

Great Whales of the Azores (Pico)

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 15 May 2017



Blue Whale



Azores Chaffinch



Cory's Shearwater



Humpback Whale fluke

Report compiled by Cathy Harlow
Images courtesy of George Rutter



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Tour participants: Cathy Harlow (leader) with 12 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 6th May

London Heathrow to Lisbon

We met at London Heathrow Airport for the early evening flight to Lisbon. On arrival, we walked the short distance to the Tryp Airport Hotel for an overnight stay.

Day 2

Sunday 7th May

Lisbon to the Azores

After a copious early breakfast at the hotel, we walked back to the terminal, passing a flock of noisy House Sparrows roosting in a tree. We checked in for the 8am flight to Horta, on Faial Island. A slightly delayed departure meant we arrived a little behind schedule. As we began our descent, there were sweeping views of several of the other islands of the Atlantic archipelago. Grabbing our luggage from the belt, we were greeted by Terry's taxi for a speedy transfer down to the port at Faial, arriving with 15 minutes to spare. A few of the group spotted a Common Buzzard in flight and Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls were milling around on the harbour wall as we drew out from the port. During the short crossing over the channel that separates Faial from Pico, we saw our first Cory's Shearwaters and some of the group noted a few Barolo (previously known as Little) Shearwaters among them.

We were met off the ferry at Madalena by Dania, co-owner of CW Azores, who arranged for our luggage to be transported to the Caravela Hotel, opposite the ferry terminal, while we walked across. After checking in, we met up for lunch at a café near the church, but several visiting football teams had also decided to eat there too and our meal was frustratingly slow to arrive.

At 2pm we met at CW Azores and owner Enrico gave us a fascinating talk on the whale and dolphin species we might encounter during our stay. Of particular interest were his observations on the changing migration patterns of the great whales since CW Azores began recording sightings. Enrico's informative talk fired us up for the first boat trip and, kitted out with life vests and rain capes, we 'waddled' down to the quay where the rib was moored. Our group of 12 had the larger of the two ribs, a stable and spacious craft with more than enough space to move around.

Heading north from Madalena harbour, this was our first taste of the exhilaration of rib travel on choppy seas. Skipper Leonildo handled the boat with great skill, avoiding the worst of the bumps but inevitably we all got doused with spray from time to time. Soon we had our first sighting: a small group of energetic Short-beaked Common Dolphins were around us, emerging fleetingly above the surface, taking turns to ride the bow wave in pairs and threes. From the front of the boat, it was thrilling to look down on them swimming below, just a few feet from us. This was a good opportunity to try out cameras and lenses, making the necessary adjustments to exposure and focal length, attempting to get one or two shots in focus. After a while, most of us agreed that watching the dolphins was more rewarding than failing to get the perfect shot!

After a while, the dolphins resumed their feeding bout, spending longer under the surface in search of Sardines, according to Leonildo. We continued the journey north, getting used to the movement of the boat as we scanned the horizon for fins and blows. Hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters and a smattering of Barolo Shearwaters passed by effortlessly, gliding above the surface of the waves. Several times we passed Portuguese Man O'War, and Atlantic Flying Fish were also observed.

Soon we were joined by a smaller group of Short-beaked Common Dolphins, who also took time off from a feeding bout to check us out. By now the wind was picking up and as we'd been out for almost three hours, we agreed it was time to head back to port.

We arranged for an early dinner at Atmosfera restaurant as on Sundays most of the other local eateries are closed. A pair of Blackbirds were foraging on a path by the restaurant and numerous sparrows were flitting among the luxuriant foliage of introduced Sweet Pittosporum. We sampled the simple but tasty menu of pasta dishes, fish and meat mains and some nice local wines. After an early rise this morning, most of the group were ready to head for bed when we returned to the hotel.

Day 3

Monday 8th May

Land tour of the island

We arranged to make today our land day as the high winds and a sea of whitecaps didn't look promising for whale watching. As Paul had already done the island tour on a previous visit, he opted to take the ferry across to Horta on Faial, for the day.

While we were waiting to depart by minibus, some of the group wandered down to the harbour, where seven Ruddy Turnstones were foraging on the boat ramp and a few Yellow-legged Gulls and a Lesser Black-backed Gull surveyed the scene.

