

Whales & Dolphins of Madeira

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 May - 1 June 2011



Bottle-nosed Dolphin



Cory's Shearwaters



Short-finned Pilot Whales



Watching Pilot Whales

Report compiled by Catherine Strong
Images courtesy of Luis Dias



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Tour summary

We had good weather and sea conditions, and our excellent hotel, tasty food and a convivial group atmosphere all contributed to making this an enjoyable trip. Our cetacean-watching started well with close views of Bottlenose Dolphins and Short-finned Pilot Whales on our first two trips out to sea, as well as seabirds including Cory's Shearwaters and Bulwer's Petrel. We also managed to get a short recording of the pilot whale vocalisations as they passed very close to our boat. We saw some of Madeira's special land birds including Berthelot's Pipit and Trocaz Pigeon on a half-day's excursion inland. This trip gave everyone a taste of some of the spectacular scenery and varied habitats present on Madeira Island, as well as a chance to learn about and see some of the native vegetation such as the lovely Pride of Madeira flowers and the indigenous laurisilva forest, which now covers only about 25% of Madeira. We were unlucky with cetacean sightings on two of our trips out to sea, but most of the group were able to take advantage of a pelagic trip on the last morning of the tour during which we saw a Bryde's Whale (and the blow of a calf swimming next to it), as well as a group of juvenile and female Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. Two intrepid tour participants did a night-time excursion to see/listen to the endangered Zino's Petrels at their mountainous breeding site in Madeira's central massif, which they thoroughly enjoyed and described as 'magical'!

Day 1

Saturday 28th May

Sun/cloud; 22°C & humid

The group arrived on three different flights into Funchal and we were all met by Luis and Catarina at the airport. Baggage collection all went smoothly and quickly, and once the whole group had met up we headed to our hotel, the 4-star Quinta Penha Frana near the Marina in Funchal.

We checked in, then began getting to grips with the somewhat complex geography of the hotel, which consists of an older 'mother house' as well as two developments which have been built more recently. The 'mother house' is a small, delightful colonial-style building set amongst mature gardens which were bursting with fruiting banana trees, all manner of subtropical and tropical flowers, a Jacaranda tree dropping mauve flowers at our feet and an almost overwhelmingly lovely perfume floating through the gardens to greet us! We ate at Joe's Bar – the Quinta Penha's very popular bar/restaurant – and began our enthusiastic exploration of the local cuisine. Some of the group tried the famous Madeiran speciality of espada (scabbard fish) cooked with, or without, bananas.

Day 2

Sunday 29th May

Sun/cloud; 24°C; sea temp about 20°C

After a relaxed breakfast sitting out in the gardens at Joe's Bar we went into the 'mother house' for a 40-minute presentation by Luis on the whales, dolphins and seabirds of Madeira and a briefing on the activities for the next few days. It was then time to walk down to the Marina for our first trip out on our boat, the Ventura do Mar, a 16-metre long yacht skippered by Luis and crewed by marine biologist Raquel who was our second local guide. As we left the harbour and slipped out past the private yachts and a few other tour boats Raquel talked to us about boat safety. There were Yellow-legged Gulls around the harbour as well as Common Terns and Turnstones; as soon as we were out on open water we started to spot steady numbers of Cory's Shearwaters – both flying and resting on the surface of the sea in small rafts, along with one or two Manx Shearwaters.

Within about 15 minutes from leaving the marina we came across our first group of Bottlenose Dolphins about 6 miles south of Porto Novo. We could see about 15-20 dolphins surfacing and swimming near the Ventura, and Raquel estimated there were several groups belonging to a pod of about 70 oceanic Bottlenose Dolphins. These oceanic dolphins are larger and more inquisitive than the resident Bottlenose Dolphins which live in the waters around Madeira (a pod of about 25). We stayed with the group for about 25 minutes, getting close enough for some good views and photos.

Next we headed to the south-east of Funchal as we'd heard Short-finned Pilot Whales had been seen by the 'vigias' (look-outs) on land. While we were searching for the pilot whales Luis saw a Madeiran Storm-petrel, but he then lost sight of it in the swell. Then he spotted a dorsal fin among the waves – a female Short-finned Pilot Whale. We soon started to see more of the small group of pilot whales – about 7 or 8 females and juveniles travelling together quite quickly out to sea in a south-easterly direction from Madeira Island. I had brought a hydrophone so we decided to see if we could record the whales' vocalisations as they went past us. Luis switched off the boat's engine and Raquel lowered the hydrophone carefully into the water. A few of the whales in the group swam very close to the Ventura, and we managed to capture some vocalisations (which sound a bit like squeaky doors) as they went past, which was exciting!

