

Tour Report Whales & Dolphins of the Azores 17 – 24 May 2026

Short-beaked common dolphin



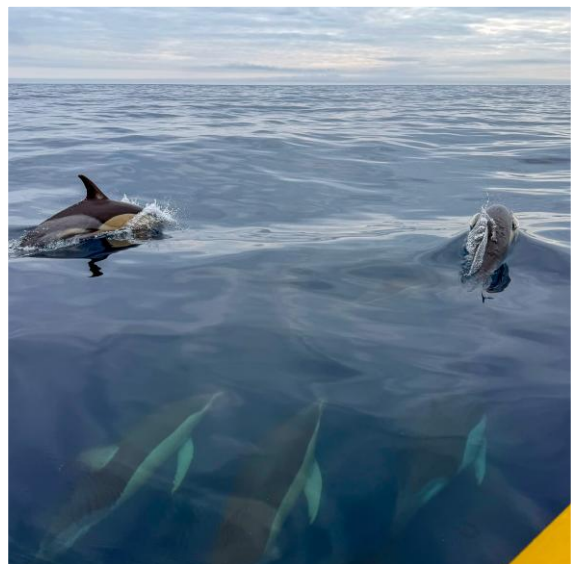
Portuguese man o' war



Red rock crab



Short-beaked common dolphin



Compiled by Alexa Kershaw

Sunday 17 May 2026

Day 1:

London Heathrow to Ponta Delgada

Weather: Overcast with sunny spells at our destination, 17°C

Our tour leader, Alexa, met most of the group at London Heathrow, and the final member upon arrival in Ponta Delgada. We departed London in cool, fair weather and landed in sunny Lisbon. We had plenty of time to navigate Lisbon Airport and enjoy a coffee while getting to know each other in the departure lounge before our onward flight to São Miguel.

Cloud and sunshine dappled the island as we landed, allowing us our first views of São Miguel and we then 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 and sits above cliffs where Cory's shearwaters roost.

We arranged to meet for dinner after settling into our rooms. 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 18 May 2026

Day 2:

Whale watching, Furnas and Terra Nostra Excursion

Weather: Moderately windy, sunny spells and dry, closing in later to a misty afternoon. 17°C

After some rain during the night, we gathered for breakfast at 7:00 am, admiring the beautiful 180° view from the restaurant. At 8:00 am, we were picked up by Daniel 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, despite the wind, the conditions were OK to head out.

Most of the group opted to sit at the back of the boat where there is more stability, while a few chose to sit at the front. We headed out in a southerly direction and not long after we departed the harbour, there was much anticipation and excitement as fins were spotted ahead: a small group of short-beaked common dolphins. We slowed the engines and watched as they travelled around us. Over the next few minutes, it became clear that there were more dolphins than we first thought and soon we were seeing fins breaking the surface in every direction, a group of over 200! There were adults, juveniles and some tiny young calves. We spent 30 minutes with the group, watching as they surfed under the waves and leapt clear of the water.

When it was time to leave the group, there was chatter over the radio between the skipper and the lookouts and under their guidance, we made our way to the east. Eyes peeled, we waited, scanning in anticipation, searching in every direction for a glimpse of the whale that had been spotted. We didn't find the whale but something else caught our attention, a fin, flopping around on the surface of the water. It was an ocean sunfish, one of the largest bony fish in the world! Ocean sunfish can be as tall as they are long and can grow to lengths of 180cm, although this individual was rather small. We all got a glimpse of its dorsal fin flopping on the surface before it sank down deeper into the water and disappeared. We decided to continue our search all the way to the east of the island as far as the small civil parish of Faial da Terra. Although the coastline was spectacular, we didn't spot any more cetaceans so we turned and headed for home. As we travelled into the wind, the journey back was rather bumpy, especially for the people seated near the front!

Just offshore, we circumnavigated Vila Franca do Campo Islet, a 4,000-year-old caldera, formed by a single explosion and a protected breeding site for Cory's shearwaters and common terns. Red rock crabs scuttled close to the shoreline, and soon, we were back at the marina. We enjoyed some local green tea before meeting our guide for the afternoon, Ciara, who drove us east to the beautiful town of Furnas.

