

Great Whales of the Azores (São Miguel)

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 18 May 2019



Sperm Whale



Blue Whale



Striped Dolphin



Long-finned Pilot Whale

Report & Images by Tom Brereton



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: Tom Brereton (leader) together with 12 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 11th May

London to Ponta Delgada

We met at Stansted Airport in the departures lounge and took a morning flight to Ponta Delgado, the capital of Sao Miguel. We had made good progress until we approached the island, which somewhat unusually was shrouded in dense fog, making it unsafe to land! After circling the island a couple of times, we were diverted to Santa Maria Island, where we waited on the runway. Thankfully we did not have to wait too long before we were back in the air and then safely landing in Sao Miguel. Phew!! We took a short coach transfer to our hotel for the week, the well-equipped Hotel Marina Atlántico in Ponta Delgada. We checked into our lovely sea view rooms, which provided a commanding view out across the harbour

After some downtime to recover from the early start and longer than expected journey, we all met up at the Hotel Reception just before 7pm to eat at the nearby 'Acores Grill'. This quirky restaurant, popular with locals is great fun and for the meat eaters involved cooking the food inside on a table barbecue! Surprisingly, there was no smoke, due to an efficient hood vent above the grill. The menu was a selection of Azorean meats, locally caught fish and some vegetarian dishes. With wine, beer and sides at 1-2 euro each, good company and good food, it all made up for a lively and enjoyable evening.

Day 2

Sunday 12th May

A superb buffet breakfast was taken at 8am in the hotel, so setting the pattern for the rest of the week. Looking out towards the harbour from the hotel breakfast room, it was apparent that the windy conditions were not conducive to a morning of whale watching. After visiting the Futurismo Office, our agents for the holiday, indeed it was confirmed that the morning whale watching trip was cancelled, but an afternoon trip was a possibility with the sea set to moderate over the day.

This gave the group an opportunity to explore Ponta Delgada in the morning. Tom, Jean and Colin took a walk east along the sea front, where Red Rock Crabs were numerous along with the odd Common Tern and a Little Egret. On the way back to the hotel, Tom found an area of waste ground off Estr. Regional da Ribeira Grande, which was full of colourful arable weeds and other wildflowers, plus Island Canary, Wood Pigeon, Greenfinch, Madeiran Wall Lizards and Clouded Yellow butterflies. As on several of the days, a number of the keener birders in the group scanned the gulls in the harbour as Iceland Gull and Ring-billed Gull had been seen recently, though sadly none were seen over the week.

We regrouped at the Futurismo Office at 1330 and were pleased to hear that that our first boat trip was on. After the customary safety briefing on the boat, we headed off at 14:00. The sea was still choppy, with a relatively large swell as we steamed south east. The conditions were ideal for spotting Cory's Shearwaters with their slow wingbeats and prolonged glides, sometimes soaring high above the deep waves. Other than that it was very quiet, and we had to sail for over an hour before our first cetacean encounter. The conditions were difficult for a number of the passengers who were feeling queasy, but the journey was well worth the wait. We had travelled some distance to see a Humpback Whale, a relatively scarce visitor to the Azores. We saw the animal

immediately and it gave incredible views, breaching and diving near the boat, with Chris in particular getting stunning breaching photos. All too soon, it was time to make the long and bumpy journey back to port.

In the evening, on recommendation of the hotel reception staff, we headed over to Bar Alianca, located in the centre of the capital. This restaurant is renowned for steak as well as serving a good variety of other meat, fish and vegetarian dishes and our meal this evening did not disappoint.

Day 3

Monday 13th May

It was still windy today, but fortuitously we had a land-based day organised by Futurismo, The trip was co-led by Azorean Bullfinch expert Ana Mendonça, with the Bullfinch a highly sought-after target species for the day. We drove first north then east tracking the north coast, passing through a landscape of lush cattle-grazed pastures, tea plantations and wooded ravines. En-route European Starlings, Buzzards and Grey Wagtails were plentiful. After a short coffee stop and comfort break, we spent the morning in Serra de Tronqueira, a mountain range, which includes the Pico da Vara Important Bird Area. The area contains the largest remaining stand of the native laurisilva forest on the island, breeding habitat for the critically endangered endemic Azores Bullfinch. Our first stop was at the spectacular Miradouro da Serra da Tronqueira, which offers commanding views of the wooded mountain range. Here we saw an Azorean Bat, flying in broad daylight which they often do as there are no diurnal predators and had excellent views of the São Miguel Goldcrest - an endemic subspecies of the island. Several more stops were made over the remainder of the morning in laurel forest habitat, primarily in search of the Azores Bullfinch. At our last stop several (though not all) of the group finally connected with this bird, which Ana told us had been elusive of late, due to limits in food availability at traditional sites. A range of typical island birds were seen at the stops including Common Blackbird, Common Buzzard, Grey Wagtail, Common Chaffinch, European Robin, Atlantic Canary, House Sparrow, and Eurasian Blackcap. Earlier a Woodcock was also seen by some of the group from one of the minibuses.

