

The idea

With my Oxford final exams finished, and dad's exam marking done, we decided to indulge ourselves in a nerdy trip to the Azores. The oceans in particular promised exciting mammals – with 28 cetaceans recorded in the waters around the archipelago. This includes **Risso's dolphin** and **Sperm whale** which were very high up on our respective “see-before-we-die” lists.

The plan

We only managed to sort out timings for the trip two weeks before flying out. But through a website called **Kiwi** (<https://kiwi.com/en/>) we found cheap flights for ~£500 return (UK to Pico) for both of us and one 15kg bag. Our itinerary was as follows:

11th June: Depart London Stansted (19.35) arrive Ponta Delgada (Sao Miguel Island; 22.40), operated by Ryanair

12th June: Depart Ponta Delgada (09.00) for Pico (arrive 10.00), by SATA

12th-16th June: Stay in Lajes des Pico

16th June: Depart Pico (11.30) for Terceira (12.05), by SATA; afternoon exploring a bit of Terceira, by car; depart Terceira (2020) for Lisbon (2335), by TAP

17th June: Depart Lisbon (0630) for London Stansted (0920), by Ryanair

The details

We set the trip up around taking four boat trips out of Lajes des Pico with **Espaco Talassa**; they also offered free talks each evening on different aspects of the natural history of Pico, and carbon-offset their boat trips (through Quercus, the Portuguese NGO). Their website (<http://espacotalassa.com>) is excellent and comes with year-round observation records – always a good sign! – and we had confirmation from two independent sources (a UK sperm whale researcher and a Norwegian wildlife tour operator) that they were excellent. Their boat trips are three hours long (or longer), leaving at 10.00 and 15.00 daily and each costs €54 per person – though this is discounted to €44pp if you book >4 person-trips. These are operated out of 8.5m RIBs, carrying 12 tourists, a skipper and a guide, with lookouts (*vigias*) positioned on the cliffs above to spot cetaceans and guide the boats in. Before you go out, you are told of the species the *vigias* have seen, and if you then choose not to go you can instead re-book for another day for free. For accommodation, we stayed in **Lena's House** in Ponta Delgada – €40 for a twin, and very pleasant place to stay; and on Pico we stayed with the Espaco Talassa, who run “**Whale'come ao Pico**”, staffed by kind, caring people, with modern, stylish rooms, costing €59 B+B per night for two in a twin room. The hotel also provided a nice lunch (upwards of €10 for two) and dinner (north of €22 for two). There was also a lovely café just around the corner (**Restaurante Ritinha**), operated by a family who seemingly never stopped smiling (~€7 for lunch; ~€15 for dinner, both for two). For our brief Lisbon stopover we picked **4ULisbon** – cheap but indescribably awful; we'd have been better sleeping in duty free.

The animals

Our first trip out was on the afternoon of 12th June; the weather was clear, though the seas a little choppy. We firstly went out after four **Sperm whale** the *vigia* had spotted. These were quite far south of the island. By the time we got there, they were disappearing but we still had three nice, if short, views of the backs of the animals before they dived to feed and we moved on. With no other cetaceans of note being picked up by the *vigia*, we headed closer to shore, and dad saw what was probably a **Risso's dolphin**, but only fleetingly, and it was missed by everyone else. The guide explained that in the afternoon they start to feed and so spend far less time at the surface, hence we moved on after five minutes of failing to re-spot it. On the way back, we came across a pod of **Bottlenose dolphin**, which were remarkably playful.

The rest of our trips were booked for the mornings (13th-15th inclusive): mornings seem to be slightly better for sightings of Risso's dolphin, Sperm whale, and Short-finned pilot whale, as well as tending to have calmer seas. Our second trip started well, with brief views of a small pod of **Risso's dolphin** on our way out to a **Fin whale**. We sat with it and a small group of **Short-beaked common dolphin** that were bow-riding it for a short while. Then the fog closed in, so we headed off in search of better weather and maybe other species.

Despite the fog and swell (~3m) we managed nice views of a **Pomarine skua**. Our third trip out was also fantastic. To start, we had great views of **Short-beaked common dolphin**, travelling quietly, near the boat. Having got our fill of those, our guide suggested we go “looking for something else” – a phrase they like to use to mean “the *vigia* has spotted something else more interesting”. This time it was a **Fin whale**, however, our boat disturbed a group of ~50 **Striped dolphins** en route, so we stayed with them for a while. No sooner had we caught up with the two **Fin whales** than the guide once again suggested the *vigia* had something else for us. Thirty minutes later (and by this stage south of the channel between Pico and neighbouring Faial) we found what he had seen – a gigantic **Blue whale**. This actually came as little surprise given we passed up views of **Short-beaked common dolphin** and another **Fin whale** on the way – we knew it was going to be something great! To top the trip off, we sat in amongst two pods (totalling ~20 animals) of **Risso’s dolphins**, interacting with each other. Little did we realise this would not even be the best outing: tomorrow was another day.