We set off in two minibuses with driver guides Caspar and Marco, first heading south to the UNESCO World Heritage Site vineyards, where each vine is wedged into crevices in the lava. While soil may be lacking, nutrients are not, and surrounded by their own enclosure of lava walls to protect from the wind, the vines do extremely well. Furthermore, the dark basalt absorbs heat and helps to promote growth. From the steps of a bright red windmill we admired the acres of vineyards stretching down to the coast. We observed Blackbird and Grey Wagtail foraging among the vines. The different islands of the Azores developed individual styles of windmill and on Pico and neighbouring Faial, they have a cone-shaped stone base. This is crowned with an upper timber structure, known as a 'casota' – or little house, accessed by an external staircase.

We stopped by a beach of giant lava boulders, rounded by wave action. Caspar explained that we would return here one evening to watch Cory's Shearwaters fly in to their nest sites among the shrubs and rocks above the shore.

Passing small fields of maize and potatoes, our guides told us that soil is brought in from neighbouring Faial to grow such crops. Now heading down a dirt road, we parked by a patch of native *Juniperus brevifolia*, *Erica azorica* and *Myrica faya* interspersed with planted figs. Each had its own lava wall to protect from the winds, though unlike the vine enclosures, which are square, those of the figs are half-moon shaped. Here, an Atlantic Canary

pair were courting on a fig branch and we observed Azores (Common) Chaffinch in flight, while several Western Azores Goldcrest flitted among the Junipers. Because of the gusty winds, the birds were subdued.

We made our way down to the sea along a shady passage flanked by lava walls, where we found *Euphorbia azorica* and Japanese Holly Fern *Cyrtomium falcatum* growing. Caspar pointed out the remains of the 15th century cliff-top settlement of Mingato, one of the earliest on Pico. Among the rocks we found a couple of Cory's Shearwater nest sites, with the skeletal remains of a chick. Caspar mentioned that feral cats are a threat to the unattended young birds when the parents are out at sea. Carl found a Red Rock Crab by the shore, defying the pounding waves that sent columns of spray into the air.

We paused for a coffee break and observed hungry bumblebees and Honey Bees on a Bottlebrush. A Collared Dove hurtled past and John added that he had seen an African Blue Tit from the minibus. Continuing the journey, we noted how effectively introduced *Lantana camara* colonizes the roadside.

Our next stop was at the Vigia on the north side of the island, from where the whale spotters scan for whales, reporting their sightings to the whale watch boats. This look-out was built and staffed by CW Azores but the original Vigias, dotted around the coast of Pico Island, were used by whale hunters until the 1980s when whaling ceased in the Azores. As today's rough sea was peppered with whitecaps, there was little hope of spotting whales from the Vigia, but Marco offered a taste of some local liqueurs instead. We also enjoyed our packed lunch of sandwich, muffin, crisps, fruit and juice in this peaceful spot, surrounded by vineyards. A few Canaries defied the winds but generally there were few birds around.

Continuing the journey along the north shore of Pico, we stopped to look for Azores Noctule Bat but without success – too much wind, Caspar admitted. Here we found Bladder Campion and *Polygonum capitatum* in bloom, together with Sharp Rush *Juncus acutus*. Next we visited the spectacular cliffs of Porto do Cachorro (meaning little dog or hot dog), a tiny coastal hamlet, whose name draws from a rock feature in the form of a dog's head. Marco pointed out a ramp where wine barrels were rolled down to the boats from the stores, known as Adegas. Walkways gave access to dizzying views of the waves foaming through blowholes, and we heard the experimental wave generator whoosh into action as the powerful Atlantic breakers hit their mark. The cliffs were formed by a lava flow from the 1718 eruption on the flank of Pico, the 2,351 metre high volcano dominating the island. A couple of confiding Common Terns kept the photographers in the group busy as they attempted to stay steady on their perches.

