside enjoying lovely food and some sampling the local Poncha alcoholic drink before making our way back to the hotel.

## Day 6

**Wednesday 31st May**

We woke to poor weather and the sad news that our last RIB trip this afternoon had been cancelled for safety reasons due to the weather forecast. After a leisurely breakfast, three of the group headed off on a pre-arranged hotel-run excursion into the interior of the island. The remaining member of the group was taken by our leader, Su, to the Monte Palace Gardens. After a taxi ride up and past the astonishing queue for the famous toboggan trip down to Funchal below, we entered the wonderful gardens.

Time and weather meant we only spent a couple of hours and, rather than head to the popular Oriental Garden section, we set our sights on the wonderful area of recreated laurisilva, full of native and mostly endemic trees and understorey. Amongst the trees we discovered lovely examples of Chain Fern (*Woodwardia*) and Hare's Foot Fern (*Davallia*), yellow flowered Madeiran Moneywort, Honey Spurge and young Dragon Trees.

With the weather deteriorating further we returned to Carlos, our driver, who was waiting for us near the gates, before returning to the hotel to relax and pack before our flight home tomorrow. Some braved the weather to

head into town but others preferred to watch the tropical-like storm from the comfort of our balconies. We met later in the hotel bar to discuss the past two days and discuss plans and timings for tomorrow's sad departure, before walking around to Rivus Restaurante and a super end to a great holiday.

## Day 7

Thursday 1st June

A relaxed breakfast was enjoyed before our driver took us to the airport, where our flight was on time, taking off in the sunshine and allowing us a last look at this wonderful island, before turning north and towards the UK. We landed on time in London and everyone's luggage was safely retrieved before we said our goodbyes and continued on our homeward journeys.

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## Species lists

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023					
		26	27	28	29	30	31
<b>MAMMALS</b>							
Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			4+	8		
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		75+	40		100	
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				1		
House Mouse	<i>Mus musculus</i>		1				
<b>REPTILES</b>							
Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Teira dugesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023					
		26	27	28	29	30	31
<b>BIRDS</b>							
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		20	30	50	20	
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		3	1	4	1	
Macronesian Shearwater	<i>Puffinus baroli</i>		3				
Desertas Petrel	<i>Pterodroma deserta</i>			1			
Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>			2	2	2	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			1	5		
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		1				
Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>			10			
Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii madeirensis</i>			6			
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓		✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis</i>			5			
Madeira Firecrest	<i>Regulus madeirensis</i>			✓		✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs madeirensis</i>			✓		✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			1			
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Siskin				✓			
<b>FISH</b>							
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>			✓		✓	
<b>BUTTERFLIES</b>							
Madeiran Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphia</i>			✓			
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓			
Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓			
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓		✓	✓	
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>OTHERS OF INTEREST</b>							
Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalis</i>					✓	
Sally Lightfoot crab	<i>Percnon gibbesi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Vagrant Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax ephippiger</i>			✓			
Garden Bumblebee	<i>Bombus ruderatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023					
		26	27	28	29	30	31
Madeiran Bumblebee	<i>Bombus maderensis</i>		✓				
Madeiran Banded Bee	<i>Anthophora maderae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

