

Great Whales of the Azores (Pico)

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 15 May 2016



Risso's Dolphin



Blue Whale and splashguard



Two Sperm Whales



Cory's Shearwater

Report and cover images by Ed Drewitt



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Summary

Pico, in the Azores, is the prime place for whale migration in the spring and on this nine-day tour we were certainly rewarded. Three Fin Whales and two Blue Whales, our second largest and largest mammals on Earth respectively, were seen within 20 metres of our boat while six, largely resident, Sperm Whales showed well on another day. The supporting cast didn't disappoint, and on one morning we enjoyed getting close to, and watching the behaviour of, a school of Bottlenose Dolphins, tussling Risso's Dolphins, and porpoising Short-beaked Common Dolphins shooting out of the water at vast speeds and energy. We saw 13 Loggerhead Turtles of varying ages, many Portuguese Man 'O' War, Salps (tunicates) and flocks of up over 400 Cory's Shearwaters, with many on one day diving to feed on krill. Poor weather at the start of the tour allowed us to enjoy our two scheduled land days, one spanning the island looking at the vineyards that form a UNESCO World Heritage Site, visiting the whale watcher or vigia, and heading into the hills to visit a lava tube. The other day was free for the group: activities included wine-tasting, visiting a larger set of lava tubes and caves, visiting whale museums and catching the ferry to Faial to see the volcano, caldera, botanic gardens and scrimshaw museum.

Day 1

Saturday 7th May

London to Lisbon

Most of us met together at Heathrow before departing (Richard and Kathryn visited Lisbon a day earlier), leaving behind a very warm, sunny afternoon in London, and headed across a hazy Home Counties. The reflection of light off the reservoirs and rivers showed clearly how birds can spot these water bodies from high up in the sky. We left in very good time, five minutes after our scheduled flight of 6.45pm, and arrived in a recently wet Lisbon ten minutes ahead of time at 9.10pm. After collecting our luggage, we walked just a few minutes to the taxi rank; we headed to our hotel ten minutes away and retired to bed ready for an early start.

Day 2

Sunday 8th May

Lisbon and transfer to Pico; first boat trip

We met again at 5.45am and caught our taxis to the airport, ready for our 8am flight. Unlike the UK it was still dark outside - a reminder why birds make the migration further north in Europe to take advantage of the longer days. After some breakfast and coffee or tea, we headed to the gate - outside it was grey and wet. Leaving ahead of schedule, we were soon above the clouds and into sunshine, and spent the next two and a half hours and just over 1,000 miles flying due west to Pico Island in the Azores.

As we approached the island of Faial, we flew in over the long, straight volcanic island of São Jorge before going past Pico Island (and the highest peak in Portugal). We transferred by taxi to the ferry port in the town of Horta and had half an hour to spare before our 10.45am ferry to Pico. We dropped our luggage at the ferry port and a few spent a little time exploring outside in the sunshine, spotting a pair of Common Terns. One was being fed by the other as part of courtship and nuptial feeding. On the way to Horta, Common Starlings were seen (a few with nest material), alongside lots of House Sparrows, a few Blackbirds, Wood Pigeons and Feral Pigeons.

We caught the ferry to the town of Madalena on Pico Island, spotting tens of Cory's Shearwaters 'shearing' the waves with the utmost precision. After collecting our luggage, we met Casper and Dania from CW Azores when we arrived 25 minutes later. Our hotel was just across the road from our hotel and, after checking in, we met again for lunch at 12.15pm. An hour later, we all came together at CW Azores next door for our whale briefing. Enrico, who runs CW Azores along with his wife Dania, gave a fascinating introduction to all the whales and dolphins we hoped to see. He went into detail about their biology, migrations, food and identifications. At just before 2.30pm, we gathered together our warm and waterproof clothing and headed for the boat with our guide Arne and skipper Leonildo.

Even before we left the port, a Turnstone was feeding on the quayside and two Common Terns were resting nearby. As we left, three Grey Wagtails chased each other overhead. Strongish winds from the north were blowing straight through the channel between the islands of Pico and Faial. Once we navigated the waves and passed an ancient caldera, a former undersea volcano now exposed and home to nesting terns and gulls, we headed south and east where the waters were much calmer.

Cory's Shearwaters, back from their wintering grounds in various parts of the Atlantic Ocean, were wheeling in the air all across the sea. Some came so close you could almost reach out and catch them! In the distance we saw a huge, swirling flock of around 300 shearwaters, some soaring higher and higher. As we approached many had already dispersed while others sat on the sea sleeping or watching us. Those birds less sure of us pattered across the water for a short distance before gliding off.