Our final trip out beckoned, with the news that there were **Fin**, **Blue**, and possible **Short-finned pilot whales** visible from shore – of course we said yes to the trip! The **Fin whale** was less than a mile off shore, and we headed there first. Spending twenty minutes with a creature which doesn’t care about one’s presence was a privilege – picking a whale up not from sight, but the sound of its blow, extraordinary. Again, the guide said we must move on – presumably after more **Blue whales**. However, we stopped early as the other boat picked up something the *vigia* hadn’t spotted. We waited eagerly, as our guide said “11 o’clock, between the boats”. What surfaced was unbelievable – **Blainville’s beaked whale** – not one but two, and maybe fifteen metres from the boat. They gave us great views, with one (presumably the male) having an especially pronounced arch on its lower jaw. We stayed with them for a good five minutes – for a species so characteristically shy of boats this was an amazing treat. We headed off when they did dive (unsurprisingly very few species would have persuaded us to leave if they were still visible) back in search of the **Blue**. Soon after setting off we slowed again, for a **Loggerhead turtle** – the first sighting we’d actually spotted for ourselves (though the guides may well have seen it and said nothing!). We saw loggerheads on every trip, but this time there were **dolphinfish** accompanying the young turtle; apparently they sometimes collect underneath turtles just as they do under other floating objects. Ten minutes later we again halted – as a pod of nearly a dozen **Short-finned pilot whales** surfaced repeatedly, with a young one obvious among them. We left for the **Blue whale** and sat with two of them for the best part of thirty minutes, before heading home.



The back of a sperm whale, two short-finned pilot whales, a Blainville’s beaked whale with an Espaco Talassa RIB in the background (clockwise from top left).

Cory's shearwater, **Bulwer's petrel**, and **Portuguese man-of-war** were also seen on every boat trip. In summary, it was the best series of whale watching trips we had ever been on – operated by a brilliant company, with enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff, great eyes (both on shore and at sea), and in a fantastic location.

Azores noctules were an ever present during daylight in Lajes do Pico (as well as by the bus stop in Ponta Delgada, and on Terceira), though their activity seemed to peak around 09.00; at one time we counted 51 feeding above the grassy patch of lava by the shore. An evening stroll (~22.30) from **Restaurante Ritinha** on our last night also produced 5 or 6 **Greater mouse-eared bats** in the middle of the village, as well as the wonderful sounds of **Cory's shearwater** coming in to roost. Walking the 1km or so east to **Espaco Talassa's** main lookout post- the **vigia queimada** – was a great way to spend time between boat trips, and having a chat one afternoon with the lookout himself (Marcelo) was a treat; he was astonishingly knowledgeable about the turnover of whales through the year. We saw **Fin** and **Blue whales** from there (when the post is unmanned you can cheat by following the boats), as well as **Common quail** – though these were far harder to find! We also saw **Risso's dolphin** (breaching) by scanning the sea from the road just east of and above the town.

Pottering around Terceira for six hours during our homeward stopover was equally rewarding. A quick stop in at **Praia da Vitoria ponds** produced a **little grebe** (amongst more stuff), and at **Cabo do Praia quarry** we saw **Ringed plover**, **Kentish plover**, and a **Pectoral sandpiper**. We then headed to **Angra do Heroismo** to look at the architecture, and have a last scan of the sea from the lookout point on the peninsula south of the city. This was surprisingly hard to get to given the complex one-way system, and our basic map. The trouble was worth it though – within minutes of arriving I spotted cetaceans splashing about 4 miles to the south south-east. A closer look with our scope showed them to be a large (45+) group of blackfish. They were big (4m+), very active (with lots of breaching as well as occasional bursts of fast surface swimming), and with taller, less hooked fins than the **Pilot whales** we saw the day before. After working through all the possibilities we concluded they were **False killer whales**; nearby there were at least 3 **Bottlenose dolphins** – apparently the two species associate quite often. We were also keen to see some **laurel forest** up close. This led us to the **Serra de Santa Barbara**. Although the **laurel forest** was conspicuous by its absence, we did spot a **European rabbit** on our way back down the mountainside.



Marcelo the lookout, and the *vigia queimada*

Mammals and notable others:

1. **Azores noctule** – everywhere, including a single group of 51
2. **Mouse-eared bat** – centre of Lajes do Pico
3. **Sperm whale** – first boat trip
4. **Risso's dolphin** – three of the four boat trips, well just once
5. **Bottlenose dolphin** – first boat trip, and from Monte Brasil, Terceira
6. **Fin whale** – on the latter three trips
7. **Short-beaked common dolphin** – middle two trips
8. **Striped dolphin** – third trip
9. **Blue whale** – second two trips; twice from the vigia (13th and 15th)
10. **Blainville's beaked whale** – last trip
11. **Short-finned pilot whale** – last trip
12. **False killer whale** – ~4 miles south south-east of Monte Brasil, Angra do Heroismo, Terceira
13. **Rabbit** – Serra de Santa Barbara, Terceira

Pomarine skua – second trip

Common quail – from the *vigia queimada*

Dolphinfish – last trip

Cory's shearwater - always at sea, and coming into roost every night behind Casa de Flores

Pectoral sandpiper – Cabo do Praia quarry (Terceira)

Little grebe – Praia Vitoria ponds (Terceira)