

Tour Report Whales and Dolphins of the Azores 18 – 25 May 2025

Sperm whale



Striped dolphin



Common dolphin



Portuguese man o' war



Compiled by Alexa Kershaw

The Azores archipelago offers some of Europe's most exceptional whale watching opportunities. Along with the resident species, sperm whales, short-beaked common, bottlenose, and Risso's dolphins, our May excursions aim to coincide with the migratory passage of baleen giants such as blue, fin, sei, and humpback whales. The deep waters and abundant food supplies in the region attract these cetaceans as they journey from subtropical winter breeding areas to their feeding grounds in the high Arctic.

Throughout our week-long itinerary on the stunning island of São Miguel, our group experienced a unique blend of the island's rich natural beauty, fascinating wildlife, and cultural heritage. Each morning, we participated in shared whale watching excursions (weather permitting), with afternoons dedicated to exploring the island's spectacular volcanic interior. Despite occasional fog, the journey was filled with spectacular whale and dolphin sightings, immersive visits to geothermal wonders, and insightful encounters with local conservation efforts.

Sunday 18 May 2025

Day 1:

London Heathrow to Ponta Delgada

Weather: Sao Miguel overcast and a light drizzle. 17°C

Our tour leader, Alexa, met some of the group at London Heathrow, others in Lisbon, and the final member upon arrival in Ponta Delgada. We departed London in fair weather and after a brief moment of turbulence, landed in an overcast Lisbon. Our onward flight to Sao Miguel was delayed by 30 minutes, giving us a little more time to navigate Lisbon Airport.

Thick mist shrouded the island as we landed, obscuring much of the view, but we received a warm welcome from Stephanie of Terra Azul. A 30-minute drive east brought us to Agua de Pau, where we settled into Hotel Caloura, our home for the next seven nights. This beautiful clifftop hotel offers sea views from every room. After settling in, we arranged to meet for dinner. Despite the long day, we all enjoyed the buffet meal and sampled our first of the delicious desserts before heading to bed, excited for the week ahead.

Monday 19 May 2025

Day 2:

Vila Franca do Campo, Furnas and Terra Nostra

Weather: Moderately windy, heavy fog and rain, clearing later to a brighter afternoon. 18°C

We gathered for breakfast at 7:15 am, admiring the beautiful 180° view from the restaurant, even through the rain and fog. At 8:15 am, we were picked up and driven along the scenic coastal route, 15 minutes east, to Vila Franca do Campo and Terra Azul's whale watching headquarters. After checking in and signing our daily waiver, we joined the briefing covering ocean conservation, safety, and the main species we might encounter. Following a short wait, word came from the clifftop lookouts (or vigias) that the weather made it unsafe to go out to sea that morning. The group chatted and decided to return to the hotel, where everyone enjoyed coffee and a second breakfast. A few members opted for a short walk down to the beach to explore the local area. Alexa spotted a pair of blackcaps mating in the hotel grounds.

Our guide for the day, Julia, collected us at 11:15 am and drove us east to the beautiful town of Furnas. Our first stop was at Lagoa das Furnas, a crater lake, where we took a short walk to visit the chapel, Capela de Nossa Senhora das Vitórias. On the far side of the lake, we could see steam rising from the fumaroles where our lunch was cooking. Our "cozidos," an Azorean dish of meat and vegetables slow-cooked by geothermal heat for seven to eight hours, had been in the ground since 5:00 am. Two sharp-eyed group members spotted a common waxbill in the restaurant grounds. After lunch, we visited the town's fumaroles, steaming in the sulfur-filled air amid pools of boiling water and mud. Our final stop for the afternoon was the botanical gardens of Terra Nostra, a tranquil haven lush with both native and introduced flora, its quiet beauty interrupted only by the wondrous calls of Perez's frogs.

We returned to the hotel at 5:30 pm, then met at 7:00 pm for a delicious dinner before retiring to the peculiar calls of Cory's shearwater coming in to their burrows in the cliffs at dusk.

Tuesday 20 May 2025

Day 3:

Whale Watching and Fogo Excursion

Weather: Overcast and damp, fog in the south, sunshine in the north. 19°C

We enjoyed breakfast at 7:00 am before Alex collected us at 8:15 am for the drive to Vila Franca do Campo. We were full of anticipation, wondering if the weather had improved enough for us to head out to sea. Just after 9:00 am, the lookouts reported persistent fog, making a successful trip uncertain. However, we were given the option to go out for 30 minutes to assess conditions, and everyone agreed to take the opportunity.

