

Tour Report

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

12 – 19 May 2023

Sperm whale



Short-beaked common dolphin



Risso's dolphin



Cory's shearwater



Compiled by Helen Bryon

In spring, the Azores archipelago is an important stopping-off point for baleen whales while migrating from their breeding and birthing areas in the subtropics to their summer feeding grounds in the Arctic. In addition, the islands are home to resident species such as sperm whales and various dolphins. This week-long itinerary, based on beautiful São Miguel island, spends mornings out on the water searching for marine life on shared RIBs, before returning to shore for lunch, with afternoons spent exploring the island itself.

Day 1: London Heathrow to Ponta Delgada

Friday 12 May 2023

Weather: sunny, clear skies at our destination, 20°C

Introductions were made between the group at our London Heathrow departure gate and we pushed back 20 minutes behind schedule. Making up time in the air, we had a short but pleasant transit through Lisbon, meeting the final members of our party who had arrived from Manchester. Our two-hour flight to Ponta Delgada passed quickly and we arrived to a clear, sunny and balmy evening. We were met by Alex and Guy, who drove us in two vehicles, for half an hour or so along the south coast towards the small, clifftop village of Agua de Pau. We passed cows grazing in fields, next to pristine white-washed bungalows with red-tiled roofs, while the ocean glittered to our right and we took in a thousand shades of green (São Miguel island is known as Isla Verde, after all)! The roads were well maintained and lined with hydrangeas, azaleas, roses, agapanthus, morning glory, lantana, Jersey lilies and more. We arrived at our beautiful accommodation, the Hotel Caloura, and after a speedy check-in and brief orientation by Helen, we agreed to meet for dinner almost immediately, leaving time to settle in afterwards. An early night was then had by all in anticipation of the week ahead.

Day 2: Whale watching and priolo quest

Saturday 13 May 2023

Weather: clear skies, 20°C

Waking to a clear sky and calm sea (breakfast was available from 07:00), we were promptly collected at 08:00 for our transfer east to Vila Franca do Campo, just 15 minutes away. There, at the marina, we signed in for our first whale watch and had a detailed introduction to what species to look out for, as well as a safety briefing. We were then kitted out with wet weather gear (for those that hadn't brought their own) and life jackets. We left additional belongings securely in the office, to be collected after our outing and boarded our 28-seat RIB with three rows of two seats at the front (the bumpiest area), followed by further rows of three seats abreast. We had chosen to sit at the back for a smoother ride.

We were welcomed by the skipper, and Nicole came on the radio to introduce herself. She was our cliff-top spotter for the day, who would be in constant contact with us, reporting and guiding us to any signs of activity spotted through her high-powered binoculars. The lookouts, or *vigias*, is a throwback to whaling days (whaling ceased here only in 1984) when this system was used for spotting sperm whales.

At 09:00 we were off! Common terns flitted around us, soon followed by Cory's shearwaters as we hit open water. By 09:20 we came across our first sighting, a group of around 25 or so short-beaked common dolphins. They were foraging and we were fortunate enough to see that the group contained a number of young. Leaving them after 15 minutes, we continued east along the southern shore of São Miguel and at 09:50, we had our first large cetacean, a sperm whale! It was cruising along the surface and dived after five minutes, fluking as it went. At 10:00, we came across another that also fluked before diving, so we decided to put a hydrophone into the water to track its sonar clicks as it descended. We sat in the sun, listening to the clearly audible whale searching for food far beneath the surface. Continuing east, at 10:20 we had another new species: bottlenose dolphins. They were actively feeding and porpoising, diving and surfacing regularly.

At 10:45, two more sperm whales were spotted by a second RIB, but they had started another dive by the time we got to their location. It appeared we were amongst a matriarchal group that was feeding. At 10:55, after an exhilarating burst of speed across the water, we were rewarded with our last sperm whale of the morning.

On returning to the marina, via Princess Ring Island (a volcanic crater just offshore where we watched yellow-legged gulls loitering with intent to steal eggs laid by nesting common terns and Cory's shearwaters), we walked to a nearby restaurant, the Casa de Praia, for a lovely al fresco lunch in the sun. Grilled fresh fish (dorado today) served with new potatoes and salad was the choice of the majority of the group, with a few opting for Azorean salad. Vegetarian options were also available.

At 13:15, we set off on a private *priolo* quest. Alex, our Portuguese marine biologist from this morning, was our guide and our route to the north-eastern part of the island was once again lined with hydrangeas about to erupt into flower and many, many grazing cows (dairy farming is big business here)! The island was being shown off to perfection in the bright sunshine. Blue sky and constant ocean views contrasted beautifully with the verdant greenery. It was glorious! After 75 minutes, we reached the island's remaining laurel forests where the endemic Azores bullfinch, known locally as the *priolo*, may be found.

