



# Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

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## AZORES, PORTUGAL

Date - August 2025

Duration - 4 Days

Destinations

Lisbon - Pico Island - Madalena - Lajes do Pico

## Trip Overview

With a few days spare following a work trip in Portugal, my partner Karina and I decided to visit the Azores, as she had never been and I had not visited for the best part of two decades. For those who are not aware, the Azores consists of nine volcanic islands in the North Atlantic and is one of two autonomous regions of Portugal, the other being Madeira. Both are situated in the North Atlantic and although both of these alluring archipelagos attract tourists for a variety of reasons, for me, the only real reason to visit either is for the incredible whale and dolphin watching. In the case of the Azores, which is roughly 1,400kms from mainland Portugal, compared to 800kms or so for Madeira, most sources state that 28 cetaceans have been observed in these waters, although at least some of these, the harbour porpoise for example, are clearly vagrants and do not occur regularly. For the record, I have listed below the species that I understand have been recorded in the Azores, which represent around a third of all cetaceans on earth:

## Cetaceans of the Azores

### Phocoenidae - Porpoises (1)

1. Harbour Porpoise - *Phocoena Phocoena*

### Delphinidae - Dolphins (11)

2. Common Dolphin - *Delphinus delphis*
3. Short-finned Pilot Whale - *Globicephala macrorhynchus*
4. Long-finned Pilot Whale - *Globicephala melas*
5. Risso's Dolphin - *Grampus griseus*
6. Fraser's Dolphin - *Lagenodelphis hosei*
7. Killer Whale - *Orcinus orca*
8. False Killer Whale - *Pseudorca crassidens*
9. Striped Dolphin - *Stenella coeruleoalba*
10. Atlantic Spotted Dolphin - *Stenella frontalis*
11. Rough-toothed Dolphin - *Steno bredanensis*
12. Common Bottlenose Dolphin - *Tursiops truncatus*

### Physeteridae - Sperm Whale (1)

13. Sperm Whale - *Physeter macrocephalus*

### Kogiidae - Pygmy and Dwarf Sperm Whales (2)

14. Dwarf Sperm Whale - *Kogia sima*
15. Pygmy Sperm Whale - *Kogia breviceps*

### Balaenopteridae - Rorquals (6)

16. Minke Whale - *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*
17. Sei Whale - *Balaenoptera borealis*
18. Bryde's Whale - *Balaenoptera edeni*
19. Blue Whale - *Balaenoptera musculus*
20. Fin Whale - *Balaenoptera physalus*
21. Humpback whale - *Megaptera novaeangliae*

### Ziphiidae - Beaked Whales (6)

22. Northern bottlenose whale - *Hyperoodon ampullatus*
23. Sowerby's Beaked Whale - *Mesoplodon bidens*
24. Blainville's beaked whale - *Mesoplodon densirostris*
25. Gervais' beaked whale - *Mesoplodon europaeus*
26. True's beaked whale - *Mesoplodon mirus*
27. Cuvier's beaked Whale - *Ziphius cavirostris*

### Balaenidae - Right and Bowhead Whales (1)

28. North Atlantic Right Whale - *Eubalaena glacialis*



Of course, not all of these can be observed all year round, as many species are migratory and pass through these waters at different times. Some are also exceptionally rare and I was advised that if I spent an entire whale watching season, so basically from April to October, across all nine of the islands that make up the Azores, I could realistically expect to encounter eighteen to twenty different cetaceans, including a few residents that can be spotted throughout the year. For our visit, Karina and I chose Pico Island, which was the centre of a thriving whaling industry until as recently as 1987, when the last sperm whales were slaughtered in these waters. Two years later, the whale watching company that I sailed with was formed, using the same spotters who used to scan the horizon for whales to hunt from watchtowers on shore. The system now works in exactly the same way, with experienced spotters using powerful binoculars to identify the distinctive spurt or blow of whales breaking the surface to breathe, before directing the boats towards their targets, but to thankfully photograph these days and not harpoon. As we would be able to confirm on our final day, the system works best in calm flat seas, as it can be almost impossible to distinguish the blow of a whale in choppy water and even a fairly moderate swell can reduce your chances significantly, particularly at distance. Before we arrived at the end of August, eight species had been encountered regularly that month, with a further six observed entirely randomly, so say between one and five times during the entire month. We were therefore hoping to observe at least eight species, and possibly as many as perhaps twelve, and had six whale tours in all, three in the morning and three in the afternoon across three days.