Soon after we departed, fins were spotted ahead: a group of about ten bottlenose dolphins slowly travelling. As we approached the resident species, they came close to the boat, travelling alongside us and allowing us to admire their nearly four-metre length, including one young calf. After a while, several dolphins put on an acrobatic display, leaping clear of the water to the delight of everyone on board. Reluctantly, we decided to leave them and continue our search.

Radio chatter between the skipper and lookouts directed us southwest. Passing Hotel Caloura and continuing west, we soon saw a fin break the surface, much larger than the dolphins. We quickly identified it as a sei whale, the third-largest rorqual whale, capable of reaching up to 19 metres in length. After seeing the fin break the surface, we followed the direction the whale was travelling by using the fluke prints that appeared on the surface of the water. Made by the fluke's movements underwater, it headed in a steady direction south. While we were tracking the whale, another sei whale surfaced further to the right – two sei whales!

As we travelled south, watching their blows each time they surfaced, a third sei whale appeared ahead. All three were travelling at speed in a southerly direction. We stayed with them for 30 minutes. Clearly on a mission heading south (despite this being the time of their northerly migration), they weren't travelling as fast as they could; sei whales can reach up to 34 mph. Our skipper and guide, Miguel and Mateo, did an excellent job manoeuvring around the whales and explaining the behaviours that we observed.

Having travelled a significant distance, it was time to leave the whales and head back. Just as we neared the harbour, a group of 60+ short-beaked common dolphins appeared. We slowed the engines and watched in awe as they travelled around us, leaping clear of the water and displaying the beautiful hourglass markings on their flanks. It was fantastic to see another resident species and note their much smaller size compared to the bottlenose dolphins we'd seen earlier.

Just offshore, we circumnavigated Vila Franca do Campo Islet, a 4,000-year-old caldera and a breeding site for Cory's shearwaters and common terns. Red rock crabs scuttled close to the shoreline, and all too soon, we were back at the marina. We enjoyed some local green tea before making our way to the Black Whale restaurant for lunch, where we tried the local "Queijadas," Portuguese cheesecake tarts. After lunch, Jackie took us north for our afternoon excursion to Fogo, another of São Miguel's many scenic crater lakes. The heavy fog cleared as we descended on the island's north side, offering beautiful views from Santa Barbara surfers' beach. We explored old bunkers and lookouts used during WWII and marvelled at the glistening Atlantic waves.

After visiting a waterfall where Jackie told us about the invasive yellow ginger-lily and we went to the thermal hot springs of Caldeira Velha. Some group members enjoyed a dip in the different temperature pools while others listened to Iberian green frogs calling and watched a goldcrest beautifully displaying among the trees. At 5:00 pm, we returned to the hotel (and the thick fog at sea level) before meeting for dinner two hours later.

Wednesday 21 May 2025

Day 4:

Whale Watching and Sete Cidades

Weather: Overcast and fog in the morning, brightening in the afternoon. 20°C

Waking to overcast skies over land and sea, we met for breakfast at 7:00 am and were on our way to Vila Franca do Campo an hour later. We positioned ourselves towards the back of the boat, where there is less motion, and headed east along the coast. After about 20 minutes, we encountered a group of around 20 short-beaked common dolphins, comprising many juveniles and a young calf. We observed some sexual behaviour and significant socialising as they swam belly-up, their ventral sides glistening white through the water. With the engines off, we deployed the hydrophone and listened to the dolphins' echolocation clicks and whistles.

One group member noticed something peculiar in the water. We slowed down for a closer look and discovered a juvenile loggerhead turtle, about 12 inches long, with spikes along its carapace's spine, which will disappear with age. We also had wonderful close-up views of Portuguese man-of-war, recognisable by their balloon-like floats rising to six inches above the waterline.



Heading further south, we later encountered a second, larger group of 35+ short-beaked common dolphins, foraging for food and leaping close to our boat. After spending some time with them, it was time to head back towards shore via the islet.

Back on shore, we enjoyed some green tea before walking to the Black Whale restaurant for lunch. Afterwards, Marylou collected us for our afternoon excursion to Sete Cidades. Driving west for an hour, we stopped at a vantage point where the fog and clouds lifted just enough to reveal the blue and green twin lake, Lagoa das Sete Cidades, situated in the crater of a dormant volcano. The largest body of water in the region, and one of the archipelago's most important freshwater resources, it consists of two small,

ecologically distinct lakes connected by a narrow, bridge-crossed strait. We continued to a higher viewpoint before descending to the small town. Our final stop was a five-kilometre tunnel, completed in 1937, that leads to the Atlantic, allowing water to be discharged when the lake becomes too full.

