

Azores (Pico and Sao Miguel) – September 2020

Report by Sjöf Öllers

This was another trip inspired by the travel limitations imposed by the Covid19 pandemic. Mammal highlights were Risso's Dolphin and an excellent and prolonged sighting of four Sei Whales, but the trip highlight was actually a fish – a Whale Shark five metres from the boat! On the bird front the only proper endemic, Azores Bullfinch, was relatively easy to track down. Seabirding could have been a bit more action-filled, but Great Shearwater and Sooty Shearwater were welcome sightings.



Spotted Dolphin

Whale Watching

It was clear that whale watching operations were at a significantly lower level than what you would normally expect at this time of year. Most tour operators had only one boat going out to sea at their scheduled departure times and on Sao Miguel most operators (except Terra Azul) only had morning departures scheduled. Occupancy rates were highly erratic with some departures filling up quickly and other tours struggling to get the minimum number of participants. So quite a bit of calling around and advance reservation was usually required to secure a place on a tour that would actually depart. Canceled trips were sometimes revived if a bigger group showed up (and the weather played ball), etc.

On Pico we used the services of Aqua Acores and Espaco Talassa once and CW Azores three times. Their services were all similar, but overall I slightly preferred CW Azores. Aqua Acores used a bigger boat than the other two operators with three rows of seats, which wasn't a problem in quieter Covid times but under normal conditions you would have to make sure not to end up on one of the middle seats or in the back. On Sao Miguel we tried to do trips with Terra Azul, but they got canceled three times, which was frustrating especially the last time when the weather was fine and actually improving; the cancellation made no sense at all. So in the end we went with Terra do Pico in Mosteiros, which were very friendly and had a good boat, but appear to operate in an area with lower densities of cetaceans.

Nevertheless, all of the above-mentioned tour operators offered good services with knowledgeable staff and I would recommend using any of them. On Faial there appear to be several good tour operators that we encountered "in action" in the same waters during our trips with CW Azores. In the end we did not visit Faial

so I don't have a first-hand experience but I had marked down these tour operators on Faial as worth checking out: <https://www.naturalist.pt/azores>, <http://azoresexperiences.com/en/home-2/>, <https://www.endemicazores.com/>.

False Killer Whales and Pilot Whales had been sighted just before we arrived and on the day we flew from Pico to Sao Miguel a Bryde's Whale had been spotted south of Sao Miguel. I did not hear of any beaked whale sightings during our stay.



Risso's Dolphin



Sei Whale

Birding

While hardcore birders might vehemently disagree, the Azores did not exactly provide an adrenaline-filled birding experience but ticking the only endemic "landbird", Azores Bullfinch, was fairly straightforward in the morning along the Serra da Tronqueira Road (I only visited the lower part and had the bullfinches within the first two kilometres in foul weather). There are several noteworthy local races of mainland Europe species, of which I thought the Chaffinch was the most interesting from an esthetic point of view. I did not

go looking for American vagrants but did encounter a handful of them, of which Semi-palmated Plover was the most interesting one.

All you need to know about birdwatching on the Azores can be found on Staffan Rodebrand's excellent website: <http://sr-oland.se/azores/index.html>. E-bird and some of the Portuguese websites that Staffan Rodebrand mentions on his website are also worth checking.

Unfortunately, there were no seabirds trips available during our stay, although Terra Azul told me they were planning to do one day after our flight home.



Cory's Shearwater

Hiking

Azores appears to have a decent reputation as a hiking destination. Based on the visits to Sao Miguel and Pico I can't say I was impressed. Pico is not really set up for hiking at all (except for the volcano climb). Trails tend to start and end at awkward places especially if you don't have your own transport (and poor or no phone reception not being untypical in the highlands). Even if you have a car, most trails are linear/one-way and not loop trails. A lot of walking is on roads and proper hiking trails are scarce. The variety and quality of trails on Sao Miguel was better, but the good ones also tended to be overcrowded, but also on Sao Miguel a lot of trails are one-way/linear and have too much walking on roads for my taste. An overview of hiking routes can be found here: <http://trails.visitazores.com/en>. This is not a selection of hikes but pretty much all there is in terms of hiking trails. The hike to Salto do Prego on Sao Miguel was the most rewarding hike in terms of scenery but it was also very crowded.