At our next stop at Cabrito (little goat) we photographed a 15th century church, built of hewn lava blocks. The cliffs were topped with pahoe-hoe lava, whose cooling surface wrinkles into ropes as lava continues to run below it. Out at sea, we observed many Cory's Shearwaters skimming the whitecaps. We noted Rock Samphire *Crithmum maritimum*, which Marco told us was a local delicacy. At Santo Antonio, we found a larger group of Common Terns perched and in flight around an offshore rock, together with a single Roseate Tern. At São Roque, while some opted for refreshments in the café, others examined the various winches and bits of machinery used to haul whales up the ramps during the whaling years. The old whaling factory is now a museum. George saw a Blackcap in the vicinity of the factory.

From São Roque, we headed inland on a winding road, flanked by yellow flowered Kahili Ginger *Hedychium gardneranum*, an invasive Himalayan species threatening the indigenous Laurel forest. Also lining the roadside

were hedges of *Hydrangea macrophylla*, just starting to bloom. We had stunning views back out to sea as we rapidly gained height to the plateau at 800 metres. Now enveloped in cloud, a short detour brought us to Lago Capitão, a small lake set among gnarled Tree Heather. Here we got good views of Chaffinch; like us, buffeted by the gusty wind, they were keeping low. Muscovy Duck and a Mallard hybrid were swimming on the lake and came to check if we had anything to offer. Much of the endemic forest was sadly cleared from the area to create pasture for grazing cows for Pico's dairy industry.

On the descent to Madalena, we stopped to walk to a crater row where we entered a spectacular lava tube, the Furna de Frei Matias. Such tunnels form when lava solidifies on the surface, but continues running below the surface in a well-defined channel. When the eruption tails off, the lava empties from the channel, leaving an empty tunnel behind. We entered the tunnel at a point where the roof had collapsed, allowing light to penetrate. In this sheltered spot we found a surprising variety of plants including a Spikemoss *Selaginella kraussiana*, and two ferns: *Diplazium caudatum* with a dark stem and a Soft Shield Fern *Polystichum setiferum*.

After this fascinating day spent discovering the landscapes, villages, bird and plant life of Pico, we returned to the hotel for a short rest before reassembling to walk to Petisca, a local restaurant in Madalena. The extensive menu had something for everyone and included fish of the day, grilled meat, copious salads and delicious desserts.

Day 4

Tuesday 9th May

Morning and afternoon whale watching trips

We awoke to a grey morning but thankfully the winds had abated during the night. Over breakfast, an extensive buffet, we watched a Blackbird foraging on the lawn by the swimming pool along with a flock of House Sparrows. Soon the skies cleared, showing promise for the day's whale watching.

We set off from CW Azores at 9am with Caspar and skipper Leonildo, heading north towards the open sea between Faial and Sao Jorge. The 24-seater rib gave us a smooth ride, in spite of a residual swell from the previous day's wind. We had reports from the spotter of baleen whale blows in that area but had to go fairly far out to sea, avoiding a heavy shower in our path. John spotted a Bulwer's Petrel shortly after leaving harbour, recognised by its all-dark plumage. An hour later we located a blow on the horizon and shortly after, an adult Fin Whale surfaced 50 metres from our boat. We could see the white on the right side of its lower jaw as it came towards the surface – an asymmetric colouring that is diagnostic for the species. The first whale sighting of any trip is incredibly moving but when it's a whale that can grow to 27 metres in length and weigh 90 tonnes, it takes more than your breath away. The whale surfaced three more times before taking a deeper dive, leaving behind a 'footprint', a circle of calmer water.

We noted that this relaxed and obliging Fin Whale had a notch in the trailing edge of the dorsal fin, which we saw clearly as it emerged from feeding bouts below. It stayed under for four to six minutes each time it took a longer dive, and then produced a bright red faeces, eagerly scooped up in a bottle by Caspar and Leonildo. Collecting samples like this is part of an Italian research project supported by Enrico, the director of CW Azores.

Not wanting to overstay our welcome, we continued the search for other whales and enjoyed repeated encounters with small groups of feeding dolphins in the company of Cory's and Barolo Shearwaters.

We arrived back at 12.30pm in time for lunch. Some of the group opted for the extensive menu at Dark Café while others explored the several other cafes in the vicinity or went to the supermarket to buy a picnic.

