

Whales & Dolphins of Madeira

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 5 September 2011



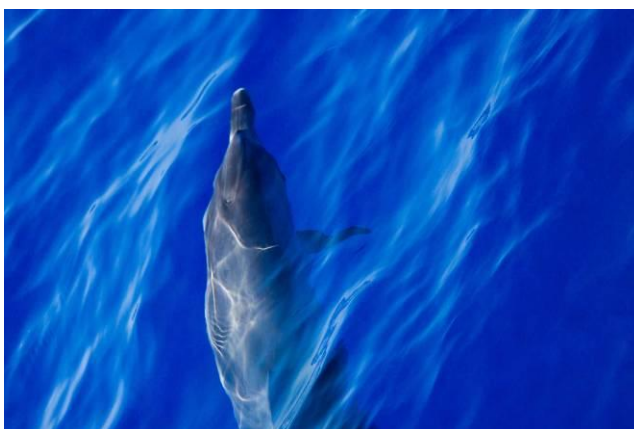
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin by Mike Jones



Madeira by Rachel Jones



Short-finned Pilot Whale by Ian Hunt



Atlantic Spotted Dolphin by Ian Hunt

Report compiled by Catherine Strong
Images courtesy of Mike & Rachel Jones and Ian Hunt



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leaders:	Catherine Strong	Naturetrek
	Catarina Alves	Local pelagic guide & marine biologist
	Filipe Alves	Local marine biologist guide
	Raquel	Local pelagic guide
	Rita	Local marine biologist guide
	Joel	Local ornithologist & naturalist guide

Participants:	Mike Jones
	Rachel Jones
	Ian Hunt
	Ruth Hunt
	Ros Steel
	David Sheppy
	Keith Cheetham
	Carol Cheetham
	Mal Desira
	Mary Desira

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 were three wonderful encounters with large pods (80+ strong) of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins which were bow-riding, leaping, tail-slapping and swimming around our boat, very close, for up to 40 minutes at a time. We also had good encounters with Short-finned Pilot Whales and saw a few Bottlenose Dolphins as part of a mixed-species group with Pilot Whales.

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. Most of the group also attended a short, optional, lecture given by Dr. Francis Zino, whose father rediscovered the endemic Zino's Petrel in the 1960s on the island. All in all a memorable trip, resulting in some of the best dolphin photographs you could ever see, and rounded off with some convivial meals at O Jango's in atmospheric Funchal Old Town.

Day 1

Saturday 1st September

Hot & sunny; 26°C & humid

The group arrived in three stages, with two members arriving on 31st August and the rest arriving on 1st September on two different flights into Funchal. Everyone headed in their separate groups to our hotel, the 4-star Quinta Penha França near the Marina in Funchal. We checked in, navigated 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, as well as a superb, mature Jacaranda tree. There were plenty of Madeiran Wall Lizards in evidence both at the hotel and in the gardens in Funchal.

Mike and Rachel had gone on a pre-tour morning boat trip and we heard the exciting news they had been lucky enough to see a Sperm Whale during the cruise. The whole group met up at 7.45pm outside the 'mother house' for a briefing on the activities for the next few days from Catarina and Catherine, then most of the group 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).

Day 2

Sunday 2nd September

Sunny & cloudless; 32°C & humid

After a relaxed breakfast sitting on the terrace by the sea, we walked down to the marina for our first whole-group trip out on our boat, the Ventura do Mar, a 16-metre long yacht skippered by Eduardo and crewed by marine biologist Raquel, a local guide. We left the harbour at 10am, slipping out past the private yachts and a few other tour boats while Raquel talked to us about boat safety. There were Yellow-legged Gulls around the harbour.

After about 40 minutes we had our first sighting – a group of about 15 Short-finned Pilot Whales composed of females and calves. There were other boats observing the whales, so we waited and watched for about 45 minutes in total, getting good views of their patterning and pale markings against their very dark integument. We left this group of whales, and changed direction to head west and at about 11.40am Eduardo caught sight of some dolphins up ahead – our first Atlantic Spotted Dolphins – and a pod of about 80 with adults and calves! They soon reached our vessel and we watched them bow-riding and leaping around us for at least 40 minutes. We could hear their communicative 'clicks' from above the water too. 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. We also saw Cory's Shearwaters, a flying fish and Common Tern. We were late arriving back at the marina, as we stopped to observe some Short-finned Pilot Whales, which were travelling fast west, on our way back. Raquel proposed a theory that perhaps the Pilot Whales had detected a large whale such as a Sperm Whale in the vicinity and were swimming fast to 'see it off'...but we didn't see the Sperm Whale!