After returning to the harbour, we all went for a quick lunch at the Mar Azul restaurant in the Marina. Full of Madeiran garlic bread, some delicious soup and other snacks (and very impressed by the super-efficient service given by the waiter at the Mar Azul) we all climbed back into the Ventura for our afternoon's dolphin and whale-watching trip. As we left the harbour and turned towards the open sea we could see Bottlenose Dolphins leaping out of the sea in the distance. This time we went about 5 nautical miles further out to sea than in the morning, to where a group of pilot whales had been seen by the vigias (these were in three different, strategic positions on land, all watching out and in contact with Luis to help everyone on board the Ventura find cetaceans).

There were more Cory's Shearwaters as we travelled south, towards the direction of the pod of pilot whales, and Raquel pointed out a few of the smaller, darker, low-flying Bulwer's Petrels as we cruised along. We had very close views of a small group of pilot whales – probably part of the same group as we'd seen in the morning, but as well as seeing females and juveniles, this time the much larger males with their large 'hooked' dorsal fins were clearly visible as the group (Raquel estimated about 25 individuals, with about 8 being seen at any one time at the surface) moved in tandem, travelling in a line, at other times in a looser formation, and sometimes stopping to log a little at the surface. The males tended to stay a little in front of the group as is typical. Everyone could see the patterned black and grey markings on their backs, and the noticeable size difference between males and females, as well as hearing the clear blows – like explosive puffs – across the sea. Raquel told us that this was probably an oceanic group of pilot whales, and not Madeira's resident group. As with the Bottlenose Dolphins, the oceanic pilot whales tend to be larger and more curious with boats than the resident group (also comprising about 25 individuals). After leaving the pilot whales we caught up with a small group of Bottlenose Dolphins, probably part of the larger pod we'd seen in the morning, before we returned to the Marina.

We assembled in the upper reception room at the hotel to go through the checklist for the day then ambled in to the old town, Funchal, to Arsenio's restaurant for dinner. While we waited for our (delicious, as it turned out!) kebabs, and drank wines and beer, we were (treated?) to a rather theatrical traditional Fado performance by some local singers and musicians. I think we all certainly found it a memorable and interesting evening ... and it was fun trying to work out what the storylines were!

Day 3

Monday 30th May

Sun/cloud; 22°C, sea temp 20°C

After breakfast we met Luis and João, our guide, for a half-day excursion inland to learn more about the island's unique vegetation and land bird species. Madeira has four endemic species of birds – two are seabirds, the Zino's Petrel and Fea's Petrel, and two are land birds – the Madeiran Firecrest and the Trocaz Pigeon. In addition, the Madeiran archipelago is home to numerous subspecies and Macaronesian endemic species and subspecies. João is an expert on the land birds of Madeira and also extremely knowledgeable about the island and its flora and fauna.

As we began to drive west out of Funchal we quickly left the main tourist hotels behind and noticed how the vegetation changes – the non-native subtropical flowers and trees that are so much a feature in Funchal and people's gardens soon became less numerous, while the banana plantations and giant reeds which grow on the lower southern slopes of the island are visible everywhere. From the early 1700s until the Phylloxera (a parasitic insect) outbreak in 1872 vines – and the wine trade – had been Madeira's most lucrative export. Phylloxera destroyed most of the vines on Madeira, after which bananas replaced the vine as the main cash crop and are still exported today.

Heading west to Ribeira Brava we then took a scenic road into the interior of the island along a route which was greatly affected by the devastating storms and floods of February 2010. Though the area has been largely restored now, João told us that many of the houses situated close to the river's edge had been swept away by the huge surges of water which raced through the Ribeira Brava Valley.

The views as we climbed were magnificent, and the mountain sides were flanked by terraces which were evidently still actively managed today as well as much older ones, situated so high up and on such precipitous slopes it was hard to believe anyone had ever managed to reach them on foot; however, there's still a network of pathways which connects them! Mist and cloud was hanging over the peaks and, as we reached about 1,000 metres we lost the superb views we'd had earlier. We continued climbing passing thick laurel and cedar forest and João pointed out some of the native plants such as the beautiful blue Pride of Madeira, the island's national flower which was in bloom and is endemic to Madeira Island.

Our first stop was in a pine forest at Estanquinhos to see if we could hear and possibly see one of Madeira's endemic birds, the Madeiran Firecrest. As soon as we got out of the minivan, João picked up the song of the Madeiran Firecrest and we walked around listening and trying to catch a glimpse, but these tiny birds are hard to spot, staying amongst the thick pine vegetation. He pointed out the Maderian subspecies of Siskin, Robin and Blackbird, as well as the island's endemic subspecies of Chaffinch which made a fleeting appearance, and which some of the group saw.