After connecting with the Bullfinch we drove into the picturesque spa town of Furnas for a late lunch. We had a thoroughly enjoyable traditional Sunday lunch in a small restaurant, Banhos Ferreos, located within a former thermal ferrous water pool. Lunch was the local speciality, Cozida, which is a Portuguese Stew cooked 'volcano style' for six to seven hours buried in the ground in a sealed pot using geothermal heat from the nearby hot springs. It was a delicious mix of beef, pork, chicken, chorizo, potatoes, carrots, kale and white cabbage, accompanied with homemade bread and very generous quantities of local wine!! For those who had space, the sweets were delicious too!

In the afternoon after this hearty lunch, we visited Furnas Lake with its adjacent complex of Fumaroles and boiling springs. The lake produced a fine drake Garganey and the long-staying Pied-billed Grebe, along with more routine birds such as Eurasian Coot, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Mallard and Common Tern. In the lakeside vegetation, we had excellent views of Chaffinch, this sub-species being much bluer on the head, neck and flanks than British birds, with a striking green patch on the mantle.

On the way back to Ponta Delgada we stopped a couple of times to look at the Cão de Fila de São Miguel (Azores Cattle Dog), an endemic breed of farm dog.

After a long day out in the field, a huge lunch and a late return, we made our own arrangements for dinner that evening.

Day 4

Tuesday 14th May

There was a welcome improvement in the weather and although it was still windy in the morning, fortunately both our scheduled boat trips were running. For the four group members not going to sea, Futurismo kindly organised an excursion to Seta Cidades, an area of beautiful volcanic scenery - a trip which proved to be thoroughly enjoyable.

For the first boat trip we assembled at the *Futurismo* offices at 8:30 to collect our tickets and after the obligatory safety briefing were off out to sea before 9.00 It was cloudy and the sea a little choppy but the visibility was good.

This proved to be an excellent day for dolphins. The first group of 30 Common Dolphins were seen at 9:45. We watched them for 10 minutes, as they leapt out of the water and came to bow ride, giving fabulous views. A second group of 30 appeared at 10:12 and there was further excitement in this area when shortly afterwards a Loggerhead Turtle floated by. It is fascinating to note that these endangered animals are born on beaches along the south-eastern coast of North America and in the Gulf of Mexico centred on Florida, then live a solitary life for 20 years or more out at sea in the north Atlantic before returning to their natal beaches to breed. Our final sighting of the morning was a feeding group of 25 Bottlenose Dolphins. Other highlights over the trip included Sooty Shearwater and Atlantic Flying Fish.

In the afternoon, there was an improvement in the weather, involving the sea moderating and the sun coming out. The highlight was a much showier group of 20 Bottlenose Dolphins, which frequently leapt out of the water in the afternoon sun. On the way back we had some superb views of Cory's Shearwaters with the sun ideally located for taking photos of them shearing above the waves. A marvellous sight.

After the daily log call (review of the days sightings), we went for dinner to a highly regarded restaurant, Taberna Acor, situated on the edge of the old town, less than 10 minutes' walk from the hotel. It is noted both for its extensive tapas menu and rustic decor. Once again the food was excellent and reasonably priced and a great evening was had by all.

Day 5

Wednesday 15th May

Our agents Futurismo had organised another packed and interesting programme for those not wanting to go on the boat trips, including a visit to Lake Fogo, some hot springs, a waterfall and a visit to a liquor factory (Fabrica de Licores Mulher de Capote)!

For everyone else, it was back out on the Catamaran by 09:00 for a 9:30 sailing. The morning saw a further improvement in the sea conditions, with the wind dropping off and just small ripples on the sea surface. After passing quite a few Portuguese Man of War jellyfish the first cetacean sighting was a large group of around 200 Common Dolphins at 10:05, which we watched feeding and bow-riding for over half an hour. At 10:43 we had our next encounter, an animated group of approximately 30 Bottlenose Dolphins. These gave some wonderful views as they played in front of the boat, jumping fully out on several occasions and at one time soaking some of

the passengers with sea water on the bow as they returned to the water within metres of the boat creating a huge splash! It must have been deliberate!

