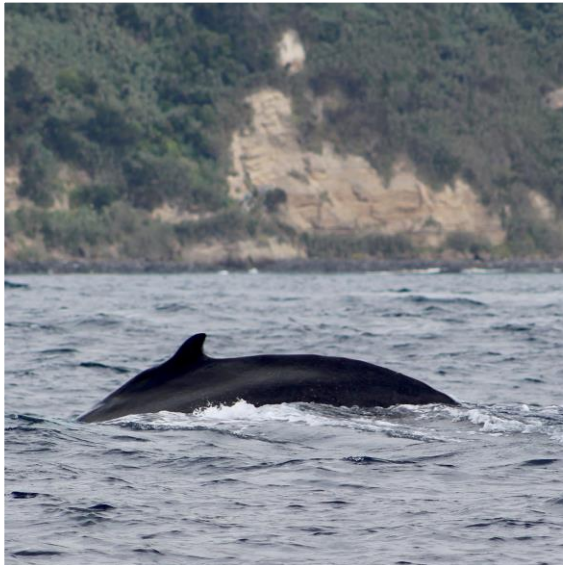


Tour Report

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

19 – 26 May 2023

Humpback whale



Orca



Sperm whale



Sei whale blow



Compiled by Helen Bryon

In spring, the Azores archipelago is an important stopping-off point for baleen whales migrating from their breeding and birthing areas in the subtropics to their summer feeding grounds in the Arctic. Plankton blooms in the nutrient-rich waters, while squid and fish maintain the resident cetaceans, such as sperm whales and a variety of dolphins.

This week-long itinerary on beautiful Sao Miguel Island explores the best of land and sea. Mornings are spent searching for marine life on shared RIB boat excursions (weather permitting) when the cliff-top lookouts (vigias) guide us to sightings. The afternoon excursions take in the island's volcanic features, including crater lakes, thermal springs, and black sand beaches.

Day 1: London Heathrow to Ponta Delgado

Friday 19 May 2023

Weather: mixed cloud and sunshine at our destination, 20°C

Tour leader Helen met the group arriving from Lisbon in Ponta Delgada. Introductions were made and our drivers, Alex and Gui, loaded up our two vehicles before we set off for Hotel Caloura, approximately half an hour away. The 'Isla Verde' shone in the late afternoon sun, as we passed red-tiled roofs on white-washed buildings and neat walls made from lava containing crows, vegetables, banana trees and beautiful gardens. Helen explained that the greenhouses lining the road were home to the only pineapples grown in Europe. Arriving at our cliff-top hotel, we admired the ocean views, and first impressions were very good. After a brief orientation, we arranged to meet for dinner.

Day 2: Whale watching and priolo quest

Saturday 20 May 2023

Weather: light cloud and a fresh breeze, 19°C

Breakfast was available from 07:00, during which one of our party informed us that he'd already seen dolphins when out exploring the headland in front of the hotel. We were off to a good start!

Meeting in the lobby shortly before 08:00, the group split across two vehicles for the 15-minute transfer east to Vila Franca do Campo. We were dropped off at the marina and signed in for our first whale watch, full of anticipation for what lay ahead. After an introductory presentation, covering the resident and migratory species we might encounter during our stay, we had a safety briefing and were kitted out with waterproofs and life jackets (these are provided and are good quality) before boarding our 28-seater RIB. We had been warned that it would be 'choppy' and indeed it was! The minute we left the harbour we went headlong into the waves and could immediately feel the swell of the ocean beneath us. Excitable squeals and wide smiles were ubiquitous, as we relaxed into the movement, letting our knees take the strain!

Twenty minutes into our journey we came across a large pod of short-beaked common dolphins. They were moving east alongside us, leaping through the waves (porpoising) on the hunt for food. On and on they went, with more joining from behind us, until we were surrounded by around 100 individuals including juveniles and calves. The young were slip-streaming their mothers, never leaving their side.

Learning that these dolphins only require a collective one hour's sleep over a 24-hour period (they rest for a few minutes here and a few minutes there throughout the day), we marvelled at their agility and athleticism. After 25 minutes they began to slow and we left them, continuing our journey in a south-easterly direction. An Atlantic flying fish appeared to our starboard side, captivating everyone as it soared across the water, hanging in a suspended manner for what seemed like an age! The propulsion required must have been incredible.