The circumnavigation of the caldera on the island Faial looks it could be a nice hike, but this area was constantly shrouded in clouds and mist on the days that we wanted to go there (and the weather was a little rainy and unstable), so in the end we did not visit Faial.

We did [Caminho das Lagoas](#) on Pico as a "wildlife drive" because it would be pretty tedious to do this as a 22-kilometre hike one way (the hike follows quiet and mostly unpaved roads for the entire length). It is a fairly scenic drive that leads across the eastern highland spine of the island and has plenty of pseudocraters, several small lakes, a few pockets of original forest but the majority of the scenery is rather boring cattle farming

country. Birding was half-decent with Ring-necked Duck, Azorean Buzzard and Common Snipe and most of the bird species labeled as common in the trip list.



Viewpoint near Mosteiros and Salto do Prego

Weather

The first four days on Pico the weather was good to excellent for whale watching (if windy on most days). Then a front rolled in, which brought significantly less stable weather, some rain and much choppier waters. On September 6 the waves looked unpleasant enough for us to decide to not join the only tour that ran from Lajes do Pico (and they only saw Spotted and Bottlenose Dolphin). On September 7 all trips were canceled with the tour operators that I contacted. Back on Sao Miguel the weather was even worse when we arrived, very windy and a lot of rain, but it improved rather quickly (but unfortunately we had to leave by then). I would seize every opportunity to do a tour when the weather is fine, but I usually felt bone-rattled enough after one tour, so I never did two tours on one day but I probably should have on September 3 when sea conditions were near-perfect.



Spyhopping Sperm Whales



Striped Dolphin

Car Rental

We used Ilha Verde on Pico, which were fine and 2Rent, which is Hertz, on Sao Miguel, which were excellent and very helpful. A good number of the car rental companies at the airport in Ponta Delgada had their office open (almost) 24/7 or at least until about midnight/1 am (depending on arrival times of flights). Pre-arranged rental vehicle pick-ups and drop-offs in the middle of the night are possible at reasonable prices/surcharges at the international airport on Sao Miguel.

Pico only had 3 or 4 car rental companies at the airport but several appear to be always open when scheduled flights arrive. Alternatively, there are plenty of car rental companies in Madalena and it should be possible to hire a car in Sao Roque or Lajes do Pico (although you will have less choice).



Spotted Dolphin and Great Shearwater



Sperm Whale

Covid19

At the time you could get a Covid test upon arrival, which is what we did. I had read that they usually provide the test results within 12-24 hours. So we opted to self-quarantine in our hotel until the results were in. In our case we got the results after about 13 hours. If you stay longer than a week you have to do another test. The procedure at the airport in Ponta Delgada was a little chaotic before you got to the tents, but inside it was well-organised. The second test on Pico was a test street for vehicles, which was a quick and easy procedure.

Itinerary

August 31	Arrival Ponta Delgada, Sao Miguel
September 1	Flight to Pico – Whale watching from Lajes
September 2	Pico – Whale watching from Madalena
September 3	Pico – Whale watching in Madalena
September 4	Pico – Whale watching in Madalena
September 5	Pico – Whale watching in Lajes
September 6	Pico – Hiking
September 7	Pico – Hiking
September 8	Flight to Ponta Delgada
September 9	Sao Miguel – Sete Cidades/Nordeste/Serra do Tronqueira Road
September 10	Sao Miguel - Hike Salto do Prego / Birding Serra do Tronqueira Road
September 11	Sao Miguel – Mosteiros area
September 12	Flight back home



Sei Whale



Cory's Shearwater

Trip Lists

General qualifications such as “common”, etc. apply to both islands if nothing else is mentioned.

Birds

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* – two on Pico that seemed “legit”, the ones on Lagoa Verde (Sete Cidades) all seemed domestic ones, saw a few singles on route on Sao Miguel but did not stop to check
[American Black Duck *Anas rubripes* – saw two that may have been species but not sure if they were pure breeds]

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris* – a pair was seen on Lagoa do Caiado

[Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* – heard on Pico island]

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* – common

Common Wood-Pigeon *Columba palumbus* – common

Eurasian Collared-Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* – common near vineyards and agricultural areas

Eurasian Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* – only seen on Lagoa Azul (Sete Cidades)

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* – 11 on Lagoa Verde (Sete Cidades)

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus* – three in the harbour of Mosteiros

