

# Whales & Dolphins of Madeira

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th – 13th June 2025

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Cory's Shearwater by Su Gough



Madeira Firecrest by Karen Spencer



Sperm Whale by Richard Stainsby



Short-finned Pilot Whale by Su Gough

Tour report by Su Gough

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

## Summary

We had a superb week, with perfect weather (warm temperatures and a light wind with no rain) and incredible encounters with seven different species of dolphin and whale. Large numbers of cetaceans were seen on every boat trip, and we also enjoyed several very rewarding trips inland to discover more of the plants, animals, landscapes and culture of this truly wonderful island.

### Day 1

**Saturday 7th June**

A very easy late afternoon flight into Funchal saw the leader and two of the group arriving in time to settle in to the hotel and relax after the journey, before heading to the upper hotel for dinner, encountering Plain Swift, the Madeiran subspecies of Blackbird, and Madeiran Banded Bees in the gardens. The remaining clients arrived later from Manchester, but thankfully were able to join the group for dinner, where some experienced the delicious local Scabbard fish for the first time. We discussed the plan for the week and looked forward to our first cetacean-watching trip the following morning, enjoying the Atlantic Festival fireworks from the bridge before turning in for the night.

### Day 2

**Sunday 8th June**

The day dawned slightly overcast, but with a very gentle breeze. We walked down to the marina, enjoying the sight of Jacaranda trees and the ubiquitous Agapanthus in full flower on our way. We boarded the RIB (rigid inflatable boat) with our skipper and guide for our first exclusive trip, and quickly headed out of the harbour, with a flyover Monarch butterfly an unexpected first sighting. Very quickly we found a small pod of the resident Bottlenose Dolphins, which were completely unconcerned by our presence, but were not interested in interacting us. The company has a very ethical approach with the cetaceans, approaching only from the side so as never to make the animals feel threatened, and then switching the engines off. Often, this is enough to get wonderful views of the animals, but it also allows them to choose to approach the boat more closely if they wish to interact. A maximum of thirty minutes is spent with any animals, before gently moving away and leaving them in peace.

After leaving the Bottlenoses, the spotters on land saw some distant Risso's Dolphins, always a challenging species due to their shyness. We quickly headed away from land towards the sighting and, as we approached, we could see that the Risso's Dolphins were actively moving through the area. Again, we came alongside them, and were delighted that, although they were only surfacing momentarily as they continued on their way, passing close to the boat, everyone could see their tall, almost shark-like, dorsal fins, their blunt 'beakless' heads and the characteristic white scarring on their bodies.

Deighted at the success of our first boat trip, we returned to the hotel via the Santa Catarina park, where we enjoyed a drink and snack and the large number of tame Madeiran Wall Lizards, before a free afternoon, where most of the group decided to relax at the hotel pool before a pre-dinner drink and snacks, catch-up in the upper hotel, and another lovely meal in the restaurant there.

## Day 3

Monday 9th June

Our two-boat-trip day started with a shared RIB outing, this time heading west along the impressive coastline. We briefly spent time with a female Bottlenose Dolphin with a young calf; the mother was relaxed but kept herself between the boat and her calf. The resident Bottlenoses here are still persecuted by the local fishermen, so are more wary of boats than many others around the world. It was interesting to see that they recognise certain boats, including the RIBs, and understand that we would not harm or hassle them; but their wariness and lack of engagement with us was a noticeable feature of the week, especially in contrast to how friendly and engaged some of the dolphins we met were!