To our surprise, a large, immature Loggerhead Turtle was surfacing in less-than-calm water. It allowed prolonged views and regularly came to the surface. Arne thought it might be tangled but, after a skilled capture, we couldn't see anything attached and it was duly released. This turtle had a distinctive white neck and its beak was clearly visible as it came up for air.

Leaving the turtle, we headed close to the shoreline of Pico to inspect and marvel at the impressive, volcanic rock cliffs. Their deep, matt black colour is permeated with the yellow and greens of lichens and fresh vegetation thriving from the gull guano - many Yellow-legged Gulls were nesting in certain sections of these cliffs. Adults were sitting on eggs, and one nest even had two young chicks. The odd Starling flew into cliff holes with a beak full of food for chicks while Feral Pigeons flew overhead, in and out of the caves where they also nest. As we edged closer to the caves, bright crimson Red Rock Crabs crept away sideways but still on show. A Common Buzzard flew round over the sea before heading in land and Kathy spotted two Azorean Noctule Bats, an endemic species, fly out from the caves and up over the fields above. More gulls were gathered at the top of the cliffs near a refuse site. Two immature gulls were chasing an adult for food, perhaps a fish, which dropped and floated down to the ground with the gulls flailing behind.

Time was getting on and so we headed back - an exhilarating ride into the strong northerly winds and impressive waves. In the lovely sunshine, we admired the basaltic coastline, coated in grey lichens. One other feature of note was the cross-section of a volcano exposed as a sea cliff, showing different layers of eruptions over specific periods of time.

After riding and contending with some exciting waves near Madalena, where the shallow water (100 metres) makes the sea very rough, we headed back into port for around 5.20pm. The calm air and sunshine made for a

pleasant hour and a half's rest before we met again for dinner at 6.50pm. We were transported to a lovely Italian/Azorean restaurant and guesthouse, Atmosfera, just on the outskirts of Madalena. A Blackcap was singing on arrival. The restaurant had beautiful views out across Pico and also towards Faial. We ate some delicious foods, with homemade pasta, including fresh fish, ham hock, local cheeses and soup. As the sun came down over Faial, its rays permeated through the darker clouds in a very magical and splendid way. Richard was telling us these are called crepuscular rays. We finished off our delicious desserts and headed back in taxis at 9pm, just as it was getting dark.

Day 3

Monday 9th May

Day trip exploring Pico

With today's forecast very windy, and the rest of the week looking much calmer, we opted for exploring the island of Pico. The day was overcast and very windy with white horse waves evident in the channel between Pico and Faial. We set off at 9.45am with Arne and Casper as our drivers and guides, and first visited the vineyards of Pico, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Their unusual design and use makes them unique and very special. Volcanic rocks have been built up to make small partition walls, and in these the seeds of the vines are planted. The terrain provides lots of nutrients, despite the lack of soil, and with the hot sunshine and rain, plenty of grapes are produced. We walked up to a bright red windmill, admiring the vineyards. The new vines of the year were growing up fresh and green, while a Robin, Chaffinch and Blackcap occasionally sang in the background. Arne also revealed more about lava flows; on the foreshore nearby, we stood on flows fossilised in time from 150,000 years ago, surrounded by large basaltic boulders rounded by the waves. It is amongst these that the Cory's Shearwaters make their nests. Occasional Atlantic Canaries, House Sparrows and Grey Wagtails were flying around.

We stopped briefly at another site good for nesting shearwaters - we would be returning near here later in the week at night to see them. Most of the world's Cory's Shearwaters are only found in the Azores, so their breeding success is crucial for the security of the population. Recent GPS tracking has revealed that these birds winter in a variety of places over the Atlantic, off the coasts of Africa, North America and Europe, switching between sites between years. Most return in March, some may even stay all year. Today only Feral Pigeons were busy flying around the cliffs above.

We continued on past small fields of maize and more vineyards, where occasional Chaffinches, Blackbirds, Grey Wagtails and Buzzards flew up.

We moved on to visit Antero Soares, our vigia, who is usually looking out for whales and dolphins for the various whale- and dolphin-watching companies. We would hear Antero's distinctive voice on the boat radio over the coming days. During a brief shower, Arne took us into Antero's old hide, also known as a vigia, and explained more about his work. Antero used to help navigate the whale-hunting boats but for the past 30 years has switched to whale-watching boats, once hunting was banned.