## Mammal Sightings

### Order Artiodactyla/Cetacea - Family Delphinidae (Dolphins - 6)

#### 1. Common Dolphin - *Delphinus delphis*

Despite its name, the common dolphin is not the most commonly observed dolphin in the Azores and we would encounter these beautiful animals on just two occasions, the second of which was very brief, as our guide decided to try for one final whale on what was our last tour. Fortunately, we had already observed this species extremely well, with several of these acrobatic and playful creatures leaping beside the boat in characteristic fashion.

#### 2. Short-finned Pilot Whale - *Globicephala macrorhynchus*

Again, despite their name, pilot whales are actually dolphins and not whales and we would encounter the short-finned version on three of our six trips. Whilst there are known to be other extinct relatives, there are only two extant species of pilot whale, the short-finned pilot whale, that is most commonly observed here during June and July and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the long-finned pilot whale, which is apparently far rarer in the Azores. That said, given that the two are pretty much indistinguishable in the water and that their ranges overlap, both here in the Azores and in several other regions, it remains possible, perhaps even likely, that the two species are sometimes confused.

#### 3. Striped Dolphin - *Stenella coeruleoalba*

Observed on our first tour, but only briefly, as our guide said that these striking dolphins are difficult to approach in these waters and she wanted to concentrate on attempting to reach a whale that the spotters had observed from the mainland. Although I was able to take a few distant reference shots as we passed by, we would not encounter this species again and they are far easier to get close to elsewhere, including across much of the Mediterranean and around Madeira.

#### 4. Atlantic Spotted Dolphin - *Stenella frontalis*

This was the most commonly observed dolphin, with sightings on five of our six tours, including extended views of large numbers, often feeding and playing around the boat. As per its name, this species occurs throughout the North and South Atlantic Ocean, but not as far east as mainland Europe, which basically means that any European sightings will take place in the Portuguese waters of the Azores and Madeira or off the Canary Islands, which belong to Spain.

#### 5. Common Bottlenose Dolphin - *Tursiops truncatus*

It is an unfortunate fact, that for many, bottlenose dolphins are the species people are least hoping to see on major cetacean tours, particularly in terms of British wildlife tourists, as this is the dolphin most regularly observed around the United Kingdom and usually visitors are hoping to see something more exotic when they travel further afield. Whilst I am always happy to spend time with any of these remarkable mammals, I guess our guides were aware of this, as bottlenose dolphins were encountered on three of our six tours, but we only lingered towards the end of one, when we were not likely to see much else. It is a shame really, as encounters with these highly social dolphins are often spectacular and I have spent a great deal of time over the years marvelling at their acrobatic displays.

#### 6. Risso's Dolphin - *Grampus griseus*

Of the more routinely observed dolphins, this was the species I most wanted to encounter in the Azores, as I had not seen a risso's dolphin for almost twenty years and have missed them on numerous occasions in that time, particularly in British waters. Sadly, these distinctive dolphins appear to be almost viewed as bottlenose dolphins in the Azores and not a great deal of time is devoted to them. Indeed, of the twenty or so hours we spent at sea across all six tours, probably around ten minutes was spent in the company of risso's dolphins, which are born largely grey, but accumulate distinctive white scars as they socialise, mate and hunt over the years. Indeed, some of the older dolphins are almost entirely white and like the sperm whales that hunt in the same waters here, risso's dolphins also feed on squid and octopus and can reach depths in excess of 600 metres. Although disappointingly brief, both of our sightings included close views of several dolphins, the first of which we left to return to shore and the second to search for a sperm whale, a species our guides clearly targeted with the aid of a hydrophone and consequently devoted the vast majority of our time to.