By this time, we were facing ever larger swells and although our cliff-top spotter had seen signs of sperm whales ahead, our skipper made the wise decision to turn around, riding the waves instead, for safety reasons. Settling into this new rhythm, the engine was revved and we were suddenly flying across the ocean as our onboard naturalist, Mary Lou, advised that signs of wildlife had been spotted elsewhere.

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Quite a few miles later, feeling utterly exhilarated by the ride, we spotted a larger boat up ahead which turned out to be a whale watching vessel from Ponta Delgada. It departed as we approached, leaving one other RIB in the area. Suddenly, between us and the other RIB, we saw a huge dorsal fin slice through the water as Mary Lou exclaimed, "Orca!" Scarcely believing our luck, we saw another two dorsal fins *and* they were coming towards us!

What followed was utter magic. For at least half an hour we watched as seven orca surrounded our vessel, seemingly oblivious to our presence, and gorged themselves on yellowfin tuna. Patches of oil released by their prey floated on the water's surface, and on more than one occasion the predators surfaced within metres of us. Every so often, and in perfect synchronisation, they would surface together and then twist their bodies back down to hunt once more. We sat enthralled.

Leaving the orca at around noon, we zoomed back to base, grinning like Cheshire cats at our good fortune. What a sighting. For many, it was the closest they'd ever been to this apex predator. Even more astounding was that just a few days earlier, Helen had been advised that orca are sighted perhaps five to eight times a season, yet we'd been blessed with an incredible sighting on our first excursion! Another flying fish completed an amazing morning and we walked to our nearby lunch spot, Casa do Praia, feeling on cloud nine! Grilled fish, Azorean salad, spicy chicken and mushroom risotto were on our delicious lunch menu, setting us up well for our afternoon excursion.

We set off in two vehicles once again, Alex and Sandra were to be our guides as we drove along hydrangea-lined roads to the northeastern part of the island. The only remaining native laurel forests are found in this area of the island, which is home to the Azorean bullfinch, an endemic species. On meeting our ornithologist guide, we were informed about the plight of the Azorean bullfinch (or priolo, as it is known locally) which was killed for many years due to its habit of eating orange blossoms - detrimental to the once-thriving local orange industry. Now protected, great strides are being taken to increase the number of breeding pairs.

We set off on a short walk through a forest of tall, dense Japanese cedar trees (introduced and invasive) before reaching the laurel forest, which was a sharp contrast with its low-lying, spread-out canopy. Walking amongst various other native species, we listened for the priolo's mournful call, then suddenly we spotted one perching on a branch almost directly above us. Most of the group had a good sighting, while others glimpsed it as it flew away. The bird was spotted again in the afternoon before we commenced our journey back to the hotel. We arrived at our accommodation at around 18:00, meeting for drinks and dinner an hour later. It had been a cracking first day!

Day 3: Whale watching and Fogo excursion

Sunday 21 May 2023

Weather: sunny spells with cloud, 19°C

After breakfast at 07:00, we transferred to Vila Franca do Campo, before heading out onto the water. The group had decided to split up across the RIB today to try out different positions. Once out of the harbour we had a slight swell, but nothing compared to the previous day. A pod of common dolphins was our first recorded sighting, but they dived fairly quickly after our arrival, so we continued east.

Close to Povoacao, we changed course, seemingly heading directly for land, when suddenly we spotted several dolphins leaping clean out of the water in unison right in front of our accompanying RIB. An excited shout of 'Speedy Gonzales!' from our marine biologist Sandra was quickly followed by clarification, 'Striped dolphins!' Ridiculously agile, the dolphins leapt through the air! They jumped clean out of the ocean repeatedly, one after another after another, absolutely delighting us in the process. Then a group of common dolphins joined them and we didn't know where to look. Dolphins everywhere. It was fabulous!

Then, just offshore from Ribeiro Quente, out of nowhere a dark behemoth shape surfaced right in front of us. It quietly sunk back down beneath the waves as quickly as it had appeared. Scarcely believing our eyes,

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we realised we had a humpback whale with us! Scanning the water in all directions to see where it might appear again, we were rewarded just a few minutes later with not one, but two small dorsal fins - a female and her calf. After a few fleeting glances the female fluked, indicating that she had begun a deeper dive.

As we headed home, we marked the occasion of a client's birthday with a raucous round of Happy Birthday, before pulling into the marina. The celebrations continued with a cake and candle produced after lunch.