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, after pausing to watch the Grey Mullet and little Sharp-snouted Seabream in the marina. Three quarters of an hour after setting off, we saw a group of about 25 Short-finned Pilot Whales up ahead, this time logging at the surface and looking relaxed. Another boat had reached them before us, and got a bit close to the pod at one point, but they left the whales before long and we were able to get very good views for about 25-30 minutes. There were males among this group as well as juveniles, some of which were spy-hopping; the group was quite dispersed. Short-finned Pilot Whales tend to move in tandem, travelling in a line, at other times in a looser formation, and sometimes stopping to log a little at the surface, which is what these were doing. The males typically tend to stay a little in front of the group.

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 served us a glass of Madeira wine as we motored back to the marina. Back at the hotel, some of the group went for a swim or had a restful evening in their room, while a few of us enjoyed an excellent dinner at O Jango's in Funchal's old town.

Day 3

Monday 3rd September

Sunny & cloudless; 32°C & humid; half-day island tour

After breakfast we assembled at 8.55am to meet Joel, our guide for a 6-hour 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.

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 Joel 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. Not long after we'd got out of the minibus, Joel 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 see, often staying amongst the thick pine vegetation; however, today we were lucky and most of us got several brief views of this diminutive bird. Madeiran Speckled Woods were very abundant. Joel pointed out the Madeiran subspecies of Chaffinch, plus Greenfinch, Robin 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. Joel explained about the system of levadas on the island as we walked along to a viewpoint to try and see these two endemic subspecies, and later on, some of us caught brief glimpses of flying Berthelot's Pipits.

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, after a coffee stop, 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. A few of us 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 were everywhere; Small White and a Long-tailed Blue were also seen here. Joel pointed out a small mauve flower which smelt of mint when crushed by our feet and also a large Lily of the Valley tree.

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 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 at first, but after a good deal of scanning with bins and scope, most of us had brief glimpses of this species as they made short flights across the valleys and mountainsides. We then headed home for a late lunch and a little relaxation time before our evening cruise.

Evening pelagic; sunny & cloudless; 30 °C & humid

We headed to the Marina in Funchal at 5pm for our evening cruise to look for seabirds and cetaceans. Our guides for this cruise were Filipe Alves, a marine biologist doing a PhD on the island's resident pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales, and local marine biologist Rita. About half an hour into the pelagic we got news from the 'vigia' of a sighting to the east of Funchal – Atlantic Spotted Dolphins travelling fast to the east. It took us about 50 minutes to reach the pod – we could make out about 15 individuals – which was foraging 'under' a flock of feeding Cory's Shearwaters and other seabirds. Some of the juveniles paused in their feeding activity to approach our boat and to bow-ride for about 15 minutes before resuming their feeding. Their behaviour was clearly different from that of the group we'd encountered yesterday – much more focused on feeding than spending time bow-riding. We hoped to find a group of pilot whales/Bottlenose Dolphins that we'd heard reports of on our way back to the Marina, but they'd moved on by the time we were in the area they'd last been seen. We did see a Zino's (or Fea's – we couldn't be certain of the ID) Petrel on our way back to the Marina, which was exciting!

We returned to the marina at about 8pm, in time to have a quick supper at the Mar Azul. All but three of the group then walked quickly back to the hotel for a short evening lecture by Dr. Francis Zino. It was very interesting to hear this personal account about the species' rediscovery by Dr. Zino's father, and of the research being done on the species – breeding, migration patterns, and the results of tagging programmes. After the lecture we met up in Joe's Cocktail bar to go through the checklist and then, after a very successful and enjoyable day, we turned in for the night!

