

Whales & Dolphins of Madeira

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 5 September 2011



Short-finned Pilot Whales by George Reekie



Atlantic Spotted Dolphin by Liz Scott



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Report compiled by Catherine Strong
Images by kind courtesy of Liz Scott and George Reekie



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	Raquel	Local pelagic guide
	João	Local ornithologist & naturalist guide

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Tour summary

This holiday was characterised by lovely weather, calm seas, excellent company and some of the best dolphin-watching you could imagine! The highlight for many of us was a wonderful encounter with a group of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins which were bow-riding, tail-slapping and swimming around our boat, very close, for about 40 minutes. We also had a wonderful afternoon with local marine biologist Filipe Alves, who is doing a PhD on Madeira's resident pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales. Filipe was able to name members of the group we were seeing, and give us a unique insight into their lives and histories.

All but two of the group took part in a late-night optional squid-fishing trip, during which the sea was lit by bioluminescence and we could hear a pilot whale surface and blow next to us in the moonlight. An excursion inland introduced the group to Madeira's varied and beautiful landscapes, flowers, 400-year-old laurel trees, primeval forest and some lovely butterflies.

All in all a memorable trip, resulting in some of the best dolphin photographs you could ever see, and rounded off with a very convivial meal on our last night at O Jango's, sitting outside in atmospheric Funchal Old Town.

Day 1

Thursday 1st September

Sun/cloud/patchy light drizzle; 23°C & humid

The group arrived in the four stages, with two members arriving on 29th September and the rest arriving on 1st September on three different flights into Funchal.

Catarina was at the airport to meet us, after baggage collection and we headed to our hotel, the 4-star Quinta Penha França 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 superb, mature Jacaranda tree. We had seen a Buzzard next to the runway at Funchal airport, and now there were Plain Swifts at the hotel, and plenty of Madeiran Wall Lizards.

Those who arrived before lunch on the 1st September met up to walk into Funchal for a light lunch at the Café do Teatro. Sue and Liz ventured up the cable car to Monte in the afternoon, and were brave enough to come down the quick way – by wicker basket! The whole group met up at 7.45pm inside the 'mother house' for a short presentation by Luis on the whales, dolphins and seabirds of Madeira, and a briefing on the activities for the next few days. We ate dinner 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

Friday 2nd September

Sun/cloud; 24°C

After a relaxed breakfast sitting out in the gardens at Joe's Bar or by the sea in the 'do Mar' section of the hotel, we walked 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.

The look-out on land ('vigia') had seen some cetacean activity to the east of the island, so we headed in the direction they had indicated. After about 55 minutes we caught up with a group of Short-finned Pilot Whales composed of females and juveniles. They were travelling and Raquel explained that as these were relatively small they were most likely to be members of the island's resident group. There were about eight to 10 individuals clearly visible in one group we saw, but Raquel told us they were part of a bigger group, more widely spread out than was apparent from above the surface. We had quite good views of their patterning and pale markings against their very dark integument.

After returning to the harbour, most of us went for a quick lunch at the Mar Azul restaurant in the Marina. Full of Madeiran garlic bread, some delicious soup and other food (and impressed by the super-efficient service) we got back on the Ventura again at 3pm for our afternoon pelagic and headed straight out to where Bottlenose Dolphins had been seen by the vigia. Raquel thought these were part of the island's resident pod of Bottlenose Dolphins. They passed quite close to our boat and did a few tail slaps. There were at least eight surfacing at any one time, and their movements seemed quite synchronised. Raquel thought there would be others further away that we couldn't see. We lowered the hydrophone to try and get some recordings, and also put a small underwater video camera down to film them.

