

Tour Report

Portugal – Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

13 - 20 May 2022

Humpback whale



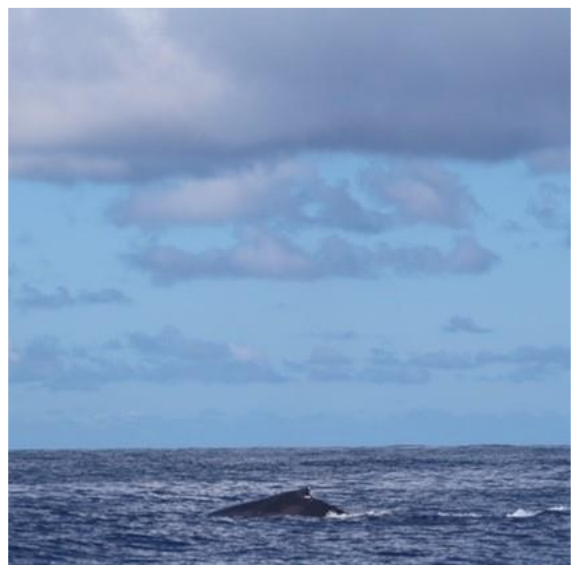
Sperm whale



Portugese man-of-war



Humpback whale



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Tour Leader: Helen Bryon with 10 participants

This new itinerary to the Azores, the most remote island group in the North Atlantic, offers the chance to explore the cetacean rich waters surrounding Sao Miguel, as well as the volcanic interior of the island itself. Travelling in May, we hope to not only come across resident species such as sperm whales and a variety of dolphin species, but also migrating baleen whales such as blue, fin and sei whales. Subject to weather conditions, mornings are spent out on the water and afternoons are spent exploring the island whilst also developing our cetacean knowledge and learning about the important role they've played in the area's history and culture.

Day 1: Depart UK for Ponta Delgado

Friday 13 May 2022

Weather: Cloudy, 19°C

Awaking to a message from Air Portugal advising that our flights had been rescheduled, it appeared that our noon departure out of Heathrow was no longer operating and that we would now fly at 13:45. Although not a substantial change, this would mean missing our connection to the Azores. As such, we had been moved to a 22:20 departure out of Lisbon, arriving into Ponta Delgado at 23:45 local time (the Azores are one hour behind mainland Portugal). After contacting the group to advise of the change, we all met airside at Heathrow and introductions were made.

Our two-and-a-half-hour flight to Lisbon was uneventful and after a lengthy transit, we finally boarded our aircraft bound for Ponta Delgado, a further two hours away. Arriving in driving rain, we collected our bags in record time and were met by Daniel, who transferred us the 20 minutes or so to our accommodation, Hotel Caloura. We headed directly to our very comfortable ocean view rooms and beds as it had been a longer day than planned!

Day 2: Morning whale watch, afternoon at leisure

Saturday 14 May 2022

Weather: Changeable, 18°C

We were up bright and early for a buffet breakfast (complete with a panoramic ocean view) and to meet the final member of our party who had flown in separately yesterday. We were waiting in the lobby at 08:00 as requested, raring to go! After the rain in the night, we weren't entirely convinced we'd be going out whale watching but our transport arrived promptly (two minibuses) and 15 minutes later we were delivered to Vila Franca do Campo's marina and were signing in for our first whale watch!

We were not alone and the marina was busy as two 28 seater RIBs were going out. We attended a safety briefing that also introduced us to the species that we may see. Year-round residents include sperm whales and a variety of dolphin species (Risso's, bottlenose and common) along with numerous beaked whales, whilst the migrants that we were hoping for included baleen giants such as blue, fin, sei and humpback whales.