Moving on, we soon found a large 'logging' (resting at the surface) pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales, which although a small whale is considerably bigger than the dolphins. The pod consisted of females and young, with some quite small calves and other well-grown individuals, and among them we spotted one adult male, with his distinctively-shaped 'humped' fin. They seemed totally relaxed, and we spent time enjoying these characterful whales, and getting very close-up views as they approached the boat and occasionally came up right next to us, at one point allowing us to experience the smell of Pilot Whale breath! Finally turning back towards shore, we found a second group of Pilot Whales, this time a nursery pod of mostly sub-adults, before dragging ourselves away to head back along the coast, close in, getting incredible views of Cabo Girão, the tallest sea cliff in Europe, towering above us. Returning to harbour, we ate our main meal in town in the lovely 'Ritz' café, enjoying the hubbub of this elegant city before a few free hours.

Meeting once again at the harbour, we boarded our exclusive catamaran 'Atlantic Pearl', and headed out once more. Heading due south, we enjoyed some of the non-cetacean wildlife to be found, including a Loggerhead Turtle, Portuguese Man O'War, Cory's Shearwaters and Bulwer's Petrels. One *Pterodroma* petrel was spotted, which allowed sufficient views of the extent of white on the underwing and heaviness of its bill to identify it as a Zino's Petrel, one of the world's rarest seabirds. There are only about eighty pairs on Earth, and they breed exclusively on Madeira. We could see dolphins breaching on the horizon, and eventually we joined a very large pod of 100 or more Striped Dolphins, which were feeding and very energetic. Shearwaters and petrels joined the throng, and we were lucky to pick out around four Common Dolphins amongst them. Tapas, snacks, wine and soft drinks helped us to celebrate our sightings, as we enjoyed the incredible light on the ocean as the sunset lit up the sky to the west.

## Day 4

Tuesday 10th June

A 7.30am start saw us meeting our local guide, Alex, at the hotel, before heading into the centre of the island to discover the birds and other wildlife. After climbing through the farmland and heath, and then the non-native *Eucalyptus* forest, we finally broke through to the native '*laurisilva*' – the endemic and very rare Madeiran laurel forest. We stopped at a picnic site which had a great range of wildlife, including very tame Madeira Chaffinches. We heard and saw the Blackbird, Goldfinches, Blackcaps (of the subspecies *heineken*) and minute Madeira Firecrests. We also got to grips with the different laurel trees, finding huge quantities of *Laurobasidium lauri*, an antler-like fungus which only grows on the Canary Laurel. Among our other floral discoveries was the very large, very rare Woolaston's Musschia, an endemic member of the bellflower family, and a good example of island gigantism.

Having crossed the centre of the island, we carried on towards the north coast, noticing Laurel Mahoghany on the way, with its characteristic red leaves. Stopping, we kept our eyes peeled for the endemic and very shy Trocaz Pigeon, and we initially spotted a pair flying over, but then found several feeding low down in shrubs, affording excellent views. A feisty Madeiran subspecies Kestrel was dwarfed by a soaring Buzzard, and large numbers of Clouded Yellow butterflies swirled around our feet.

Heading back into Funchal, we had ample time for a leisurely lunch by the shore, before some of the group went out for another cetacean-watching RIB trip. Box-lipped Mullet were obvious in the harbour as we boarded, and several Sally Lightfoot Crabs were basking in the sun. Although this was a shared boat trip, it was half empty, and this time we headed east towards the distant Desertas Islands. Stopping initially with the inshore Bottlenose Dolphins, we moved on to a logging pod of Pilot Whales, marvelling at the remarkable structure of Madeira's airport as we moved along this stretch of coast for the first time. The Pilot Whales were more awake, interacting with the boat, one even trying to scratch itself on the underside! We also saw for the first time a large cloud of Pilot Whale poo.

The land-based spotters had also moved along to the east and spotted activity further out, which we initially suspected to be the Striped Dolphins we'd seen previously. As we approached, there was plentiful full-body breaching, and the animals seemed to be playing. Approaching quietly, we shut off the engines and the pod came quickly over to us, seemingly keen to interact. They were Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, a tropical species that summers around Madeira. Almost all of the group appeared to be sub-adults, well-grown but still grey, without any of the distinctive spotting which begins to appear as they reach adulthood and continues developing as the animals age. After the allotted thirty minutes we withdrew, but the dolphins went with us, and as we turned and began to speed back towards Funchal they joined us, gleefully bow-riding until we eventually outpaced them.

