

AZORES CETACEAN TOUR

- Defying Atlantic Storms To Search For Big Baleens



Pico Mountain.

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1 Introduction

The main objective of this short trip was to find and get good views of Blue Whale. I'd seen this iconic species once before in Chile, but only at very long distance through a telescope from an on-shore clifftop location. I wanted to get up close and personal!

I was also hopeful of snagging at least one other good cetacean, possibly a Sei Whale or even a Bryde's Whale. Both are on the Azorean menu at this time of year. Any other cetaceans that came along would be gratefully received!

The centre of operations was the small town of Madelena on Pico Island, which is accessible by ferry from Horta on Faial Island.

2 Logistics

The ground arrangements were organised by CetaceanWatching Azores Lda who put a package together including six nights at the Hotel Carevalas in Madelena on Pico Island, ferry passage to and from Horta on Faial Island and, of course, the actual whale-watching itself. They were extremely easy and pleasant to deal with and I would rate them highly. You can book an identical itinerary through operators like Naturetrek but it will cost a bit more than booking everything independently.

I flew from London Gatwick to Horta on Faial Island via Lisbon, using Monarch and SATA/Air Azores.

The Hotel Caravelas is a fairly comfortable, medium-price tourist hotel with about a three star rating. It is OK and convenient for the CW offices which are only a hundred metres down the seafront. There are other B&B options but given the potential language issue and the need to get transport to and from CW each day I couldn't be bothered to look at them.

Eating options in Madelena are not extensive but I found three or four places where lunch and dinner were available for around Euro 20 per day all in.

3 The Whale-watching

The actual whale-watching is conducted from rigid inflatable boats (RIBs) of which CW have two: "Kometa" and "BWA". Both operate in conjunction with a network of shore-based spotters called "vigias" with whom they are in continuous radio contact. When the spotters, from their elevated hillside positions on Pico and Faial spot cetaceans they guide the RIBs toward the target. It works extremely effectively and it is very rare for a trip to produce no cetaceans at all.

The RIBs offer the advantage of speed – once a target is spotted the skipper can accelerate towards it at speeds of up to 45 knots. But they are, it has to be said, very uncomfortable. The ride is bumpy and you get thrown about quite a lot and get showered in spray. After three hours on one of these most people will be saddle-sore. After two trips in the same day you can hardly walk! But it is worth it. You get very close to big cetaceans, often ten metres or so and get fantastic views. Bigger boats couldn't get so close simply because the animals wouldn't tolerate it.

CW say that binoculars are unnecessary but I would advise people to bring them. Only on the roughest days is it impossible to use them and, usually, they are helpful.

4 Results

I got four sightings of Blue Whale including a mother and calf pair. We saw Blue Whale breaching and tail-slapping and got incredible and prolonged views at close range. I lost count of the Fin Whale total. We saw them at ridiculously close range (one metre from the side of the boat!). There was also one Sei Whale (fairly briefly) and one Sowerby's Beaked Whale (seen underwater swimming under the RIB). Dolphins were scarce but we had four or five sightings of Common Dolphin.

I wasn't looking for birds but Cory's Shearwater were common. Roseate Terns were around the harbour most days and I recorded one Azorean Buzzard.

Other miscellaneous sightings included Loggerhead Turtle (three times), Portugese man-o'-war (common) and Clouded Yellow Butterfly. There were also a few small lizards which I didn't try to identify.

5 Day by Day Record

Saturday 13th May

I rose at the inhuman hour of 03.30am to catch the early flight from Lisbon to Horta, having arrived in Lisbon the evening previously. The first leg, from Lisbon to Ponta Delgada (on the Azorean island of San Miguel) went smoothly enough but the second, (from Ponta Delgada to Horta was delayed). I eventually arrived in Horta and was met by my taxi which took me the short distance to the ferry terminal. I just had time to catch the 10.45 ferry to Madalena on Pico Island. The thirty minute crossing, in light drizzle, produced only a few Cory's Shearwaters and Yellow-legged Gulls though I have seen dolphins in this area before.

The weather was poor and deteriorating. Visibility was impaired by a heavy sea mist and the drizzle continued unabated. The outlook was very bad indeed with strong winds (30 knots plus) forecast for the following day. I was already fearing a wipe out.



Rain, fog and gales; the view of Madelena Harbour from the hotel.

However, when I pitched up at the CW offices at about 13.00 I discovered that there had been a trip that morning and that they'd seen Fin Whales and a Blue Whale (and some Common Dolphins to boot). To my pleasant surprise there was the possibility of a second trip out that afternoon with a proposed "pitch inspection" at 14.00. The wind was starting to pick up (as forecast) but visibility was improving. At least the "vigias" might be able to spot the whales we would be struggling to reach!