There was some additional excitement when Raquel caught sight of a large lump of pale flesh floating on the surface which turned out to be part of the head of a Giant Squid! Luis and Raquel were very keen to recover it for identification by Madeira's Whale Museum - though it proved a very difficult and slippery object to get hold of! In the end after several failed attempts, Richard helped Luis and Raquel get it out of sea. We all stood and looked at it in awe – we had recovered just part of a huge head – mainly the tentacles. Raquel showed us the huge beak, which was the part that would be sent to a lab for a positive ID on the species. She and Luis guessed that it had been attacked the previous night, as it was so fresh, perhaps by a Sperm Whale, at great depth.

After Raquel had served us another glass of Madeira wine, we arrived back to the marina at about 6pm, went back to the hotel for a swim or to relax before enjoying an excellent and convivial dinner at Jango's in Funchal's old town, after first completing the checklist together at the hotel.

Day 3

Saturday 3rd September

Sunny; 28°C; half-day island tour

After breakfast we assembled at 9am to meet 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. The area has been largely restored now, though many of the houses situated close to the river's edge were 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! We were very lucky with the weather, and as we reached about 1,000 metres we stopped to take some photos at a viewing point. We continued climbing, passing thick laurel and cedar forest and João pointed out some of the native plants as well as attractive non-natives plants such as Agapanthus and Hydrangea, plus some of the island's more unwelcome and invasive non-native plants such as acacias and eucalyptus.

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. These tiny birds are hard to spot, often staying amongst the thick pine vegetation; however, today we were lucky and most of us got brief views of this diminutive bird. Madeiran Graylings and Madeiran Speckled Woods were very abundant. He pointed out the Madeiran subspecies of Siskin and Blackbird as well.

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 and Berthelot's Pipit, both Macaronesian endemic subspecies. After Paúl da Serra, the vegetation we passed comprised about 90% indigenous species – broom heathers, laurels, lily of the valley tree, Madeiran Bilberry and Pride of Madeira, which had finished flowering but we could still see brown dead flower heads.

Our next stop was at Fanal, to see the 400-year old laurels including the Fetid Laurel (so-named on account of its rather acrid smell) trees covered in thick lichens, as well as to listen and look for the island's subspecies of Chaffinch. Our visit coincided with a large and rather vocal group of scouts, so, after hearing the Chaffinch calls, we walked up to a nearby peak where we had views of the north side and coast of the island with its indigenous Laurissilva forest covering the mountainsides and slopes. Clouded Yellow Butterflies and blues were everywhere, and we saw a little mixed flock of Linnets and Canaries. As we walked, we noticed a fragrant aroma, which João told us was caused by our feet crushing the tiny leaves of a small pretty blue flower.

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. After a brief coffee and comfort stop, where some of us saw Madeiran Firecrest again, at closer range than before, João talked to us about the ancient Laurissilva forest we could see around us. 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; waterfalls tumble down from craggy peaks, and the whole area feels primeval. The Trocaz Pigeons were proving elusive, but after a good deal of scanning with bins and scope, João at last managed to fix his scope onto one and most of us managed to have a brief glimpse of this species, while others of us saw distant Trocaz Pigeons flying tantalisingly quickly across the valleys and mountainsides. We also saw Buzzard and a lot of butterflies, particularly Clouded Yellow here, and Grey Wagtails. We then headed home for a quick lunch and a little relaxation time before our evening cruise.

Evening pelagic; sunny & calm; 26 °C

We met up again back at the marina in Funchal at 5pm for our evening cruise to look for seabirds and cetaceans. Our guide for this cruise was Filipe Alves, a marine biologist doing a PhD on the island's resident pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales.

About an hour into the pelagic we got news from the vigias of a sighting to the east of Funchal – Short-finned Pilot Whales. As we approached, we could see that the group was very relaxed, logging at the surface or swimming slowly together. The group was composed of about 15-20 individuals, which Filipe told us looked like females and juveniles. As we drew near, the encounter got even better as Filipe started to recognise individual whales on account of having done so much photo-ID work on this group for his PhD! It was fantastic to have this added dimension to the sighting.