Turning due west we then drove onto the flat high plateau (1,400 metres) which is at the centre-west of Madeira called Paúl da Serra. It was hard to believe that this huge stretch of windswept moorland is part of the same island as Funchal! Goats used to roam the area, managed by goatherds, but the goats were destroying so much of the native vegetation that they are now banned from the moor. The area is carefully managed, and we could see evidence of replanting programmes to restore the natural vegetation of tree heath. Some of the invasive species which took a hold as a result of the goats eating native plants, such as gorse, are so widespread it would be hard to remove them, however, and they also provide habitat for one of the area's special birds, the Spectacled Warbler. As we climbed, the mist cleared and we stopped at a place which João told us is a good place for seeing/hearing Spectacled Warbler and Berthelot's Pipit, both Macaronesian endemic subspecies; we set up our scopes, and waited and scanned the moorland with our binoculars. Most of the group did see Berthelot's Pipit and one bird conveniently sat for a short time on a traffic sign, allowing for a few of the group to take photos.

Next we drove to our final destination for the excursion, Chão da Ribeira, an excellent location for seeing the native laurisilva forest which once covered the island, but which now only covers about a quarter of Madeira, as well as the island's other land bird endemic, Trocaz Pigeon. The views over the north coast were stunning and we stopped to take photos and watch Kestrel, Sparrowhawk and Plain Swifts, as well as to have a quick coffee, before reaching Chão da Ribeira. This is a beautiful place, with high mountains covered in ancient laurisilva forest – the forest consists of a rich mosaic of plant life, including Madeiran Mahogany, Lily of the Valley Trees and Heather Brooms growing on the steep mountainsides and in the valley; huge precipitous waterfalls tumble down from craggy peaks, and the whole area feels primeval – one or two of the group joked that they half expected to see Velociraptors or some other prehistoric life forms emerging from the undergrowth! We didn't see any Velociraptors, but we did manage to catch glimpses of the shy Trocaz Pigeons which fly tantalisingly quickly across the valleys and mountainsides. Luis and João set up their scopes and we saw the pigeons, as well as getting superb views of the island's race of Buzzard sitting perched on a branch, preening. It's a special place with a very distinctive atmosphere; however, we had run over time and had to return to Funchal.

The group met up again back at the Marina in Funchal at 5pm for our evening cruise to look for seabirds and cetaceans. There was much initial excitement just as we had all sat down in the Ventura do Mar ready to set off. Luis suddenly pointed at the mast and leapt into the cabin for his camera.

We all looked up to see what the object of all the excitement was – a Yellow-crowned Night Heron had perched on the Ventura's mast! This individual represented only the third record of this North American vagrant in Europe and the first in Madeira ... definitely one to add to our checklists later that evening! The heron flew off after about five minutes – allowing plenty of time for photos – and we set off into a calm, grey sea. We headed out about 9 nautical miles south of Madeira in search of seabirds and cetaceans. Raquel pointed out Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters, and we enjoyed being at sea and the sunset, but the sea was unusually devoid of life, and we returned to shore at 8.30pm. We had an excellent meal at O Jango's in Funchal's old town, and did the checklist before turning in for the night.

Day 4

Tuesday 31st May

Sun/cloud; 21°C; sea temp 20°C

We set off for the Marina after breakfast with high hopes of seeing more whales and dolphins. The wind had turned and was blowing quite strongly from the north-east. We heard that the look-outs (vigias) on land had seen a group of dolphins to the south-east of the island, so we headed in that direction, soon coming across a 'band' of stronger wind, so Luis put up the sails which gave us a very invigorating ride across the sea, and we sped through the water at quite a pace! We came across a juvenile Loggerhead Turtle and Flying Fish, as well as Cory's Shearwaters, Manx Shearwaters and Bulwer's Petrels, but, most unusually for Madeira, we did not see any cetaceans.

We ate dinner at the Londres Restaurant in Funchal, walking there along the main avenue which is lined by Jacaranda trees still in bloom. Despite the lack of cetacean sightings, we had a very convivial evening with everyone in high spirits, enjoying each other's company and the local excellent cuisine. Most of the group extended the evening and stayed up for a night cap back at Joe's Bar too, and it was extremely pleasant to sit out so late watching Geckos, and chatting with new-found friends in the warm subtropical air and gardens.

Optional Zino's Petrel excursion (9pm – 1am)

Pam and Alex decided to do the optional excursion to see/listen to Maderia's endemic seabird, the Zino's Petrel. Zino's Petrel is the most endangered seabird in Europe and only breeds on Madeira, in the central massif. The breeding area was struck by fires in 2010, destroying some of the nests and killing some of the chicks – a potential disaster for the species. The area had been closed for many months while conservationists and scientists worked to restore habitat and the breeding area. Luckily for us the nesting area was open again for those with guides and special permits. It is a steep climb, at night, but the rewards for the keen birder are absolutely worthwhile. Luis and João met Pam and Alex complete with head torches and sturdy footwear and set off at 9pm.