### Order Artiodactyla/Cetacea - Family Balaenopteridae (Rorquals - 2)

#### 7. Sei Whale - *Balaenoptera borealis*

Of the six rorqual whales that occur in the Azores, the sei whale is the most common at this time of year and was viewed on each of our first three tours. Indeed, we had multiple sightings on two of those trips and although we always remained at a respectful distance, I did notice that our guides were far more willing to approach and even follow sei whales, than they were sperm whales. The third largest of the rorquals, after blue and fin whales, I had understood that most sightings in the Azores take place between June and July, but in the August of our visit, this was the fifth most regularly encountered cetacean and the second most regularly observed whale behind only the sperm whale.

#### 8. Bryde's Whale - *Balaenoptera edeni*

For the vast majority of our final day, it appeared that our sightings would be limited to the eight species routinely observed during the month of our visit, with no special surprises. I will therefore remain forever grateful to our guide, who opted to leave the common dolphins we had been watching, for the outside chance of seeing one last whale. That gratitude should also extend to the spotters on shore, as the conditions at sea on our last day were pretty rough and we had struggled to find whales all morning and again on this final afternoon excursion. How they spotted the blow of this particular whale in such dire conditions will remain a mystery, as will how we found it again when we eventually arrived in the approximate region. Pure luck would be my guess, but we somehow did and in all would have three views of what we at first thought was a sei whale, but then clearly recognised as a bryde's whale. This was the bonus species we had been searching so long for and would be the final cetacean of the entire trip. As such, I was somewhat disappointed that it turned out to be the only one of the nine I failed to even take a reference shot of, but, as you will discover below, I already had far greater reason to regret the rough seas and the fact that I had not been able to use my camera on either of our final tours.

#### Order Artiodactyla/Cetacea - Family Physeteridae (Sperm Whale - I)

#### 9. Sperm Whale - *Physeter macrocephalus*

As I was to discover over the course of our tours, sperm whales are the go to species in the Azores, partly because they occur here throughout the year, but principally because you can search for them with a hydrophone in poor weather, when other species are all but impossible to spot. Sperm whales are therefore encountered on almost every tour and were by far the most commonly observed cetacean during both July and August. We had watched these magnificent leviathans on three of our first four sailings, all of which took place in almost ideal conditions, so in bright sunshine and on almost flat seas. The opposite was the case on our final day, as the wind had got up overnight and we left the harbour bouncing around in what was a relatively small inflatable. The conditions deteriorated even further as we pressed on beyond the shelter of the shore and after my camera bag had been soaked, along with my camera as I attempted to photograph some Atlantic spotted dolphins, I decided to pass it back to the captain to store in the dry behind the wheelhouse. There was no other way of protecting my equipment, as I was already completely drenched and there is absolutely no cover on a Zodiac with heavy waves crashing against you. It was probably touch and go in terms of whether we should have even sailed, but I had obviously wanted to and as we eventually headed back to the harbour, I was extremely glad we had, as a young male sperm whale breached in full view of our little boat, not once, but three times. I of course automatically reached for my camera after the first breach, as I knew that others were likely to follow, but it was safely tucked behind the wheel and I knew that I had missed the chance to record one of nature's true wonders, a sperm whale completely out of the water. At the time it was difficult to know whether to laugh or cry, but for a while now, I have tried to worry less about photographs and just enjoy the sightings for what they are, extraordinary natural encounters that I am immensely privileged to experience.



## Order Lagomorpha - Family Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares - I)

### 10. European Rabbit - *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

European rabbits do not occur naturally on the Azores and we encountered three of these introduced animals on an evening drive between Lagoa do Paúl and the coastal village of Cais do Pico, as well as several dead animals on various other drives.