Our first stop was for lunch, where we enjoyed "cozidos," an Azorean dish of meat and vegetables steamed by geothermal heat for six to eight hours, which had been in the ground since 5:00 am. After lunch, we visited the town's fumaroles, steaming in the sulphur-filled air amid pools of boiling water and mud before continuing on to the botanical gardens of Terra Nostra, a tranquil haven lush with both native and introduced flora. While some of the group enjoyed a relaxing soak in the cloudy orange waters of the spa, others explored the tranquil gardens, marvelling at the wondrous calls of Perez's frogs.

Our final stop for the afternoon was 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, through the shrouding mist, we could just make out the steam rising from the fumaroles where our lunch had been cooked.

We returned to the hotel at 5:45, then met at 7:30 pm for a delicious dinner before retiring.

Tuesday 19 May 2026

Day 3:

Sete Cidades (whale watching cancelled)

Weather: Overcast and foggy in the morning, closing in to heavy fog and rain in the afternoon. 17°C

After enjoying a slightly more leisurely breakfast this morning due to the boat trip being cancelled because of the weather, some of the group joined Alexa for a morning walk down to the beach to explore the shore and watch for birds.

We were collected at 11:30 am and driven to Vila Franca do Campo where we enjoyed the short walk through the beautiful town square to the Black Whale restaurant for lunch. We tried the local "Queijadas da Vila", Azorean pastries featuring a thin, flaky shell wrapped around a rich, creamy, and mildly sweet centre. Baked to perfection, these small custard-like cakes are traditionally dusted with powdered sugar.

After lunch, Sophie collected us for our afternoon excursion to Sete Cidades. Driving west for an hour, we were hopeful that the forecast poor weather might clear enough to allow us some glimpses of the blue and green twin lakes, Lagoa das Sete Cidades, situated in the crater of a dormant volcano. Our first stop at the aqueduct known as the Carvão Wall, constructed in the 1830s, was quite exhilarating, fog rising upwards as it was blown through the arches by the wind.

Unfortunately, the fog only became heavier as we climbed through the twisting mountain roads to the "viewpoints", and we were left to imagine the scene! 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. While some of the group sheltered in the vehicle, others explored the abandoned and dilapidated multi-million-pound five-star hotel overlooking the lakes, Monte Palace. It's an eerily photogenic place, covered in modern graffiti while slowly being reclaimed by nature.

Descending to the small town, we had a short walk around the lake before deciding to warm up and dry off in a fabulous café with cake and locally grown white tea before making our way south back to the hotel. We had some time to relax before meeting for dinner at 7:00 pm.

Wednesday 20 May 2026

Day 4:

Priolo Quest (whale watching cancelled)

Weather: sunshine and cloud, strong winds, 18°C

We enjoyed another leisurely breakfast this morning due to the boat being cancelled on account of the windy weather. As the rain gradually subsided, some of the group joined Alexa on a walk to the coast east of the hotel. By the time we reached the shore, the sun made a very welcome appearance after yesterday's fog, as we watched the powerful waves crash on the black basalt beach and rocks. As we made our way

down the winding narrow streets, we spotted Madeiran wall lizards, peeking out and basking in the warmth of the sun. We also spotted our first butterflies today, the Azorean large whites also making the most of the sunshine after a few overcast days.

We were collected at 11:30 am and taken to the Black Whale for lunch, before setting off with our guide Emma, for our afternoon excursion to the Priolo Interpretation Centre in the east of the island.

Crossing the island, we admired the luscious vegetation: hydrangea, agapanthus, lily, and azalea lining the narrow country roads as dairy cows grazed the lush green fields and Azores buzzards wheeled overhead. On reaching the north coast, we headed east to an area of indigenous forest, home to an endemic bird, the Azorean bullfinch. Known locally as the Priolo, it is now confined to the far eastern extremities of the island.

We were welcomed by our SPEA (the Portuguese equivalent of the RSPB) guides Luis and Lucia and given a tour of the information centre before joining Luis for a fascinating hour-long guided walk through Japanese cedar woodland and on to the native laurel forest, learning about the work being done to protect this endangered endemic species.