We regrouped at 2.20pm and headed out with Caspar and Leonildo, who had news of a Sperm Whale sighting quite far to the north, so we set off in that direction, avoiding a large storm cloud along the way. The sea was teeming with Portuguese Man O' War drifting by in the currents and wind. Several small groups of Short-beaked Common Dolphins joined us along the way, some feeding on Sardines alongside excited Cory's Shearwaters snatching scraps from the surface.

The wind was starting to get up and white caps on the sea coupled with a residual swell made for a bumpy ride. From time to time we stopped while Caspar and Leonildo dropped a hydrophone overboard to listen for Sperm Whale clicks – Caspar explained how these are audible when the whales are feeding and diving below the surface, but cease once they come up to breathe.

It soon became obvious that the Sperm Whales sighted earlier were no longer in the area, so we moved in the direction of Faial, in the hope of encountering a baleen whale. Several other whale watch boats on the horizon were a promising sign and as we got closer, we began to see tall blows ahead. Blue Whale? Fin Whale? Fin Whale as it turned out, but while we waited for them to resurface, we suddenly discovered a group of five adult and juvenile Sperm Whales a short distance away. Approaching them, the first fluked up and took a longer dive followed shortly by the rest of the group. Even though CW Azores are exemplary in their whale manners, sometimes you can't help getting the feeling that the whales don't want company.

A juvenile then resurfaced but shortly after dived again and though we waited in the hope of seeing them again, this was not to be. Running short of time, the sun began to cast a golden light, throwing a stunning rainbow over the storm clouds on the horizon. We made our way back to port, passing the partly submerged crater forming the islands of Deitado and Em Pé (meaning 'lying down' and 'standing'). Numerous Yellow-legged Gulls were on and flying around the islands. Madalena's charming church was bathed in golden light on the final approach to port.

For dinner we returned to Petisca, dining on swordfish, tuna, pork, huge salads and the same irresistible desserts.

Day 5

Wednesday 10th May

Morning and afternoon whale watching trips

We awoke to a fine and calm morning, with the snowy summit of Pico appearing through the clouds. After tucking into the copious breakfast buffet at Hotel Caravelas, we walked round to CW Azores base and again got kitted up with life jackets, ready to set off on the rib.

The spotter at the vigia had already seen blows to the north of Pico and we headed towards the open sea between the islands of Faial and Sao Jorge. There were noticeably fewer shearwaters feeding on the surface today and we didn't meet any dolphins on our way north. The first blow was a Fin Whale, but this one dived when we arrived. Rita, our guide for the morning, explained how normally they dive for around four to six minutes and on cue, it surfaced five minutes later. It was likely that this individual was feeding and so when Leonildo picked up

multiple blows to the north, we headed in that direction, already eight miles out from port. The beauty of using rib boats is that you can cover long distances at speed and in relative 'comfort'.

Here we found two more adult Fin Whales on the surface. They didn't appear to be feeding and for what seemed like ages, they swam at or just below the surface, blowing in tandem so close to us we felt and smelled their fishy breath. The photographic opportunities during this Fin Whale chill-out session were unbelievable and soon we were swapping telephoto lenses for wide-angle ones.

Time goes incredibly fast when you're watching whales and soon it was time to head back to base. We followed the north coast of Pico past the black cliffs of Cachorro we had explored on land a few days back. We spotted a few Short-beaked Common Dolphins along the way and a small Loggerhead Turtle poked its head out of the water.

After lunch we were back on the boat with Caspar and Leonildo. The spotters had picked up blows to the south, potentially Humpback Whales. We headed first for Monte Guia, a nature reserve and semi-submerged crater just outside Horta. Here we watched a curious phenomenon of sea water blowing up through a crack in the rock like a whale spout or a geyser.

Next we headed for the open sea and the area where the Humpback Whales had been spotted earlier; about four miles south of Faial. No sign of them. Then Leonildo spotted a tall blow about 500 metres away. A Blue Whale perhaps? Hearts thumping, expectations high - for some of our group this would be a second or third attempt to see Blue Whales. And it was a Blue Whale! It took a couple of breaths and then dived, but surfaced again a short distance away. Caspar explained that they normally dive for six to eight minutes. But this time the whale didn't come back up in the same area and appeared to be travelling, so we turned towards Faial and picked up its trail again, getting great views as it took four breaths on the surface before diving. The afternoon sunlight was perfect for photography. We continued to search but the whale had another agenda and after all, the Azores are only a snack-bar stop for Blue Whales on a long journey north to Iceland, Norway and beyond.