Having met the rest of the group back at the hotel, we ventured out to a lovely traditional restaurant and had a delicious, and very generous meal.

## Day 5

## Wednesday 11th June

Another beautiful day dawned. A free morning allowed exploration of some of the other attractions of this lovely island, with some deciding to 'brave' the famous wicker road toboggan ride. We reconvened after a leisurely lunch for another exclusive RIB outing. Once again, we headed east and first enjoyed the Bottlenose Dolphins, this time a small group and one female with a very young calf. We left them and set our sights towards the Pilot Whales, finding a reasonable-sized pod of around twenty animals. Although they didn't actively engage with the boat, they got very close, with some swimming right under us, or surfacing to blow right next to us, allowing us privileged views of these incredible animals.

We then headed out towards the Spotted Dolphins, which we could see from some distance, again up to their energetic antics! Amazingly, we discovered over 100 of these playful cetaceans, and as they were so engaged with us, we gave them the opportunity to ride our bow wave, a chance which they eagerly took up! There were more adults with this group and one female appeared with a very young calf, possibly only a few days old. On a bit of a high from this encounter, we returned towards Funchal, coming close in under the cliff on which sits the Christ the Rei statue (every Portuguese territory has one, the most famous being the one in Rio de Janeiro), before turning for the harbour. Walking up into town we ate at 'The Ritz' once more, before heading back to the hotel.

## Day 6

Thursday 12th June

Our final full day dawned sunny, and some of the group met up with Alex once more for a flower-focused morning. We started at a clifftop viewpoint west of Funchal, where we saw many endemic plants growing among introduced flowers. This area would naturally have been a more Mediterranean, dry, low-growing forest, and we found a splendid Madeira Olive tree, alongside Small Pride of Madeira and other floral treasures. We also couldn't ignore the head-height flocks of screaming Plain Swifts around us, the ever-present lizards, and some lovely examples of the introduced Tiger Spider. Moving inland we stopped briefly at a cliff face to see some transitional plants, including the endemic and rare Golden Musschia, with beautiful plate-like Disc Houseleeks growing next to Viscid Houseleeks, allowing easy comparison. We headed for our final destination, at the point where you cross over to the north side of the island, and we left our van, noticing Madeiran Marsh Orchids growing by the side of the road before we joined a levada path. The flowers (and scenery!) were stunning, and we enjoyed phenomenal views of Blackcap and Madeira Firecrest, some of which stayed still long enough for photographs to be taken! The water of the levada had little vegetation in it, but we did see Rainbow Trout fry, a species introduced for food, and examples of the different *laurisilva* trees, with Lily of the Valley Tree being a particular treat. Madeira Speckled Wood butterflies were evident as we approached the entrance to one of the many tunnels, where our walk ended, giving us time to return to Funchal in good time for our final RIB trip, but not before a Sparrowhawk had zoomed across in front of us.

As we were all ready, our boat headed out a little early, and we started with a final visit to the Bottlenose Dolphins, Short-finned Pilot Whales and Spotted Dolphins, heading east along the shoreline and deciding to dedicate the rest of the trip to the birds, unless something else was spotted. Almost immediately a call came in from the land-based spotters that they had indeed spotted something, a long way out: a large whale blow. As they were speaking to the skipper, the animal rolled forward and tail flukes were visible: it had made a deep dive. We quickly decided that we would investigate, knowing that it could be forty-five minutes or more before the whale resurfaced. We very quickly headed to the area it had been seen moving west, so we positioned ourselves 500 metres west of where the whale had dived, switched off our engines and waited.