After years of persecution in the 1800s due to their penchant for orange blossom when the orange industry was booming, habitat loss is now one of the key threats to this non-migratory species. We didn't see the Priolo, but we did see other passerines, including the Azores robin and common waxbill and thoroughly enjoyed our afternoon walk in the sunshine. We returned at 6:00 pm and had time to rest and freshen up before dinner at 7:30 pm.

Thursday 21 May 2026

Day 5:

Fogo Excursion (whale watching cancelled)

Weather: Overcast morning, fog and rain later. 15c

During breakfast, we received word from Stefanie that the sea conditions were still too poor for a boat trip, so we decided to make the most of the dry morning and walked to the beach to the west of the hotel. The beach was littered with washed-up Portuguese Man-o'-War along with By-the-Wind Sailors, two species of strange and beautiful colonial hydrozoans, made up of small individual animals called zooids. We also found violet sea snails, a unique, pelagic marine mollusc that spends its entire adult life floating upside-down at the ocean's surface. Famous for their delicate purple shell and a "bubble raft" used for flotation, they primarily feed on drifting cnidarians like By-the-Wind Sailors and Portuguese Man-o'-War.

After lunch at the Black Whale, Marina drove us north for our afternoon excursion to Fogo, another of São Miguel's many scenic crater lakes, this one completely untouched with no human habitation at all. The heavy rain and fog obscured the first two viewpoints but as we neared the highest vantage point, 800m above sea level, the rain stopped and the fog cleared enough for us to see Lagoa do Fogo to our east, with tall cedars, tranquil waters and a grey sand beach, and the town of Ribeira Grande to the north.

Winding our way down to the northern aspect of the island, we drove to Salto do Cabrito, a spectacular waterfall and hydroelectric plant where we were greeted by incense trees, Atlantic canaries and a pair of obliging Azores grey wagtails.

As we continued our journey, the rain returned and we arrived at the thermal hot springs of Caldeira Velha to a heavy downpour. No one felt inclined to have a dip in the different temperature pools, so instead we visited the information centre and walked through the vibrant, dense and tree-fern-filled ravine.

Our last stop for the afternoon was Santa Barbara Beach in Ribeira Grande, the surfing capital of São Miguel, located on the north coast. We explored old bunkers and lookouts used during WWII and marvelled at the glistening Atlantic waves before rain made us retreat to the vehicle and head for home. We gathered for dinner at 7:00 pm, enjoying another great meal and talking well into the evening.

Friday 22 May 2026

Day 6:

Azorean Whaling History, Science of Cetaceans and Tea Plantation (whale watching cancelled)

Weather: Heavy fog, sunshine in the north. 17c

After breakfast, we were collected and taken to Vila Franca do Campo. Despite waking to heavy cloud and fog, we were hopeful we'd be going out to sea today as the weather was forecast to clear for our two boat trips today, but after a short while, word came that it wasn't safe to head out in the heavy fog. Instead, Claudia gave a talk about the history of whaling in the Azores. Official whaling began in the Azores on Faial in 1857 and on São Miguel in 1945, primarily targeting resident sperm whales. Whaling was not a traditional career here; instead, villagers would down their tools and leave their day jobs whenever news of a whale reached them. 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 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, historically using fires, clothes, and flags to signal the boats, now guide whale-watching skippers using VHF radios.

We then went out to the harbour where Miguel showed us his long-term project to restore an old whaling boat. It was fascinating to hear about his motivation for the restoration: to acknowledge and retain the sociocultural history of this whaling nation. We then drove to one of the lookouts at Ponta Garca where Nicole explained her role in guiding the whale watching boats to the whales from her clifftop vantage point. Her high-powered binoculars were of little use today, visibility being just a few metres, highlighted as fog rolled in through the window of the lookout hut!

After lunch at the Black Whale, we made our way back to camp, where Claudia gave an interesting presentation on the 'Science of Cetaceans'. This covered their evolution from land to marine mammals, adaptations to life at sea, threats, research methods and conservation.

The persistent heavy fog meant the afternoon boat trips were also cancelled. After hearing there was sunshine on the north coast, we decided to make the most of the afternoon and drive to the Gorreana Tea Plantation. After crawling through the foggy mountain roads, we descended to the north and were met by glorious, warm sunshine! We explored the beautiful fields of Europe's oldest tea plantation, where *Camellia sinensis* is cultivated and processed using centuries-old traditions. After enjoying several cups of the black and green tea, we drove to a miradouro above Porto Formoso where lush green fields extended down to the sea and the glistening waters of the Atlantic, before heading back to Hotel Caloura, where the fog returned.