Caspar took us back towards Monte Guia, where a colourful raft of thousands of pink and blue Portuguese Man O'War were bobbing with their floats inflated at the foot of the dark tuff cliffs. These jelly-fish like animals are known as siphonophores and are a colony of four animals each with different functions. The tentacles contain stinging nematocysts that deliver venom to paralyse and kill small fish and crustaceans. In spite of its reputation, the Man O'War's sting is rarely fatal to people, but it causes painful blistering.

Caspar pointed out a dike in the cliffs, a vertical band of darker basalt that had hardened inside a fissure.

In the evening we went to Atmosfera restaurant again. After dinner, Caspar and Marlene picked us up and took us just south of Madalena to see the Cory's Shearwaters come in to land at dusk. The sight of these large seabirds flying rather clumsily over our heads was memorable, but the sound of their calls as they locate their nest sites is unforgettable, especially when there are dozens flying in at a time.

Day 6

Thursday 11th May

Morning and afternoon whale watching trips

A windier start to the day and as the spotters had identified Humpback Whales, we headed south again with Marco, Caspar and Marianne, a research student joining our trip. We encountered several small groups of Short-beaked Common Dolphins, who raced in to check out our bow wave. Three of them leapt clear of the water to greet us but soon moved on. We found a young Humpback Whale doing shallow dives in an irregular pattern. Then Marco had news of a baleen whale further out to sea and we headed south at speed. A tall, straight blow showed us this was likely to be a Blue Whale – and it was.

The Blue Whale was on the surface for four blows and then dived, showing the fluke, which is unusual in this area, appearing again several hundred metres to the south. After several dives and continuing its fast movement south, we concluded that the whale did not want the boats around and so we headed in towards the south shore of Pico. By now the wind had really got up and we enjoyed a bumpy and exhilarating ride back to port, getting sprayed along the way. We passed by the cliffs on the south shore of Pico, with huge waves crashing on the rocks, sending up jets of spray.

Everyone dispersed for lunch, some opting for a picnic and others heading for the Dark Café. We set off again at 2.30pm with Marlene, Karin and Marco and again headed south as we were keen to look for Sperm Whales, whose blows had been spotted south of Faial.

First up was a lone juvenile Sperm Whale who fluked up as it dived. This must have been a shallow dive as it surfaced again in the same area 20 minutes later. Meanwhile, a mother and calf pair were spotted about 500 metres away. As we were waiting for the juvenile to surface again, Marco spotted a Blue Whale blow on the horizon to the south. It was hard to tell if this was the same whale we'd seen in the morning. We watched as it came to the surface, took four breaths and then dived again. Its movements were more random than in the morning and we wondered if it was feeding. There were some Cory's Shearwaters in the area and Short-beaked Common Dolphins punctuated the afternoon's viewing, at times leaping out of the water but as always, hard to photograph. The wind had dropped by this point.

After we'd spent about half an hour with the Blue Whale and keen not to outstay our welcome, Marco had news from the spotters of Humpback Whales closer into shore, further to the east. With the wind now picking up again, this seemed a good plan and we soon found the mother and calf pair and spent a delightful half an hour watching them take several breaths on the surface then fluke and dive in tandem, re-surfacing again.

As the clouds cleared from Pico's summit, the sun came out and the photographic opportunities were superb. All too soon it was time to make our way back and we had a smoother ride along the base of the cliffs back to Madalena.

In the evening, some of our group went to the Chinese restaurant for a change, while the rest enjoyed another meal at Petisca and the chance to try some of the local liqueurs: a fiery Neveda and a sweeter Honey and Blackcurrant potion. On the way back, some of the group stopped off to indulge at the ice cream kiosk.

