

Great Whales of the Azores (São Miguel)

Naturetrek Tour Report

10th – 17th May 2025



(Short-beaked) Common Dolphin



American Wigeon



Sperm Whale



Long-finned Pilot Whales

Tour report by Tom Brereton



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Tour participants: Tom Brereton (leader) with 12 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 10th May

Travel from Heathrow went smoothly, and the group met Tom in the baggage area at the airport on São Miguel. We were then taken by bus a short distance to the capital, Ponta Delgada. By early afternoon, we had checked into our comfortable hotel for the week, the Hotel Marina Atlântico, which is in a superb location overlooking the harbour. There was time to catch up on sleep after the early flight, or to enjoy the complimentary leisure facilities, which included sauna, steam room, Jacuzzi® and swimming pool.

After a quick group briefing early evening, we had a dinner in a nearby restaurant, Tixico, which offered a tasty range of meat, fish and vegetarian dishes, and good Portuguese wine, beer and juices.

Day 2

Sunday 11th May

An excellent buffet breakfast was taken at leisure between 6.30am and 8.15am in the hotel, setting the pattern for the rest of the week. In the morning, we had our first three-hour boat trip, covering 41 miles over a three-hour period. After the obligatory safety briefing, we set off out to sea, passing numerous immature Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls and smaller numbers of Common Terns in the harbour.

Our first sightings of dolphins came at 10.20am, with a pod of forty Common Bottlenose Dolphins seen really well, as they hunted for food near the boat. The animals were bow-riding at times, as well as leaping clear of the water. An hour later we came across a pod of 21 Long-finned Pilot Whales, a great sighting as this is a relatively uncommon whale species in the Azores. Excellent views were obtained as they swam alongside the boat. On some of the animals, we could see the Pseudo-stalked Barnacle, a plankton feeder which hitches a ride on dolphins and whales. Back in the harbour, we saw the beautiful 'Torch Flock', a tall ship of the German Navy.

On the afternoon trip, we had further sightings of dolphins giving fabulous views, with both Bottlenose and Common Dolphins, coming to bow-ride and swim alongside. Over the two trips there were frequent sightings of Cory's Shearwater, with around 200 counted, the occasional Common Tern, and best of all a Roseate Tern.

In the evening, we had what was to be a daily routine: a log call reviewing the day's sightings on the mezzanine. After that, we headed to a harbour-side restaurant, Bom Pesquero. On our way to the restaurant, we scanned the rocky edge of the harbour, picking up a range of marine animals including Marbled Rock Crab, Red Rock Crab (very common here), Mediterranean Green Crab, Fangtooth Moray and Gilthead Bream.

Day 3

Monday 12th May

Today we again completed another two trips on the catamaran. In the morning, the sea was smooth and the light fantastic at times. We passed the 'Disney Dream' cruise ship in the outer harbour, then headed out west. We soon got some wonderful views of Common Dolphins, with several leaping clear of the water; with some, we could see their whole bodies just below us given the crystal-clear waters. Half an hour after leaving the Common Dolphins behind, we came across a group of Bottlenose Dolphins, within which was 'Sparkle', easily identified by the shape of the nicks out of its dorsal fin. On our way back to port we got some fabulous views of Cory's Shearwater, plus

brief views of a Sooty Shearwater, and saw other playful pod of Common Dolphins. The circular journey lasted just over two and a half hours, with 28 miles travelled.

In the afternoon we steamed purposely east-south-east. After forty minutes, we picked up a group of Bottlenose Dolphins, but did not stay too long with them, as we had reports from land-based spotters (the *vigias*) of whales a long way ahead of us. We continued our journey towards the whales, passing a fishing boat where a Cory's Shearwater was entangled in fishing gear, a real-life reminder of the threats bycatch causes to seabirds.

After an hour and three quarters of purposeful steaming, we arrived at the area where whales had been seen, with several whalewatching boats in the vicinity. After a short wait, we had our first sighting of mighty Sperm Whales, the largest toothed whale on the planet! Over the next thirty minutes we watched them on and off between dives, casually logging and blowing (with their characteristic angled and bushy blows) on the surface. We obtained some fabulous views at close range, always being patient and waiting for the animals to move towards us, rather than the opposite, to avoid disturbance.