One pilot whale had a noticeably more pronounced dorsal fin, more like the dorsal fin that the males of this species have. We asked Filipe whether this was indeed a male and he told us that this was in fact 'Number 89' – and that there was some doubt as to whether the whale was male or female – she was always seen in very close proximity with other females or calves, and that Number 89 was one of two whales in this pod that had been seen holding a dead calf in her mouth for two weeks! For this reason he'd concluded that Number 89 was a female, though they can't be certain. Filipe pointed out another pair of females which he said had never been recorded apart from each other! We lowered the underwater video camera and managed to get some footage of the group logging and diving, totally relaxed around us, as they passed alongside and near the boat!

The whales approached and passed very near to us, so that we could make out individual markings clearly – the pale patterns on their dorsal fins and differences in colouring across the back. We watched as they blew, logged, swam together, alone or re-grouped and dived. Normally quite shy, it was wonderful to have such a long encounter with the group which seemed so relaxed in our presence and with Filipe, the one person in the world who knew the members of the group by sight and who could reveal some of their life stories to us!

The pilot whales were accompanied by two Bottlenose Dolphins, which allowed us an excellent opportunity to see the difference in size and dorsal fin shapes, colouration and so on between the two species. We returned to the marina at about 8pm, in time to have a quick supper at the Mar Azul. All but two of the group then opted for a late-night squid fishing excursion, which Alex had suggested the day before, and Luis and George were busy preparing for on board the Ventura, while we relaxed and ate our supper.

Night-time (optional) squid fishing pelagic; calm, warm conditions

At 9.30pm the 10 of us doing the night-time squid fishing trip assembled in the Ventura again and set off in the dark for our fishing expedition! It was extremely atmospheric setting off at night – leaving all the myriad of lights of Funchal stretching to the east and west along the south side of the island, and the lights and bustle of the marina, under a superb canopy of stars and a bright half-moon! As we motored out to sea we turned off our mast light, in order to enjoy the stars and the phosphorescence in the ocean caused by the bioluminescence of plankton. Several of us leaned over the bow to watch the glowing lit-up water of the bow-wave spray and after about 50 minutes most of us heard a loud, distinctive blow – and some of us saw the head and body of a Short-finned Pilot Whale near the boat.

As we got nearer the other squid fishing boats, about 12 that we could see, we turned on our mast light, George chose a place to stop, and then Luis went into action with lanterns and torches. The squid are attracted to light above and in the water, so we lowered lanterns into the sea, as well as shone torches and lights down onto the water.

We tried several approaches for the fishing itself – Luis had come well prepared! One method was to attach lights to the fishing lines; another was to attach bait (mackerel); some lines had no lure or light. Luis demonstrated how to lower the lines to about 4 metres' depth then give sharp tugs on the lines to attract the attention of the squid below. After about between one and a half to two hours of trying, we were considering whether to go back to the marina and call it a night, or to move to a different spot. Luis shone his torch one more time onto the water's surface to see if there was anything and suddenly shouted 'Squid!!' Everyone went into action again as hopes of catching some squid became real again and in quick succession we caught four – Luis landed three and Alex, with Richard, landed the fourth! As they came on board, a beautiful bright red, we had to stand back, or risk being soaked by the squids squirting water and ink across an impressive range!

Happy, and now knowing the answer to that all important question of 'how do you catch a squid?', we motored back to the marina, enjoying the now substantial patches of luminescence distributed through the top of the water column like giant snowflakes, at about ten past two in the morning and went back to our rooms (after putting the night porters somewhat reluctantly to work, to let us all back in again!!). It had been a very interesting experience, as well as a lot of fun.

Day 4

Sunday 4th September

Sunny; 30°C; 5-hour pelagic cruise

We met after breakfast at 9.30am in the marina for our full day cruise at sea. About an hour into the trip we had news that Catarina, who was our 'vigia' for today, had seen Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. The dolphins kept changing direction so proved a little bit of a challenge to catch with, but our skipper, Eduarte, and Raquel between them managed to find the pod of dolphins. Atlantic Spotted Dolphins are a small, warm-water species about 2 metres in length. Adults have the distinctive spot patterns on their bodies which give the species their name, while calves are born without any spots at all, and as they mature, the spots develop.