Day 4

Tuesday 4th September

Sunny & cloudless; 31°C & humid; 6-hour pelagic cruise

We met after breakfast at 9.00am in the marina for our full day cruise at sea with Filipe and Catarina. At 10.35am, Rachel caught sight of dolphins up ahead, and we also we had news that our vigia had seen Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, swimming towards us. The pod consisted of about 25-30 animals and they spent about 25 minutes with us. Catherine lowered her hydrophone in the water and recorded some of their communicative clicks, and Rachel filmed the dolphins' behaviour underwater by lowering the Go-Pro down on a telescopic pole. The dolphins were clearly very relaxed, inquisitive and playful around us and we witnessed a variety of behaviours – with dolphins coming close, spy-hopping and 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. We watched 3 individuals turn together, perfectly synchronised, and 'surf' a wave. Others were leaping and bow-riding while we all watched and took as many photos as we wanted in perfect conditions! It always feels a real privilege to have such an encounter with cetaceans in such perfect conditions – a beautiful calm azure sea, and a clear blue sky. We also got some footage of the dolphins underwater as they were bow-riding and swimming near us. Rafts of Cory's Shearwaters took off from the water near us as we passed by, offering good photo opportunities for those with the right lenses!

At 11.03am, almost as soon as we'd left the first group, we got another call – more dolphins. This time a different group of about 30 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins had been sighted, heading in our direction. They were swimming fast, and seemed to be foraging intently. They paused to 'check us out' for about 5 minutes around the boat then swam off. We turned to approach the group again and this time we had a slightly longer time with them, about 10 minutes. Though still looking as if they were actively engaged in foraging they again took a brief break and bow-rode and swam alongside us, allowing us to take more photos.

We had our packed lunch, provided by Catarina, while there was a lull in the whale and dolphin activity. Then at 1.20pm Filipe arrived in the area where a friend of his had seen a group of pilot whales and Bottlenose Dolphins a couple of hours earlier. At 1.35pm we caught sight of the group of cetaceans – Filipe saw some splashing on the water surface and it turned out to be a group of about 25 'logging' Short-finned Pilot Whales. There were at least four males, plus females and sub-adults; we could not see any small calves. We had excellent views of their thick tail stocks. Mal filmed them underwater by lowering the Go-Pro camera down as the whales travelled slowly westwards. Filipe is doing his PhD on the resident population of Short-finned Pilot Whales in Madeira and he did not recognise any of the individuals in the group, so we assumed they were probably part of larger, transient, oceanic pod. The latter will breed with resident whales, which maintains out-breeding – and therefore a healthy gene pool – in the Macaronesian population as a whole.

Filipe, as part of his PhD research, has recorded both females from the resident group amongst oceanic transient males, and also oceanic males amongst the resident group of female whales. Filipe also told us that pilot whales are the only other species in which females reach a 'menopause' (humans being the other). Scientists think this must mean the older non-reproductive females have a very significant role in raising and helping with young and the group's welfare. There were four Bottlenose Dolphins among the group of pilot whales; these two species are very commonly seen together.

After we had returned to shore, we had a few hours to relax back at the hotel before meeting up at Joe's Cocktail Bar to enjoy watching video from the underwater camera of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins seen on the trip, as well as photos taken by Mike and to complete the checklist for the tour. Most of us then headed to O 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 as we re-lived some of our sightings, and enjoyed the excellent food and company.

Day 5

Wednesday 5th September

Sunny & slight cloud; 29 °C

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

Mammals (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September			
			1	2	3	4
1	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>				✓
2	Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		✓	✓	✓
3	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	✓			
4	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>		✓		✓
5	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			✓	

Fish

1	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>	✓	✓		✓
2	Grey Mullet	<i>Chelon labrosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
3	Sharp-snouted Seabream	<i>Diplodus puntazzo</i>		✓		

Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>			✓	
3	Bulwers Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Mallard	<i>Anus platyrhynchos</i>			✓	
5	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓	
6	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	
7	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				✓
8	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓	
12	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba schmitzi</i>			✓	✓
13	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>			✓	
14	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			✓	
15	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii madeirensis</i>			✓	
16	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>			✓	
17	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	
18	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i>			✓	
19	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis</i>			✓	
20	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia maderensis</i>			✓	
21	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	

Butterflies

1	Madeiran Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphia</i>			✓	
2	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	
3	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓	
4	Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>			✓	
5	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>			✓	
6	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	✓			✓

Reptiles

1	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta dugesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>		✓		