

The Azores 28th April - 5th May 2018



Sperm Whale

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Photos taken on mobile phones by Paul (cetaceans) and John (other).

Intro: I have seen a few species of whales and dolphins in various locations around the world, including some great trips on the Portsmouth to Bilbao ferry (Bay of Biscay) before they stopped running the cetacean friendly crossings. So too has my friend Paul Baker but neither of us had seen a Blue Whale so we set about changing that with a spring trip to the Azores. The Azores are located in the Atlantic Ocean 1,125 kilometres west of Portugal.

We discussed plans - timings, flights, tactics, boats, whale watching companies, accommodation, car hire etc and then Paul did a sterling job and organised the trip. We stayed in Ponta Delgada at the start and end of our trip. Ponta Delgada, on Sao Miguel Island, is the capital of the Azores Archipelago of Portugal. We stayed for four nights in Lajes Do Pico on Pico Island.

We did the trip at a very reasonable price - approx £810 (926 Euros) each, not including our evening meals, a few lunchtime snacks from local shops and a few beers. If you aren't interested in looking for birds or touring the Island you don't have to hire a car which will of course bring the costs down.

International Flight: We flew with Ryanair from London Stansted direct to Ponta Delgada on Sao Miguel. The flight took under 4 hours. We drove the 50 minutes to Stansted from Southend-on-Sea, South East Essex and parked in the mid-term car park at the airport.

Local Flight: Return flights on SATA Airlines from Sao Miguel to Pico Island.

Car Hire: We hired a car for two days (28th & 29th April) from Guerin booked through Ryanair and for one day (4th May) from Ilha Verde booked through Rentalcars. Pick-up and drop-off both from Ponta Delgada airport.

Accommodation: Two nights (28th & 29th April) and one night (4th May) at *Lena's House*, Ponta Delgada, Sao Miguel - room only but with use of kitchen. On Pico Island we had a four nights package with Espaco Talassa staying at Hotel 'Whale' come ao Pico, Lajes Do Pico - including airport transfer, bed and breakfast and four whale watching excursions.

Weather: Amazingly lucky! It wasn't cold, it wasn't too sunny and bright, visibility was generally very good and it only rained one night. But more importantly it wasn't very windy, a bit breezy at times but nothing to worry about.

Consequently the sea wasn't rough when we went out on the RIBs (Rigid Inflatable Boats). I took waterproofs and didn't wear them and only got a bit wet from sea spray one afternoon. However, I recommend that you go prepared for the worse just in case! In any event Espaco Talassa provide water proof jackets on every excursion which even if it isn't a rough sea certainly keeps the chill out when offshore.

Whale Watching Excursions: We did five excursions all on RIBs and all booked in advance. The RIBs are fast and can get you to the whales pretty sharpish but it can be bumpy and wet if the sea is rough. On Sao Miguel we used Terra Azul for the one trip, on Pico we used Espaco Talassa. With Terra Azul we were in a 24 seat RIB and with Espaco Talassa we were in a 12 seat RIB. Excursions last for around three hours. Both companies were very professional and mindful around the whales ensuring they weren't harassed or stressed due to our presence. We can thoroughly recommend these two whale watching companies. See

<http://www.azoreswhalewatch.com/> (for Terra Azul) and <https://www.espacotalassa.com/en/>

These websites give a lot of very useful cetacean watching advice, like when to go for what species, latest sightings etc. But briefly Blue Whales start appearing around the Azores in March and depart around June with April and May being the peak months for sightings. These timings, basically spring, are generally true for Fin Whale sightings as well. Although Sperm Whales are resident all year around the Azores the peak of sightings are in summer - June/July/August.

Book: Mark Carwardine's Guide To Whale Watching in Britain and Europe (Bloomsbury) has an informative chapter on the Azores.

Daily Log:

Saturday 28th April. We arrived at Ponta Delgada late afternoon, picked up the hire car and drove to our accommodation. No time to do too much but time enough for a walk by the harbour - Roseate Terns being the highlight.

Sunday 29th April. Drove to Vila Franca do Campa which is only a 25 minute drive east from Ponta Delgada. If you haven't hired a car it would be easy to get a taxi from Ponta Delgada. We arrived in plenty of time for the 08:30 briefing with Terra Azul before our three hour excursion - approx 09:30 - 12:30.

Our trip got off to a great start with our target specie's found in less than an hour of setting off with two **Blue Whales** and a **Fin Whale** swimming together all giving super views plus a single **Blue Whale** when we were returning to shore. We also found three **Sperm Whales** two adult females with a calf in tow and a playful pod of **Bottlenose Dolphins**.