After quick stops at Lagoa de Santiago, another of the seven lakes, and a 15th/16th-century viaduct shrouded in atmospheric fog, we made our way south back to the hotel. The fog had finally lifted there, and we enjoyed sunshine and blue skies before meeting for dinner at 7:00 pm.

Thursday 22 May 2025

Day 5:

Whale Watching and Priolo Quest

Weather: Brighter, cloud over the island, sunshine out to sea. 19°C

After breakfast at 7:00 am, a few of us scouted the hotel grounds for birds; we heard Azores blackcaps singing, saw Azores grey wagtails displaying beautifully, and spotted our first noctule bat. Some of the group who were up around 5:30 am had heard the Cory's shearwater calls at dawn.

We were collected at 8:15 am and taken to the camp. Some group members opted to sit at the back of the boat this morning for more space to move around. It was wonderful to be heading out in sunshine after several days of overcast skies. Soon, we heard the lookout guiding us east and saw a blow, followed by a tall, sickle-shaped fin. It didn't take long to realise this was a sei whale, and soon there was another, and then a third! We spent a short while with these incredible "greyhounds of the sea" as they travelled west before deciding to leave them and continue our search. As we moved, we marvelled at the Cory's shearwater gliding past us over the water; they are much larger than the Manx Shearwater typically seen in the UK.

Thirty minutes later, we changed course and, with excited anticipation, headed towards another blow - this time, the indicative 45° blow of our first sperm whale! As we neared, we realised there was more than one: two sperm whales close by, both breathing at the surface. We had a brief look before they dived, one raising its flukes beautifully before disappearing into the water for a typical 40-minute dive.

We were just deciding whether to wait for them to resurface when the lookout spotted a larger blow in the distance. We headed back east, and the excitement grew as we realised the blow was much taller, nearly ten metres high! It was incredible to realise we were, in fact, seeing a blue whale! Some saw the blow, while others saw the mottled colouration of the largest creature on the planet's back against the backdrop of Sao Miguel island as it dived. We waited with much anticipation, scanning in every direction, and about ten minutes later, it surfaced ahead of the boat, taking three breaths in quick succession, its distinctive tall blow filling the air. Again, some saw the blow while others managed to catch a glimpse of the whale's back before it dived again. Breathtaking—quite literally! We decided to leave the blue whale and head back towards the area where we'd been watching the sperm whales. Right on cue, 40 minutes after they dived, one surfaced close to us, resting on the surface in mirror-calm waters. The light danced, creating beautiful reflections as we watched it lay motionless, taking breaths, before it slightly raised its head, arched its back, and took a deep dive, lifting its tail flukes out of the water.



Slowly heading back towards the islands, one of our group mentioned not having seen dolphins today... less than five minutes later, we encountered a small group of short-beaked common dolphins, much to everyone's delight!

After a quick lap of the islet, we returned to camp and went to the Black Whale for lunch. One of our group decided to have a restful afternoon at the hotel, so we said farewell after lunch. The rest of us set off in thick fog with our guide Julia to the island's far east, to the Priolo Interpretation Centre, where we met our SPEA guide (the Portuguese equivalent of the RSPB). We were given a tour of the information centre and then enjoyed a fascinating hour-long guided walk through the native laurel forest, learning about the work being done to protect this endangered endemic species. We didn't see the priolo, but we did see noctule bats flying between the trees and thoroughly enjoyed our afternoon. The fog had lifted and we drove back under clear skies, with Azores buzzards overhead, admiring the luscious vegetation: hydrangea, agapanthus, lily, and azalea lining the narrow country roads as cows grazed the lush green fields.

We returned at 6:00 pm and had a short while to rest before dinner at 7:00 pm.

Friday 23 May 2025

Day 6:

Whale Watching, Azorean Whaling History and Vigia Visit

Weather: Cloudy with sunny spells. 19°C

After our usual breakfast at 7:00 am, we were collected at 8:15 am and taken to Vila Franca do Campo. Most of the group opted for the very front of the boat today, hoping the calm seas would minimise the motion. Under direction from the lookouts, we headed east and soon came across three sei whales (we passed dolphins on the way but didn't stop, knowing larger whales were ahead). We spent some time with the sei whales, appreciating their long, sleek bodies and tall, hooked dorsal fins, located about two-thirds along the back. Notably, a sei whale's dorsal fin usually appears at the same time as its blowhole when it surfaces to

breathe. They do not arch their backs or show their flukes before diving; they simply sink below the surface.