We steamed out a little further and at 11:30 saw a distant group of cetaceans. As we approached further, we were excited to see that these were in fact Long-finned Pilot Whales. This is not a common species in the Azores as the archipelago marks the southern edge of their range and they are only seasonal visitors. In fact this was the first sighting of this species off Sao Miguel by Futurismo this year! We got closer to the group which comprised 15-20 animals, obtaining some excellent views as they swam slowly from right to left across the bow of the boat. After watching them for 15 minutes, we had to return to port as we had already spent a longer than usual time out at sea and it was a fair journey back.

The afternoon was free time - the other half of our scheduled full day off for this holiday. Several of the group headed up to the botanical gardens to look at Azorean Bats roosting there and see the Marsh Frogs, whilst others explored the old town with its many fine buildings. With its many coffee bars and narrow cobbled streets, Ponta Delgada is a lovely place to relax and while away time. There was also ample time to use some of the hotels excellent facilities including the indoor pool, sauna, Turkish bath and Jacuzzi, which proved popular with some of the group. Additionally, Tom managed to arrange a free boat trip for Chris, to go out to sea with Futurismo again.

In the evening we had dinner in the highly regarded Gastronomo restaurant, where we have had excellent meals in previous years. This family-run restaurant is one of the highest rated in Ponta Delgada and our visit this time did not disappoint. Freshly caught local fish and beef or chicken chunks on skewers proved particularly popular choices from the rustic menu.

Day 6

Thursday 16th May

Today was overcast and again the sea was really flat and ideal for spotting cetaceans, with further morning and afternoon boat trips on the cards. The group split, as several wanted to experience the thrill and speed of going out in a RIB at least once, with the remainder opting for the height, stability and comfort of the Catamaran. Two of the group went on another Futurismo excursion - this time a scenic hike to the Grande Ribiera.

After passing through the outer harbour, we set course east and heard a whisper from the crew that something big had been sighted this morning in that direction. After a long steam, at 9:53 we had reached 'the zone of interest and spotted a large blow to the port side - a BLUE WHALE! Elated, we followed the whale as it blew and surfaced for the next 40 minutes. We had excellent views of this mighty animal, albeit rather distantly. The mottled blue-grey colouration of the body was clearly visible and the sheer size apparent with the enormous blow and endless body length finished by a ludicrously small dorsal fin towards the tail stock.

After this excitement, it was time to return to port. The journey back was enlivened by two groups of Bottlenose Dolphins, numbering 50 and 20 animals respectively. The first group in particular gave incredible views as they swam right in front of the boat from left to right, regularly jumping out of the water, in really good light conditions for viewing.

The afternoon boat trip saw us heading back east, following a call from one of our vigias (a lookout, based on the island) who had spotted another big whale. There was little wind and en route Cory's Shearwaters were loafing in rafts, occasional taking flight giving superbly close views. By 15:03 we were in the vicinity and saw a large bushy, angled blow meaning that we were watching a Sperm Whale - the largest toothed whale on the planet! We watched it logging and blowing on the surface for about 10 minutes, before it arched its back raising the tail flukes fully out of the water as it deep dived. Superb driving by the skipper meant that we were directly behind the animal allowing a perfect view of its iconic tail.

Soon after, another group of Common Dolphins came into view, numbering 20 animals. We were soon distracted though by bigger things, because another two Sperm Whales had been spotted blowing, a little further south east. We were arrived at these animals, getting superb side-on views of the long body, large block-shaped head and angled bushy blow. We gradually moved around so we were behind one of the animals in anticipation of the deep dive that would inevitably follow. We were not to be disappointed. After watching the animal for seven minutes, it took a deep dive and we had more superb views of tail fluking. On our way back to Ponta Delgada the journey was enhanced by a group of 20 bow-riding Common Dolphins and some really close views of Cory's Shearwaters.

The day's drama was not over though. Chris had secretly had been hatching a plan over the week to make a marriage proposal to his long-term girlfriend Cathy. The leader, Tom, was in on this plan, as transport organiser and photographer, as were the lovely reception staff from the hotel, who organised a bottle of champagne to be put in their room! After the boat trip, a taxi was arranged to a local beauty spot, Miradouro do Ilhéu de Rosto de Cão, a small hill with wonderful views out to sea. Cathy was invited to an early evening trip there to look for Roseate Terns with Chris and Tom. In fairness, this is a good spot to see them and Chris' cover was not blown. On arrival, Cathy, Chris and Tom walked up to the top of the mirador and Chris went down on one knee, whipped out the ring and made a moving marriage proposal, which Cathy duly accepted and Tom captured in photos. An extraordinary event!! Has this ever happened before on Naturetrek tours we wonder?