With life jackets and masks on (the wearing of masks is compulsory on transport and RIBs are no exception), we set off at 09:20 with excitement levels high! By 09:30 however, we were back in the marina as our engine had snagged on some flotsam and jetsam in the harbour area that was there as a result of last night's storm. Fortunately, a 12 seater RIB had been prepared as a backup for us and we were gratefully and swiftly transferred onto it. We were on our way again by 09:40 and a few whoops of joy were heard as we zoomed east along the south coast of Sao Miguel, admiring the sheer cliffs adorning the coastline to our left. Before long, Cory's shearwaters appeared gliding just above the waves and on the water, numerous Portuguese man-of-wars could be seen. These, we were reliably informed, are not jellyfish, but are four independent organs working together with tentacles up to nine metres long! The sun was shining brightly and the clean, deep blue ocean was a beautiful shade of indigo. What a difference a day made after yesterday's long travel day.

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At 10:10, we came across our first fluke prints on the water's surface indicating a rather large whale in the vicinity. It finally surfaced and we had our first baleen of the trip, a lone humpback! After changing direction a few times (to keep us on our toes) we settled into a serene encounter with this gentle giant as it remained just below the surface, searching for food, and cruised alongside us for over half an hour. It was remarkably relaxed and its white flipper was evident, glowing aqua, helping us follow its movements underwater. Simply wonderful!

After it quietly slipped below the surface, we moved towards an area where sperm whales had been seen diving earlier. They dive to feed and in the inky depths, where no light penetrates, they use echolocation to locate their favoured prey, giant squid. These dives average around 40-45 minutes in duration so we waited, with bated breath, scanning the ocean for signs of them returning to the surface to breathe and rest before their next course. As they blow out of their left nostril only, the air is exhaled at a distinctive 45-degree angle which helps in terms of identification.

The Azorean islands have a wonderful system, a remnant from whaling days, whereby land-based cliff-top lookouts, 'vigias', search the water below for signs of cetacean activity. They then radio locations to whale watching vessels to guide them to potential sightings. At 11:15, a hydrophone was inserted into the water where the sperm whales were last seen, to listen for their distinctive clicking (sonar) communication and by 11:45, we were rewarded for our wait as three adults and a juvenile surfaced nearby. It wasn't long before they resumed their hunt for food and dived once more but it wasn't over, as a further two individuals were spotted slightly closer to shore, and we joined them at 11:55.

Feeling thoroughly spoilt, we headed back to base taking in the islet just offshore from Vila Franco do Campo as the last stop. Home to the area's annual cliff diving competition, the small dormant volcanic islet is 3-4,000 years old and is a perfectly circular caldera that we circumnavigated in a clockwise direction. Its sheer cliffs are home to Cory's shearwater and common tern nests and we saw many yellow-legged gulls that predate on their eggs and chicks whilst also destroying their nests. At the base of the cliffs, were numerous red rock crabs, not dissimilar to their more famous counterparts, Sally lightfoot.

Returning to the marina, we disembarked and walked to lunch at a cafe overlooking the beach nearby, where grilled fish, chicken, salad and mushroom risotto were on the menu. Well-fed, we returned to the whale watching headquarters to be told that due to poor weather, tomorrow's excursion had been cancelled. A contingency plan was put into place and after our late arrival in the small hours of the morning, we opted to rest for the afternoon rather than rushing off to the eastern side of the island to try and find the endemic priolo (the Azores bullfinch).

We re-convened at 19:30 for a buffet dinner at the hotel. After our huge lunch (which was to become the norm), the ability to take as little, or as much as was wanted, was welcome. Desserts proved to be a hit throughout the week though!

Day 3: Morning at leisure, afternoon visit to Fogo

Sunday 15 May 2022

Weather: Changeable, 17°C

After a morning spent relaxing or exploring the cliffs surrounding the hotel, we met in the lobby, ready to depart for our afternoon excursion to Fogo, at 11:00. Initially, we drove to Vila Franco do Campo, to whale watching headquarters, to sign in for the day's activity (a process we followed every day) before proceeding to our lunch stop, just a few minutes walk away, at the utterly marvellous Estrela do Mar restaurant. This overlooks the working harbour and en route, we came across a man shaving wood and creating beautiful sperm whale, ray and dolphin carvings. He proceeded to bring out boxes of previously finished products and the shoppers amongst us went into overdrive! We promised to return after lunch which was mountains of local cheese, fresh bread, salad, potatoes and fresh grilled tuna or meat of the day alongside a massive pasta, spinach croquette and vegetable dish for the vegans amongst us. Wow! Sated, we indulged in a little retail

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therapy and clutching our spoils, set off for Lagoa do Fogo, a crater lake and one of Portugal's natural wonders.

