

Great Whales of the Azores (São Miguel)

Naturetrek Tour Report

9th – 16th May 2026



Blue Whale



Sperm Whale



Bottlenose Dolphin



Short-finned Pilot Whales

Tour report by Su Gough



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Summary

This was an intense and very successful cetacean-focused trip in one of the best whale-watching areas of the world. We found numerous cetaceans on every outing, with eight different species encountered, including an incredible five different Blue Whales. Other wildlife included Cory's Shearwaters, Portuguese Man O'War, Sally Lightfoot crabs and the endemic Azores Chaffinch, alongside endemic subspecies of familiar birds, such as Wood Pigeon and Goldcrest. We were also able to enjoy the beauty of this volcanic island, with its Atlantic Rain Forest of endemic *laurisilva* woodland clothing the volcano peaks and the stunning crater lakes.

Day 1

Saturday 9th May

16°C, sunny spells, heavy showers moving in overnight, strong breeze

An easy midday BA flight from London Heathrow direct to Ponta Delgada on the Azorean island of São Miguel saw most of the group meet up with the others who were already on the island. We were met by the ground agents and driven to the Hotel Marina Atlantico, perfectly positioned on the harbour front. After time to settle in and relax, we met in the reception area for introductions before walking a short way into town to eat local *tapas*-inspired dishes at Arco da Velha.

Day 2

Sunday 10th May

15°C, frequent heavy showers moving in, steady rain in the afternoon, strong breeze

After a delicious buffet breakfast, we made our way to the harbour, only to discover that all trips out had been cancelled. As the weather was looking better later in the week, the trips were rescheduled, and it meant we had a day free. Some of the group headed off independently to explore the town. It was the day of the Festivities of Senhor Santo Cristo dos Milagres, the largest festival in the town, where the processional routeway is decorated with a floral walkway, so there was much to keep us all occupied.

Some of the group chose to accompany Su to the Jose do Canto botanic gardens, enjoying a gentle walk through town first. The trees and plantings in the botanic gardens were fascinating, and there were large numbers of birds to be seen and heard, with Wood Pigeons, Blackcaps, Blackbirds, Robins, Greenfinches and Atlantic Canaries all around us. A handsome male Grey Wagtail entertained us as we walked past one of the pools. As the rain grew heavier, some chose to make their way back to the hotel, while others stayed on to await the festival procession itself.

We ate a super meal that evening at Momentos on the harbour front, enjoying the Sally Lightfoot Crabs on the rocks as we walked over there.

Day 3

Monday 11th May

11°C, heavy cloud, drizzle, heavy rain showers moving through, and sun in the afternoon

Today was our planned day to travel inland and explore this, the largest of the Azores islands. We heard that the boat trips had been restarted, but due to the rain we were not unhappy today was a land-based day. We headed for the north coast, and then up and east towards the Priolo Environmental Centre, Nordeste, where we went for a short walk to explore an area of remaining endemic *laurisilva* (laurel forest) to look and listen for native wildlife well within the clouds. In the car park, we were met by a pair of endemic Azores Chaffinches and, bizarrely on a decorative water feature we spotted a young Rabbit. Walking through the towering stand of introduced Japanese Red Cedars was an atmospheric experience, but we could hear Goldcrests and there were sheets of Tunbridge Filmy Fern clothing the base of the trunks. Walking through the Atlantic rainforest was fascinating, it lived up to its name!

We moved on to the north coast, where we had a traditional buffet lunch at Os Melos in Achadinha, before finishing our afternoon at the fascinating volcanic crater lake at Furnas. Driving around some flooded farmland en route nearby, we found flocks of Atlantic Canaries and Common Waxbills, with Little Egrets and a flock of eight Glossy Ibis in the flooded areas. The picturesque Furnas village certainly had a distinctive smell, and fumaroles were dotted around, including in people's gardens! We had a short walk along part of the lakeside, examining the fumaroles up close, and seeing where locals slow cook food in the hot ashes. Azores Chaffinches kept us company, and a Grey Heron, nesting Coots and Common Terns were seen on the lake itself, with Buzzards overhead before our drive back across the island to Ponta Delgada

Day 4

Tuesday 12th May

15°C, frequent heavy showers moving in, steady rain in the afternoon, strong breeze

Our first day out at sea had finally arrived! We had two trips planned, both on the larger of the catamarans, *Artemisus*. We set off towards the east side of the island and very quickly made contact with our first cetaceans, a playful group of at least twenty Bottle-nosed Dolphins, who were very happy to come in close to the boat as we sat, with engines off, near them. Although not far from shore, these were the larger deep-water oceanic subspecies of Bottle-nosed Dolphins, as were all the ones we saw this week. We then set our sights on a much scarcer and difficult to see great whale and, thankfully, we found it. Sei Whales are very large baleen whales, but they are shy at the surface, barely breaking the surface to breathe, and sinking back down very quietly and quickly. We were able to watch this animal's progress by the distinctive circular fluke prints it left: smooth circles on the surface created by the movement of the fluke underwater. When it did surface, we caught sight of its tiny dorsal fin as it slipped back under the surface.