Alighting from our vehicle to the sound of birdsong in the Japanese cedar trees all around us (beautiful but an alien invasive), we met the resident ornithologist who introduced us to the *priolo*, its dietary and breeding habits, as well as the conservation efforts being made to preserve the species. Oranges were big business here in the past and the *priolo* would feast on their flowers, so they were considered pests and killed accordingly. Now protected, we set off for a stroll through the laurel forest, looking for them. We were shown various native and endemic species of vegetation as we walked, stopped and listened for our target. We were unsuccessful in our quest, but it had been a lovely afternoon regardless.

We headed for home via a high viewpoint on the south eastern side of the island. As we pulled up, one client excitedly pointed out a *priolo* sitting on a wall literally right next to our vehicle. Isn't that just typical?! Unfortunately we didn't all see it, but the views were stupendous; common buzzards rode the thermals below us and we enjoyed seeing more of the island as we were driven home.

We met for dinner at 19:30 and enjoyed the buffet style, as there was plenty of choice and some wonderful desserts!

Day 3: Whale watching & Lagoa do Fogo excursion

Sunday 14 May 2023

Weather: mainly sunny with scattered cloud and light rain at times, 19°C

Another 07:00 breakfast was followed by departure from the hotel at 08:00. Once again, we signed in for our morning whale watch and were soon skimming across the waves searching for wildlife. Heading south initially, by 09:40, we were in the company of a new species, Risso's dolphin. Distinguished by their large size and pale bodies, which are covered in scarring from fighting with other dolphins and also from the beaks of their squid prey, they were resting on the surface on either side of our vessel. Counting around 10 individuals in all, we learned how they whiten with age.

Heading east, we saw a gathering of shearwaters and accompanying them, a small pod of common dolphins. As we continued right past them, we hoped that something a little larger may be coming our way! Our wish was granted at 10:10, when we encountered our first sperm whale of the day. A few minutes later, we saw a tiny fin and realised we had a calf with us too. We stayed with it, hoping that Mum would return to the surface from feeding earlier rather than later to reunite with her offspring. When both disappeared however, we made our way back to the marina.

Our guides this afternoon were Saane and Sandra. Boarding two vehicles, we drove central eastern highlands to view Lagoa do Fogo (Lake of Fire) from various viewpoints. Although it was often shrouded in cloud, we were lucky with the weather and continued our journey to Caldeira Velha. This fluvial valley is filled with tree ferns, birdsong and the sounds of Iberian green frogs. There are thermal springs there, cold and warm, and two of us decided to take the plunge. It was lovely! With the others taking in the serenity of the area, or photographing amphibians, we all reconvened and visited a nearby waterfall and finally, Ribeira Grande on the north coast, which is known for its surfing and its black sand beach. We visited a few tunnels built into the lava during World War II as defence against potential attack due to the island's strategic location (despite Portugal's neutrality).

Arriving home in bright sunshine just before 18:00, we met for drinks on the sunset terrace and basked in the evening's warmth until 20:00-ish, when we went in for dinner.

Day 4: Whale watching & Siete Cidades

Monday 15 May 2023

Weather: mainly sunny with some cloud, 20°C

What a morning! The sea was as calm as some of us had ever seen it and, switching position to be at the front of the RIB, we headed south into the sunshine. Only 20 minutes later we were with a group of Risso's dolphins. Although we were advised that they were the same pod we'd seen yesterday, their behaviour couldn't have been more different. Gone was the resting on the surface, slowly and carefully dipping in and out of the surf; today was a different kettle of fish (if you'll excuse the pun!). Racing through the water, they showed their bulbous foreheads and pale bodies (they were a bachelor group), sometimes lifting themselves right out of the water, tails and all. As they moved swiftly east, we wondered if they were heading away from danger, or protecting territory. The reason soon became clear.

After 20 minutes they dived and we made an about-turn, moving back towards the entrance to the marina. As we approached, distant telltale fins sliced through the water and we soon found ourselves surrounded by a large pod of bottlenose dolphins (plus one spotted dolphin - seen by our marine biologist and later confirmed). Bow riding, darting underneath the RIB, surfacing literally right next to us, making a few leaps here and some wonderful breaches there, they kept us entertained for nigh on half an hour. Their bellies turned pink (blood rushes apparently to the vessels there when they're active) and we were enthralled by their proximity and athleticism. We oohed, we aahed, and we grinned!