Tour participant Alex Naish describes the experience:

We made our way by bus to the Zino's Petrel site some 1,800 metres above sea level. I noticed two very distinct features of the journey up the mountain: firstly, the beautiful night views of Funchal below as we made our way up the very winding road, then this view suddenly disappearing obscured by the mist that hangs in the air at a certain height. After about 40 minutes we reached our destination, disembarked and were kindly kitted out with head lamps by Luis and João in order to see our way along a well-constructed path leading to the Zino's site; it was about 10pm.

I was sorely tempted to look around me at the landscape but needed to focus on where I was walking as there were steps going up and down along the way. It was a brisk 20-minute walk before we reached our destination. Before long our expert guides alerted us to the sound the wind was making as the birds flew in, and then the strange eerie sound which the birds made as many more juveniles gathered in with the social throng. The eerie sounds the birds made seemed even stranger because it was very difficult to actually see them. It seemed to me that if you were brought here blindfold you'd wonder where on earth you were! The whole experience – the thousands of night stars, a few shooting stars or comets, the black craggy mountain shapes all around us, the mist hanging in the valleys below, and the sounds of the Zino's – was unforgettable!

Day 5

Wednesday 1st June

Sunny; 21 °C

Pelagic from Funchal

As soon as we rose the next morning we heard that Bryde's Whale had been seen on the very next trip after ours the previous evening! Though three members of our group were departing at 9am, the rest of the group was offered an extra boat excursion by Luis and the Ventura team in order to try and catch up with the Bryde's Whale, which we hoped had stayed in the same area overnight, south of Ponta da Cruz and not far from Funchal. Nine of us decided to go and have one last attempt at seeing Bryde's Whale and headed to the Marina for 10.30am, hoping the whale might still be around!

Soon after leaving the harbour we saw three boats not far south of Cabo Girão, to the west of Funchal. George, our skipper, headed towards the boats and as soon as we neared them we caught sight of movements in the water – it was a small group of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. There were many juveniles in the group, as well as some females – in total about 15-20 animals were visible. These small oceanic dolphins are so-named because of the obvious spot-markings in the adults; the dolphins have no spots when born and the spots develop on maturity. The juveniles in the group were small enough not to have developed clear spots yet. The dolphins were travelling quite fast through the water and we watched them for a short while before John called out that he'd seen something larger in the water. We all scanned the water eagerly, wondering if it was a larger dolphin, perhaps a Bottlenose, when suddenly off the starboard side of the Ventura a huge broad bluish-grey back appeared only about 10-15 metres in front of us – it was a Bryde's Whale, travelling east. Though we didn't get a clear enough view to be 100% sure of the species (we would need to see the 'diagnostic 3-ridges on the rostrum for that), Raquel was pretty certain from the size and other features that the whale was a Bryde's. We saw several blows and then the whale dived, but then soon surfaced again right between two catamarans just in front of us. We saw a large blow and then immediately afterwards, and just behind the first blow to the left, was a small blow – so we assumed this was a mother with a calf. We saw the blows several more times, and Pam managed to photograph the whale's back, before we lost track of the whales amongst the white crests of waves.

There were rafts of Cory's Shearwaters with a few Bulwer's Petrels amongst them. We also heard reports that two Bottlenose Dolphins (probably members of the shyer resident group around Madeira, which are smaller than the transient oceanic Bottlenose Dolphins which are seen here) had been observed by a boat near Funchal harbour; however, we didn't see those dolphins.

Raquel served us a last glass of Madeira wine and everyone on the trip returned to shore, where most of the group went for a final lunch and drinks at the Theatre Café in Funchal, sitting under Jacaranda trees and opposite the gardens. We sampled some of the Portuguese specialities such as the delicious Portuguese pastel de nata, and John tried a rice cake, then it was time for the next four of our group who were departing on the evening flight to head back to the hotel to catch their taxi to the airport.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; L = leader only; P = present but not seen; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June			
			29	30	31	1
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>			✓	
3	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Bulwers Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Madeiran Storm-petrel	<i>Oceanodroma castro</i>	L			
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓			
7	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>				✓
8	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>		✓		
9	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓		
10	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓		✓
11	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓	✓		
12	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓		
14	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>				
16	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>		✓		
18	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba schmitzi</i>				✓
19	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓
20	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii madeirensis</i>		✓		
21	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>		✓		
22	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i>		✓		
24	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>		H		
25	Madeiran Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus maderensis</i>		H		
26	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs madeirensis</i>		✓		
27	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		✓		
28	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	✓			
2	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>				✓
3	Bryde's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>				✓
4	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	✓			
5	Beaked whale sp.				P	

Other Taxa

1	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>			✓	
2	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>			✓	
3	Sea slug sp.				✓	

Butterflies

1	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓	
3	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓		
4	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>		✓		