## Order Chiroptera - Family Vespertilionidae (Vesper Bats - I)

### 11. Azores Noctule - *Nyctalus azoreum*

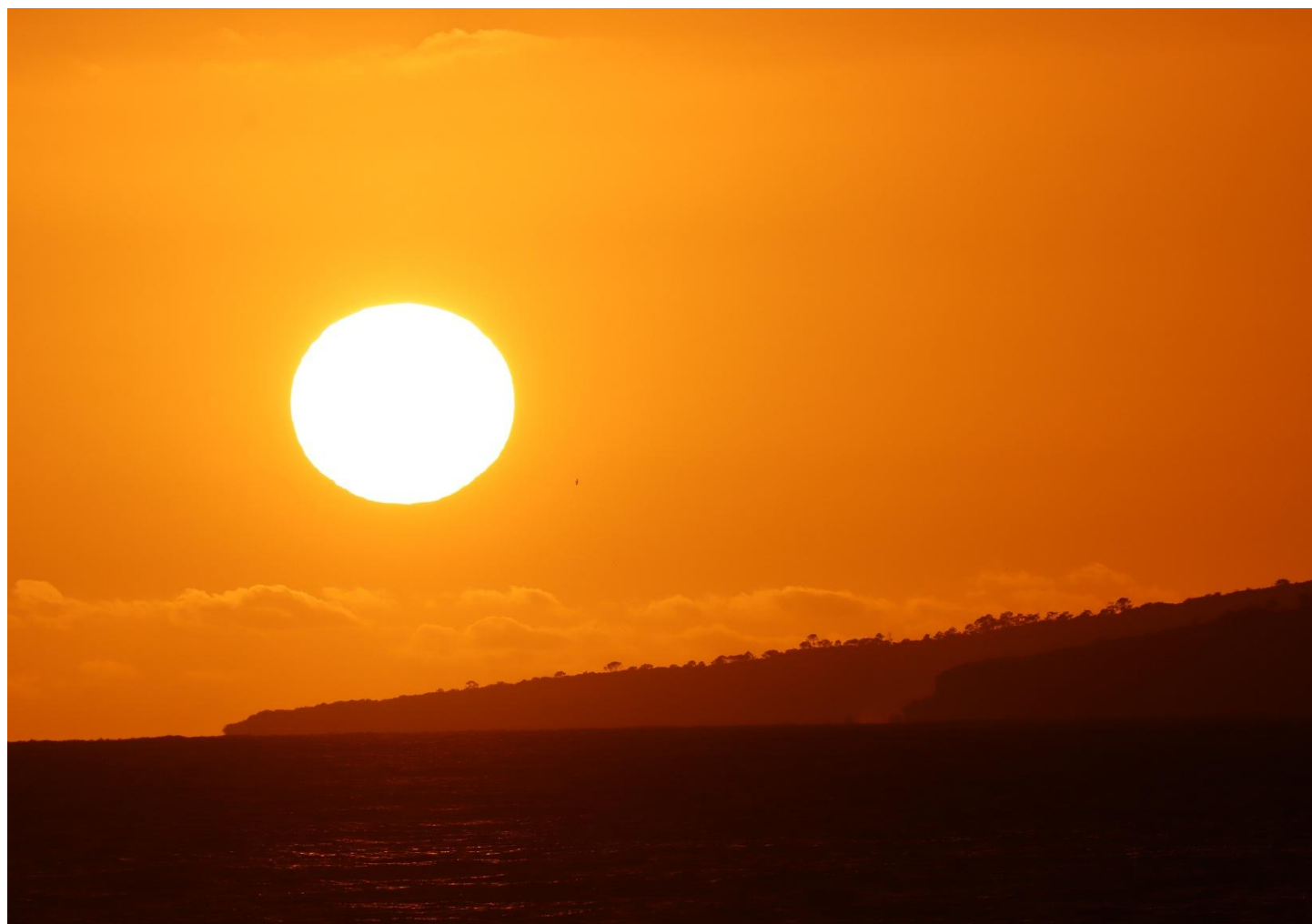
The Azores noctule, or Azorean bat as it is also known, is the only bat that occurs in the Azores and, as far as I am aware at least, was the only new species of the trip for me, as I have no record of observing it on my previous visit. That said, I never used to record every fleeting animal and have always been particularly remiss regarding bats, as there are just too many to attempt to distinguish between. Although it is therefore possible that I have seen this small vesper bat previously, given that it is the only mammal endemic to the Azores, I made a specific point of searching for it, just in case. This intensive search involved a walk of no more than 300 metres from where we were staying at Lajes do Pico and concluded at a deserted house, where I spotted bats spilling out into the evening air through a small hole under the roof. Having attempted to photograph flying black dots for the best part of twenty minutes, as the bats swooped back into the derelict building, I gave up and took the easy way out, filming them with my phone like a regular tourist. I was ultimately pleased that I had made even this modicum of effort, as no other bats were observed throughout our entire stay, even whilst driving across the island at dusk.