Passing cows grazing at impossibly steep angles on volcanic cones, we had clear skies above us as we ascended to our first viewpoint at 947 metres above sea level. Upon alighting the vehicles, however, we were blown to smithereens and gladly carried on to our next viewpoint which was a little more sheltered! Our guides, Reine and Andries, exclaimed how lucky we were to be able to take in views of the caldera without it being fog or cloud bound. It was here that we began to appreciate how changeable the weather can be as we experienced different elements at every stop. We carried on to Caldeira Velha, where we took a short stroll to natural thermal springs and took in the verdant, impossibly lush vegetation, alive with frogs and birdlife (the chaffinches were bold and delightful subjects for our photographers). Sao Miguel is referred to as the 'green island' and the tree ferns alongside azaleas and hydrangeas provided an array of leaf shades all around us. Here too were boiling mud pools and impressive cliffs. A brief visit to the Interpretive Centre later and we were on our way once again, descending to the island's north coast and Ribera Grande.

Here we viewed underground tunnels and lookouts carved into the rocky lava coastline, that were used during the Second World War in case of any incoming threats (despite Portugal's neutrality). A short walk along the coast and we came to a glorious black sand beach, where rollers were tumbling, sending turquoise spray into a moody, dark grey, stormy sky. A renowned surfing spot, the north coast is not considered particularly safe for swimming due to its strong currents but it was wild, woolly and fabulously atmospheric. We loved it!

Returning to the hotel, we met for drinks at 19:00, before continuing to our buffet dinner afterwards.

Day 4: Morning presentation, afternoon visit to Sete Cidades

Monday 16 May 2022

Weather: Changeable, 17 °C

Once more, we were unable to head out whale watching today, so we did the next best thing, we learnt as much as we could about these wonderful creatures to better prepare ourselves for our next excursion. As such, this morning at 09:00, a presentation had been arranged by Sona, the Head Guide and Naturalist. Starting with the evolution of cetaceans, she went on to cover modern whales, and their feeding and breeding behaviour before ending on conservation. She kept us all enthralled until 11:45, her passion and enthusiasm shining through. She spoke in layman's terms, had clear and concise PowerPoint slides and used some fabulous videos to demonstrate points. It was excellent.

Afterwards, we headed to Estrela de Mar once more, this time for fresh grilled dorado, pork, salad and another excellent vegan option. Our local artisan was unfortunately not open, so we could not support him further, so we set off for our afternoon excursion to Sete Cidades on time at 13:30.

Initially, we drove west towards Ponta Delgado before turning inland and north, following traditional hydrangea lined roads, to visit a small crater lake, an aqueduct teeming with plants (it looked like a designer living wall) and a viewpoint overlooking the north coast. We could see 'our beach' from yesterday and then we continued towards a trail where we would get our first view of Sete Cidades. Translated as Seven Cities, the name refers to the seven calderas found right on the western edge of the island (it could also be a reference to the fabled lost city of Atlantis). Here, we set off for a 15-minute walk to our first viewpoint from where we had a fantastic, clear view of the 'blue lake'. Legend has it that there was once a princess who happily roamed the fields and countryside of western Sao Miguel and during her adventures, she met a shepherd boy and they fell deeply in love. When the king found out, he was furious as she was already promised to a prince elsewhere. The princess cried so much that she was permitted one last rendezvous with the boy and she cried tears of blue to match her eyes and he cried tears of green to match his. Today, the two different coloured pools of tears (caldera lakes) are forever intertwined. We had a phenomenal view (with no cloud cover!), one of the most photographed in the Azores, looking down on the blue lake and various other craters, with the Atlantic behind. The next stop would be Newfoundland.

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We drove to a further viewpoint from where we could see both the 'blue' and 'green' lakes, separated by a bridge, after which we descended into Sete Cidades town itself for a brief walk around a typical Azorean neo-Gothic church.