We walked up along a track surrounded by the introduced Australian *Pittosporum* shrub. Thick clouds loomed over Mount Pico, occasionally revealing its snow-covered peak. A few Blackcaps sang nearby. Antero was entertaining another group when we arrived, so we spent some time looking at a pair of large duck-size Cory's Shearwaters sleeping in their burrow nest, a hollow in some volcanic rocks. We then met Antero and his vigia or

'office' which is a small, basic hide covered in cetacean posters; Antero sits with his large binoculars fixed to a wooden platform from his chair. There was nothing to spot today with the rough sea but it was still a good chance to see what he gets up to. Outside the odd canary was singing or flying by, a Robin was ticking and a Buzzard disappeared off overhead.

We moved along the coast to a woodland park in São João. A small herd of captive Fallow Deer were resting or feeding - they were very tame. We stopped here for our packed lunch and a rest. When the sun came out, Richard was able to show everyone the planet Mercury which was passing in front of the sun. With a special filter over his telescope, a dark spot on the sun was Mercury and a larger dot was a sunspot, a cooler area of the sun. A Greenfinch sang overhead while sparrows chirped all around. As we headed back to the buses, a canary sang overhead and Liz found a canary nest made out of lichens, grasses and plastic wrapping. Julia, who was slightly ahead, saw a Robin and a Maderian Wall Lizard.

We stopped in Lajes briefly - Pico's oldest large settlement. Across the saltmarsh and rocks, a Turnstone was present along with a pair of flying Whimbrels, and a Little Egret feeding in a pool. Yellow-legged Gulls were roosting on the shoreline while sparrows and the odd Common Tern flew past. A small shoal of White Sea Bream swam in the water below us and a few spotted half a dozen Madeiran Wall Lizards nearby.

We headed up into the mountains, passing Ginger Lilies, *Hydrangeas*, and cows, few of which we had seen on the lower ground. The *Hydrangeas* will be in full blue bloom in a few months and form informal hedgerows and field boundaries in the higher land. The landscape became cooler and even windier! The countryside here is full of ancient juniper and laurel trees left over from the last ice age. Although severely fragmented by farming and forestry, the remaining stands are protected and give some insight into how the island would have looked thousands of years ago.

We stopped at the Lagoa do Capitao, a small lake amongst the highlands. It was very cold and windy but a Muscovy Duck and a domestic Mallard came to say hello and were keen to be fed. Up to four or more male Chaffinches also fed nearby. Unlike the British subspecies, these males are much greyer with just a blush of pink on their breast and a collar of green on their back. Most of the group headed on to a collapsed lava tube. The collapsed lava tube was a site where hot lava had cooled and a hard rocky ceiling had formed, similar to when opening the oven on a cake too early. The remaining lava then shrank and collapsed as it cooled further, leaving a large gap or cave. At the entrance, the greenest of green ferns, bryophytes (liverworts) and lycophytes (club mosses) were carpeting the rough volcanic walls. Under our feet you could make out the lava flows and see where, after settling, the flows had dropped further to form an irregular, pleated surface. The volcanic rock beneath our feet was in fact red as a result of the iron oxides present.

Ed headed back down to CW Azores with the first group after their visit while the second group also visited the lava tube with Arne and Casper. The weather forecast was still very windy, so a planned free day was available for people to do their own thing. After working out a plan for everyone for tomorrow's land day, we headed off for a rest.

We met at 7pm for the checklist and then headed to our restaurant, Petisca, just a ten-minute walk down the road. After enjoying Pico-style fish, prawns, salads and meats (and some liqueurs presented by the owner Daniel), we headed back at 10pm.

Day 4

Tuesday 10th May

Free day - mix of activities

Today was an opportunity for everyone to do their own thing. Alison took the ferry to Faial and then a taxi to explore the countryside, caldera and volcano, before coming back to eat in Horta and visit the scrimshaw museum at Peter's Cafe. Kathy and Ken also went to Faial to explore the botanical gardens and scrimshaw museum. Valerie, Geraint and Julia took a taxi to Lajes to visit a whale museum, looking at the social history side of whale hunting in the Azores. Common Terns were in the harbour at Lajes and many Wood Pigeons, darker than the UK individuals, were seen along the way. Kathryn and Richard headed for a local wine museum and wine-tasting before walking back and spotting canaries along the way. Hazel, Liz and Ed visited the nearby, small whale museum which covers the biology of the Sperm Whale and celebrates the life of Malcolm Clarke who spent a lot of his life studying the diet of this species. A fascinating life-size diagram of a Sperm Whale in cross-section is on the wall and helps visitors understand how whales dive, communicate, find food and digest prey. A jar of squid beaks, squids and heavy whale ear bones were on display. There was the opportunity to smell ambergris, a nodule of bile duct secretions and squid beaks, which is highly prized in the perfume trade as an essential ingredient to prologue the smelliness of chemicals.