We were on for a hat-trick however, as just five minutes after they left us, we were joined by their smaller and incredibly agile cousins, common dolphins. The water clarity was startling and we watched them dart all around the RIB, their pale yellow sides clearly visible as they swam in and around us underwater. Another half an hour in their company and the endorphins were flowing as we slowly commenced our journey back, once again circling Princess Ring Island.

Once on terra firma, we indulged in a little retail therapy as Helen had checked that a local artisan whom she met last year, was still crafting and selling whales, dolphins, rays and fluke tails made out of the alien invasive wood, Japanese cedar. Purchases in hand, we drove to a local restaurant with a sea view, Sabores da Vizinha, before being driven west, in two vehicles, by Saane and Daniel.

Daniel, a skipper, kept us hugely entertained with his big personality and Saane impressed us with her incredible knowledge. Originally from the Netherlands, she moved to Azores in 2017 and has loved it ever since. We were on the far western edge of the island and took in various viewpoints of the stunning Sete Cidades, a series of crater lakes, in glorious sunshine. According to legend, some believe this area may be the lost city of Atlantis. We then drove down into and through Sete Cidades town before heading for home, taking in wonderful views and making a brief visit to an aqueduct as we went, arriving back just after 17:30.

Caipirinhas on the lawn followed, and then dinner. It had been a great day!

Day 5: Whale watching & Furnas

Tuesday 16 May 2023

Weather: mainly sunny with scattered cloud and light rain at times, 21°C

We couldn't believe our luck with the weather, as we woke to yet another clear and windless day. Once again the ocean was like a mill pond as we set off, travelling east along the southern coastline, staying very close to shore. Slowing down and waiting in one area, we kept eyes and ears peeled as our cliff spotter had seen a blow but hadn't been able to identify it. When nothing surfaced and we could see no other signs of activity, we turned south and at 09:55 came across a small pod of Risso's dolphins.

Leaving them to continue resting five minutes later, we zoomed south-west as something 'larger' had been spotted. It was a little choppiest away from shore, and the trip out to sea - further than we had been all week - was best described as 'exhilarating'! For a brief minute or two, a few common dolphins rode with us off on our port side before we were distracted by a blow ahead. The telltale wrinkled skin, shining brown in the sun, alerted us to the fact that we were in the company of a sperm whale. We were in line with Ponta Delgada so had travelled some way west to find the animal. We had travelled in tandem with another RIB and left the scene when a few other vessels from Ponta Delgada approached. We watched the giant fluke disappearing before the whale dived into the depths, then made our way back east towards Vila Franca do Campo.

A quick turnaround back at base saw us loading into two vehicles with our guides for the afternoon: Sanne and Sandra. Two Canadian ladies joined us and we travelled the half hour or so to Furnas, a picturesque village set in heart of a volcanic crater. Driving on leafy roads and past a large turquoise crater lake, we reached our lunch stop where fish was not on the menu. Today we were to experience a traditional Azorean dish unique to this area, the *cozido de Furnas* consisting of meat and vegetables cooked in a large pot for seven hours or so, using steam produced by geothermal heat. The result is a smoky concoction of sausage, beef, chicken, potatoes, carrots, cabbage and spinach. Vegetarian options were also available.

After lunch we visited the Terra Nostra Garden. We split up to wander through this botanical extravaganza and a few of us enjoyed a dip in the very warm thermal spring. We then walked around the town's fumeroles, barely able to avoid the sulphurous smell (!) and took in pools of boiling mud, drank natural sparkling water from taps in the rock, and ended with a walk to a Gothic church overlooking a lake. Another sunny evening saw us home by 18:00 and gathering on the lawn, as ever, for pre-dinner drinks.

Day 6: Whale watching & Azorean whaling history

Wednesday 17 May 2023

Weather: Rain and moderate winds, clearing to mixed sunny and cloudy periods, 21°C

It was a misty start to the day and rain fell during our transfer to Vila Franca do Campo. It cleared once we reached the marina, but we knew that the wind had picked up and, as being forewarned is forearmed, we kitted ourselves out in wet weather gear and set off shortly after 09:00. Just ten minutes later we were surrounded by a relatively large and spread out pod of common dolphins, with a few bottlenose dolphins amongst them for good measure. Encounters between the two species are not always amicable, but no aggression was shown today. Quite a few juveniles were seen and we watched them leap through the choppiest sea.