Of note - on our excursion the weather was relatively calm and sunny but the wind was strengthening and the afternoon excursion was apparently cancelled due to the worsening weather.

In the afternoon we drove to the eastern side of the island, south of the town of Nordeste in search of the endemic Azores Bullfinch. We eventually found a showy pair along the Tronquera track by the Miradouro da Serra, plus Azorean

Goldcrests and Chaffinches. We also had cracking views of an **Azorean Noctule Bat** here - the only endemic mammal on the Azores. The bat was flitting about hunting in the afternoon sunshine. Day flying is a trait that this species is known for and believed to have evolved because there are no avian bat predators on the Azores - no falcons which will, and do, catch/eat bats. The only raptor on the Azores is the Common Buzzard which isn't built for bat hunting.

Monday 30th April. A morning walk around Ponta Delgada harbour produced a 1st winter Iceland Gull but not a lot else. We then drove to the east of the island to a lake - Lagoa das Furnas where we found the long staying Pied-billed Grebe (an American species). In the afternoon we drove to the south east of the island at Faial da Terra where a seawatch produced a small pod of around 10 **Risso's Dolphins** and a pod of around 15 **Bottlenose Dolphins**. Also plenty of Cory's Shearwaters and a few Manx Shearwaters. After that we made our way back to Ponta Delgada airport for our 17:35 flight to Pico. From Pico airport, situated in the north west of the island, we were picked up and driven to the central south of the island to Lajes Do Pico and the Hotel Whale' come ao Pico. It was too late to do anything apart from a short walk before an evening meal and a couple of beers before turning in.



Tuesday 1st May. There is an introductory talk with Espaco Talassa before every whale watching excursion but you only have to attend once. One thing they mention and it is also explained more fully on their website is that they use a 'whale spotter' located in a lookout tower - a vigias - just over a kilometre along the coast east of Lajes Do Pico. The spotter is in radio and mobile phone contact with the RIBs. This technique has proved to be very successful and saves a lot of

time when out at sea searching for whales. So, after the introductory talk we set off from the small harbour at around 10:00. Making our way past hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters we were given directions twice by the spotter in the vigias - first to a **Blue Whale** and second to a **Fin Whale**. We also came across a pod of around 50 **Common Dolphins** before heading back to the harbour around 13:00.



Blue Whale

During the rest of the afternoon we walked up to the lookout tower and had a chat with Marcelo the spotter. You get fantastic views of the sea and in fact saw two **Fin Whales**, albeit brief and distant. Early evening we walked to the back of the town where it gives way to a bushy hillside and watched at least 20 **Azorean Noctule Bats** flitting about. When it was dark it was also fantastic to see, but mainly

hear, the Cory's Shearwaters overhead returning and departing from their nests on the cliffs and hillsides.



Blue Whale



The lookout tower/vigias

Wednesday 2nd May. We headed out to sea on our 10:00 excursion and within 10 minutes were watching two **Fin Whales**. They performed admirably for us before we left them alone after about 15 minutes. We headed off east in the hope of more whales but unfortunately there just wasn't any in the immediate vicinity and even the spotter high up on the cliff in the vigias couldn't find any for us. However, we did come across a small pod of around eight **Risso's Dolphins** consisting of females with calves and a pod of around 20 **Common Dolphins** which, as this species tends to do, came over and rode the bow wave of the RIB. We also came across two Loggerhead Turtles before making our way back to harbour after nearly three hours out at sea.



Fin Whale

For lunch we stocked up on snacks from the local store before spending the rest of the afternoon up at the

watchtower area. We spent a bit of time watching Quails, Canaries and saving Madeiran Wall Lizards from drowning in a cattle trough. But we eventually went in the vigias and had a chat with Marcelo. From the top of the vigias we spotted 3 **Fin Whales** but they were very distant and the glare of the sun meant that all you could really see was the blows and then a brief glimpse of a back shining in the sun before disappearing beneath the waves.



Fin Whale

After our evening meal and when it was dark we walked around the back of the town to hear the Cory's Shearwaters calling again and were pleased to find a Long-eared Owl

perched on a tree lit up by a street lamp. We also saw a few **Azorean Noctules**.