The afternoon trip took us out to the west, where our target was the mighty Sperm Whale. And we found more than one! We came across a logging (resting at the surface) group of around twenty animals, mostly young and their mothers. Some of the females fluked as they dived, indicating that they were deep diving for food, and would be gone for thirty minutes or more. The lungs of the younger animals are developed enough to cope with deep dives, so they rest at the surface waiting for their return. Watching the animal's interactions and how relaxed they were at the surface was a real treat, and testament to how their behaviour has changed since the days of whale

hunting when they were one of the most sought-after species and were, not surprisingly, not easily approachable. Dragging ourselves away, we headed back to harbour, but not before being joined by four bow-riding Common Dolphins and, as we neared the harbour, an Atlantic Flying Fish launched itself from the front of the catamaran and nearly joined us on deck!

After a fantastic first day out at sea, we enjoyed a lovely meal at Sabores da Costa on the seafront, where some of the group were brave enough to try the local dessert, Baba de Camelo, which translates as Camel Slobber! It is actually a thick caramel custard, and tasted much nicer than it sounded!

Day 5

Wednesday 13th May

17°C, sun and occasionally showers, light wind

Today was to have been a free day, but as we had missed our trips out on Sunday we had booked additional RIB outings, of which some of the group took advantage, and thoroughly enjoyed. The morning's outing once again headed to the east, and the skipper skilfully navigated around all of the showers coming down from the island. Indeed, we didn't get wet once. A new arrival around the island was a small pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales, and we soon found them, spending much time at the surface but also making feeding dives, which was unusual for a nocturnal feeder. The pod consisted of about fifteen adult females, youngsters of all ages, and one or two mature males. A second, smaller group of Pilot Whales was enjoyed, and as we headed back towards land we came across the Bottlenose Dolphins again: they were very playful, and some performed full body breaches.



Azores Chaffinch



Bottlenose Dolphins

We had a quick turnaround for lunch and were out once more, again heading east. We came across a female Sperm Whale at the surface, which treated us to an incredible close-up fluke display as she set about a deep feeding dive. Our next goal was set by the news that a Blue Whale had been seen further out. As this was a 'must see' species for everyone, we headed out towards it: one other boat was present. We saw the Blue Whale surface a couple of times from a distance, but the animal was moving through fast and diving a lot, suggesting it was not happy being attended by boats, so both left the whale in peace to continue its journey. Ethical whalewatching companies will always respect the animal if it does not want to engage. Buoyed by this (albeit brief and distant) view of our key cetacean, we turned and headed for home.

On the way, some distant dolphins were spotted, and we headed towards them, quickly realising they were Risso's Dolphins. Although reasonably common, they very rarely engage with the boats and usually move through rapidly, which was what we were expecting. Instead, the group came in close and surrounded the RIB for some time,

carrying on their socialising and generally ignoring us, allowing incredible views of this rarely seen species. The beakless head, extensive white scarring on the older animals and narrow tail flukes were all easily seen, and, quite incredibly, at one point we saw a pair mating right by the boat. Remarkable! Somewhat later than intended, we finally made it back to shore, with a Collared Dove resting on the boat and hitching a ride into shore. After relaxing, most of the group met up for a meal in our hotel's restaurant.

Day 6

Thursday 14th May

16°C, cloud cover, light breeze and sunny spells

Today we were back to two trips out on the catamaran, this time the smaller *Quatro-ventos*. On both outings we headed west, and in the morning our contacts started with a group of about twenty Bottlenose Dolphins, many of which enjoyed bow-riding, much to the delight of everyone on board. We then came across a Sperm Whale, which we watched shallow diving before it fluked and deep-dived. Knowing it would be gone for at least thirty minutes, we moved on, and quickly heard of a Blue Whale nearby. We approached and were treated to fantastic sightings of it blowing and rolling slowly at the surface before, eventually, its tiny dorsal fin appeared and it slipped under. It was only shallow diving and staying in the same area, but a second Blue Whale was spotted closer inshore, so we made our way over. Again, this animal was only shallow diving, and each time it went down there was five minutes or so of expectation, with everyone looking for where it was coming up next.