After dinner, we went to bed to the sound of Cory's shearwater calling from their burrows.

Saturday 23 May 2026

Day 7:

Whale watching - 3 boat trips

Weather: Heavy fog, clearing to sunshine, then cloud. 17c

We gathered for breakfast at 7:15 am, somewhat disheartened by the thick fog that greeted us once again and worried that our final chance to get out to sea would be thwarted by the weather. We received word from Stefanie that we'd be collected at 8.15 am and should hope for the best... We arrived at the camp to thick fog in the harbour, signed our daily waiver and then, to our great excitement, received word from Filipe, one of the lookouts, that the fog had cleared to the east and we would be heading out to sea!

The sea had calmed since the wind earlier in the week and we set off in thick fog, feeling somewhat like the

Pirates of the Caribbean. Some of the group opted to sit at the front of the boat today, hoping the calm seas would minimise the motion, while others chose the relative stability of the back. Soon after we departed, we spotted fins ahead: a group of around 10-12 bottlenose dolphins slowly travelling. Although a number of the group were juveniles and young calves, it was still easy to see how much larger they are than the common dolphins we'd seen on our last boat trip, the adults reaching nearly four metres in length. As we approached the resident species, they came close to the boat, travelling alongside us, allowing us to admire their robust, dark grey bodies as they moved through the calm water, lifting their heads clear of the water and slapping their tail flukes on the surface.

Radio chatter between the skipper and lookouts directed us further to the east, although in the thick fog, it was hard to get a sense of direction and we could actually have been going anywhere! We had wonderful close-up views of Portuguese man-o'-war, recognisable by their balloon-like floats rising to six inches above the waterline.

As we approached the northeast coast, the fog finally began to clear and we saw our first large blow and a long, dark body resting at the surface, our first sperm whale! A moment later, we saw another, another, and then another - a group of four of the largest of the toothed whales, including a young calf and a noticeably larger male. Both sexes have massive, blocky heads, but a mature male's head becomes disproportionately larger and more robust. As we watched, they remained calmly at the surface, exhaling and inhaling to oxygenate their blood and recover from their extreme deep dives, hunting for squid.

One individual repeatedly raised its bulbous head clear out of the water. While the young calf remained at the surface, the others dived, undertaking long, deep, foraging dives. Sperm whale calves remain at the surface because they lack the physiological capacity to dive to deeper depths and wait for adults while "babysitting" pod members protect them.

We saw the arch of their backs as they dived, lifting their enormous tail flukes and disappearing down to the deep waters below, with the beautiful backdrop of Nordeste behind. As we watched the sperm whales, a group of 30+ striped dolphins approached, our third species of the day. 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, giving great views of their beautiful triple stripes extending from their eyes. After a while, the striped dolphins, true to their nature, made several fast changes in heading and then disappeared from sight.

Our skipper and guide, Miguel and Diane, did an excellent job manoeuvring around the whales and dolphins, explaining the behaviours that we observed. Having travelled a significant distance, it was time to leave the whales and head back to camp via the islet, where we had great views of red rock crabs and incredibly fluffy yellow-legged gull chicks. We were relieved to see that the fog was clearing to the south of the island, too.

Our vehicle was waiting to take us to the Black Whale for a rather rapid lunch, before our second boat trip of the day. Heading out, we soon encountered a group of 15-20 bottlenose dolphins, spread out travelling slowly east, a mother and calf surfacing together, the calf 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. Alexa pointed out the pseudo-stalked barnacles that could be seen trailing from some of the dolphins' dorsal fins.

We made our way back to the northeast of São Miguel, where Filipe was watching 15 sperm whales from the headland at Nordeste. Although the sea wasn't quite as mirror calm as it had been earlier, we soon spotted the indicative 45° blow of a sperm whale. As we neared, we realised there were more; three sperm whales close by, breathing at the surface. We watched until they dived, one raising its flukes beautifully before disappearing for a typical 40-minute dive. While in the same area, we found another two sperm whales and then a group of four. One particularly curious individual kept lifting its head out of the water, giving us beautiful views of its singular blowhole on the left side of its head. As time was getting on, we left the whales and started our long journey back to camp.