Over this time, spy-hopping behaviour was also noted, and then after some skilful manoeuvring of the boat by the skipper, we were treated to the ultimate experience of watching them fluke directly in front of us, allowing brilliant views of the enormous tail. Seeing a whale's tail is special, because so few species fluke, and they are all large. In many cultures, it is a symbol of good luck, speed, strength, and freedom.

Having travelled almost the same distance in one direction as the length of the morning tour, we had to head reluctantly back to port, seeing more Common Dolphins en route. On the way back, the conditions were ideal for spotting Cory's Shearwaters: they showed their slow wingbeats and prolonged glides, sometimes soaring high above the deep waves. Two Atlantic Flying Fishes and a Loggerhead Turtle were further highlights. We arrived back to dock just after 5.00pm, having been at sea for three and three-quarter hours and having travelled 53 miles.

Before dinner, several of the group searched for a Ring-billed Gull that had been seen in the harbour recently, the first of several attempts which all failed to locate the bird!

In the evening we had a superb meal at the harbourside restaurant Momentos, once again stopping to check the harbour edge for marine life. Here, additions to the species tally were Common Spider Crab and White Sea Bream.

Day 4

Tuesday 13th May

The plan today was to explore the island, searching for some of the wildlife specialities. 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, House Sparrows, Starlings, Buzzards, Common Waxbills and Grey Wagtails were seen. By late morning, we were in the 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, the breeding habitat for the Critically Endangered Azores Bullfinch (known locally as the *Priolo*). Our first stop was at the Priolo Environmental Centre, set among the laurel forest south-west of Nordeste.

One of the staff gave an informative talk on the bullfinch and other wildlife of the laurel forest, together with the conservation measures being put in place through an EU Special Protection Area (SPA) partnership project. After

this inspiring session, we took a wander in the surrounding woodland and botanical gardens searching for the Azores Bullfinch, though the area failed to deliver for that species. However, there were some wonderful plants to see, and a selection of birds which included Wood Pigeon, Blackbird, Robin, Atlantic Canary, Blackcap and São Miguel Goldcrest (an endemic subspecies of the island), along with Marsh Frog. Noteworthy plants included Azores Tree Heath, Azores Ivy, Azores Holly, Azores Juniper, Azores Cherry, Azores Blueberry and Azores Viburnum.

For lunch, we tucked into a delicious buffet of local dishes at Os Melos Restaurante in Achadinha on the north coast. After lunch, we stopped at the Jardim do Miradouro da Ponta da Madrugada mirador, which offers a spectacular view out to sea from the eastern end of the island. We visited another favoured location for Azores Bullfinch near here, where two were seen briefly, along with Painted Lady and Red Admiral butterflies.

Our last stop of the day was Furnas Lake, a noted birding spot on the island. Here, we had excellent views of the long-staying Pied-billed Grebe, a Nearctic vagrant, and stunningly close views of another, a drake American Wigeon, also known as a Baldpate. Other birds seen included Mallard, Little Egret, Coot, Moorhen, and Common Tern. Beside the lake we had close views of Island Canary on a picnic bench! Beside the lake, we strolled around the sulphury volcanic steam vents, seeing a number of Azores Chaffinches, which looked striking and very different to the species we are familiar with in the UK, with their blue heads, green patch on the mantle and large, pointed silver bills. Robin and Atlantic Canary were also seen. Mammals seen over the day included European Rabbit and the endemic Saint Miguel Cattle Dog.

Having had a hearty cooked lunch and a long day out in the field (we arrived back at 6.30pm), we made our own arrangements for dinner and the remainder of the evening.

Day 5

Wednesday 14th May

Today was to have been a customary day of leisure, and a chance for everyone to explore São Miguel, which has many fine old buildings, leafy plazas and two botanical gardens. However, with windy weather forecast for the remainder of the week, some rescheduling was needed, so we decided to get out on any available boats, and booked onto 'Moby Dick' for an afternoon excursion, this being the only company that was running trips that day.