Soon it was time to head for home, and keeping the south coast to our right, we desperately searched the ocean below for any signs of whales, arriving back at Hotel Caloura around 18:20. We quickly freshened up to meet for pre-dinner drinks at 19:00, as was becoming the norm!

Day 5: Morning Whalers Heritage, afternoon visit to Furnas

Tuesday 17 May 2022

Weather: Changeable, 18°C

With winds still curtailing our ability to get out onto the water, the majority of the group opted for a relaxing morning at the hotel or exploring Agra do Pau, the closest village. Three of us headed to headquarters however to learn about the whaling history of the islands. We visited a restored whaling vessel, that would have accommodated just six men. Only a metre or so wide, and two-thirds of the length of their sperm whale prey, we held harpoons and lances that would have been used to kill the creature before it was towed to shore for harvesting. Whaling only stopped here in 1984, although three more were taken in 1987.

The second part of our experience was to visit one of the vigia lookouts. Driving just along the coast in an easterly direction, we came to a small white wooden hut (imagine something along the lines of a tardis) perched right in the cliff edge. Here we met Nicole, who is employed full time to search for cetaceans in the seas below. Using a very high powered set of binoculars, she is one of a handful of vigias found along the north and south coasts. Hers is a real skill, honed with years of experience that takes huge mental strength. We took turns searching the seas below but to no avail and we left with great respect for her and what she does. We continued a little further along the coast to visit a lighthouse before meeting up with the rest of the group back at headquarters.

I was incredibly pleased to let them know that the weather for tomorrow seemed to be improving and that we were booked in for three whale watching excursions to try and make up for lost time, plus a further two on Thursday.

We then proceeded to drive northeast to the beautiful spa town of Furnas, stopping to visit a lakeside church along the way. Arriving at Furnas and passing numerous old villas, we made our way to our lunch spot, where we were to experience a local speciality, Cozido nas Caldeiras. Meat, yams and vegetables are slow-cooked in the ground, using geothermal energy for approximately 6-7 hours before being served with rice and bread. The group were split in their overall opinion of the feast!

After lunch, we visited Terra Nostra, a botanical garden with thermal springs. After a stroll around the immaculate gardens, some of us enjoyed a dip before taking a brief walk around town to photograph several fumaroles. Boiling mud, steam and a strong smell of sulphur later, we were even able to drink natural 'sparkling' water directly from a spring. Move over Perrier!

We made our way back to the hotel and you guessed it, met for pre-dinner drinks at 19:00.

Day 6: Morning whale watch, afternoon at leisure

Wednesday 18 May 2022

Weather: Changeable, 17°C

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Expectations were high this morning as we were picked up at 08:00 for our morning whale watching excursion. After signing in and waiting for new clients to finish their pre-departure briefing, we were kitted out with life jackets and waterproofs for those that wanted them and were in our 28 seater RIB by 09:00. We had a brief delay as two people were missing but were finally off by 09:25 ...it felt simply fantastic to be out on the water!

By 09:45, common dolphins were spotted off our starboard side but we were advised that sperm whales had been seen up ahead so we were going to prioritise seeing them. We reached the area at which they had last been seen, just after 10:00, and we waited for them to surface after a series of deep and shallow dives. A few minutes later, the hydrophone was lowered into the ocean to listen for signs of them but when there was no joy, we turned east around 10:20, to try our luck elsewhere. Our skipper put on an exhilarating burst of speed and we felt certain that another creature of the deep had been seen and we weren't wrong! One of our group saw a blow at 4 o'clock (times are used as compass points with the bow being 12 o'clock) and all eyes turned to our starboard side. There it was again, along with fluke prints. Finally, it surfaced at 10:35 and from its high, falcate (sickle-shaped) fin, we were able to identify it as a sei whale, the third-largest baleen whale on the planet. Notoriously tricky to follow, we were incredibly fortunate to be in the presence of not just one relaxed animal, but a mother and her calf! Keeping all eyes peeled as we never knew where they'd surface next, we had a few more glimpses of them (they are fast) before a small pod of common dolphins joined them and us, swimming under our bow and causing much delight onboard! At 11:05 we began to head for home, getting there shortly before noon.