Meanwhile, the northerly winds were whipping up impressive waves just outside of Madalena harbour, though the wind speed was due to drop as we headed into the afternoon. On the beach in the harbour, half a dozen translucent-blue Portuguese Man 'O' War cnidarians, a colony of creatures each with different functions that form a jellyfish-like organism, were washed up. They had their bladders inflated alongside and were washed up with a few limp purple blobs of jelly of another species of jellyfish.

Julia, Liz and Ed headed just out of the town square, to a wild area of vineyards and scrub/wild flowers to look for Atlantic Canaries. They weren't disappointed and various canaries were flying around calling and singing. Males were in full song flight with bowed wings, and chose two particular trimmed trees to sing from. A brood of two fledged chicks were being fed while at least two females were collecting strands of nest material and flying up into the Maritime Pine trees to make their nests. The males were particularly yellow-headed with streaky wings and backs and a yellow rump. The females were streaky-headed but still had a very pale grey-brown rump.

After lunch, Valerie, Geraint, Kathryn, Richard, Alison, Liz and Ed headed for Gruta das Torres, nearby lava tunnels for a 70-minute tour. It was first explored by scientists in the 1990s and opened to the public in 2005. Dressed up in hard hats and torches, we headed down into the tunnels, finding out how this area came about, with our expert guide Milton. These are the largest lavic tunnels in Portugal. As we entered, specks of gold were in fact colonies of bacteria, while a white powder was a special fungus that lives here. We were encouraged not to touch the walls - previous hands from a decade or two ago have left clear marks where the fungus no longer grows. Other wildlife includes an endemic beetle, an endemic spider and a mosquito - all specially adapted to this dark, moist environment. We found out about the biscuit lava that resembles biscuit crumbs, beneath our feet, and rivers of fluid lava that have been 'frozen' in time when they cooled 1500 years ago. The lava flowed down through the tunnels and out towards the coast. As the lava flows stopped flowing, the holes where they exited into the open air became clogged, effectively sealing the tunnels. Huge caverns above our heads were evidence of gas bubbles that couldn't escape until the lava had dropped in level; they left behind a concave ceiling. We walked through a secondary tunnel, of which there are over 40, and then joined the primary tunnel. All the walkways have been naturally formed and haven't been dug out in any way. We turned our torches off at one

point to experience complete darkness which for some was very calming. Heading back out of the tunnels, we walked up 100 steps where the main lava tube had collapsed back in time. Now plant roots cling to the exposed rock, while primitive plants such as mosses and ferns happily grow in this moist, dark environment. On top of the entrance area a small woodland grows and conceals the tunnel's presence from afar.

We arrived back around 5.30pm and had some spare time to relax before meeting again at 7pm and walking to Petisca for our second evening meal here. The winds were dropping away overnight and whale watching was imminent the next day.

Day 5

Wednesday 11th May

Whale Watching

This morning we were back on the sea with Arne and skipper Leonildo - the wind had dropped and the sea was calmer. Leaving at 9am, we headed out towards Faial and then south towards where some whales had been spotted. The waves were coming from a north-west direction and, as we sailed against them, we got very wet! After an hour and a half we had whales - three Fin Whales, around 20m long, were heading west and we followed alongside them, gasping as they came up for air. They would suddenly disappear for a few minutes and reappear on the other side of us close to other nearby boats. We followed them for 20 minutes or so, enjoying their columnar blows, distinctive blowholes and falcate dorsal fin, and occasionally spotting their white right jaws (the left is the same colour as the rest of the body). As they shallow dived and disappeared, we headed back to Madalena to dry off and have lunch. During the trip we also saw various Cory's Shearwaters, navigating the waves and calmer winds, Common Terns and Yellow-legged Gulls. The Fin Whale is the second largest whale in the world and one of the fastest moving.

After lunch and a rest, we headed back out again with Arne and Michael at 2.30pm. Although the winds had dropped, the sea was still choppy, though we had a smoother ride out than in the morning. We were looking for Sperm Whales but, despite looking, after two and bit hours we headed back, having not seen very much (and getting rather wet again from the big waves eight miles out!). However, we did have beautiful views of Mount Pico as the clouds moved aside and showed off its peak in glorious sunshine. Clouds cloaked the lower parts of the mountain and lowlands of Pico and we arrived back once the heavy rain had passed. A few Cory's Shearwaters, gulls and terns were also seen. The particularly strong winds we had witnessed on Monday and Tuesday were unusual for this time of the year. Michael reckons the northerly winds have moved a lot of the phytoplankton and zooplankton further south and the fish and whales have followed. However, the wind speed was dropping, switching to the west and south over the coming days. Hopefully things would return back quickly.