Day 7

Friday 12th May

Morning whale watching; afternoon free

With whale watching, go with low expectations and high spirits and you'll not be disappointed. Today was a case in point! We headed north with skipper Marco, guide Chiara and research student Lara. Neither they, nor we were optimistic as the spotters were unable to see much with the misty conditions and choppy seas. Perhaps the whales were already heading north away from the Azores? Fin, Blue and Sei Whales migrate between their winter breeding grounds with warmer seas and high latitude summer feeding areas, and the Azores provide a convenient re-fuelling stop en route. May, coinciding with the plankton bloom, attracts the greatest number of migrating whales, some of which are seen in the area for just a few days, while others may stay up to two months. There's an online catalogue of Fin Whale dorsal fins but we had failed to match the Fin Whale with a notched dorsal fin we'd seen earlier in the trip. Was this its first visit?

After eight miles and ever closer to São Jorge Island, we were still bobbing cluelessly among the white caps, not rating our chances of finding whales when the first blows appeared: two Fin Whales chilling out side by side on the surface, taking shallow dives. Chiara scooped up some faeces, which showed they had recently been feeding. With the movement of the boat and spray from the waves, blurred photographs and wet cameras looked inevitable so most of us opted to watch the graceful giants glide past. Further blows indicated at least four other Fin Whales in the area and Marco wondered if one might be a hybrid as it showed pigmentation on the back.

Joined briefly by a few Short-beaked Common Dolphins, the exhilarating journey back to port was an adventure in itself and we were fairly well soaked when we arrived. We re-grouped after lunch to discover that, not surprisingly, the afternoon whale watching was cancelled due to high winds.

Lesley, Karl, Margaret, Nathalie, George, Paul, Sarah, Chris and John were happy to have a free afternoon to explore or rest and catch up with some reading. Ken headed off for a leg-stretch along the south coast past the vineyards.

Jane, Steve and Cathy opted to visit the lava tubes at Gruta das Torres, which cost an additional €15, including transport. Open to the public since 2005, the largest lava caves in Portugal were formed in an eruption from the Cabeço Bravo crater on the side of Pico mountain, about 1500 years ago. Over five kilometres of tunnels have been explored, but only 450 metres are included on the visit. Kitted out with hard hats and torches we descended a flight of stone steps into the opening of the tunnel, where the ceiling had collapsed. The walls glittered with what appeared to be flecks of gold but were in fact bacteria. As our eyes got accustomed to the darkness, we continued along a walkway into the tunnel, careful not to touch the walls to avoid damaging a powdery white fungus we could see growing here. Underfoot, the crunchy, gassy 'biscuit' lava gave way to gas-depleted, thinner and faster flowing pahoe-hoe lava, forming a characteristic ropy surface. Lowering our heads for the narrower passages, we emerged into a spacious cavern where reddish stalactites of iron-rich lava hung from the ceiling. Unable to escape, a huge gas bubble had formed the concave roof of the large chamber. At this point, we all turned off our torches to experience the total darkness and silence of this magical place. As we exited, we admired the mosses and ferns flanking the steps that led out of the underworld.

On the way back, we stopped to admire a creeping *Asarina* with foxglove-shaped pink flowers rambling over a wall. We arranged to eat dinner at Dark Café, whose extensive menu offered something for everyone.

Day 8

Saturday 13th May

Free morning; afternoon whale watching

We arranged to meet for an early morning birding walk to the harbour and on to the fields on the upper edge of town. We found a single Ruddy Turnstone and several Yellow-legged Gulls by the port and then, making our way past the church, Feral Pigeons and a White-Necked (Common) Wood Pigeon flew overhead and Blackbirds were foraging on the ground. Blackcaps were calling and Chaffinches were flitting among the trees. A small flock of Starlings were perched on a roof and Collared Dove sat on a wire. A pair of Canaries showed well perched on a branch, singing their hearts out.

After breakfast, Sarah, Paul, Nathalie and George took an additional boat trip. It was overcast with low visibility but calmer seas than yesterday. They found a Blue Whale and a Fin Whale, again in the area of a deeper sea trench north of Pico. Jane and Steve went for a walk and watched Madeiran Wall Lizards.