The boats can, rightly, only approach from certain angles, and only up to a 'polite' minimum distance if the animal appears relaxed. However, this doesn't stop any animals coming nearer the boat themselves. As we waited, people were looking out in all directions for the tell-tale electric blue of the animal just below the surface, the reason why it is called the Blue Whale, despite its mottled grey skin. When it surfaced again, it came right up next to the boat: wow! It sank just under the surface and kept coming back up, completely unconcerned by our presence: it was an incredible encounter. As the dorsal fin rolled forward, the tail stock bent down, and we became aware that whales do bend at the hips!

The afternoon's trip focused on Blue Whale again, with a third different individual found. What an incredible, triple Blue Whale day! In between the whales, we were able to enjoy the Cory's Shearwaters which were our constant companions out at sea, and as we returned towards shore another Flying Fish surprised everyone looking out that side of the boat, both in how big it was, and in how far it could 'fly'. In the evening, many of the group took a short walk along the harbour to Restaurante San Pedro.

Day 7

Friday 15th May

17°C, sunshine and cloud, light breeze

Each successive day at sea had been calmer, and today the flat ocean made a fantastic backdrop to the antics of a huge pod of around seventy Bottlenose Dolphins. There was so much activity that we spent some time with them, and they didn't disappoint! Socialising, playing, breaching and bow-riding were all observed, and as we left them and speeded up, they came with us. As the speed increased, some of them started 'porpoising', with bodies right out of the water! Our next find was another Blue Whale: we were now up to *five* individuals for the week.

After a quick lunch, we were back out again, this time with around a dozen Common Dolphins, the yellow and white 'hourglass' pattern on their sides very obvious in the clear, calm water. We were briefly able to enjoy a remarkable second Sei Whale, once again shyly appearing and barely breaking once it had blown. Again, however, the distinctive fluke prints were visible on the surface, a useful ID feature for this large whale. Our final treat was a group of ten Sperm Whales, both mothers and calves, and we were incredibly lucky to see a calf nursing from its mother; again, neither was at all concerned by our presence.

Day 8

Saturday 16th May

20°C, sunny, light cloud and very light winds

This was our final day on São Miguel, and we woke to a sunny, flat calm day. We had an additional outing on the larger catamaran. It was another fantastic outing, with twenty bow-riding Bottlenose Dolphins, before we connected with a pod of about thirty Short-finned Pilot Whales. A final treat was a sighting of a Fin Whale, the second-largest animal ever to have lived. This one was seen surfacing several times and, because it appeared at different angles each time, it clearly showed its unique ID feature: the lower jaw is white on the right, and dark grey on the left. As we made our way back to land for the final time, some of the group were lucky enough to spot a Hammerhead Shark, and a Swordfish shot past at speed.

We were picked up from the hotel at 2.00 pm for the short transfer to the airport, and we landed in London bang on time, before picking up our luggage, saying goodbyes and beginning our onward journeys.

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Species lists

Mammals

I=Introduced		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			1					
Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>								1
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>					1	3	1	
Sei Whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>				1			1	
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>				20	1		10	
Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>					20			
Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>					15			30
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>				20	10	20	70	20
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				4	5		10	

Birds

I=Introduced		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓					
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓		✓				
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓					
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓					
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			✓					
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓					
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓					
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>			✓					
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus azoricus</i>		✓	✓					
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓		
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓				
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			✓					
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		✓	✓					
Azores Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla moreletti</i>			✓					
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓						
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis parva</i>		✓	✓					
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>		✓	✓		✓			

Amphibians & reptiles

I=Introduced		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Iberian Water Frog	<i>Pelophylax perezi</i>			✓					
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>								✓
Madeiran Rock Lizard - I	<i>Teira dugesii</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓			

Fishes

Common name	Scientific name
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>
Thick-lipped Grey Mullet	<i>Chelon labrosus</i>
Smooth Hammerhead Shark	<i>Sphyrna zygaena</i>
Atlantic Swordfish	<i>Xiphias gladius</i>

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>

Crabs

Common name	Scientific name
Marbled Shore Crab	<i>Eriphia verrucosa</i>
Sally Lightfoot	<i>Grapsus adscensionis</i>
Dark Shore Crab	<i>Pachygrapsus marmoratus</i>

Other invertebrates

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