Then Sandra and Gui drove our group into the clouds (literally) as we went to view our first crater lake, Lago de Fogo. The clouds lifted as we reached our second viewpoint. We started by visiting Caldeira Velha, a lush valley with natural thermal springs. A few of us went for a dip, while others enjoyed a short walk and/or a spot of amphibian photography.

Next up was an impressive waterfall, before reaching our final stop, Ribeiro Grande, on the north coast. Proceedings were halted briefly for birthday piña coladas overlooking the ocean. The locally grown pineapples were hollowed out in front of us, then the contents were liquidised with cream and rum. We sat in the afternoon sun, overlooking the ocean and enjoyed the spoils!

After our drinks, we took a brief walk along the black sand beach, dodging hundreds of washed-up Portuguese man-of-war. We also visited some tunnels which had been dug out of the lava during World War II (for strategic purposes in case of attack), before ending our second full day on Sao Miguel.

The festivities weren't quite over yet though, as we had champagne in the sun back at the hotel before dinner!

Day 4: Whale watching and Siete Cidades

Monday 22 May 2023

Weather: generally sunny with some cloud and light rain in the afternoon, 20°C

Calmer seas awaited us on Monday morning. Despite the forecast suggesting a cloudy day ahead, we also had gorgeous sunshine.

With many of the group inching forward on the RIB, we set off into the gently undulating ocean, heading south-east. Twenty minutes later, we were slowing down, so we all searched the surface of the ocean for blows, gatherings of Corey's shearwaters, or other signs of activity.

Suddenly, a small brown dorsal fin appeared in front of us. Then a distinctive 45-degree angle blow alerted us to the fact that we were with a sperm whale. Another day, another species! As we moved forward for a closer look, the whale rested on the surface. We were advised that it was likely to do this for around 8-10 minutes (on average) before arching its back, fluking its tail, and descending for 45 minutes or so into the deep, seeking its preferred prey of giant squid.

True to form, our two RIBs were able to bob alongside the whale for around seven minutes before it disappeared. Nicole, our cliff-top lookout, advised us to stay in the area as other whales had been seen. We waited 40 minutes for more whales to surface, then suddenly we were zooming across the water in a north-westerly direction having caught sight of two more. Other vessels had joined us by this stage, so we turned south to view another recently surfaced sperm whale. Four in one morning!

To avoid crowding any animals (our partners are affiliated with the IWC which strictly limits the number of vessels approaching a whale to three), we flew across the water towards Sao Miguel, stopping just off-shore to view a pod of common dolphins who were foraging and feeding. The Corey's shearwaters opportunistically flew with them and those that settled on the water had us giggling. They seemingly run across the water's surface whilst gaining momentum to take off. One client captured a picture of this perfectly!

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Shortly before heading back to the marina every morning, we circumnavigate Vila Franca Islet, affectionately known as the Princess Ring Island. This protected area is a breeding ground for common terns and Corey's shearwaters, so yellow-legged gulls are often in attendance, seeking opportunities to predate on eggs and chicks. The water was so clear that it crashed against the rocks in shades of vivid turquoise, a colour that reminded Helen of a Foxes Glacier Mint!

We had a different venue for lunch, which overlooked the islet. We basked in the sun, discussing all that we had seen so far.

Sanne and Gui arrived to transfer us to Sete Cidades, another scenic crater lake system located on the far western side of the island. We visited an aqueduct en route, then a viewpoint at the top of the crater which was devoid of clouds (hoorah!) so we could fully appreciate the scene below us. After enjoying the views, we drove into the town and had free time to wander around at our leisure.

We arrived back at the hotel at around 18:15, meeting for drinks and dinner after freshening up.

Day 5: Whale watching and Furnas

Tuesday 23 May 2023

Weather: cloud, light rain and a sunny afternoon, 20°C

Rain was forecast for the morning, so we waterproofed up before leaving the marina. A small swell greeted us that increased as the morning wore on. Although the eastern end of the island was clearly experiencing rainfall, the glare of the sun was strong on the ocean.

As we progressed, the wind picked up and the cloud cover increased, so it was befitting of the grey scene before us, that we saw our first uniformly grey dolphins, bottlenose! We added this new species to our list as they flew through the waves around us. They were rather haphazardly swimming in all directions so it was difficult to know where to look!

The bottlenose dolphins were substantially larger than the other species we had seen, with muscular bodies that intermittently dived and reappeared in different locations around our vessel. At one point they looked like they may be schooling fish, as they appeared to circle ahead of us, but then they took off to the northeast and we were not far behind.