By lunchtime the wind had picked up and we wondered if our last whale watching trip would go ahead. By now all seasoned rib passengers, were we going to be put off by wind and waves? It seemed not, as we set out all smiles and keenness with Stefano as guide and Michael as skipper. Stefano confirmed that the visibility was so bad that the spotters would not be able to help. With a southerly wind behind us, we sped north towards Sao Jorge and after about 40 minutes had the first blows in sight, spotted by Sarah. Then it was multiple blows in all directions, mostly Fin Whales but a taller Blue Whale blow to the north. The Fin Whales were clearly feeding and spending little time on the surface. In all we counted 15 individual Fin Whales, the last of which were easier to observe as they rested on and near the surface. By now the wind had increased but Stefano ably kept the boat steady while we attempted to take photographs. We noticed a whale with a smaller and less falcate dorsal fin and some pigmentation on the back. Was this a hybrid? A few Short-beaked Common Dolphins joined us briefly, and one shot out of the water right by the boat. We remarked that there were fewer Cory's Shearwaters in evidence.

It was a very exhilarating last ride back to base. As we approached the coast of Pico, huge waves were crashing on the shore just outside Madalena. After a hot shower and a cuppa, most of us began to feel human again!

We gathered for a celebratory drink in the reception area of the hotel. Totting up the numbers, over the week we had observed eight Sperm Whales, three Humpback Whales, 27 Fin Whales, five Blue Whales and several hundred Short-beaked Dolphins. Given the difficult sea and weather conditions we experienced, this is surely a spectacular success. Thanks must go to the great team at CW Azores who took us whale watching and ensured that the trips were enjoyable, safe and informative and kept us going when the going was sometimes tough. Thanks too to the determined, spirited and 'let's go for it' group of whale watchers we were!

For our last dinner we returned to Atmosfera, the restaurant on the hill above Madalena.

Day 9

Sunday 14th May

The journey home begins

We arranged for an early breakfast and then made our way across the road from the hotel to the ferry terminus. With the winds already gusting and a sea full of whitecaps, the 35 minute crossing from Madalena to Horta was

thankfully a short one and we were suitably distracted by the numerous Cory's Shearwaters in flight. On arrival, we saw a pair of Common Terns engaged in nuptial feeding on the harbour wall. The taxis were waiting to take us to the airport for check in. Once at the airport, we were informed that our flight was cancelled due to issues at Lisbon Airport and the stormy weather in the Azores. After a long wait in a queue, we were re-booked on flights for the next day and transported back into Horta, to a nice hotel overlooking the port. With lunch, dinner and breakfast provided, there was little to complain about other than the inconvenience of rearranging train and bus travel, car parking and work and other commitments.

We had the option to arrange a tour of Faial by taxi but with the prospect of awful weather, no one was that keen. However, after lunch most of us took a walk to look for birds. A few House Sparrows, a Grey Wagtail, several Chaffinches and Blackbirds and a Robin were spotted in the hotel gardens. Down by the harbour Yellow-legged Gulls and Common Terns were keeping a low profile. We paused to look at some of the old whaling boats pulled on the beach. With oars, sails and hand-thrown harpoons, these tiny boats looked ill-suited to the seas we had experienced in the Azores! Whalers in the Azores engaged in the practice for purely economic reasons. The last Azorean factory for processing whales for their meat and oil closed in 1984, although a few whales were still taken until 1987. This coincided with the start of commercial whale watching operations in the islands, an industry that has seen a huge growth in recent years. Moreover, those employed as whale spotters for whaling stayed in their jobs, but worked instead for the whale watchers.

Some of the group decided to retreat to Peter Sport Café for a drink, but Cathy and Ken were keen to hike up to the Monte Guia Nature Reserve. A few Canaries and a Blackcap were sheltering in the shrubs. By then, the winds were so fierce that Portuguese Man O'War were being blown off the sea onto shore. We got a great view from the summit of Monte Guia, but it was hard to stay standing on the exposed top.

We all met up for dinner and then an early night in preparation for the early ferry and flight next morning.

Day 10

Monday 15th May

Faial – Pico – Lisbon - UK

After an early breakfast, we were driven by coach to the ferry terminal for a final journey across the channel between Faial and Pico. Taking off from Pico's small airport, there were a few breaks in the cloud and though relieved to be finally in the air, Cathy couldn't stop hoping we might see one last whale.

