

Tour Report Whales and Dolphins of the Azores 10 – 17 May 2024

Striped dolphins



Sperm whale



Sei whale



Humpback whales



Compiled by Helen Bryon

The Azores archipelago offers some of the most accessible whale watching opportunities in Europe. Boasting resident species such as sperm whales, short-beaked common, bottlenose and Risso's dolphins, our departures in May hope to coincide with the passing of migratory baleen giants such as blue, fin, sei and humpback whales amongst others. Deep waters and an abundance of food attract the cetaceans as they travel from subtropical winter breeding areas to feeding grounds in the high Arctic. During our week long itinerary on the stunning island of Sao Miguel, we join shared whale watching excursions every morning (weather permitting) with afternoons spent exploring the spectacular volcanic interior.

Day 1:

Friday 10 May 2024

London Heathrow to Ponta Delgado

Weather: sunshine at our destination, 19 degrees

Tour leader Helen met the group in Lisbon at the departure gate for our flight to Ponta Delgada. Two hours later and we were flying directly along the south coast of Sao Miguel, with beautiful views to be had of the 'Isla Verde' in the late evening sunshine. We were met on arrival and transferred 30 minutes east to the village of Agua de Pau, where home for the next seven nights would be the stunning Hotel Caloura. Occupying a glorious cliff top position where every room boasts a sea view, we settled in and arranged to meet for dinner shortly afterwards. The desserts were a hit (they always are!) and as it had been a long day, we headed to bed falling asleep to the sound of Corey's shearwaters nesting in the cliffs around us.

Day 2:

Saturday 11 May 2024

Whale watching and priolo quest

Weather: light cloud, clearing to sunshine, 20 degrees

Waking up to a beautiful morning, we met for breakfast at 07:00am and enjoyed the 180 degree view from the restaurant over the sun splashed ocean. By 08:00am we had been picked up and were taking the scenic coastal route 15 minutes east to Vila Franca do Campo. Once dropped off at whale watching HQ, we signed our daily waiver, had a safety briefing and by 09:00am were life jacketed up and sitting aboard our 28 seater vessel. Raring to go, everyone had secured themselves a 'window seat' and we were positioned towards the front and middle of the vessel (the front is considered bumpier and the back is generally more stable). Making our way out of the marina, Felipe, our cliff top lookout (or vigia), introduced himself over the radio and Mary Lou, our naturalist, explained that he sits trained to high powered binoculars throughout the day, scanning the ocean for signs of marine mammals in the hope of directing us to the appropriate spot.

It was a perfect day on the water. The ocean was crystal clear, there was hardly a breath of wind and we sped across the waves as Corey's shearwaters danced close to the water and beautiful Portuguese man-of-war drifted by on the currents. Full of anticipation we headed south west slowing down around 25 minutes later. We had not changed course so we were hopeful that we were about to see something 'big'. Big turned out to be an understatement as the rise and fall of two huge humpbacks were seen off our port side. Swimming one behind the other we watched them and every time they went under, we scanned the ocean for their fluke prints to anticipate where they may appear next. We moved position and direction a few times and then suddenly they were coming straight at us, in tandem, and the collective intake of breath on board was audible. They were immense! We lost them again but remained in the area as we hadn't seen them fluke so we hoped they were swimming just under the surface. Out of nowhere, a lunge and then a tail slap. Wow! We stayed with them, savouring intermittent surface activity and then, half an hour later more boats began to approach the area, we took our leave. What a superb start to our adventure.

Speeding further south still, we slowed a good ten miles or so off shore and were advised that another species of whale had been spotted but that it had just dived. We therefore continued on our way and to our absolute delight came across a large pod of striped dolphins (perhaps the most beautiful dolphin species of all) porpoising through the air, leaping as a group repeatedly clean out of the water and producing delighted peels of laughter and oohs and aahs aplenty. They were simply brilliant! Athletic, streamlined, gorgeous and wonderful in equal measure, they proved to be a highlight of our week.

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When they disappeared, we returned to the spot of the whale that had dived and were told that it was a sperm whale that had been seen. With their distinctive brown wrinkled skin and 45 degree angle blow, they are the deep divers of the cetacean world. The largest of the toothed whales, they feed on octopus and giant squid found in the depths a kilometre or more down so dives generally last around 30-45 minutes. We were hoping that our arrival may coincide with a re-surfacing and as such, we 'loitered' in the area, sitting in the sunshine listening to their clicks on a hydrophone. Suddenly we powered off again slowing down just in time to see a tail fluke indicating that one individual was off to feed once again. Three sightings so far, three different species, and it was only 10:45am!