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* – one in Lajes do Pico

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* – only seen in and around harbour areas: one in Madalena, a few in Lajes do Pico, 15 in Vila Franca do Campo, 10+ in Mosteiros, a few in Ponta Delgada and Povocao

Sanderling *Calidris alba* – one in Mosteiros harbour

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* – one seen well near Lagoa do Paul, Pico

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius* – one in Lajes do Pico

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* – one in Lajes do Pico

Azorean Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis atlantis* – common to very common

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* – a few on Sao Miguel

Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* – small numbers on both islands

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* – common

[Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii* – possible sighting on one of the boat trips, rear view of a bird flying away from us, frustrating]

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* – common on boat trips, easy to see along the coast but usually quite distant (scope needed)

Great Shearwater *Ardenna gravis* – only seen on two whale watching trips around Pico

Sooty Shearwater *Ardenna grisea* – one and one possible on whale watching trips around Pico

Gray Heron *Ardea cinerea* – one on Lake Furnas, one near Lagoa Congrio

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* – two at Lajes do Pico on Sept. 1, two in the harbour of Povocao on September 11

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* – at least four on Pico, common and seen daily on Sao Miguel

[Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* – one heard at Alma do Pico Lodge]

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* – three in Porto do Calhau/Pocinho Bay area in Pico, two on the Lagoa do Capita Trail, 4+ on the Serra Tronqueira Road

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* – 5+ on the [Lagoa Capita Trail](#) and one near Pocinho Bay in Pico; a few on the Serra da Tronqueira Road

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* – locally common on Pico, common near towns and agricultural areas on Sao Miguel

Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula* – common to very common

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* – surprisingly only two seen on Pico, locally common on Sao Miguel, easy to see along the northern edge of Lagoa Verde (Sete Cidades)

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild* – 3+ at Lagoa Verde (Sete Cidades), 4 on the Serra Tronqueira Road

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* – common

Gray Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* – common

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* – common

Azores Bullfinch *Pyrrhula murina* – at least 5 of which 3 could be photographed on the Serra da Tronqueira Road; all sightings were within the first two kilometres on the Serra da Tronqueira Road (from the Povocao side, the turn-off for the Tronqueira Road is well-signposted on EN1-1 main road). As others have reported, they are much much easier to see and find in the morning.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* – probably under-recorded but (appeared only) locally common on Pico and Sao Miguel

Island Canary *Serinus canaria* – common to abundant



Island Canary and Priolo (Azorean Bullfinch) in very dense fog



Azorean Noctule

Mammals

European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* – several road kills, twice seen crossing the road on quiet mountain roads in Pico

House Mouse *Mus musculus* – several road kills, once seen alive

Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus* – several seen on Pico

[Black Rat *Rattus rattus* – only as roadkill]

European Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus* – one alive, many road kills

Greater Mouse-eared Bat *Myotis myotis* – a few in Lajes do Pico

Azores Noctule *Nyctalus azoreum* – common on both islands

Sei Whale *Balaenoptera borealis* – 4 together on September 2 (seen for at least 45 minutes, very relaxed and staying on the surface), one on September 4

Risso's Dolphin *Grampus griseus* – one sighting of 20+ animals on September 2

Short-beaked Common Dolphin *Delphinus delphis* – poor sighting of two animals once

Striped Dolphin *Stenella coeruleoalba* – one sighting of 20+ animals on September 2

Atlantic Spotted Dolphin *Stenella frontalis* – the most common dolphin, seen on 5 out of 6 trips

Common Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* – two sightings of 4 and 2 animals, respectively

Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus* – seen on 5 out of 6 trips

Least Weasel *Mustela nivalis* – one crossing the road into a stone wall in fields north of Capelas, Sao Miguel



Relaxed Sperm Whales near Mosteiros

Other Noteworthy Wildlife

Whale Shark *Rhincodon typus* – one on September 1

Blue Shark *Prionace glauca* – one on September 3

Loggerhead Sea Turtle *Caretta caretta* – one on September 1 and one on September 3

Madeiran Wall Lizard *Teira dugesii* – common

Moorish Gecko *Tarentola mauritanica* – seen once



Whale Shark



Loggerhead



Spotted Dolphin



Spotted Dolphin – mating attempt



Spotted Dolphin



Salto do Prego area on Sao Miguel