Thursday 3rd May. We were on an afternoon excursion today so after breakfast I walked up to the vigias, whereas Paul decided to stay around Lajes. Before entering the tower I scanned the sea and soon picked up the blow of a **Sperm Whale** which despite being some way off I could see quite well thanks to the good light and calm sea. I could even see it spy hopping and saw its tail flukes as it went for a deep dive. I also saw two **Fin Whales** also by picking up on their blows in the first instance. When I went up the vigias and chatted with Marcelo he confirmed one Sperm and two Fin Whales.

Marcelo was in the process of guiding in a morning excursion RIB towards a Blue Whale. I locked on to the RIB and after five minutes or so I saw the blow of a **Blue Whale** but to be honest it was a very long way away and the blow was all I could really see!

At 15:00 we set off from the harbour on our only afternoon excursion. Heading east we went to the same general area where I had seen the whales from the cliff-top in the morning. We were guided in to a **Blue Whale** which we stayed with for around 10 minutes. Soon after leaving the Blue Whale we came across two, possibly three, **Fin Whales**. We also came across a pod of **Risso's Dolphins** and a pod of **Common Dolphins** the pods appeared the same size as yesterday's sightings and were no doubt the same dolphin

pods. Both these species are residents of the archipelago. We also saw a Macaronesian (Barolo) Shearwater a Loggerhead Turtle and a Blue Shark before returning land side around 18:00.



Above and below Common Dolphins





Espaco Talassa RIB

At dusk I took a walk around the back of the town by the hillside and saw at least 30 **Azorean Noctule Bats**.

Friday 4th May. We set off just before 10:00 on our final RIB excursion and I'm pleased to say it was a fine farewell. We soon encountered a **Fin Whale**, followed up later by a **Blue Whale** and then a loose group of six possibly eight **Sperm Whales**. The Sperm Whales were particularly pleasing as they just loafed on the surface logging, spy- hopping and on a couple of occasions fluking as they dived. We just drifted on the calm sea and watched them, including two fairly close females with their calves watching us watching them - fantastic. After leaving the Sperm Whales to it we came across a Loggerhead Turtle which the crew managed to catch. This is done whenever possible to see if it had been

tagged - which it had. So after taking the tag number and various measurements it was released back into the ocean. The tagging is part of a monitoring scheme being carried out in Florida (USA) - the immature turtles spend quite sometime around the Azores before going back to Florida to breed. The time went by quickly and as we headed back to shore we came across a big pod of 100+ **Common Dolphins** - a fantastic site.



Fin Whale



Fin Whale



Blue Whale



Sperm Whale



Loggerhead Turtle

In the afternoon we had a stroll up to the vigias for the last time. Scanning from the cliff top we spotted, not far off-shore, a pod of **Common Dolphins** and a pod of **Risso's Dolphins**. We went into the tower for a chat and to say goodbye to Marcelo who put us on to two **Blue Whales** - nice but they were an awful long way away. Late afternoon we

collected our bags from the hotel and got out transfer back to the airport for our 18:50 flight back to Sao Miguel.

Back on Sao Miguel as we collected our hire car at the airport an **Azorean Noctule Bat** flew over the car park.



Risso's Dolphin

Saturday 5th May. We spent a leisurely day driving around the western end of Sao Miguel. We didn't see any mammals but did see our second Pied-billed Grebe of the trip and some Common Waxbills. We headed to the airport late afternoon for our early evening flight back to the UK.

Summing up and sightings: A really enjoyable, easy going and inexpensive trip. We got our target specie's the Blue Whale, had great views of all the cetaceans and got an endemic bat (and bird) into the bargain.

Sightings: Seven species of mammal seen. Please note, as I'm sure you are aware, it isn't easy to be certain just how many whales/dolphins you actually see on a trip like this.

Blue Whale minimum 7, maximum 9

Fin Whale minimum 7, maximum 10

Sperm Whale minimum 9, maximum 12

Good numbers of Short-beaked Common Dolphins, Common Bottlenose Dolphins and Risso's Dolphins.

Azorean Noctule Bat - 2 seen on Sao Miguel, 50+ on Pico.

Loggerhead Turtle 3

Blue Shark 1

Madeiran Wall Lizard - seen on both islands, extremely common on Pico.

Iberian Water Frog - on Pico

Best Birds: Common Quail, Pied-billed Grebe, Cory's, Macaronesian (Barolo) and Manx Shearwaters, Little Egret, Common Buzzard, Whimbrel, Great Skua, Azorean Yellow-legged Gull, Iceland Gull, Roseate Tern, Long-eared Owl, Goldcrest, Chaffinch, Canary, Azores Bullfinch.



Cory's Shearwaters



Loggerhead Turtle



Pico Mountain

The End.