Heading back towards shore, we circumnavigated Vila Franca do Campo Island, a four thousand year old caldera just off shore that is a nesting site for Corey's shearwaters. Common terns flew overhead and yellow-legged gulls lurked on the cliffs hoping for a free meal preying on the shearwater eggs. Red rock crabs scuttled close to the shore line and all too soon we were back at the marina, being offered locally grown green tea before being whisked off to lunch (fresh fish or grilled chicken with new potatoes and salad) at the Black Whale restaurant just up the road. We were to eat here most days and were certainly well fed and looked after.

Just over an hour later and fully sated, we set off for the far eastern part of the island on a quest to find the endemic Azorean bullfinch, or priolo as it is locally known. Confined to the last few tracts of laurel forest left, we climbed out of town, driving hydrangea, agapanthus, lily and azalea lined narrow country roads. Passing field after field of cows munching on lush green grass, we hit the north coast and continued climbing east, enjoying magnificent sea views as we went. We soon arrived at the Priolo Interpretation Centre where we met our SPEA guide (the Portuguese equivalent of the RSPB) who gave us a brief introduction to the work being done here to protect this endangered species. Its numbers are critically low due to the fact that in the 1800s, the orange industry was booming and the birds would gorge on the blossom to the extent that they were considered pests to be eradicated. Now their biggest issue, like so many species, is habitat loss.

We commenced a short walk along a trail through the laurel forest, entering a peaceful and enchanted wonderland where native and introduced species were pointed out. We were shown Azorean blueberry and heather as we walked over deep carpets of moss (avoiding brambles) and underneath the low lying and twisted, gnarled branches of trees covered in lichen. Although our prior search was unsuccessful, it was an informative and enjoyable afternoon and we came across distinctive fern 'buttons' and potential new orchid growth. Afterwards, we took advantage of the continuing good weather and visited the nearby viewpoint of Pico Bartolome to take in breathtaking views over the Atlantic almost one thousand metres below.

Returning to Hotel Caloura at 17:45pm, we freshened up, enjoyed the evening sunshine and met up for dinner at 19:30pm. It had been a really wonderful first day!

Day 3:

Sunday 12 May 2024

Whale watching and Fogo excursion

Weather: cloudy to start, clearing to bright sunshine, 22 degrees

All you need to know about this morning is that a sperm whale breached right in front of us. Not once, not twice, but five times! Yes, FIVE times! We'd been following it swimming along gently when out of nowhere, its massive 45 tonne weight soared clear out of the water and hung suspended for a few seconds before gravity caused it to thump back down. Once we'd processed what we'd seen, oh the joy! We laughed out loud at our incredible fortune and then watched incredulous as it did it again, and again, and again, and again. The endorphin and dopamine hits were immediate, engulfing our systems as we absorbed the enormity (literally) of what had just happened. We had been in the right place at the right time and what an extraordinary privilege it was to have witnessed such an incredible phenomenon.

It was a case of 'sperm whale central' really as during the course of our morning we came across at least one female and calf pair (the female diving while we were with them and reuniting with the youngster later) as

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well as one lone individual resting on the surface and two adults swimming along together, one of whom became the star of our show.

In addition, we added two other resident species to our list with a fleeting glance of Risso's dolphins (only the third time they've been seen this spring) and short-beaked common dolphins too. Admittedly the Risso's were difficult to see as they surfed the swell just under the surface, their pale, streamlined bodies looking much like torpedoes flying alongside us. They were on a mission, swiftly passing us with only the very tips of their dorsal fins occasionally visible above the water. The common dolphins were a little more obliging, joining us towards the end of the morning as we sped west along the south coast of Sao Miguel, enjoying perfect views of the island. A small pod, they rode our bow and porpoised regularly, travelling between us and our sister vessel, delighting us with their presence.

Once again we enjoyed a lovely lunch before being collected for our afternoon excursion to Fogo, one of Sao Miguel's many volcanic and scenic crater lakes. Leaving glorious sunshine behind us, we ascended into thick cloud so ended up by-passing our first viewpoint as there was literally nothing to see. At the second, the cloud lifted exposing the sunken caldera that had filled with rain water over the years. The Atlantic glistened beyond and we continued our journey, visiting a waterfall towards the north coast and then the thermal hot springs of Caldeira Velha. During our dip we watched and heard highly vocal Iberian green frogs in the stream next to us before moving on to Santa Barbara beach on the north shore. There, we tucked into pina coladas (or the mocktail equivalent) made from, and served in, locally grown pineapples, spiced with locally made rum. Sitting in the hot sun watching surfers catching waves below us, we enjoyed the Sunday crowds and holiday ambiance, quite satisfied with ourselves that we were supporting two local economies!