## Plants of note

Common name	Scientific name
A Clubmoss	<i>Selaginella denticulata</i>
Hard-fern	<i>Blechnum spicant</i>
Chain Fern or Woodwardia	<i>Woodwardia radicans</i>
Hare's-foot Fern	<i>Davallia canariensis</i>
Bracken	<i>Peridium aquilinum</i>
Macaronesian Polypody	<i>Polypodium macaronesicum</i>
Maidenhair Fern	<i>Adiantum capillus-veneris</i>
Prickly Juniper	<i>Juniperus cedrus</i>
Aleppo Pine	<i>Pinus halepensis</i>
Maritime Pine	<i>Pinus pinaster</i>
Canary Laurel	<i>Apollonias barbujana</i> *
Fetid Madeiran Laurel	<i>Ocotea foetens</i> *
A Laurel	<i>Laurus novocanariensis</i>
Madeiran Mahogany	<i>Persea indica</i> *
Fennel	<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>
Maderia Barberry	<i>Berberis maderensis</i> **
Pride-of-Madeira	<i>Echium candicans</i> *
Elephant-ear Prickly Pear	<i>Opuntia ficus-indica</i>
Red Valerian	<i>Centranthus rubra</i>
White Eupatorium or Croftonweed	<i>Ageratina adenophora</i>
Andryala	<i>Andryala glandulosa</i> ssp <i>varia</i> **
Disc Houseleek	<i>Aeonium glandulosum</i> *
Madeira Stonecrop	<i>Aichryson divaricatum</i> *
Navelwort	<i>Umbilicus rupestris</i>
Tree Heather	<i>Erica arborea</i>
Madeiran Heather	<i>Erica maderensis</i> **
Besom Heath	<i>Erica scoparia</i> ssp <i>maderinicola</i> **
Madeira Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium padifolium</i> **
Bystropogon	<i>Bystropogon maderensis</i> **
Madeiran Ironwort	<i>Sideritis candicans</i> var <i>candicans</i> *
Pitch Trefoil	<i>Bitumaria bituminosa</i>
Broom	<i>Cytisus scorpiarius</i>
Shrub Trefoil	<i>Genista maderensis</i> **
Madeiran Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus glaucus</i> *
Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>
Garden Pink Sorrel	<i>Oxalis latifolia</i>
Californian Poppy	<i>Eschscholzia californica</i>
Common Poppy	<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>
Ivy-leafed Toadflax	<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>
Madeira Moneywort	<i>Sibthorpia peregrina</i> *

Common name	Scientific name
A Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus cortusifolius</i> var. <i>minor</i> *
Maderian Rose	<i>Rosa mandonii</i>
Maderian Willow	<i>Salix canariensis</i>
Nasturtium	<i>Tropaeolum majus</i>
Pelitory-of-the-Wall	<i>Parietaria judaica</i>
Mind-your-own-business	<i>Soleirolia soleirolii</i>
Lantana	<i>Lantana camera</i>
African Lily	<i>Agapanthus praecox</i>
Slender False garlic	<i>Nothoscordum gracile</i>
Calla Lily	<i>Zantedeschia aethiopica</i>
Dragon Tree	<i>Dracaena draco</i> *
A Butcher's-broom	<i>Ruscus streptophyllus</i>
Yellow Canna Lily	<i>Canna indica</i> (+hybrids)
A Galingale	<i>Cyperus esclentus</i>
Montbretia	<i>Crocsmia x crocosmiflora</i>
Madeira Marsh Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza foliosa</i> *
Giant Reed	<i>Arundo donax</i>
Large Quaking-grass	<i>Briza maxima</i>
<b>PLANTED SPECIES:</b>	
Norfolk Island Pine	<i>Araucaria heterophylla</i>
Bougainvillea	<i>Bougainvillea x hybrida</i>
Amaryllis	<i>Brunsvigia rosea</i> ( <i>Amaryllis belladonna</i> )
Angel's Trumpet	<i>Burgmansia versicolor</i>
Dragon Tree	<i>Dracaena draco</i>
Tree Fern	<i>Dicksonia antarctica</i>
Giant Agave	<i>Furcraea</i> ( <i>Agave</i> ) <i>foetida</i>
Hibiscus or Shoe Plant	<i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i>
Jacaranda	<i>Jacaranda mimosifolia</i>
Lantana Hybrida	<i>Lantana camara</i>
Mexican Breadfruit	<i>Monstera deliciosa</i>
Dwarf Banana	<i>Musa acuminata</i>
Silver Banana	<i>Musa x paradisiaca</i>
Oleander	<i>Nerium oleander</i>
Canary Island Palm	<i>Phoenix canariensis</i>
Suger Cane	<i>Saccharum officinarum</i>
Bird of Paradise Plant	<i>Stelitzia reginae</i>