We witnessed continued breaching from one individual and we 'oohed' and 'aahed' as the others porpoised alongside us. There were many youngsters in the group and we stayed with them until they began to tire and approach our bow to ride it. For forty minutes, we enjoyed the dolphins' company until the continued buildup of waves and cloud cover saw us moving closer to sheltered water near Sao Miguel's south coast.

The low cloud was causing headaches for our cliff-top lookouts, so we scoured the bays of the south coast, in their blind spots, searching for wildlife. Corey's shearwaters were everywhere and it was after 11 o'clock when we stopped in one bay and were asked to look up. There, perched on the edge of the cliff above us, was a small white building. A figure appeared outside it, waving. It was Felipe, our lookout. After waving back, we turned towards Vila Franca do Campo and headed home to base.

From there, we boarded our vehicles and set off to Furnas, along with an American couple who were joining us for the afternoon. We arrived half an hour later and Sanne and Sandra drove us straight to our restaurant, Vale de Furnas. We were about to experience a traditional Azorean feast of meat and vegetables, steamed by geothermal heat for around seven hours!

Afterwards, we visited Terra Nostra for an escorted walk around the botanic gardens. Two members of the group took a dip in the large thermal pool there. We then experienced more volcanic activity with a short walk around the town's fumaroles, before ending the day with a walk to a chapel overlooking the crater lake.

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We were dropped back at our hotel at 18:00, but our dinner was interrupted by the need to run outside to witness a most beautiful rainbow which had appeared over the headland. It was a beautiful evening and a few clients walked to the closest beach, a few hundred metres away.

Day 6: Whale watching and Azorean whaling history

Wednesday 24 May 2023

Weather: Rain and wind, clearing to mixed sunny and cloudy periods, 19°C

We were excited at breakfast, having spotted fins rising and falling by some rocks just offshore. A quick check through binoculars revealed that we hadn't been joined by any wildlife, but instead, a lone human was raising his flippers every time he dived! Despite this initial disappointment, we did what we had been doing every morning and put our wish list for the day out to the universe. We requested calm conditions, flying fish, a baleen whale and dolphins...this proved to be fortuitous!

A cloudy day had been forecast and indeed it was raining on the island as we sped south-west on our RIB. For us though, the sky was clear, the sun was shining and the ocean was clear and calm. It was a beautiful morning with perfect visibility at sea.

Within minutes, exclamations of "flying fish" were heard as one was spotted off our port side. A few minutes later, we passed through a large gathering of Corey's shearwaters and eagerly scanned the waters for fins amongst them (as they often associate with dolphins when feeding). It was another ten minutes before we found what we were looking for, bottlenose dolphins.

Travelling gently, and with grace through the water, a few of the bottlenose leapt clear of the ocean in unison and we laughed with delight. Suddenly, Daniel, our skipper, and Sanne, our naturalist, roared, "Baleen whale!" and at full throttle we raced ahead towards the blow. A minute or two later it blew again, directly up into the sky. The blow was not quite high enough to be a blue or fin whale, and once we caught sight of its dorsal fin, we identified the animal as a sei whale. Yet another new species! It was super relaxed, gliding across the surface in superb conditions, leaving fluke prints and blowing so we could follow its course. Our two RIBs were the only two vessels with it and we watched as it appeared and disappeared regularly just beneath the waves. Fabulous!

As another two RIBs came into the area, we took our leave, grinning widely, and rejoined the pod of bottlenose dolphins that we had seen earlier. They sped up and slowed down with us and we enjoyed their company for around twenty minutes. Suddenly, we sped up again and were told we were off to see yet another creature which turned out to be not one, but two sperm whales. We sighted another, but it dived so we went back to our original two who turned out to be a female and a calf. The calf bobbed up and down repeatedly, behaviour which suggested it was trying to feed from its mother.

We then spotted a sperm whale which was about to dive as we approached, so we inserted a hydrophone into the water to capture the sounds of it feeding. Multiple clicks were heard (a single whale sounds like a metronome when it is mapping its immediate surroundings through echolocation) so it was likely that we were within a matriarchal group spread out across the area.

The wind was picking up, increasing the swell, and the rain falling on Sao Miguel could clearly be seen from our position 5-6 miles offshore. We headed back towards land, but it wasn't over yet. A group of common dolphins swam across our path just south of Princess Ring Island, completing our sightings for the morning.