We were back at the hotel by 17:30pm where we relaxed in the continuing evening sunshine before meeting for dinner two hours later.

Day 4:

Monday 13 May 2024

Whale watching and Sete Cidades

Weather: cloudy, light rain clearing to sun later, 19 degrees

Waking to overcast skies over both land and sea, we gathered for breakfast at 07:10am and were on our way, as usual, to Vila Franca do Campo an hour later. There we relaxed with a cuppa before hitting the high seas at 09:00am. We came across a handful of common dolphins within 10 minutes of setting off but they didn't hang around and neither did we. Daniel, our skipper, opened the throttle and we headed due west at speed. It was nothing but exhilarating and those in the front seats couldn't help but whoop with excitement when facing, head on, quite large waves in the rain! A short while later and a few more common dolphins passed us by but we didn't stop until we reached off shore Ponta Delgada. There we noticed quite a few whale watching vessels up ahead so we were on full alert for blows, fins and/or any other signs of activity.

Suddenly a blow! And then another one! We were in the company of baleen whales but we had yet to learn how many and which species. Once we got a good look at the back and fin of one individual they were identified as sei whales. We ascertained that there were three of them moving at speed continually west. Despite the choppy conditions, we'd had good views of them coming to the surface to breathe so as more and more vessels began to arrive, we adhered to regulations and respectfully moved out of the area so as not to crowd the third largest whale in the world. It had been short but sweet, and we had our third whale species in as many days in the bag!

We headed back the way we had come, rain clouds over the island and dark skies ahead becoming more and more threatening. The sun pierced through at times, producing a wonderful silvery sheen but all was quiet...or so we thought. Suddenly there were more blows ahead! Again, we waited until we had a good look at the dorsal fins before ascertaining that we were in the company of two more sei whales, this time a female and her calf. By now it was already past 11:30am (time flies when you're having fun!) so we made our way back to the marina via Vila Franca de Campo Island where Portuguese man-o-war were out in force, their beautiful iridescent colouring belying the danger below.

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Following a typical Azorean *bachalau* of potatoes, onions and shredded fish, we were driven west to stunning Sete Cidades for the afternoon. Thinking we wouldn't see much as our stop en route at an old aqueduct was a rather wet and windy affair, we were thrilled to reach our first viewpoint on the caldera rim and see the crater lakes far below. Dominated by two large lakes (there are more), one is usually blue and the other green but due to the cloud cover, they were uniform today. The lakes, pyroclastic cones and crater never fail to impress and we continued to another viewpoint lower down the slopes before descending further and stopping on a bridge between the two lakes. We then drove as far as it was possible to do so around the blue lake to visit a tunnel that led to the Atlantic. Now only used by pilgrims, we soaked up the serenity of the area before driving into town for a brief visit to the church. By now the skies had cleared and the island vistas were stupendous as we drove home bathed in bright, warm sunshine.

Day 5:

Tuesday 14 May 2024

Whale watching and Furnas

Weather: cloudy with sunny intervals, 18 degrees

Well if yesterday's whale watch was dominated by sei whales, today's was well and truly the time for sperm whales to shine. Although common dolphins were our first and last sighting respectively, in-between we saw no less than nine sperm whales over the course of the morning. Our cliff top spotter Nicole, had certainly had her Weetabix!

Initially we were directed towards two spots south east of Vila Franca do Campo, around three to four miles out. No sooner had our naturalist guide Sandra advised that we would wait there a few minutes in case sperm whales that had been seen here earlier re-appeared, when we were off again, zooming across to another location where they'd been seen resting and preparing for their next deep dive. On our third attempt we were successful, coming across a female and juvenile swimming through the relatively calm seas. We followed them and then came across a solo adult. Next up was another female, this time with a calf who repeatedly lifted its head right out of the water, gulping great lungfuls of air as it swam close to Mum. Once they had both fluked and disappeared, we moved slightly further east again arriving just in time to see a massive male dive. The width of his tail was enormous so he must have been an absolute beast! We then passed two vessels with blows ahead of them, the angle of which confirmed that they too were sperm whales. They were out in force! One final whale also came into the mix, moving directly in front of the path of our sister vessel. Crikey!

As we began our return to base, we came across small fins cutting through the water and we slowed to see if they may join us. They did! Appearing all around us, the yellow hourglass on their sides gave away their identity as common dolphins. Predominantly resting on the surface, they were moving in all directions, slowly and without purpose, so we enjoyed their company for as long as we could. Their numbers steadily grew and we noticed plenty of babies and juveniles within the pod. We were completely surrounded and were loving it! After 20 minutes or so, with time pressing on, we left them and circumnavigated the islet off shore Vila Franca before returning home.