We arrived back at just after 5.30pm in good time to dry off and shower before leaving for Petisca at 7pm. We enjoyed another hearty meal of local Pico cuisines, from clams to limpets, grilled sardines to grilled shrimps, as well as local Pico cheeses, salads and home-made chocolate mousse. Walking back just after 9pm, the first quarter of the moon was out and the sea was calming down - a contrast to the big waves on our walk back last night.

Day 6

Thursday 12th May

Whale Watching

The winds had dropped and the dawn chorus was more audible this morning, particularly with Blackbirds singing. However, during breakfast the rain came in and set in for the morning. We met at CW Azores at 8.50am and headed out just after 9am into heavy rain. The sea state was much calmer and more comfortable, however. We headed out to the south of Pico, stopping to see a young Loggerhead Turtle that was relatively inactive on the surface of the sea. Two immature Risso's Dolphins swam past, surfacing for a few moments before disappearing. We then sailed into the zone, the area where a Sperm Whale may surface. The land behind us had disappeared due to the low cloud and heavy rain; despite waiting for over an hour, we missed any surfacing whale. Julia and Alison kept spirits up by singing songs relevant to the sea and rain! We headed back to Madalena, taking in some of the sights such as a 15th century settlement that we would visit tomorrow afternoon. Cory's Shearwaters, Common Terns and Feral Pigeons were all seen along the trip. Arriving back very wet, we stopped for lunch which included flaming chorizo (it literally arrived flaming!), fish soup and prawn bolognese.

We met again at 2pm, by which time the clouds had lifted and the weather was looking more promising. A boat had earlier stayed out at sea, with a hydrophone, detecting Sperm Whales 14 miles south of Pico. So, we travelled the distance in 40 minutes from the south coast, over a relatively calm sea, though we were travelling against the waves so still had numerous bumps! We arrived with a few other boats in situ, and waited. After about ten minutes a whale blow was spotted. We headed over and saw a Sperm Whale to our right. We quickly realised there were more whales, four in fact. Two whales were together in front of us and one swam quickly from our left to join them - they all lined up together blowing. Meanwhile a fourth was resting on the surface 50 metres away from them to the right. They were all adult females and decided to deep dive all at the same time, predicted by their dip and arching of the body followed by a full submersion and showing of the fluke. They would be under for 45 minutes and surface about a mile and a half away in the direction of travel. Just as the last whales went under, some dolphins photo-bombed the perfect whale-fluke moment! Common Dolphins had arrived to join in the fun and for the next half an hour we enjoyed having them all around the boat, surfacing, getting frisky, and jumping out of the water. The sun had come out in this area and had a halo beaming all around it in a perfect circle. Once 45 minutes arrived, there were no whales to be seen. Perhaps they changed direction after finding no squid. We gave it another 15 minutes and then started to head back. On the way we had passed over half a dozen Portuguese Man 'O' Wars and stopped by one of the way back to photograph it up close. At one point it toppled over but managed to get its bloated, translucent sail back up vertical again. Everyone cheered when it had righted itself. We also encountered five Loggerhead Turtles which were much easier to spot in the calm, smooth waters, particularly on the way back. We stopped for a few - the younger ones had spines running along the middle of their carapace (shell). Another had a shell covered in soft, red-brown filamentous seaweed. Cory's Shearwaters were often resting in groups on the sea and when flying had to flap a lot more than the other day. A few were gathered together feeding on part of a fish or the like. We arrived back at just after 6pm, very pleased that we had ventured out so far and seen the Sperm Whales, dolphins and turtles.

We met again at 7pm and walked up to Petisca - our walk tonight was slightly different in that all the locals were out in the middle of the road decorating it. A line was being patterned with a mosaic of flowers and leaves using wooden frame templates. The line started near the church in Madalena and extended in a huge circle round the

south of the town. Everyone was getting involved, from children to grandparents. It was very exciting. The event was part of the Azoreans' Catholic celebration of Our Lady of Fatima.

Day 7

Friday 13th May

Whale Watching

The winds had continued to remain low overnight so we headed out with Arne and Leonildo at 8.45am, with flat seas and sunshine. We stopped by the caldera, a raised underwater volcano, outside Madalena - it forms two raised cliffs known as Ilhéu em pé and Ilhéu deitado. Today the shallow vegetated cliff tops and ledges form nesting sites for gulls, terns and pigeons.

As we left, it wasn't long before we stopped again with the Cory's Shearwaters. Looking out across the water, there were at least 300, probably more. Many were together in tight groups and, as we sailed close, we watched them dipping their heads underwater searching for food. Many were plunging or diving under to grab food, quickly swallowing it as their heads came back up. Around the boat we could see shoals of krill, small red shrimp-like crustaceans trying to hide. Below them were large foot-size fish also hoping for a quick meal. We stayed with the shearwaters for some time watching their behaviour - those already full were washing and preening on the water, a few rising almost vertically in the water to flap their wings and get water into all their feather crevices.