In the morning, several of the group headed up to the botanical gardens to look at the Azorean Noctules roosting there and the many Madeiran Wall Lizards in rocky areas, while 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 hotel's excellent facilities.

Almost all the group opted for the afternoon boat trip, departing at 2.00pm. We left on time, the boat full of numerous refugees from other whalewatching companies! We were told that this was an attempt to get out to sea, with no guarantees of a full trip, paying only if we had a full trip, and sure enough within about forty-five minutes, it became apparent (when one of the crew nearly fell overboard) that it was too rough to continue. We returned to port: but nothing ventured, nothing gained. We thanked the crew for their efforts and reassembled on land.

Tom offered to take an excursion to the eastern edge of town, to look for terrestrial wildlife. The land at our first stop was sadly being built on, but the second spot, an area of scrubby farmland and waste land, was more

productive. Plants seen here included a colourful range of arable weeds and grassland flowers, among them Small-flowered Catchfly, Cut-leaved Evening-primrose, Sand Viper's-bugloss, Climbing Fumitory, Pink Evening-primrose and Mediterranean Marigold. Atlantic Canary and several Madeiran Wall Lizards provided further interest. As this was a scheduled day off, we made our own arrangements for dinner.

Day 6

Thursday 15th May

Unfortunately, all boat trips were cancelled today due to the weather. The morning was at leisure, in lieu of the group activity the previous afternoon. For the remainder of the day, Futurismo had arranged a land-based excursion for us. We departed the hotel at 2.00pm, travelling to the north-west part of the island.

Our first stop was the car park for the Lagoa do Canário (Canary Lagoon). It was foggy and windy, so just Tom left the vehicle, searching for the rare Short-spurred Butterfly Orchid which grows along the roadside. Several plants were found, though they were only in bud, indicating a comparatively late season. Other noteworthy plants included Cornish Moneywort.

From here we visited the Lagoa das Sete Cidades: a twin lake situated inside a dormant volcanic crater, famous for its two distinct colours: blue (Lagoa Azul) and green (Lagoa Verde). The folklore says the lakes were formed by the tears of a green-eyed princess and a blue-eyed shepherd who were forbidden from being together. However, the real reasons are that each side of the lake reflects the sunlight in different wavelengths: there are differences in depth and algal density.

We started at the causeway, where we could see several Coots, and in nearby field got excellent views of Common Waxbill and Atlantic Canary. After this, we scanned the western marshy fringes of the Lagoa Azul, where the highlights were both Great and Little Egrets.

On the way back, we stopped at the Miradouro do Caminho Novo, one of the whalewatching lookouts, located well inland. It's amazing that the spotters can see whales so far away from these watchpoints. Here, a Quail was heard calling in the distance.

In the evening, we visited the renowned São Pedro restaurant, one of the most popular with local residents.

Day 7

Friday 16th May

Unfortunately, all boat trips were again cancelled due to the weather. Thankfully, Futurismo had put on another excursion for us, since the group were keen to do some sight-seeing, and as we had visited the main birding areas already. The first stop was the Miradouro de Santa Iria, which offered panoramic views of the northern part of the island and out to sea. With the sun shining, this seemed an opportune location for a group photo. After this we had a guided tour of the Gorreana Tea Factory, followed by sampling of the locally-produced teas. Our next stop was the Pico do Ferro mirador, one of the most visited viewpoints on São Miguel Island, which gave us incredible views of Lagoa das Furnas and the surrounding caldera. Butterflies seen here included Red Admiral and Painted Lady.

From here we travelled to Furnas, a spa town with numerous hot springs. We had the opportunity to sample two types of the mineral-rich water from drinking fountains. We returned to Furnas Lake to see 'our lunch' being hauled from underground, with the help of two members of the group! We had lunch at Restaurante Tony's, famous for its unique "pot stove" (or *cozido das furnas*) experience, where traditional stewed meats and vegetables are slow-cooked for hours in pots buried in volcanic steam vents (fumaroles) in the ground, giving it a distinct flavour.