To my relief the decision was made to go at about 14.15. We anticipated very difficult conditions but our group was determined to try if at all possible. Inshore we encountered a sea state of around 4-5 with a slight swell. The drizzle had stopped for the time being and, for a while, things didn't look too bad. But, as we got further out, the swell grew and the sea state worsened. It wasn't long before we were bobbing about like a cork in a washing machine. With each dip in the swell our visibility was shortened to less than a hundred metres while at each peak we momentarily had a panoramic view of acres of angry, white-capped waves. It was clear that we'd have to get pretty close to cetaceans to see them.

For a time we just pushed on into the waves hoping that the vigias or CW's other boat might radio with some good news. I was far from optimistic but eventually our required miracle materialised. There was some excited chatter on the radio and our skipper gave us the news: the other boat had stumbled across some Fin Whales! We gunned the engine and crashed our way through the swell to get to the scene of the action, soaking ourselves in spray as we went. Twenty minutes later we caught up with the pioneer boat, which was now sitting still with all its occupants gazing out looking for whales. They'd lost them for the time being, the animals having gone on deep dives.

Then, finally, we got our reward. Less than fifty metres ahead there were two big blows and we had glimpses of long grey backs breaking the surface. Then they were gone. Was that going to be it? But our patience and fortitude were repaid and, eventually, we got much better views, some at

extremely close range. At one point we had three animals to port just twenty or thirty metres away on a series of shallow dives. The morning trip had apparently found Blue and Fin Whale together and so I carefully examined every surface hoping to see the Blue Whale's characteristic tiny dorsal fin. But all of these were **Fin Whales**. We saw at least five different animals with at least one being a juvenile. We had around twenty minutes enjoying their company in which time they seemed remarkably unconcerned about us. Several times we saw one arch its back well clear of the top of a big wave - an impressive sight! But then it was time to go, our plan being to skirt around the inshore waters hoping for dolphins.



Fin Whale arching its back in preparation for a deep dive.

The sun had briefly shown itself while we were watching the whales but that proved to be a very temporary reprieve. As we got back inshore the sky darkened, the wind freshened yet further and it began to rain. Worse, the rain soon turned to hail which we took full in our faces. Battered by rain and hail and drenched in spray, the last forty minutes or so became an endurance test and, in the end, we were glad to reach the sanctuary of Madalena harbour. But at least we'd got something to put on the scoreboard!

Back in CW's offices I learned the depressing (but predictable) news that the next day's trips were cancelled.

Sunday 14th May

The weather was every bit as gruesome as the forecast had said. Even by 10.00am it seemed barely to have got light and the rain was lashing down. The wind had become a gale and outside the trees were bucking back and forth. I stared out of my bedroom window at the sea where massive rollers were crashing onto the shore. This looked very bad indeed. Would there even be any trips the next day?

Monday 15th May

I awoke the next morning and immediately went to the window to see what improvement, if any, there had been overnight. The sun was shining and, glory be!, the wind had abated a little. Down at the CW offices there was a debate going on – the forecast was showing further improvement throughout the morning but conditions were still poor. In the end, after much deliberation, it was a “go”.



Common Dolphin, clearly showing the “hourglass” flank pattern.

It *had* improved a bit from Saturday. We had a sea state of 4 or 5 with a heavy two metre swell, which made it tough going, but visibility was good and, between the peaks and troughs, we could see quite a long way.

We weren't out long before a group of **Common Dolphins** materialised. I think they found us as much as we found them. They happily whizzed about alongside and underneath the boat and, when we got going again, tried to keep up with us by bow-riding. I'd seen Commons before lots of times but it was a great pleasure to look down, at very close quarters, and see them zooming along beneath the surface. When we see them at “normal” distance I think we tend to forget how fast they actually are.

We headed north towards Sao Jorge Island where we'd seen Fin Whales two days previously. They were still around and it wasn't long before we'd encountered the first of around ten animals we were to see that morning. Several times we were able to see the green-blue silhouette of an animal lying still or moving slowly beneath the surface. One animal appeared to be “logging” but just beneath the surface! The views were a lot better than two days previously and we were able to appreciate just how big these guys really were. I kept hoping we'd find a whale with a particularly erect, sickle-shaped dorsal (signifying possible Sei Whale) or one with a tiny stub of a dorsal (signifying Blue Whale) but every one we found was, without question, a **Fin Whale**.