We sailed on down the south coastline encountering a few more turtles - we saw four in total during the trip, of various sizes. We also encountered turtle food - Salps, cylindrical or barrel-shaped, planktonic tunicates. Many had formed together to produce a short (75cm x 20cm) plank or chain of jelly (blastozoids) - they had red, pip-like structures on their edges which were embryonic eggs known as oozoids.

Heading on, we came across a school of Bottlenose Dolphins, huge dolphins, on their way west. We had a group which appeared to be three or four in size at first but, as they surfaced, we realised there were at least 20. We followed them for a while and had them coming up right by our boat and alongside another nearby boat. Behind us, another group of 10 to 20 appeared, quickly passing by us and catching up with the others. Although they were heading away from us, they would still disappear for moments to feed. Around the boat there were sudden rushes of Horse Mackerel jumping out of the water - at one point a tuna was in hot pursuit and also leapt out of the water with a fish in its mouth!

After spending some time with the Bottlenose Dolphins, we headed four miles south, out to sea, to find a school of Risso's Dolphins. And we weren't disappointed. Up to 50 or 60 animals, perhaps more, were swimming all around us and diving down to feed. The males, with their white skin from battle scars, were particularly obvious both beneath the water and as they surfaced. The darker females and younger animals were also surfacing. At one point, many of the group swam towards a group of males, possibly to catch up with some food. We were also fortunate to see some social behaviour. One male was leaping out of the water and splashing back down into the water - he did this eight times. At another moment, four or five male individuals came together, poking their heads out of the water, perhaps tussling between each other. This is one way in which they inflict the marks across each other's bodies with their teeth.

We left the Risso's Dolphins and headed back to Madalena, but it wasn't long before we stopped again to watch the more diminutive Common Dolphins - they looked tiny in comparison to the other two species. Suddenly they took off and, in a rare moment, up to 150 dolphins porpoised south at tremendous speed, 60 knots likely. They would pause for a moment and then race off like a Cheetah. The energy involved and splashing was awesome. Dolphins were leaping out of the water in a long line. We left them heading south, perhaps towards the Risso's Dolphins and their food.

The sun was shining and it was very warm back on Pico. After lunch at the bar Dark, we met again at 1.30pm with a special reception - a Blue Whale had been spotted 20 miles south of Pico. With sea conditions perfect, we headed out with Louisa and Leonildo, passing a turtle and half a dozen Portuguese Men O' War on the way. After an hour, we arrived and it wasn't too long till we had our first sighting at 2.43pm. Wow! The largest mammal to live on Earth was in front of our very eyes. Over the next hour, we watched it surfaced 15 times - it generally dived between three and six minutes before surfacing. When it appeared we usually heard it first, an incredible sound as it opened its blowholes and spurted water metres high into the air. Sometimes you could see its white or turquoise form appearing just beneath the surface. When it was back up, it usually surfaced three or four times, each time blowing, before arching its spine more than usual - a sure sign it was about to deeper dive. Sometimes we could just see its fluke touching the water's surface. On one surface, the Blue Whale was only 20 metres away - we were able to appreciate its blowhole splashguard, full curved body, blue-grey mottled skin and tiny dorsal fin, before it disappeared back under in a rainbow shape. On another surface, the sound and spray was like a firework going off. The spray often reached us and coated our lenses! As we had our final sightings of the whale, it did a big poo before diving. It left behind huge pieces of red flattened faeces and flour-like deposits - all the digested remains of the krill it has been feeding on. As the faeces drop into the ocean, they provide an important food source for all manner of zooplankton. Enrico, at CW Azores, has collected and studied the faeces of baleen whales, looking at which species of krill they eat. On this occasion, Louisa collected some pieces of faeces in a bucket, to be filtered back on land. An hour later, we left the Blue Whale and headed back north. We had also watched a sub-adult Loggerhead Turtle that floated to the side of the boat giving remarkable views - it had very big eyes. Not long after we left the whale, we encountered a small group of Common Dolphins which played around the boat for a while. We then continued on towards Faial as another Blue Whale had been sighted.

Around 4.30pm our luck was in and, after waiting five to 10 minutes, we had a second Blue Whale just off the south coast of Faial (not far from Horta Airport). Leonildo managed to get us there before it dived for six minutes. However, on its next surface, we got there much quicker and enjoyed watching this huge mammal 20 metres away. It surfaced four times, each time dropping just below the surface appearing as a white ghost. It made a deep dive and this was our signal to head back to Pico. Compared to the first whale, this one had more muscle and was in better condition. The first whale was revealing its spine more obviously and was no doubt hungry, feeding all the time we were there. We arrived back at 5.30pm, ready for a quick change and out again at 6.30pm.