Special thanks must go to all the group for unfailing enthusiasm and good humour throughout; to John for bird spotting and identification and to Sarah for spotting more whales than the whale spotters!

Once back in the UK, another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May									
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		30		100	10	30	6	6		
2	Blue Whale	<i>Balaeanoptera musculus</i>					1	2		2		
3	Fin Whale	<i>Balaeanoptera physalus</i>				3	3		6	15		
4	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeanglia</i>						3				
5	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>				5		3				

Birds

1	Fea's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma feae</i>				3	1					
2	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>				1						
3	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		350	200	500	200	300	100	200	200	200
4	Barolo Shearwater	<i>Puffinus baroli</i>		20		50						
5	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>		1					1			1
6	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			7					1		
7	Azorean Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>		30	10	20	2	10	4	10	6	2
8	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			30	20	8	10	4	4	2	2
9	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>			1							
10	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			2				1	1		
11	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	White-necked Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>					1			4		
13	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		1	6					1	2	
14	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>									1	
15	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>		2	6	4	2		10	30	4	2
16	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Silvia atricapilla gularis</i>			1		1		2	4	1	
17	Western Azores Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>			4							
18	African Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes teneriffae</i>			1							
19	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>		4	5					6		
20	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Azores Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>			8					2	6	

	Common name	Scientific name	May										
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
22	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>											H
23	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>			8					10	10	2	

Butterflies & moths

1	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea faillae</i>								1			
2	Diamondback Moth	<i>Plutella xylostella</i>			1								

Other Invertebrates

1	Bumblebee	<i>Bombus sp.</i>			1								
2	Honey Bee	<i>Apis mellifera</i>			2								

Reptiles

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>					1						
2	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (teira) dugesii</i>			3		1		50	1			
3	Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis sp.</i>							1	1			

Marine

1	Marbled Shore Crab	<i>Eriphia verrucosa</i>								1			
2	Limpet	<i>Patella piperata</i>					✓						
3	Portuguese Man O'War	<i>Physalia physalia</i>		1			✓	10	✓				
4	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>		1			1		1				
5	Red Rock Crab	<i>Grapsus adsensionis</i>			2								

Plants

1	Japanese Holly Fern	<i>Cyrtomium falcatum</i>			✓								
2	Soft Shield Fern	<i>Polystichum setiferum</i>			✓								
3	A Fern	<i>Diplazium caudatum</i>			✓								
4	Krauss' Spikemoss	<i>Selaginella kraussiana</i>			✓								
5	Japanese Cedar	<i>Cryptomeria japonica</i>			✓								
6	Norfolk Island Pine	<i>Araucaria heterophylla</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓					

	Common name	Scientific name	May											
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15		
7	Sweet Pittosporum	<i>Pittosporum undulatum</i>		✓	✓									
8	Laurel	<i>Laurus azorica</i>			✓									
9	Fire Tree	<i>Myrica faya</i>			✓							✓		
10	Madeiran Mahogany	<i>Persea indica</i>		✓	✓									
11	Azorean Tree Heath	<i>Erica azorica</i>			✓							✓		
12	Juniper	<i>Juniperus brevifolia</i>			✓									
13	Lantana	<i>Lantana camara</i>			✓									
14	Common Fig	<i>Ficus carica</i>			✓									✓
15	Kahili Ginger	<i>Hedychium gardnerianum</i>			✓									
16	Hydrangea	<i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>			✓									
17	Rock Samphire	<i>Crithmum maritimum</i>			✓									
18	Bladder Campion	<i>Silene vulgaris maritima</i>			✓									
19	Spurge	<i>Euphorbia azorica</i>			✓									
20	Buck's Horn Plantain	<i>Plantago coronopus</i>			✓									
21	Greater Quaking Grass	<i>Briza maxima</i>						✓						
22	Sharp Rush	<i>Juncus acutus</i>			✓									
23	Hottentot Fig	<i>Carpobrotus edulis</i>			✓									
24	Pink Knotweed	<i>Persicaria capitatum</i>												
25	Climbing Snapdragon	<i>Asarina scandens</i>		✓								✓		
26	Garden Nasturtium	<i>Tropaeolum major</i>		✓	✓							✓		

Naturetrek Facebook

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