While we gathered our belongings from the office and the vehicle was prepared for our afternoon excursion, Helen decided to run to the old port to see if a wood carver who creates beautiful whales, tails, dolphins and other marine creatures out of invasive Japanese cedar was there selling his wares. He was, so the group went to visit him and afterwards continued to the beautiful town of Furnas. Passing our last crater lake en route, we went straight to lunch where we were to enjoy 'cozidos', an Azorean dish of meat and vegetables slow cooked by geothermal heat for seven to eight hours. It was a hit!

Afterwards, we visited the town's fumaroles that were steaming away like billyo in the pungent sulphur filled air. Pools of boiling water and mud were a reminder that although it has been many years since an eruption here, the volcano is still well and truly active below the false security of the cobbled streets. Next, we visited Terra Nostra, a botanical garden with a large thermal pool that we all enjoyed. The gardens are a haven of tranquility, bursting with introduced and native flora. Sighting a goldcrest proved to be a highlight for one client and we ended our afternoon visiting a church overlooking the town's crater lake.

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Day 6:**Wednesday 15 May 2024**

Whale watching, Azorean whaling history and vigia visit

Weather: Cloudy with sunny spells, 18 degrees

We'd not been on the water for more than six or seven minutes when the engine abruptly slowed and Sandra, our naturalist guide, yelled out 'sei whale' on the left. The ocean was flat calm and lo and behold, between us and the Sao Miguel coastline beyond, came blows only 30 metres or so away. We couldn't believe our luck! As we watched the surface, we counted four individuals; two adults, a juvenile and a calf. They were socialising, moving in slow circles, seemingly comfortable with our presence. We kept a respectful distance as they continued to change direction, at one point even swimming directly across our bow! Their proximity was mesmerising and addictive as we carefully kept a vigil for their fluke prints, thus predicting (hopefully) where they may surface to breathe next. Never has an hour passed so quickly and as 10:00am approached, we felt it appropriate to leave them be.

Just ten minutes later we found ourselves in the presence of common dolphins. They were moving slowly, slowly through the water, just off the south coast, resting and popping up all around us. The sun had come out and the deep blue of the ocean showed off their colouration to perfection. More and more arrived and we sat in their company for at least half an hour. A loggerhead turtle popped its head up to breathe before diving below almost before we had registered what it was. Common terns flew overhead and it was a simply stunning morning at sea.

Whilst watching the dolphins, our skipper, Mary Lou, calmly announced blows off our bow. Eyes darting forward, we moved slowly towards them noting a higher number of seabirds and dolphins also in the vicinity. Our sei whales were back! For a further 30-40 minutes we followed them as they calmly swam ahead of us in an easterly direction. Once again, they were really quite close, breathing regularly, their dorsal fins covered in stalked barnacles hanging down like tendrils. Maintaining their speed, they appeared to be in no hurry to get away from us (they are considered the fastest whales) which was simply wonderful!

After another wonderful morning, fresh tuna was on the menu back at the Black Whale restaurant, after which we returned to base for a presentation on the history of whaling in the Azores. The first official whaling operation existed on the central island of Faial back in 1857 and on Sao Miguel's north coast at Capelas in 1947. The main targets were sperm whales (resident here) with spermiceti oil being used as a mechanical lubricant and for lighting. Ambergris was used in the production of perfume, bones for corsets and umbrella handles and the meat was fed to livestock while teeth were carved and sold as scrimshaw. Whaling was banned here relatively recently in 1986 after a memorandum from the IWC and the last whales were killed one year later. It was soon afterwards in 1989 that commercial whale watching began.

The nine cliff top lookouts (vigias) that directed whalers to their targets are now used to inform skippers on the whereabouts of marine mammals and the next part of our afternoon entailed visiting two of them. Driving east to Ponta Garca, we stopped at the village's lighthouse to watch Felipe hard at work pointing out sperm whale activity to two vessels out on the water. We then drove to a small white building perched further along the cliff to where his colleague, Nicole, had found a pod of dolphins. We all had a look through her binoculars which are capable of picking up signs of activity up to 40 miles away would you believe?! With a new found respect for the mental strength and willpower required to search the ocean for up to nine hours a day, we returned to Hotel Caloura for a few hours of R&R and dinner as usual at 19:30pm.