Dinner tonight was taken in another long established and highly regarded restaurant, Sao Pedro, which was just a few minutes' walk from the hotel. The food and ambience was fabulous and the restaurant chef had made and brought out a cake for Chris and Cathy, which was a nice touch, crowning a special day for the now engaged couple.

Day 7

Friday 17th May

Our final day of the holiday and two more whale watching trips on the catamaran were on the agenda. The weather was absolutely sensational, sunny with a flat calm sea and very little swell. Despite perfect conditions, we had to wait a little while for our first sighting but it was more than worth the effort. At 10:50 we located a distant school of 30 Striped Dolphins. Once more we had been lucky, as this was of the first sightings of this species this year. The dolphins were moving purposely and rather fast, but we gradually caught up with them and got totally brilliant views of this sought after species, as they swam in front of the boat leaping out in unison. It really was a wonderful sight and we were able to watch them for around 20 minutes. As we left them, a group of Common Dolphins appeared and this proved to be the best encounter of the holiday for this species. The sea was crystal clear, the sun was shining, the water a brilliant blue and the dolphins were giving fantastic views - bow-riding, accompanying Cory's Shearwaters in a feeding frenzy and regularly breaching all around us. There

were many mother and calf pairs, which were highly visible under as well as above water as the sea was so clear. It really was magical. After watching the dolphins for half an hour it was time to head back to port, with Portuguese Man o' War Jellyfish and Cory's Shearwaters numerous on the way back.

On the afternoon boat trip we headed east again, with our first significant sighting a Loggerhead Turtle seen at 14:36. We sailed a good way east as one of the spotters had reported seeing a whale. By 14:45 we were in the vicinity of the whale and as it surfaced and blew, we were amazed to see it was another Blue Whale! The whale was moving erratically and quickly, but we were able to follow it given the slight sea conditions and large number of pairs of eyes looking for it. The undoubted highlight over the 25 minute encounter was when it dived, giving a great view of the tail flukes. The flukes of Blue Whale are infrequently seen, so much so that it was the first time Tom, the leader, had seen them.

Returning to Ponta Delgado for the final time, we had more lovely encounters with Common Dolphins feeding amongst Cory's Shearwaters at point blank range, giving a smashing end to what had been a world class day out at sea for cetacean watching.

Our final evening saw us trying a different restaurant and one very close to the hotel, the Tixico, as recommended to us by the hotel staff. The service and meal were impeccable and we were treated to some local liquor 'on the house', which went down well and rounded off a lovely evening out

Day 8

Saturday 18th May

This morning we left the hotel in good time to catch an 11:50 flight. Everything went smoothly and were soon on our way back to England. At the baggage reclaim at Stansted we said our goodbyes, and headed home from what had been an excellent and eventful holiday amongst a lovely and entertaining group.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays

Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	Azores Noctule Bat*	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>			1		50		
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			1		1		
3	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>				45	30	70	
4	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				60	300	50	75
5	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>							30
6	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>						1	1
7	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeanglia</i>		1					
8	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>						3	
9	Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>					20		

Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea borealis</i>		150	10	100	50	100	300
2	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>				1			
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1				
4	Little Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>		1		1		1	
5	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>			1				
6	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>			1	✓			
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓				
8	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>			30			1	
9	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1				
10	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			6				
11	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		4	2				
12	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1						
13	Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>			1				
14	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>		30	300	50	50	80	30
15	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	12	15	12	10	15	10
16	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	(Common) Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>		1	3				
18	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	10	✓			
19	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		3	15	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>			1	1		✓	✓
21	(Common) Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>		20	30		✓	✓	
22	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>			5				
23	Goldcrest (Soa Miguel)	<i>Regulus regulus azoricus</i>		✓	10	✓			
24	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>		✓	70	✓			
25	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓				
26	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>			50	✓			
27	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			6	2	2	✓	3
28	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		3	1	1			
29	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>			50				
30	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			20				
31	Azores Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula murina</i>			6				

Amphibians & reptiles:

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>		1					3
2	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>		10			✓	✓	
3	Perez's Frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>					✓	.	

	Common name	Scientific name	May						
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17
4	Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>					30		

Butterflies and dragonflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		1	3		1	1	
2	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			1				
3	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea faillae</i>	1	10			1	6	
4	European Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			2				
5	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>							1

Marine

1	Marbled Shore Crab	<i>Eriphia verrucosa</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
2	Red Rock Crab	<i>Grapsus adscensionis</i>		10					
3	Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalia</i>		1		2	✓	✓	✓
4	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>				2	1	1	



Bottlenose Dolphins



Common Dolphins