After lunch, we spent the remainder of the afternoon at the Terra Nostra Garden, a botanical garden with a thermal pool. The garden is known as a romantic place, as it holds over 600 species of Camellia and other rare species. The thermal pool, filled with volcanic water from the hot springs, is at a steady 40°C, and is rich in iron and other minerals; it was much enjoyed by a number of the group. Birds seen at the park included Grey Wagtail and São Miguel Goldcrest.

For the final group dinner, we returned to the most popular restaurant of the trip, Momentos, which was superb again.

Day 8

Saturday 17th May

Our last morning on São Miguel is normally a quiet one of relaxation and souvenir shopping, but with a number of cancelled boat trips, we were keen to get out to sea again. Luckily, we managed to get spaces on the 'Moby Dick', as all the other operators were fully booked. The return time back to port dovetailed nicely with our later-than-normal departure flight.

The sea was fairly calm, and it was the last roll of the dice cetacean-wise. But hopes were high as we left port. The sea was unusually quiet though, perhaps because of the recent stormy weather, and we had to steam a long way south-east to get our one and only cetacean sighting of the trip, a majestic Sperm Whale. We got superb views of the animal, finishing with an iconic view of the animal fluking at close range.

We arrived back at port, thirty minutes later than anticipated, but still with time to return to the hotel, collect our bags and transfer to the airport in good time. With Tom leaving a day later, it was time to say goodbye to the group at the airport, after what had been a fun week. We had packed in a lot, working successfully around the weather and having seen lots of fantastic wildlife.

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Species lists

Mammals

E = endemic, I = introduced		May 2025							
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
European Rabbit - I	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				✓				
Brown Rat - I	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>					✓			
Azores Noctule - E	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>					✓			
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>								
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>			10					1
Long-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala melas</i>		21						
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		40	50					
(Short-beaked) Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		20	150					

Birds (H = Heard only)

I = introduced		May 2025							
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Muscovy Duck - I	<i>Cairina moschata</i>		✓			✓	✓		
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>				1				
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				2	✓	5		
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix conturbans</i>						H		
Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				4		10		
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>				1				
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		40	30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>		1						
Azorean Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	300	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	200	700		✓	✓		✓
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>			1					
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			1	1			1	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>							1	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>				20	✓		✓	
Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>				H	H			
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>		2		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>				6				
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>		1		30	✓	✓	✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>				6	✓		✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>				4		10		
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>				15	✓	✓	✓	
Azores Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla moreletti</i>				30+		6		
Azores Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula murina</i>				2				
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓			
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				4	✓	4		
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	✓		30+		30	20+	

Amphibians & reptiles

I = introduced		May 2025							
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Perez's Frog - I	<i>Rana perezi</i>				✓				
Marsh Frog - I	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>			✓					
Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>		1						
Madeiran Wall Lizard - I	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>			✓	✓				

Fishes

Common name	Scientific name
White Sea Bream	<i>Diplodus sargus</i>
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cheilopogon melanurus</i>
Common Carp	<i>Cyprinus carpio</i>
Sea Bass	<i>Dicentrarchus labrax</i>
Thick-lipped Grey Mullet	<i>Chelon labrosus</i>
Gilthead Bream	<i>Sparus aurata</i>
Fangtooth Moray	<i>Enchelycore anatina</i>
Sea Bass	<i>Dicentrarchus labrax</i>

Butterflies

		May 2025							
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>				5				
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			2					
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea faillae</i>				1				
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			1			1		
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		1	4			2		

Other insects

		May 2025							
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Marmalade Hoverfly	<i>Episyrphus balteatus</i>			✓					
Honey Bee	<i>Apis mellifera</i>			✓					
White-tailed Bumble Bee	<i>Bombus lucorum</i>			✓	✓				

Crustaceans

Common name	Scientific name
Red Rock Crab	<i>Grapsus grapsus</i>
Marbled Rock Crab	<i>Pachygrapsus marmoratus</i>
European Green Crab	<i>Carcinus maenas</i>
Common Spider Crab	<i>Maja brachydactyla</i>