We met Arne and our taxi driver José in the vehicles and, after a 15-minute drive away along the coast, we stopped to visit an old settlement, Mingata. A Goldcrest was calling nearby as we arrived. We carefully walked down a narrow path with crunchy, coarse volcanic stones beneath our feet. We walked along the ruined walls of 15th Century Pico. Here lay the remains of buildings which date back to some of the first settlers to arrive on the island when wine making was first introduced on the island. In amongst the rocks, bright orange lichens, green Holly Ferns and other pioneer species were growing and contrasting with the dark black volcanic scree.

We drove back to Madalena for a buffet dinner at 7.30pm at Dark, the restaurant/bar next to CW Azores - the food was a mix of Pico foods including beef and potatoes, yams, octopus, chicken wings, salad, home-made crisps and falafel.

We then met Casper and José at 9pm and travelled down the road for a few miles. We waited for it to get dark and meanwhile Richard set up his telescope - we looked at the craters on the Moon and the four moons of Jupiter. We were here to listen to the Cory's Shearwaters, mainly males, coming in to their nests. At 9.35pm, just as a little light hung on, our first male Cory's Shearwaters circled overhead calling. We spent the next 20 minutes listening to more and more of the strange gargling and wheezing sounds of the birds as they glided inland from the sea. The birds were coming back to defend their nests and see their mates. At 10pm we left them to it and spotted more birds flying across the road, catching the beam of the headlights, as we drove back to the hotel.

Day 8

Saturday 14th May

Dolphin Watching

Some of our group met at 7.15am and walked up the road back to some fields that are excellent for canaries and other birdlife. It wasn't long before we were spotting Canaries alongside Blackcaps. The light was poor but a few brighter males showed their yellow colours nicely. Collared Dove, Wood Pigeon, Blackbirds and House Sparrows were also seen, plus a Starling feeding young in a roof cavity.

After breakfast, we headed out at 9am. The winds were coming from the south today so we headed to the north of Faial where the water was calmer but started to whip up throughout the morning. We encountered Common Dolphins - up to 100 were spread out across the sea, though just a few to a dozen came to see us around the boat. Over 300 Cory's Shearwaters were feeding or sitting on the sea close to the dolphins. We also caught a quick glimpse of two Little or Macronesian Shearwaters. With the waters relatively quiet, we headed west along the northern coastline of Faial - as the waves got rougher we headed back east close to shore where the water was calm. We were able to admire the older, more vegetated cliffs - Faial is 700,000 years older than Pico. Some of the vegetation looked like giraffes poking their heads above the bushes. We could also see the signs of now-dry waterfalls. We went to look at the dolphins again and the headed back for 11.30am.

With a little time to spare, we met with Casper and Arne 15 minutes later and headed up the road in two vehicles to a wine museum where there are some splendid and very old Dragon Trees, some of the oldest in the Azores (over 100 years old). These trees are found across the Macronesian Archipelago and its red resin was used between the 15th and 19th century for paints, dyes and medicinal products. The trees are common houseplants in Europe but it was magnificent to see these mature examples thriving here on Pico. While here, we were able to have a quick look at some of the museum's grape pressing artefacts and photograph the many Madeiran Wall Lizards warming themselves on the volcanic boulders forming the walls of one of the buildings. The lizards came in a mix of black/volcanic rock hue, dark black-green with delicate green spots, and lighter brown. The walls of the vineyards, part of the museum, were also full of lizards. Meanwhile a Collared Dove and a few canaries flew overhead and Blackbirds and Blackcaps called from the bushes.

We headed back into town and, after most of us lunched at Dark, we met again at just before 2pm. The wind and sea state was very similar to this morning and we headed out to the north again. This time we went into the channel between Pico and the adjacent island São Jorge where a deep canyon attracts whales such as Sperm

Whales passing through. However, this afternoon the whales and dolphins were elsewhere and our only wildlife were 400 Cory's Shearwaters sitting together on the sea and passing Common Terns and Yellow-legged Gulls. Despite this, the journey gave us a chance to appreciate the northern coast of Pico and to see the landscape that by car wouldn't be possible. We passed the large town of São Roque do Pico which is almost opposite Lajes on the other side of the island. The volcanic rock, vegetation, vineyards, woodland and fields were all to be appreciated, alongside the distinctive red and white houses with volcanic stone walls. As we headed back, we stopped by the cliffs outside Madalena to admire a gap between the rocks which at some angles look like a shark, a dolphin and the Virgin Mary. We arrived back at 4.15pm, in time to say our thanks to Dania, Enrico and their team, and head back to pack, buy souvenirs and enjoy Madalena before meeting for dinner.