After half an hour, we left them and returned to find the dolphins we'd passed earlier. It was a super pod of over 150 striped dolphins, our first encounter with the species. These gregarious animals can travel in groups of several hundred. They are highly social, fast, and acrobatic, leaping, spinning, and somersaulting clear of the water as they travel. True to form, they were incredible, changing direction, herding fish, and leaping clear of the water, accompanied overhead by common terns and Cory's shearwater. At one point, the entire horizon was leaping dolphins, their beautiful triple stripes extending from their eyes. Magical!



After spending time thoroughly captivated by the striped dolphins, we slowly made our way back towards the harbour. As we got closer to shore, we encountered a group of around eight bottlenose dolphins, our third species for the day. There were two young calves in the group, surfacing in the echelon position. Used by mother-calf pairs, this position allows the calf to swim close to the mother, benefiting from her hydrodynamic wake, which reduces the effort required for swimming and enables them to stay close. One dolphin offered great views of pseudo-stalked barnacles on its dorsal fin. We were captivated by the dolphins as they approached the boat before continuing to feed at depth. The size difference between the bottlenose dolphins and the much smaller striped dolphins was, again, very apparent.

During our circumnavigation of the islet, we had great views of red rock crabs and incredibly fluffy yellow-legged gull chicks before heading back to camp and lunch at the Black Whale. After lunch, we returned to camp for a fascinating talk by Marylou about the history of whaling in the Azores. Official whaling began in the Azores on Faial in 1857 and on São Miguel in 1947, primarily targeting resident sperm whales. Spermaceti oil was crucial for lubrication and lighting, while ambergris was used in perfume, bones for corsets and umbrella handles, and meat for livestock, whilst their teeth were carved into scrimshaw. Whaling was banned in 1986 by the IWC memorandum, with the last whale killed in 1987. Commercial whale watching commenced in 1989. The nine clifftop lookouts (vigias) once used to direct whalers now guide whale-watching skippers. We then met Nicole at one of them, where she let us track a pod of bottlenose dolphins through high-powered binoculars. After a quick visit to the nearby Ponta Garca

Lighthouse, we returned to camp to join our second boat trip of the day.

Again, most of the group chose to sit at the very front of the boat. As we headed out, it was noticeably cooler than the morning, and the wind had picked up a little. We headed east and after some time, found two sei whales, a mother and juvenile, on their migration from the warm equatorial waters to the cooler waters of the North Atlantic, where they spend the summer feeding. Although sei whales usually surface three times to take a breath before diving, these whales were taking a single breath and then diving, swimming below the surface and creating visible fluke prints that we were able to follow. As we travelled with the two sei whales, Cory's shearwater wheeled around close by, offering spectacular views of these magnificent petrels. We then headed southwest several miles out to sea and encountered a mixed group of 50+ short-beaked common dolphins and 50+ striped dolphins, feeding together. Common terns and Cory's shearwater joined the feeding frenzy from above. The dolphins were clearing the water, leaping in the air to the delight of everyone on board. After a while, the striped dolphins, true to their nature, made several fast changes in heading and then disappeared from sight, but the common dolphins stuck around and entertained us for some time, coming alongside the boat as we watched them underwater before they surfaced right next to the boat's tubes. When we eventually decided to leave, a smaller group of common dolphins accompanied us, bow-riding our boat.

As we headed northeast, we found a group of eight to ten bottlenose dolphins, again with a young calf or two, approaching the boat and captivating us with their antics.

Finally, it was time to head to the islet and back to the harbour before making our way back to the hotel and straight to dinner, where we all warmed up with soup and a hot meal. Everyone was ready for an early night in preparation for our final boat trip tomorrow morning.

Saturday 24 May 2025

Day 7:

Whale Watching and the Science of Cetaceans

Weather: Cloudy and damp, then brightening through the afternoon, sunshine later. 18°C

Meeting for breakfast at 7:00 am, we were collected at 8:15 am for our final journey to Vila Franca do Campo. Positioned at the front of the boat, we headed south and travelled quite a long way before encountering a group of 50+ short-beaked common dolphins feeding. There were some tiny calves among the group. Some were bow-riding, catching a free ride in the pressure wave created by our boat, and we watched them through the beautifully clear water, seeing them distinctly on both sides. Huge numbers of pale brown Cory's shearwater were gliding over the surface this morning, and Alexa spotted one, noticeably smaller and blacker, Manx shearwater too.