Most of our group joined the final boat trip of the day, departing just before 6.00 pm, while two guests decided to make their way back to the hotel to relax before dinner. The sea had calmed once again and we set off in mirror-calm waters, sunlight and clouds reflecting off the surface.

Shortly after leaving the harbour, we encountered a group of 60+ short-beaked common dolphins, our fourth species of the day. 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 the resident species and note their much smaller size compared to the bottlenose dolphins we'd seen earlier. The further we travelled, the more apparent it became that there were hundreds of common dolphins, spread out across the ocean as far as the eye could see, foraging for food, socialising and leaping clear of the water.

Travelling south, on several occasions, we shut down the engines and lowered the directional hydrophone into the water to glimpse an auditory insight into the ocean below. Firstly, we heard the whistles and echolocation clicks of the dolphins and then later we heard the characteristic rhythmic clicks of a sperm whale. As the clicks became louder, we received word that the other Terra Azul boat was with the sperm whale close by, so we made our way over and joined them, watching as the whale rested at the surface before lifting its flukes and disappearing into the deep waters below.

As we made our way back towards camp, surrounded by common dolphins, we marvelled at the Cory's shearwater rafting on the surface and gliding over the water, offering spectacular views of these magnificent petrels. We made one final circumnavigation of Vila Franca do Campo Islet and returned to the harbour, where Stephanie greeted us and thanked us for our patience during a week of exceptionally challenging weather. In high spirits and thankful for a fabulous day on the water, we made our way back to the hotel and straight to dinner, where we joined the others and warmed up with soup and a hot meal. Everyone was ready for sleep after an amazing but tiring final day.

Sunday 24 May 2026

Day 8:

Departure

Weather: Sunshine. 18°C

We woke to sunshine and clear skies this morning and after breakfast at 7.00 am, we were collected for our journey to the airport. We thanked the team and all the staff at Terra Azul for looking after us so well during our time in the Azores. Those sitting in window seats on the aeroplane were treated to fabulous views of the island and a spectacular view of the volcanic lakes as we took off.

Travelling home via Lisbon, we were thankful for a lovely group and a wonderful week in the Azores during some challenging weather, but nonetheless, with fabulous sightings.

Images by Alexa Kershaw (pod of short-beaked common dolphins) & Julie Wright (short-beaked common dolphin, Portuguese Man o' War, red rock crab)

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Checklist for Whales & Dolphins of the Azores



	Common Name	Scientific Name	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	Azores buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo insularum</i>			✓		✓	
4	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓				
5	Common coot	<i>Fulica atra</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	<i>Streptopelia Decaecto</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Azores grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Azores blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Azores blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>	✓		✓			
13	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
14	Azores starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓		✓	
17	Atlantic canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
18	Azores chaffinch	<i>Fringilla moreletti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Common waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			✓			
20	São Miguel goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus azoricus</i>	✓		✓			
21	Madeiran storm petrel	<i>Hydrobates castro</i>		✓				
	MAMMALS							
1	Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>						✓
2	Bottle-nosed dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncates</i>						✓
3	Short-beaked common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	✓					✓

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4	Striped dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>						✓
5	European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓		✓	✓	
	REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS							
1	Madeiran wall lizard	<i>Lacerta dugesii</i>			✓			
2	Perez's frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>	✓		✓		✓	
	BUTTERFLIES, MOTHS & OTHERS							
1	Azorean large white	<i>Pieris brassicae azorensis</i>			✓		✓	
2	Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>					✓	
	OTHER TAXA							
1	Portuguese man o' war	<i>Physalia physalis</i>				✓		✓
2	Red rock crab	<i>Grapsus adscensionis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
3	Ocean sunfish	<i>Mola mola</i>	✓					
4	By-the-wind sailor	<i>Velella velella</i>				✓		
5	Violet sea snail	<i>Janthina janthina</i>				✓		
6	Common carp	<i>Cyprinus carpio</i>	✓	✓				