More than forty-five minutes passed, but suddenly we saw movement in the water and a large blow. It was a Sperm Whale! It had a notch behind the head, telling us it was a lone male, and he spent the next twenty minutes very close to the surface, frequently coming up to blow and breathe, and coming ever closer to the RIB. We could see the off-centre nostril and could clearly hear him breathing. Eventually, and after he had approached us quite closely, he breathed once more then rolled forward, humping his back and showing the crinkled skin on his tail stock, before his enormous tail flukes became visible as he went into a deep dive. We couldn't have finished this whale- and dolphin-focused trip on a better note!

A brief walk around the harbour on our return gave great views of some of the fishes, including a tropical-looking Ornate Wrasse and a big surprise in the form of a sub-adult Striped Barracuda! We sat outside overlooking the shore for our final meal, and enjoyed our last evening on this superb island.



## Day 7

Friday 13th June

A relaxed breakfast preceded a pickup for the whole group, as our planes were due to leave within thirty minutes of each other, and we added a final bird species to the list on the way to the airport: Collared Dove, only recently arrived on the island. Norfolk Island Pines and Aloes were some of the characteristic plants we noted as we entered the bright, modern airport, where we said goodbye to those heading to Manchester, before boarding our flight to London. Farewells were said after we collected our luggage, but we have all been left with super memories of the cetaceans and other wildlife, along with the scenery, people and culture of this incredible island.



Spotted Dolphin by Richard Stainsby

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## Species lists

### Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	June 2025						
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			4				
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>			100				
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>				25	100	100	
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		10	2	20	10		
Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>			20	30	30		
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		6					
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>						1	

### Birds

E=endemic, ES=endemic subspecies, ME – Macaronesian endemic (sp.or ssp.)		June 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>					✓		
Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>				1			
Ferel Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trocaz Pigeon - E	<i>Columba trocaz</i>				6			
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>							✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellow-legged Gull - ME	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
Madeiran 'Band-rumped' Storm-petrel	<i>Hydrobates castro</i>		1			1		
Zino's Petrel - E	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>			1				
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		✓	✓			✓	
Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				1			
Eurasian Sparrowhawk - ES	<i>Accipiter nisus granti</i>						1	
Common Buzzard - ES	<i>Buteo buteo harterti</i>				1	2		
Common Kestrel - ES	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blackcap - ME	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Madeira Firecrest - E	<i>Regulus madeirensis</i>				✓		✓	
Common Blackbird - ES	<i>Turdus merula cabreræ</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>				✓		✓	
Grey Wagtail - ES	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Madeira Chaffinch - E	<i>Fringilla maderensis</i>				✓		✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓		✓	
Atlantic Canary - ME	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

### Reptiles

Common name	Scientific name
Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>
Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Teira dugesii</i>

## Fishes

Common name	Scientific name
Box-lip Mullet	<i>Oedalechilus labeo</i>
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>
Ornate Wrasse	<i>Thalassoma pavo</i>
Striped Barracuda	<i>Sphyræna viridensis</i>
Redlip Blenny	<i>Ophioblennius atlanticus</i>
Rainbow Trout	<i>Oncorhynchus mykiss</i>

## Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name	June 2025						
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>				✓	✓		
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>				✓	✓		
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>					✓	✓	
Madeiran Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphia</i>				✓		✓	

## Other invertebrates

Common name	Scientific name
<b>Crustaceans</b>	
Sally Lightfoot Crab	<i>Percnon gibbesi</i>
<b>Bees</b>	
Madeiran Bumblebee	<i>Bombus maderensis</i>
Garden Bumblebee	<i>Bombus ruders</i>
Madeiran Banded Bee	<i>Anthophora maderae</i>
<b>Flies</b>	
Drone Fly	<i>Eristalis</i> sp.
<b>Dragonflies</b>	
Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>
<b>Spiders</b>	
Tiger Spider	<i>Argiope trifasciata</i>
<b>Jellyfishes</b>	
Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalis</i>