We were advised upon disembarking that our 13:30 trip had unfortunately been cancelled due to increasing winds and that we'd be updated after lunch on the fate of our last trip planned for the afternoon. Lunch was taken at our original beach cafe overlooking the ocean and when we met back at base at 14:00, we found all remaining excursions could not take place either this afternoon or tomorrow. Disappointed, but appreciating that no one can control the weather, further contingency plans were made and we headed back to our hotel for a relaxing afternoon and agreed to meet for drinks slightly earlier at 18:45.

Day 7: Ponta Delgado

Thursday 19 May 2022

Weather: Changeable, 19°C

After bidding farewell to one of our party who was flying home today, we were collected from the hotel lobby at 09:00 and dropped at the marina area of Ponta Delgado approximately 20 minutes later. We had all decided that a day exploring the capital would be time well spent. It was grey but dry, and the forecast was for sunny skies ahead.

Seven of us proceeded west on foot, eager to find Grutas do Carvao, where it is possible to take a guided walk through an old lava tunnel. Helen rang once they opened at 10:00, only to find that they were fully booked for the day so, with maps in hand, we split up to enjoy the city.

The historic centre comprises a multitude of narrow, cobbled lava stone streets, with a charming mix of restored and run-down houses alongside small businesses and churches. The city gates overlooking the harbour are impressive and for a spot of serenity, look no further than the many immaculately kept gardens dotted around. The cafe at Jardim Antonio Borges proved popular and the garden also features bat caves, offering the chance to see the only endemic mammal in the Azores, the noctule bat. I heard them but didn't see them so they didn't make it onto the species list! Another peaceful spot was the Jardim do Palacio de Santana where wall lizards scurried around exotic tree species introduced in the 19th century for ornamental purposes and grey wagtails and Azores blackbirds went about their daily business. The people-watching was good as the city was preparing for a big festival this weekend and quite a few of the group enjoyed the shops.

Upon returning to the hotel, the wind had died down and the sun was shining so we enjoyed a drink outside on the terrace before our final dinner.

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Day 8: Departure

Friday 20 May 2022

Waking to a beautifully clear and calm morning, we soaked up the incredible ocean view from the restaurant one last time and said our goodbyes to the super staff who had looked after us so well during our stay. We were picked up at 08:20 and arrived at the airport 30 minutes later. Check-in was speedy and our 10:45 flight was on time, indeed we left 15 minutes early, enjoying lovely views of 'Ilha Verde' before flying west towards the mainland. Arriving two hours later, the group split in half as five had opted to extend their holiday with a Lisbon city break.

Those of us continuing to London had a quick lunch before making our way to the gate for an early boarding call as our aircraft was located at a remote stand. Just over two hours later, we were back in Blighty saying our goodbyes. Despite the weather not being on our side, and therefore seeing more of the island than the surrounding ocean and its inhabitants, we had had a great week.

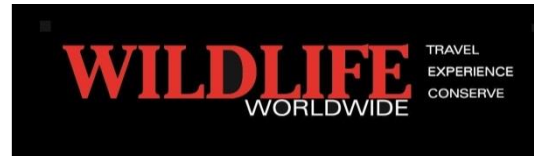
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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 6	Day 7
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>				
1	Cory's shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓		✓	
2	Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michaellis atlantis</i>	✓		✓	
3	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓		✓	
4	Azorean wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbas azorica</i>	✓			✓
5	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus domesticus</i>	✓			✓
6	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothchildi</i>		✓		
7	Azorean robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>		✓		
8	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		✓		✓
9	Azores chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>		✓		✓
10	Azores blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>		✓		✓
	MAMMALS	<i>MAMMALIA</i>				
1	Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	✓			
2	Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	✓			
3	Sei whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>			✓	
4	Common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			✓	
	OTHER					
1	Portuguese man-of-war	<i>Physalia physalis</i>	✓		✓	
2	Red rock crab	<i>Cancer productus</i>	✓		✓	
3	Wall lizard	<i>Lacerta dugesii</i>		✓		✓
4	Iberian green frog	<i>Hyla molleri</i>		✓		

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