We met again at 7pm and headed for our last meal to Petisca, an enjoyable evening with our waitress Karina and restaurant owner Daniel - we parted after tasting a warming blackberry liqueur. As we walked back, a few Blackbirds were singing - they sound distinctly different to UK Blackbirds with particular notes in very different places to where you would expect.

Day 9

Sunday 15th May

Transfer back to the UK via Lisbon

We left a very wet Madalena on the 8.15am ferry, leaving behind Pico and its magical wildlife and scenery. The sea was relatively calm and, across the channel, a dozen or so Cory's Shearwaters were gliding over the sea taking advantage of the windy morning.

We had a quick transfer to the airport and left Horta at 10.45am. The grassy verges of the airfield were full of purple flowers adding some spring colour - we flew over Pico spotting the ferry on its way back to Madalena and landmarks that had become familiar friends over the past nine days. We headed west to Lisbon, arriving at just before 2pm, and waited for our 4.10pm flight back to London Heathrow. With clear views across southern Portugal on our way north before crossing a cloud-covered Bay of Biscay, we arrived back in good time and landed at 6.40pm. Our entire luggage came out first and by 7.20pm we were saying our goodbyes and headed home after an enjoyable and whale-filled holiday.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
1	Azores Noctule Bat*	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>	3						1		
2	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>					2	60			
3	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>						60			
4	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>					60	150	100		
5	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>						2			
6	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>				3					
7	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>					6				
8	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>							Signs		1

Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea borealis</i>	300	10	Y	20	160	400	400	12
2	Little Shearwater	<i>Puffinus assimilis</i>							2	
3	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		1						
4	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>	1	3						
5	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	1	1	1	3		3		
6	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus phaeopus</i>		2						
7	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	50	30	20	20	40	40	40	
8	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	6	2	10	6	8	12	10	
9	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>								
10	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	20	30	20	20	40	30	30	✓
11	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>	2	2	4			1	2	
12	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			2				1	
13	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>	3	3	4	1	1	H		
14	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>		1						
15	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	6	8	10	✓	✓	H	6	
16	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>	2	1	1			H	4	
17	Goldcrest (Pico)	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>						H		
18	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	6	4					1	
19	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	50	30	50	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>		6	1			2	1	
21	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			1				1	
22	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		H						
23	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	2	2	10		2	2	10	

Butterflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		1	6				1	1
2	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		1						
3	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea faillae</i>		1	1					

Reptiles

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	1				5	7		
2	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>		6	1		1	2	30	

Marine

	Common name	Scientific name	May							
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	Marbled Shore Crab	<i>Eriphia verrucosa</i>	2							
2	Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalia</i>			6		10	12		
3	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>	1							
4	Red Rock Crab	<i>Grapsus adscensionis</i>	6				6			
5	White Seabream	<i>Diplodus sargus</i>		4						
6	Atlantic Horse Mackerel	<i>Trachurus trachurus</i>						20		
7	Tuna sp.							1		

Plants

Common name, Scientific name

Japanese Holly Fern, *Cyrtomium falcatum*

Fishbone Fern, *Nephrolepis cordifolia*

Japanese Cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica*

American Pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*

Hydrangea, *Hydrangea macrophylla*

Sweet Pittosporum, *Pittosporum undulatum*

Wild Carrot, *Daucus carota*

Oxeye Daisy, *Leucanthemum vulgare*

Kahili Ginger/Ginger Lily, *Hedychium gardnerianum*

Laurel, *Laurus azorica*

Lichen, *Parmotrema sp.*

Pink-headed Persicaria, *Persicaria capitatum*

Bristle Fern, *Trichomanes speciosum*

Lantana, *Lantana camara*

Bracken, *Pteridium aquilinum*

Soft Shield-fern, *Polystichum setiferum*

Elaphoglossum, *Elaphoglossum semicylindricum*

Common Fig, *Ficus carica*

Garden Nasturtium, *Tropaeolum major*

Hypericum, *Hypericum foliosum*

Spurge-laurel, *Daphne laureola*

Blue Morning Glory, *Ipomea indica*

Giant Reed, *Arundo donax*

Juniper, *Juniperus brevifolia*

Madeiran Mahogany, *Persea indica*

Norfolk Pine tree, *Araucaria heterophylla*

Fir Clubmoss, *Huperzia dentata*

Azorean Tree Heath, *Erica azorica*

Blue Gum Tree, *Eucalyptus globulus*



Fin Whale by Richard Mansfield