## Plants (wild)

Common name	Scientific name
A Clubmoss	<i>Selaginella denticulata</i>
Giant Horsetail	<i>Equisetum telmateia</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>



Common name	Scientific name
Barbusano	<i>Apollonias barbujana</i>
Fetid Madeiran Laurel	<i>Ocotea foetens</i>
Canary Laurel	<i>Laurus novocanariensis</i>
Madeiran Mahogany	<i>Persea indica</i>
Devil's Horsewhip	<i>Achryanthes aspera sicola</i>
Black Parsley	<i>Melanoselinum decipiens</i>
Fennel	<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>
Maderia Barberry	<i>Berberis maderensis</i>
Pride-of-Madeira	<i>Echium candicans</i>
Small Pride-of-Madeira	<i>Echium nervosum</i>
Purple Viper's Bugloss	<i>Echium plantagineum</i>
Madeiran Sea Stock	<i>Matthiola maderensis</i>
Shrubby Wallflower	<i>Erysimum bicolor</i>
Elephant-ear Prickly Pear	<i>Opuntia ficus-indica</i>
Woolaston's Musschia	<i>Musschia woolastonii</i>
Golden Musschia	<i>Musschia aurea</i>
Red Valerian	<i>Centranthus rubra</i>
Coral Necklace	<i>Illecebrum verticillatum</i>
White Eupatorium	<i>Ageratina adenophora</i>
Lily-of-the-Valley Tree	<i>Clethra arborea</i>
Andryala	<i>Andryala glandulosa ssp varia</i>
Argyranthemum	<i>Argyranthemum pinnatifidum</i>
Willow-leaved Carlina Thistle	<i>Carlina salicifolia</i>
Mexican Fleabane	<i>Erigeron karvinskianus</i>
Pinnate Sowthistle	<i>Sonchus ustulatus</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 ssp maderinicola</i>
Madeira Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium padifolium</i>
Honey Spurge	<i>Euphorbia mellifera</i>
Spear-leaved Spurge	<i>Euphorbia piscatoria</i>
Madeira Cranesbill	<i>Geranium maderense</i>
Anemone-leaved Cranesbill	<i>Geranium palmatum</i>
Bystropogon	<i>Bystropogon maderensis</i>
Madeiran Ironwort	<i>Sideritis candicans var candicans</i>
Pitch Trefoil	<i>Bitumaria bituminosa</i>
Broom	<i>Cytisus scorparius</i>
Shrub Trefoil	<i>Genista maderensis</i>
Madeiran Bird's-foot Trefoil	<i>Lotus glaucus</i>
Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>
Wax Myrtle	<i>Myrica faya</i>
Macronesian Olive	<i>Picconia excelsa</i>
Garden Pink Sorrel	<i>Oxalis latifolia</i>
Californian Poppy	<i>Eschscholzia californica</i>
Common Poppy	<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>
Ivy-leaved Toadflax	<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>
Common Broomrape	<i>Orobancha minor</i>
Madeira Moneywort	<i>Sibthorpia peregrina</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Madeiran (Shrubby) Plantain	<i>Plantago arborescens maderensis</i>
A Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus cortusifolius</i> var. <i>minor</i>
Madeiran Rose	<i>Rosa mandonii</i>
Noble Bush Madder	<i>Phyllis nobla</i>
Madeiran 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>
Cape Bugle Lily	<i>Watsonia borbonica</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 esculentus</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>

### Plants (introduced)

Common name	Scientific name
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>
Blue Gum	<i>Eucalyptus globulus</i>
Giant Agave	<i>Furcraea</i> ( <i>Agave</i> ) <i>foetida</i>
Hibiscus or Shoe Plant	<i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i>
Hydrangea	<i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>
Jacaranda	<i>Jacaranda mimosifolia</i>
Lantana Hybrid	<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>
Sugar Cane	<i>Saccharum officinarum</i>
Bird of Paradise Plant	<i>Stelitzia reginae</i>