

# Madeira 3rd – 12th July 2019

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I decided on a summer cetacean watching trip to Madeira with the main targets being Spotted Dolphin and Bryde's Whale. But coming across a Monk Seal was, of course, very much on my mind. I was confident in seeing the first species, in with a chance for the second and needed lots of luck for the third. But whatever the outcome its always enjoyable going on whale and dolphin watching trips. My wife, Jane, joined me on this trip. I did some research into accommodation and flights but in the end, we settled on a package holiday as it suited us price wise, accommodation wise and airport wise. Our hotel was in Funchal, the capital of Madeira.

The island of Madeira is in the North Atlantic and is an autonomous region of Portugal. It is around 520km west of the Moroccan coast, 400km north of Tenerife (Canary Islands) and 966km south east of the Azores.

We booked four whale/dolphin excursions in advance with Ventura Nature Emotions ([www.venturadomar.com/](http://www.venturadomar.com/)) plus a day trip to the Desertas Islands where I knew we stood at least a chance of seeing a Monk Seal. The Desertas Islands are 25km south east of Madeira. As it turned out we also had one whale/dolphin excursion with Rota dos Cetaceos (<https://www.rota-dos-cetaceos.pt/index.php/en/>) as a trip rearrangement by Ventura and one with Madeira Wind Birds (<https://www.madeirawindbirds.com/>) which I booked whilst I was out there. For information Madeira Wind Birds are a more birding orientated company but do look out for, and stop for, cetaceans.

Ventura has a 12 seat RIB (Rigid Inflatable Boat), Rota used an 18 seat RIB and Wind Birds had a 10 seat RIB if I recall correctly. All RIB trips were for approximately two hours duration. The trips went from Funchal harbour apart from Wind Birds which went from Machico on the eastern side of the Island.

We went for 10 days allowing for a contingency should any excursions be cancelled due to bad weather or some other reason. This paid off as one of our excursions was cancelled due to lack of demand and rearranged for a later date with another company, furthermore our day trip to the Desertas Islands was moved from Sunday to Tuesday.

The following daily log is for the days we went on whale/dolphin excursions or did something related to mammal watching. At other times we explored parts of the Island or went out birding. There are two endemic land birds on Madeira – Trocaz Pigeon and Madeiran Firecrest.

## Daily Log

Thursday 4th. RIB trip with Ventura 10:15 – 12:15. A strong south west wind meant a somewhat choppy sea, so we headed east and took some shelter in the south east corner of the Island. We got off to a good start with a pod of around 80 **Spotted Dolphins** which performed well bow riding and generally swimming close to the boat. A short time later we came across a pod of around 40 **Striped Dolphins** which didn't hang around which is expected for this very fast species.

At dusk we staked out a small park in Funchal – Paraque Santa Catarina – which looked a likely place for Madeira Pipistrelle. We chose well as we saw about eight **Madeira Pipistrelles** before it got too dark to see. We went back to the park the following night at dusk but didn't see any bats. In fact, we looked on a few other occasions at dusk and only saw one bat there briefly. I also saw one Madeira Pipistrelle fly through the grounds of our hotel one early evening.

Friday 5th. We should have gone out on a Ventura Rib this morning, but it was cancelled as they didn't have the minimum amount of five people on the trip – very disappointing. However, they did rearrange the trip for us by booking us onto a trip with Rota dos Cetaceos on Wednesday afternoon.

Sunday 7th. Afternoon RIB trip with Ventura 14:20 – 16:40. The afternoon was sunny and warm with a light wind. We covered the sea west and south of Funchal.

The land-based spotter directed us to where a whale was seen to blow and although we bobbed about in the area for 20 minutes, we didn't see anything. We then went off and connected with a pod of around 25 **Spotted Dolphins** and a little later a small pod of 10 -15 **Bottlenose Dolphins**. Back onshore we saw a **Brown Rat** amongst the boulders on the beach.

Monday 8<sup>th</sup>. No RIB trips today but I did a late afternoon (17:00 – 18:00) sea watch from the hotel grounds. Apart from some distant unidentified dolphins I saw three or four **Sperm Whales** including one that breached twice – all very distant unfortunately. A RIB that was out there around the same time reported 10-20 Sperm Whales.

Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup>. A day trip to the Desertas Islands with Ventura, 09:00 – 18:00.

I asked the Ventura marine biologist on board if any Monk Seals had been seen recently. My hopes were raised when she replied that one was seen a couple of days ago and in fact they had been seen quite often this season but not on every trip, so no guarantee. It took three hours to get to the Islands, arriving around 12:00, and as we were about to drop anchor in a small bay a **Monk Seal** was directly in front of the boat and very close. It swam right past the boat looking up at us as we went by before diving under. Obviously, I was very happy and couldn't believe my luck, but it wasn't over yet. We dropped anchor, lunch was being prepared and some people were preparing to go swimming off the boat. I scanned the sea in the direction the seal took and couldn't believe my luck as the seal was just hanging about by a buoy no more than 40 meters away. I watched the seal on and off for the next hour as it dived for around eight minutes before surfacing again by the buoy where it stayed up for four or five minutes before diving again. Just before I boarded a small zodiac to go ashore the seal was joined by a second one and they both hung around the buoy.

We were on the Island (Grande Desertas) for an hour, standing on the beach I could still see the seals loitering by the buoy. Back on board the boat I just sat and watched the seals which were still there when we set off from the Island just after 15:00. To be honest after the initial sighting the rest of the passengers weren't too interested in watching the seal, as they were, in general, day tripping tourists which is expected on a holiday destination island like Madeira.

We arrived back in Funchal harbour at 18:00 and despite not seeing any cetaceans it was an exceptional mammal watching day from my point of view!



So, above (and below) are 3 poor photos of one of the Monk Seals. I'm not a wildlife photographer, I don't have the camera/telephoto lens for good photographs.

Current survey results of the Monk Seals on the Desertas Islands suggest that there are around 40 seals. One or two still wander to Madeira from the Desertas every year and are seen around the beaches but you would be lucky indeed to come across one by chance. Apparently, an immature seal hauled up on a beach every day for a week earlier this year – you just need the gen whilst you are there. However, I would still recommend a trip to the Desertas Islands for any realistic chance to see one. You only get about three hours at the Island on a day trip but some companies allow a sleep over on the Island so you can have extra hours looking if you want to raise the odds of a sighting.





The 'Ventura' our transport for the day in the small bay where the seals were.





Wednesday 10th. Morning RIB trip with Ventura 10:15 – 12:15. Calm, light wind, sunny. We did the area of sea west and south of Funchal.

A pod of around 15 **Bottlenose Dolphins** and a pod of about 40 **Spotted Dolphins** – both species showed well and close.

An afternoon RIB trip with Rota dos Cetaceos 16:20 – 18:15. Despite heading to an area where a whale had been seen blowing by the land spotter, we didn't find any whales. We did come across a pod of around 40 **Short-beaked Common Dolphins** and a pod of around 80 **Spotted Dolphins**.

Thursday 11th. A RIB trip with Wind Birds, 10:15 – 12:15, from the eastern town of Machico. A stiff north east wind meant a choppy sea. We didn't see any cetaceans! Later in the day I had a chat with someone from Rota dos Cetaceos who told me that their morning excursion had a pod of Pilot Whales and a Bryde's Whale and their early afternoon trip had a Sei Whale. Oh well you can't be everywhere can you – C'est la vie.

## **Systematic Lists**

**Mammals, 8 species:** Madeira Pipistrelle, Mediterranean Monk Seal, Brown Rat, Sperm Whale, Short-beaked Common Dolphin, Atlantic Spotted Dolphin, Striped Dolphin, Common Bottlenose Dolphin.

**Best Birds:** Cory's Shearwater, Manx Shearwater, Desertas (Fea's) Petrel, Bulwer's Petrel, Trocaz Pigeon, Plain Swift, Berthelot's Pipit, Spectacled Warbler, Madeira Firecrest.

**Reptiles & Amphibians:** Iberian Water (Perez's) Frog, Madeiran Wall Lizard, Moorish Gecko, Loggerhead Turtle.

**Butterflies:** Monarch, Small White, Madeiran Speckled Wood, Lang's Long-tailed Blue, Painted Lady.

End