The afternoon saw further improvement in the conditions. Out at sea there was still a swell but the sea state was easing towards a steady 4. Again we found **Common Dolphin**, both on the outward and inward journey. And again we found lots of **Fin Whale**. One dramatically rolled just five metres off our port bows and we routinely had them twenty or thirty metres distant. Fabulous stuff!



Two Fin Whales "logging" on the surface. The white right side lower jaw is visible.

Two of the whales, which we only saw briefly, could have been Sei according to our guide Stefano. I thought the dorsals were too far back for Sei but Stefano thought the shape of the dorsal (the "shark-like" kink at the top) suggested Sei. We'll never know. The two animals went on a deep dive and we didn't see them again.

In fact, many of the animals that afternoon proved problematic. They were apparently feeding and therefore undertaking frequent deep dives with long gaps between surfaces. Frustrating! We'd rush towards a blow, get only a brief view of a heavily arched back and then have to wait ten minutes for another brief re-appearance. They have to eat I suppose!

Tuesday 16th May

The sun was shining and the azure sea carried only a slight ripple around the harbour. I set off full of hope, especially as we learned that the vigias had already found baleen whales out to the north near Sao Jorge Island.

These, unsurprisingly, turned out to be **Fin Whales**. In fact, the area to the north of Pico was starting to resemble Fin Central. We found about nine in total, most of which gave good photo opportunities. The last Fin was actually a bit of a disappointment; the vigia had told us he'd spotted a Blue Whale but, on arriving at the scene, it was "only" a rather large Fin. Of course, there's nothing wrong with Fin Whales but I was starting to wonder if we were ever going to get a Blue. We also found more **Common Dolphin** on the way back, along with a **Loggerhead Turtle**.

The afternoon trip put all our outstanding business to bed. On arriving at the CW offices I learned from Stefano that the vigias had got a Blue Whale in their sights to the south of Pico. I couldn't wait to get started! The location was some 25 kilometres out so we gunned the engines of "Kometa" and set off in quick pursuit.



The vast bulk of a Blue Whale.

After about fifty minutes of crunching through the slight remaining swell two small boats came into view on the horizon. I guessed straight away that they were watching Blue Whales and so it proved. When we arrived everything looked serene – the Whale (or Whales) must have gone on a deep dive. We would need to be patient. But, after five tense minutes of waiting, up she came. Seventy or eighty metres to port there was a sudden eruption. A colossal blow shot up into the air like Old Faithful, accompanied by a long, guttural snort. Then, a huge head broke the surface and a great expanse of grey rolled forward over the surface, followed finally by a comically small hooked dorsal fin. **Blue Whale** indeed! We stayed with it for an hour getting views at ridiculously close range and, once, getting the classic "hand of God" sight of a vertical tail fluke sliding down into the water. It was obviously feeding; two or three shallow surfaces would be followed by long dives and equally long and frustrating waits for the next act in the show. Eventually, with mission accomplished and time passing, we decided to move on. The vigias had also seen a Sperm Whale earlier and we were hopeful we might snag that too.

Instead we found two more Blue Whales, a mother and calf. Another forty-five minutes passed as we gorged on the sight of these marvellous creatures. After such a rich surfeit of Blue Whale I wasn't really paying attention anymore and was somewhat surprised when one of the guides said "look, a whale coming straight towards us". I gazed over in the direction they were looking but couldn't see anything. I was about to ask "how far" when I suddenly noticed something like a torpedo zooming straight towards our stern under the surface. "Beaked Whale" said the skipper. And so it was, a long and slender medium-sized animal with a generally dark appearance but a bit of white around the

chops. “Sowerby’s Beaked Whale” the skipper elaborated. He must surely have been right; the only other likely candidate would be Cuvier’s Beaked Whale – a species which would be bigger and have a pale head and orange-brown body. In any event, Sowerby’s would be by far the most common species of beaked whale here, outnumbering others by an order of magnitude.

By now we were very late and simply had to start retracing our steps back to Madalena. But there was one last surprise in store. About a hundred metres to starboard we spotted a disturbance on the surface and slowed down to investigate. On cue, a greyish medium-sized cetacean emerged. It gave a small bushy blow, unlike anything else we’d seen so far, and that immediately caught my attention. At the same time the whole back appeared together with a distinctly prominent and vertical shark-like dorsal fin. My reaction was instantly that it was a **Sei Whale**. Certainly it looked completely unlike Fin Whale, which produces a tall, vertical blow and only shows its dorsal long after the head has disappeared. It was also smaller and had a noticeably different surfacing sequence. Fins look slow and ponderous. This looked quicker, sleeker and showed no tailstock at all as it sunk back under the surface. After a lot of discussion the general opinion among the experts – I exclude myself from that group! – was that it was indeed a Sei. I was ecstatic!