Already very pleased with our sightings on the previous days, this was probably the highlight of the trip – the pod of dolphins was clearly very relaxed and ready to be curious and playful around us and we witnessed a variety of behaviours – with dolphins coming close, swimming alongside the boat, so near you could make out individual patterns in their spots easily and see their eyes watching us by the boat. One juvenile was particularly exuberant, turning belly-up and swimming along fast, slapping its tail on the surface, while others leapt or bow-rode while we all watched and took as many photos as we wanted in perfect conditions! On closer examination of the photos later, it was very clear how tactile this species is – with pairs of dolphins in physical contact constantly, touching dorsal fin to the body or fin of another in the pod! It's rare to get such a prolonged encounter with cetaceans in such perfect conditions – a beautiful calm azure sea, and a clear blue sky that's not too bright for photos! Perfect! And we also got some very good footage of the dolphins underwater as they were bow-riding and swimming near us.

After about 40 minutes the dolphins left us, and we all had our lunch. Not long after that we saw a small group of Bottlenose Dolphins; then hot on their heels came sightings of a Loggerhead Turtle and lastly, a Hammerhead Shark (Raquel was 99% certain it was a hammerhead!). Just before the end of the trip we pulled an old canister out of the sea which was acting as a temporary home for a few fish underneath. We lowered the underwater video camera quickly and later watched the very clear footage of the fish that had been hiding under it!

We had a few hours to relax back at the hotel before doing the checklist and heading to Jango's again for an al fresco supper, taken in Funchal's atmospheric old town in balmy air ... there was a great deal of lively chatter, and attempt to locate bats with a bat detector, and cheerful laughter as we re-lived some of our sightings, and enjoyed the excellent food and company. Several of us extended the evening with a night-cap at the hotel before turning in for the night.

Day 5

Monday 5th September

Cloudy with patchy rain; 23 °C

Catarina picked us up in the morning, in two groups, to go to Funchal airport for our flights home. We said our farewells until only George and Sue were left at the hotel for a couple more days' extension to the trip. It had been a most enjoyable short break, with excellent sightings of Short-finned Pilot Whales and Atlantic Spotted Dolphins in particular, all enhanced by lovely weather, excellent company, tasty food and an extremely comfortable hotel.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			1	2	3	4
	Mute Swan (in a park)	<i>feral</i>			✓	
	Muscovy Duck	<i>feral</i>			✓	
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		✓	✓	✓
2	Bulwers Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>		✓	✓	✓
3	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓		✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓	
5	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓		✓	
6	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓			
7	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	
8	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓			✓
9	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓		✓	✓
10	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓	
11	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓		✓
14	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	✓			
15	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</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	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			✓	
21	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓			
22	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>	✓		✓	✓
23	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>			✓	
25	Madeiran Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus maderensis</i>			✓	
26	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	✓		✓	✓
27	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs madeirensis</i>			✓	
28	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓			
29	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>			✓	
30	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			✓	
33	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	

Mammals

1	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		✓	✓	✓
2	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>				✓
3	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>		✓	✓	

Fish

1	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>				✓
2	Trigger fish sp					✓
3	Grey Mullet	<i>Mugil sp.</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Hammerhead shark sp.					✓

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			1	2	3	4

Butterflies

1	Madeiran Grayling	<i>Hipparchia maderensis</i>			✓	
2	Madeiran Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphia</i>			✓	
3	(Madeiran) Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas phlaeoides</i>			✓	
4	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓	✓
6	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	✓		✓	✓
7	Blue sp				✓	

Reptiles

1	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta dugesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>				✓
3	Squid sp				✓	



Atlantic Spotted Dolphin by Liz Scott