	Cetacean Sightings Per Tour					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Common Dolphin	--	X	--	--	--	X
Short-finned Pilot Whale	X	--	X	X	--	--
Striped Dolphin	X	--	--	--	--	--
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	X	X	X	--	X	X
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	X	X	X	--	--	--
Risso's Dolphin	--	--	X	X	--	--
Sei Whale	X	X	X	--	--	--
Bryde's Whale	--	--	--	--	--	X
Sperm Whale	X	X	X	X	X	--
Total Species Per Tour	6	5	6	3	2	3



## Trip Summary

So it is probably unnecessary for me to state that the Azores is a fairly incredible destination if you like dolphins and whales. We were not particularly successful and still observed nine species in just three days, one of which was significantly impacted by poor weather. As per the mammal sightings recorded above, we encountered all eight of the most commonly observed species at this time of year and of the remaining six cetaceans spotted in August, so false killer whale, bryde's whale, cuvier's beaked whale, sowerby's beaked whale, true's beaked whale and pygmy sperm whale, we chanced upon only one, the bryde's variety. A sowerby's beaked whale was observed on the afternoon we landed on Pico and another was spotted a couple of days after we left, when a true's beaked whale was also encountered on what must have been an incredibly exciting morning tour. All of our excursions took place in rigid inflatable boats, or RIBs if you prefer, seating either 12 or 24 passengers, with one guide mostly talking and one captain mostly driving, with them both hopefully spotting. That said, the vast majority of the spotting takes place from shore, which, as I have already described, is significantly more productive in fine weather with calm, flat seas. When that is not the case, plan B is mostly utilised, which basically involves listening for sperm whales with a hydrophone, which can be a little frustrating, as until they dive and you are able to observe their impressive flukes, basically the two lobes of their tail, you can usually see very little of a sperm whale above the water. On both of the tours that took place in bad weather, we spent most of our time waiting for this one species with our engines off, which again, can be slightly frustrating if you have seen a lot of these whales and want to explore for less common species. However, there is no such plan C in this instance, as the hydrophone can more or less guarantee a sighting and consequently a boatful of happy tourists. Reasonable enough I guess if you are only taking one tour and have never seen a whale, which is actually the case for the vast majority of passengers on these trips, and of course, on this occasion our patience was ultimately rewarded in spectacular fashion. Whilst we had originally hoped to see at least a couple more species, what good fortune you sometimes perhaps lack in numbers, you can often make up for in terms of just one extraordinary encounter and that was certainly the case on our final day in the Azores. As I would later share with Karina, when we were able to reflect quietly on what had been a momentous event for us both, I would have gladly swapped every sighting for the breathtaking and entirely unforgettable view of a sperm whale leaping through the air and crashing back beneath the waves...simply magical.



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