After lunch, we walked back to base for an afternoon of learning about the whaling history of the Azores. Mary Lou delivered a brief presentation and then we walked to a warehouse on the harbour to view an original whaling boat built in 1945, but that was still in use until the 1970s. It is now in the process of being restored to help preserve the cultural history of the area.

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As we walked back to HQ, we passed a local artisan who carves whales, dolphins and rays out of Japanese cedar wood and sells them on the waterfront. After a little retail therapy, Mary Lou and Sandra drove us along the coast to Ponta Garcia where we would meet Nicole, one of our lookouts. She had just directed two RIBs far below us to a pod of bottlenose dolphins, and although we could see the RIBs with our naked eye, the dolphins evaded us even when using her high-powered binoculars!

Arriving back at our hotel around 16:15, we all took advantage of a little downtime. Some walked to the local beach, others out to the headland in front of the hotel, and a few took the opportunity to simply sit and take in the views from their balconies. It really is a lovely spot.

Day 7: Whale watching and the science of cetaceans

Thursday 25 May 2023

Weather: Cloudy and wet, 19°C

The tall dorsal fin was unmistakable. Orca! We were barely twenty-five minutes into our morning whale watch and couldn't quite believe our eyes. Twice in one week? Wow. The orca cruised east along the south coast and we cruised right alongside them. Then they dived and we lost sight of them for a few minutes before suddenly, they surfaced behind us at our 4 o'clock (the bow of the boat is considered 12 o'clock), only a few metres away! The surge of adrenaline was immediate, with not a hint of fear. The orca calmly moved through the swell, in no hurry, and for 35 wonderful minutes, we drank them in, grins as wide as the ocean. The RIB fell silent as we watched and the wet start to our day faded into insignificance. We followed them at a responsible distance.

Leaving the orca to continue their journey, we turned west and ten minutes later were being approached by a super pod of short-beaked common dolphins. A conservative guestimate would be 300 individuals. We lowered the hydrophone into the water to enjoy the multi-sensory experience of hearing them as they cavorted around us. Leaping, breaching, bow riding, the lot! It was quite an experience and a marvellous end to our time on the water in the Azores.

A little soggy but very happy, we disembarked the RIB for the last time, enjoyed locally grown green tea, then walked the short distance along the esplanade to our lunch stop back at Casa de Praia. Gloria and Sofia, our waitresses, looked after us as we headed back towards HQ around 13:30.

Sanne was waiting for us and began her afternoon presentation on the Science of Cetaceans. She covered their evolution, then took us through the necessary adaptations that they have made for a life at sea (temperature control, dealing with water pressure, storing oxygen, the ability to get and keep fresh water in their system, feeding techniques, hunting techniques etc). It was a very informative couple of hours. Finishing with a conservation message, Sanne encouraged us to upload photos to happywhale.com and [flukebook](http://flukebook.com), in order to aid identification of individuals around the world. She finished with a brief quiz, testing our aural recognition of marine mammal communication. Trying to identify our belugas from our bottlenose dolphins simply by listening to their whistles and clicks was quite an entertaining experience!

Returning to Hotel Caloura around 16:00, we checked in online then prepared for our journey home. Helen read out a synopsis of the week when we reconvened for dinner and drinks. Falling asleep to the marvellous sound of roosting Corey's shearwaters, we reflected on a great week. We had been so fortunate with both the wildlife and the weather - and a great group to boot!

Day 8: Departure

Friday 26 May 2023

Weather: heavy rain to start followed by mixed cloud and sunny spells, 20°C

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Two of our party departed early, then at 08:00 the rest of us were collected from our hotel and dropped off at Ponta Delgada airport for our flight back to Lisbon. We left one client there, while the rest of us flew to Heathrow and said our goodbyes!

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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	MAMMALS	<i>MAMMILIA</i>							
1	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>		✓					✓
2	Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>				✓		✓	
3	Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			✓				
4	Sei whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>						✓	
5	Short-beaked common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
6	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					✓	✓	
7	Striped dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>			✓				
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>							
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	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
6	Eurasian blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

7	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓					
8	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Azores chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
11	Atlantic canary	<i>Serious canaries</i>		✓				✓	
12	Azores bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula marina</i>		✓					
13	Eurasian buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
15	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>							✓
	REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS								
1	Maderian wall lizard	<i>Lacerta dugesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Iberian green frog	<i>Pelophylax perezi</i>			✓				
	OTHER TAXA								
1	Red rock crab	<i>Grapsus adscensionis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Atlantic flying fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>		✓				✓	✓