It was long after our scheduled return time when we finally made it back into Madelena but that evening the beer tasted especially good!

Wednesday 17th May

The weather by now had become positively balmy. We set out in scorching sunshine on a gentle sea. The sea state had eased to about 3 and the swell had diminished to an easy roll. Saturday’s bleak conditions seemed a long time ago!

After picking up two extra clients at Horta we sped northwards towards Fin Central. Sure enough, there were plenty of Fin Whales around and we quickly found a couple of fairly un-cooperative animals more intent on feeding than surfacing. Ten minutes later we found two more who were similarly engaged. But eventually we came across a group of five **Fin Whales** just idling about. For an hour we drifted along together, the whales cruising parallel with us in a broad “chorus line”. Several times one of them would come within a metre or two of our sides just hanging a few feet below the surface. It allowed us to see just how big these animals are – certainly longer than our boat – and also to see the pectoral fins and tail flukes, normally invisible on a routine surface roll. Quite a sight!

On the way back we ran across some **Common Dolphins** which, as ever, were in playful mood and came to greet us. In the translucent water we could watch them racing past us at a range of less than two metres under water. To see the whole animal like that is just great – normally of course you just see the back and dorsal fin and perhaps an occasional glimpse of the “hourglass” pattern on the flanks.

Over lunch I had to decide whether to do the usual afternoon trip or instead take a siesta and do a special “sunset cruise”. I opted for the former, mainly because I discovered that the afternoon trip was heading south where I hoped we might find more exotic species. I surmised that another trip north into Fin Central would just produce loads more Fins.

It proved to be the right decision. We re-located the same three **Blue Whales** who, this time, were in the mood to lark about a bit. In addition to a couple of vertical tail flukes demonstrations we had some tail-slapping and a full breach. I heard some-one gasp and when I looked round there was an airborne Blue Whale about fifty metres away. Down it came with a crash. My word!

We also thought we'd found something unusual again. At the first brief surfacing the murmer in the boat was "Bryde's Whale" but, on closer inspection, it turned out to be yet another Fin. Can't win them all I suppose.

Thursday 18th May

We headed north once more towards Fin Central and were duly rewarded with several **Fin Whales**. The first couple were feeding and going on long dives so we didn't waste time waiting for them to re-appear but went after another group that the vigia told us were likely to be more co-operative. The two animals in question were a mother and subadult, both recognisable as animals from the quintet we'd seen the previous morning.

The weather seemed to be on the turn. The wind was fresher and the sea state had deteriorated to four or five. A slight swell was also developing. The ride back was especially bumpy and those on the port side, facing the wind, got regular facefuls of Atlantic.

The afternoon trip didn't happen, disappointingly. There were no other customers and so I was left kicking my heels. Instead I arranged a trip up the hillside to visit one of the vigias. He operated from a small but very comfortable wooden hut overlooking the north-west side of Pico. On the wall was a chart showing the sightings of the various species seen over the previous weeks. It included False Killer Whale – apparently in town three weeks previously – as well as Blue Whale, Sperm Whale and Humpback Whale. He said he didn't bother recording Fins as the dots would obliterate his chart! While we were there we saw half a dozen or so blows out at sea, all Fins from what I could make out. An **Azorean Buzzard**, the first of the trip, also put in an appearance.

A late afternoon stroll around the shoreline east of Madelena produced **Roseate Terns** and two **Clouded Yellow Butterflies**.

Friday 19th May

I had one last trip out in the morning. It was overcast but the wind had dropped to a standstill and a sea state of 2 or 3 awaited us as we headed north into Fin Central.



Common Dolphin.

We duly found a couple of **Fin Whales** and met with three or four pods of **Common Dolphin**, the latter being associated with large numbers of very active Cory's Shearwaters. Nothing exotic or unusual came our way but it was a pleasant end to a very productive trip.

An hour or two later I was on my way across to Horta on the ferry and beginning the tedious journey home.

6 Summary of Cetacean Sightings

Species	13/7	14/7	15/7	16/7	17/7	18/7	19/7	Totals
Fin Whale	5-6		20+	9	10	9	3	ca 60
Blue Whale				3	3			6
Sei Whale			??	1				1
Sowerby's Beaked Whale				1				1
Common Dolphin			30+	15+	20+		40+	105+