We stayed with the dolphins for some time before a message from the lookouts directed us to travel at speed to the west. It was exhilarating at the front of the boat as we travelled past Ponta Delgada and further south, passing a group of 30+ short-beaked common dolphins on our way.

Eventually, we slowed down and with much excitement, wondered what had led us so far. Ahead of the boat, we saw the dorsal fin of a sei whale breaking the surface. It had some quite distinctive nicks and notches in its dorsal fin. We stayed with the whale for some time, watching it surface to breathe. We followed the fluke prints appearing on the surface of the water as the whale travelled beneath. It was a solitary sei whale, and all too soon, it was sadly time to head for home.

We made a final loop of the islet and then, just as we approached the harbour, our captain opened the throttle and turned the boat into a huge doughnut, much to the delight and exhilaration of all passengers.

On our way to lunch, we visited the wood carver in the Old Harbour and admired his carvings of whales and dolphins, made from invasive Japanese cedar. The wood is so light, making it easy to pack a few in your luggage to take home! We enjoyed our final lunch and thanked and bid farewell to the staff at the Black

Whale, who had looked after us all week. One group member opted for an extra boat trip after lunch and was rewarded with another blue whale encounter!

The rest of us made our way back to camp, where Ines gave a very interesting presentation on the 'Science of Cetaceans'. Covering their evolution from land to marine mammals, adaptations to life at sea, threats, and conservation, it was a fascinating talk that concluded with ideas on how we can all make decisions in our lives to help protect the oceans. At 4:00 pm, we headed back to the hotel in beautiful sunshine, with time to rest and pack before our farewell dinner at 7:00 pm. During dinner, we said goodbye to one guest who was leaving early the following morning to explore some of the other islands in the archipelago, and we were treated to a spectacular sunset on our final night.

Sunday 25 May 2025

Day 8:

Departure

Weather: Sunshine. 19°C

Last night's sunset was followed by a beautiful sunrise this morning. After breakfast at 7 am, we were collected by Marylou for our journey to the airport. We thanked her and all the staff at Terra Azul for looking after us so well during our time in the Azores. Travelling home via Lisbon, we were thankful for a lovely group, calm weather (albeit rather foggy) and fabulous sightings.

Images by: Alexa Kershaw and Jane Gallie (close-up of the common dolphin)

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Checklist for Whales & Dolphins of the Azores



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	BIRDS								
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				✓			
2	Cory's shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					✓		
4	Azores buzzard (Endemic ssp)	<i>Buteo buteo insularum</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
5	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓		✓			
6	Atlantic yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Eurasian collared dove (Introduced)	<i>Streptopelia Decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Azores wood pigeon (Endemic ssp)	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
11	Azores grey wagtail (Endemic ssp)	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Azores blackbird (Endemic ssp)	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Azores blackcap (Endemic ssp)	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>		✓	✓	H	H	✓	✓
14	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Azores starling (Endemic ssp)	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓
18	Atlantic canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>		H	✓	H	✓	✓	✓
19	Azores chaffinch (Endemic)	<i>Fringilla moreletti</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Common waxbill (Introduced)	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>		✓					
21	Azores goldcrest (Endemic ssp)	<i>Regulus regulus azoricus</i>			✓				
22	Manx shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>							✓

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MAMMALS									
1	Blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>					✓		(✓)
2	Sei whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
3	Sperm whale	<i>Megaptera novaengliae</i>					✓		
4	Bottlenose dolphin (Resident)	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			✓			✓	
5	Short-beaked common dolphin (Resident)	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Striped dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>						✓	
7	Azores noctule bat (Endemic)	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>					✓		✓
8	European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					✓		
REPTILES & Amphibians									
1	Loggerhead turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>				✓			
2	Madeiran wall lizard	<i>Lacerta dugesii</i>			✓				✓
3	Perez's frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓
BUTTERFLIES, MOTHS & OTHER									
1	Azorean large white	<i>Pieris brassicae azorensis</i>			✓			✓	✓
2	Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>				✓			
3	Garden bumble bee	<i>bombus ruderatus</i>				✓			✓
4	Honey bee	<i>Apis mellifera</i>				✓			✓
OTHER TAXA									
1	Portuguese man of war	<i>Physalia physalis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
2	Red rock crab	<i>Grapsus adscensionis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