Day 7:**Thursday 16 May 2024**

Whale watching and the science of cetaceans

Weather: Cloudy, clearing to bright sunshine, 20 degrees

Well, I've seen wild dog pups do it, lion and leopard cubs do it, and maned wolf do it, but never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that I'd ever see a pair of juvenile sperm whales playing with a stick. It was a large stick admittedly, a small log really, but play with it they did!

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We set off under cloudy skies this morning but the ocean was calm and the cloudscape was beautiful. Passing a few common dolphins, we continued directly out to sea until blows up ahead alerted us to the presence of sperm whales. We had at least three individuals, one adult and two youngsters. Once the adult had replenished its oxygen levels, it prepared to dive, arching its back and fluking as it disappeared under the waves. The two youngsters remained on the surface settling into what can only be described as a slow motion rough and tumble with each other. Rolling around and around, their tails appeared above the water regularly and while one repeatedly spy-hopped, its head appearing like a bulbous mass above the ocean, the other's open mouth (complete with pink pigmentation and black spots along its jaw) kept moving from side to side as it 'lay' upright in the water occasionally slipping on to its back. We watched enthralled as they played, noticing that the log and watching with interest as the whale intermittently held it in its mouth before releasing it only to push it with its broad square head. We lowered a hydrophone into the water picking up the steady metronome beat of the adult as it searched for prey using echolocation far below. In-between that rhythm came a speedier, more rapid series of clicks as the two juveniles, using sonar, tried to work out what they were playing with. We heard the whistles of a few passing dolphins too as we took in the extraordinary event unfolding in front of us. A soporific sensory overload!

After 35 minutes or so, their behaviour changed and they began to swim steadily in an easterly direction, perhaps responding to a signal from adults returning to the surface. Jorge, our skipper, advised it was time to go so we took our cue to leave and within moments came across a small pod of common dolphins. They were moving lazily through the waves when we came across one of the juvenile sperm whales again, this time reunited with what we assumed was its mother. Swimming side by side, the calf submerged a few times, appearing on the other side of the adult. Perhaps it was suckling but we couldn't know for sure as so much of what goes on with these incredible creatures is out of sight.

We did a 180 degree turn and soon came across more dolphins. Although a similar size to common dolphins, these were uniformly grey and were identified as Atlantic spotted dolphins! A new species for all, we revelled in their proximity as they rode our bow. At the arrival of some adults, we noted their distinctive mottled colouring. They swam around us, moving with ease around numerous Portuguese man-o-war as Corey's shearwaters flew close, no doubt hopeful of some feeding activity as trigger fish had been spotted. Sperm whales still dotted our horizon in a few directions and as we started to head for home, the broad patchwork quilt of greenery on Sao Miguel ahead, one large adult appeared that we had to stop and admire before it fluked and disappeared. Another loggerhead turtle presented itself (two in two days!) and finally, as we rounded Vila Franca do Campo islet for the last time, one of our party received a 'message in a bottle' and we returned to base with broad grins on our faces.

Delicious horse mackerel or chicken was on the lunch menu at the Black Whale restaurant and we then returned to base for an incredibly interesting presentation by naturalist guide Sanne, on the 'Science of Cetaceans'. Covering their evolution from land to marine mammals, adaptations that have been made to deal with life at sea, threats and conservation, it was a fascinating few hours peppered with ice cream and shopping breaks. Just after 16:00pm we were back at our hotel packing and preparing for our departure tomorrow but we made time for a drink on the terrace before dinner. Sitting in the now strong sunshine, surrounded by lush, verdant vegetation and overlooking the ocean, we committed our scenic location to memory and headed for dinner at 19:30pm. Afterwards, we said our goodbyes to the restaurant and bar team who had looked after us so well during our stay.

Day 8:

Departure

Weather: mixed cloud and sunny spells, 18 degrees

Friday 17 May 2024

As our time on the beautiful island of Sao Miguel drew to a close, we tucked into our packed breakfasts and departed for the airport at 06:00am. Travelling home via Lisbon, we were grateful for a lovely group, wonderful weather, great sightings and a simply fantastic team who had looked after us so well during our time on the Azores.

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Checklist for Whales and Dolphins of the Azores



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	MAMMALS								
1	Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		✓					
2	Striped dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>		✓					
3	Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓
4	Risso's dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>			✓				
5	Short-beaked common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Sei whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>				✓		✓	
7	Atlantic spotted dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>							✓
	BIRDS								
1	Corey's shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Atlantic yellow-legged gull	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Wood pigeon	<i>Columba Paul bus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Eurasian blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Eurasian buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
9	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓		✓	✓		
10	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Azores chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>				✓	✓		
13	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					✓		

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14	Atlantic canary	<i>Serious canaries</i>						✓	✓