After 15 minutes with them, we headed south-west as some whale blows had been spotted. Half an hour later, after a somewhat bumpier and wetter ride than yesterday, we were due south of Ponta Delgada once again. We waited in the swell for a few minutes before a blow was seen off the starboard bow. As we moved towards it, a second, smaller blow could also be seen and we realised that we were in the company of an adult sperm whale and a calf. After a few minutes, the adult female dived, fluking as she went, and we lost sight of the calf. Turning east, we headed back towards home as the wind dropped, making for calmer seas and bright sunshine.

Walking to our beachside restaurant, the Casa de Praia, for lunch, we enjoyed a return to fresh grilled or breaded fish for most people, and Azorean salad for others.

This afternoon we were to learn about the history of whaling in the Azores. We started by driving east with our guides, Mary-Lou and Sandra, along the south coast to Ponta Garca. Here we visited Felipe, our clifftop spotter, and saw his lookout, the Vigia da Furada. We learned more about his role and how he applies his 20 years of experience to spot whales on a daily basis, which requires vast amounts of mental stamina. He spends around 9-10 hours every day scanning the ocean and directing boats to cetaceans that are sometimes far offshore, and in difficult conditions. However without these lookouts, whale watching boats would be scouring vast areas of ocean completely blind.

Our group then split into two, with three quarters of people returning to the hotel for some down time, while the rest returned to the whale watching base for a presentation on whaling history. We then visited an original whaling boat (a fraction of the size of a sperm whale, the preferred target species), in the process of being restored and maintained. By just after 16:00 we got back to the hotel and yes, you guessed it, met for drinks before dinner!

Day 7: Whale watching and the science of cetaceans

Thursday 18 May 2023

Weather: Cloudy with intermittent sun, a light breeze, 20°C

Our heading this morning was south-east and we flew across the ocean in a light swell. Coming across a small pod of common dolphins resting on the surface, we continued at speed, only to perform a rather exciting U-turn that culminated in us coming across a larger pod of more active common dolphins. After spending ten minutes with them, we resumed our original direction and at 10:00, stopped to lower the hydrophone into the water to listen for whale activity. Hearing nothing, we continued, and around 20 minutes later spotted an amalgamation of Cory's shearwaters on the water ahead. Suddenly, right in the midst of them, common dolphins appeared from almost every direction, porpoising, slapping and flying through the waves. We were clearly amidst a feeding frenzy! The atmosphere on board was excited and jolly, and we spent nigh on half an hour enjoying the antics around us, watching a variety of behaviours and trying to get an idea of the size of the pod (our naturalist settled on around 300). Described by one client as 'like being on an Attenborough set', it was a case of not quite knowing where to look to take in all the activity around us.

Later, as we returned to base, we came across two common dolphins lazily cutting through the waves and then suddenly we were delighted to see a flying fish seemingly suspended in thin air, for what seemed like an age, just off our starboard side. This proved to be a real highlight!

We walked to lunch at the Casa de Praia one last time and after a leisurely meal with the odd spot of rain continued to our final activity, a presentation from Sanne on the Science of Cetaceans. Starting with their evolution and necessary adaptations for a life at sea, she covered their ability to move through water efficiently, how they regulate temperature, how they get fresh water, how they deal with fluctuating water pressure, and how they store oxygen. She then took us through the classification of orcas around the world and finally, whale conservation and what we can all do to help on a personal level.

Arriving home just after 16:00, the group had time to pack and prepare for their flights home tomorrow. By 19:00 we were at the pool bar meeting for final drinks before dinner.

Day 8: Departure

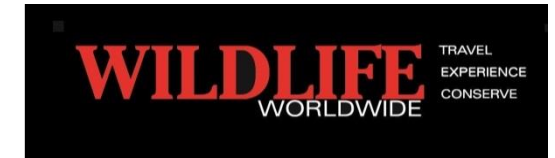
Friday 19 May 2023

Weather: Cloud, rain and intermittent sun with a moderate breeze, 21°C

Breakfast at 07:00 was followed by check-out, and the group were ready for the airport transfer at 08:00. Ponta Delgada is a small airport and by just half an hour later, all clients had dropped off their bags and said their goodbyes to Helen, who was staying on to await the arrival of the next group later in the day.



Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	MAMMALS	<i>MAMMALIA</i>							
1	Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
2	Short-beaked common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncates</i>		✓		✓		✓	
4	Risso's dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>			✓	✓	✓		
5	European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓					
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>							
1	Cory'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>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Common waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrid</i>		✓					
15	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			✓				
	REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS	REPTILIA & AMPHIBIA							
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>							✓