

## Madeira 20-27 August 2021

We'd long had Madeira on our list as a possible option for a week-long nerd trip, and with destinations still limited by the pandemic, it was high up on our list of feasible places. Indeed, it turned into a rather decent trip – though with apologies to our better halves: I was away as we completed on our first house, and dad returned to give mum covid (which he presumably picked up sat next to a whooping un-maxed fellow passenger on the return trip home).

We obviously went to look for the **Mediterranean monk seals** on **Deserta Grande**, but Madeira also has beautiful scenery, good cetaceans (though noticeably fewer than the Azores) and some brilliant birds. It would probably also make a good place for a family holiday, with some nice beaches too.

We booked an Airbnb called "**Humble House Stays**" in **Ponta do Sol** for the week, and hired a car through **rentalcars.com** and would highly recommend both. The location of the Airbnb was good – a nice, relatively quiet town, quite well positioned for all destinations on the island. (Our friend in Madeira also took us to Restaurante Sol Poente in the village – and it is ace!). Flights were with **British Airways** owing to their really rather decent cancellation policy (check whether it is still in force).

Our holiday basically consisted of three whale and dolphin boat trips, sea-watching from a couple of different "*Miradouros*" (lookouts), exploring the island's interior for birds, and an overnight trip to the Desertas Islands for the **monk seals**. I think that this was a relatively good split; with another boat trip or from **Funchal** we might have seen another species or two we hadn't, but I enjoyed our balance of mammals/birds/other.

### Boat trips

We took two boat trips with a company called [Lobosonda](#) and another one with [Madeira Wind Birds](#). Madeira Wind Birds – as the name suggests – are primarily a bird watching tour company, but on some days also run whale trips. They were the only guides that we had who knew their birds (very useful when you're trying to work out which petrel you have seen!). As far as I can tell from sightings reports, Lobosonda are the only company that seems to find **rough-toothed dolphin** at all frequently (about once every other week). Unfortunately we didn't get lucky, but they had been seen a few days before we arrived. Our first trip with them produced a couple of pods of **striped dolphin**, and a loggerhead turtle. Our second Lobosonda trip produced no cetaceans at all unfortunately. As with our other trips, **Cory's shearwaters** and **Bulwer's petrels** were near omnipresent on both of these; and rather excitingly, on the trip that was blank for mammals, we picked up a brilliant view of **great shearwater**. The trip with Wind Birds was also quiet on the mammal front – we had to travel most of the way to the Desertas to find a large (50-100 animal) pod of **short-finned pilot whales**. But our time with them was really memorable. The group very large, and they were very active – staying in the vicinity of the boat, but interacting a great deal, with lots of calves and some spy-hopping. We also had a single **Desertas petrel** ID'ed by the guide.

We didn't see any cetaceans on the way to Desertas, but on the way home had a large pod of **Atlantic spotted dolphins** play in the boat's wake, and as we got close back in to port had a few **bottlenose dolphins**.

### On land

We spent a bit of time looking out to sea. In general, we didn't see all that much: as with the boat trips, it appeared that it was relatively quiet sea-watching. That said, we did pick up a pod of (almost certainly) **bottlenose dolphins** from **Miradouro Trigo de Negreiros ou Moledos** (32.70853478987107, -17.14031247248173, just below the paragliding centre on the ER222). When we visited the [Fajã da Quebrada Nova](#) (an amazing area of farmland created on rockfalls at the bottom of a spectacular cliff, accessed via a cable car) we had a distant **sperm whale**. Later in the trip, just before boarding our flight, we had another **sperm whale** from the [Miradouro do Rosário](#).

There were a few other land-based highlights. First, spending time in the **Laurisilva** forest. There's a particularly nice walk which follows a "levada" (old irrigation system) from [Queimadas guesthouse to Caldeirão Verde](#). Second, and easily a trip highlight, was spending an evening watching the **Zino's petrels** come back to their nests at **Pico de Arreiro** – an incredible experience (again, it is Wind Bird's who offer this tour). Rabbits were common in the hills at night. Third was bat spotting in the evening. The best place for them – where we saw at least 6 **Leisler's bats** and 1 **Madeiran pipistrelle** – was at **Parque Ecológico do Funchal**. From around dusk until midnight there were plenty of bats at the small pool just near [these shelters](#) and in the woodland above.

## Desertas Islands

**Ventura do Mar** are the only company that we could find which offer commercial overnight trips to [Desertas Islands](#) (and only in the summer). I'd highly recommend that you *do* organise a night on the Deserta Grande (the main island) – the seal was not around at all when there were lots of people in the water who arrived on a day trip tourist boat. We had good views of a **Mediterranean monk seal** in the bay in front of the guards' station. It was quite shy, but would resurface every so often and give quite good views. I'd recommend just scanning that area fairly frequently (if not the whole time!) as the seal's body/head didn't sit much above the water level even when it was surfaced. The seal would, though, blow out as it surfaced, and you could sometimes hear (and even see) this, which was a bit of a giveaway. We also saw **feral goats** on the scree slope above the guard station on our morning there.

There are two other brilliant activities on Deserta Grande: snorkelling in the bay below the station (good the day we arrived, but better on the morning we left, as there was far better visibility, possibly due to no boats moving around just before we went), and second listening (and wandering amongst) the shearwaters and petrels coming back to their nests.

## Mammals

Rabbit

Madeiran pipistrelle

Leisler's bat

Mediterranean monk seal

Striped dolphin

Atlantic spotted dolphin

Bottle-nosed dolphin

Short-finned pilot whale

Sperm whale

Feral goat