

A TWO-HOUR, 1600 KILOMETRE FLIGHT DUE WEST FROM PORTUGAL, ACROSS THE EXPANSIVE ATLANTIC OCEAN, AND YOU'LL ARRIVE AT AN ISOLATED CHAIN OF ISLANDS CALLED THE AZORES. LOCATED ALONG THE MID ATLANTIC RIDGE THE NINE VOLCANIC ISLANDS WERE OFFICIALLY DISCOVERED IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY AND HAVE A LONG HISTORY OF WHALING.



Two sperm whales socialising. Female sperm whales come to the Azores in order to calve.

The Azores have more recently become known as an important cetacean migration route and rather than hunting the whales, locals now take tourists to view these magnificent animals in their natural habitat. I came to the islands in June, the northern hemisphere summer, to fulfil a lifelong ambition of swimming with one of the world's largest predators, the sperm whale.

My journey to the Azores began in London and took most of a day of travel, after transiting through Lisbon in Portugal. The journey to the whale-watching hub of the Azores, wasn't complete until we'd jumped on a local ferry across to the island of Pico where the main town, Madalena do Pico, would be our home for the next ten days. We had planned five days of swimming with sperm whales to give ourselves the best possible chance of seeing them. This gave us plenty of leeway should the weather deteriorate, which it can very quickly do in this remote seascape. The regional government strictly regulates entering the water with whales in the Azores so it was necessary to apply for a permit several months in advance. My case was made through my background as a marine biologist and underwater photographer. I read several studies in advance about cetacean-human interactions learning how to keep our disturbance to a minimum. Permits aren't easy to come by so I was very pleased and relieved when the green light finally came through.

Sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) are named after the spermaceti, a waxy substance located in their bulbous head, which is used in echolocation. They are one of the many species of whales that come to exploit the rich and warm waters of the Azores throughout the year. They arrive in May and give birth to their young here, where the benign waters can shelter their young. Adults dive to over 1185 metres for more than an hour in search of their favourite prey, the giant squid. Scars on sperm whales from the tentacles of the squid allude to epic tussles occurring many leagues under the

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The bulbous head of the sperm whale contain spermaceti, a waxy substance used in echolocation.

MID ATLANTIC WHALING

sea. Extrapolating the diameters of scars to the massive cephalopods that must possess them, the squid are estimated to reach over 18 m in length! Upon returning from these dives, the mother returns to her calf, which eagerly suckles on the nutritious milk.

We stayed in a quaint little apartment overlooking the port of Madalena. The island of Pico itself is absolutely stunning and dominated by the Azores' highest volcano. The very low population densities on the island mean the slopes of the volcano remain clear and the low-lying scrub disappears into the distance of the volcano's peak. The high mountain slopes also provide a great vantage point

On the morning of day one we didn't want to get too excited about the possibility of seeing even a single sperm whale. You never know what to expect on an expedition like this! Our worries were abated after only an hour or so at sea, as we received word from a *vajia* up on the volcano that a sperm whale had been spotted several miles off the north of the island. We were already out at sea in the small inflatable that would be our home for ten hours a day over the coming days. We donned our wetsuits, I was wearing 10 mm of neoprene all in all, to combat the elements and in preparation for leaping into the water at a moment's notice. The sky was clear and the ocean relatively calm, but the water was a cool



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for the *Vajias* who sit on the high ground looking out for the tell-tale signs of whale blows coming from the water below. They are then able to tell the boat crews in the water where exactly the whales are hanging out and thus our adventures begin!

Our crew for the trip consisted of our skipper Fernando (a very friendly local guy who knew these waters like the back of his hand), our guide Guja (a fantastically crazy Italian and an old friend of mine) plus my buddy Ida (a Swedish marine biologist). Our daily trips and accommodation were organised by Pico Sport who are based right on the harbour front of Madalena. They are one of the biggest companies on the island, conducting daily whale-watching tours and dolphin swims, as well as diving around the island, in peak season.

18°C so we needed a fair amount of protection to keep us warm.

As we approach our first whale it was resting calmly at the surface and it turned out to be one of the most accommodating that we encountered. We slipped into the water making every effort not to make a splash, which may frighten off the whale. The animal was around 100 metres away from us so we cautiously approached, still ensuring to keep splashes to a minimum. Over the coming days we developed quite a good system with the boat crew for approaching the whales. As I have a large, and not very streamlined, camera setup I needed to swim on my back with the camera on my belly, enabling me to move much more quickly in the water. This allowed me to look back to the boat from where our captain would direct me using his arm as a heading. This stopped



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- 3. A sperm whale calf nuzzling its mother.
- 4. Pico's stunning volcano and scrub foliage native to the islands.
- 5. One of the small active fishing harbours found on Pico island.
- 6. These Common dolphins were attracted by my rubbish attempt at karaoke.
- 7. An ocean wandering loggerhead turtle comes to pay us a visit out in the blue.

me swimming off on random tangents. When the whale was relatively near he'd tell me to turn and I would wait for the whale to approach.

Whale swims were quite hit and miss and required lots of jumping in and out of the zodiac before even seeing a whale in the water. Sometimes they would divert away from us, and other times dive before they reached us. It was pretty exhausting jumping in, making a mad dash, keeping up with a whale if we saw one and then flopping back in the boat, but seeing our first whale in the water made it all worthwhile. We never chased or harassed a whale, and certainly never attempted to touch one, despite them occasionally coming close enough for us to have reached out. We named the very first whale that we saw 'Spot' due to the white blotch above his eye. Spot was an extremely accommodating whale and it felt like hours that we spent with him in the water. He was very inquisitive and swam extremely close to us many times. It was a serious adrenaline rush to be so close to such a large predator, but I never felt threatened, perhaps wrongly!

We swam with sperm whales on four of the next five days with group sizes ranging from solitary animals to mothers and calves and the most amazing encounter with a group of at least a dozen animals. This latter group were resting at the surface with four or five individuals hanging motionless at around ten metres below the surface, so we weren't aware of them until we reached the group at the surface. Amongst the group was a calf, which absolutely had to investigate what these strange creatures were that had joined the pod. It made a b-line for us and only turned off at the very last minute, eyeballing us as it passed. This was easily one of the most amazing wildlife encounters I have ever had.

As well as sperm whales we came across many other creatures during our daily trips at sea. The first was a friendly loggerhead turtle that must have seen its own reflection in my camera's large dome port as it swam straight at me. We tried swimming with bottlenose dolphins on a few occasions, whilst the *vajias* were searching for sperm whales, but they never came close enough for us to see them underwater. We did however see a large pod of common dolphins on a day where the visibility was

uncharacteristically clear. On our first attempt we dived down amongst the very fast moving pod but they sped straight past us. On the second go I decided to try an old trick I had learnt a few years previously and began to sing. The dolphins immediately turned, apparently appreciating my lame karaoke, and came within only a few metres of us as we swam down among them.

Another very special encounter was with a large pod of pilot whales. The adults didn't seem very interested, but like some of the other cetaceans we encountered it was a calf that decided to check us out. The pale grey calf was much lighter than

the adults, which are almost black, hence their other name 'black fish'. The calf twisted and span around just below us in the water, whilst constantly singing and twittering. It had some very light scrapes on its surface that looked like another member of its pod had bitten it. Perhaps the calf had a penchant for mischief! After a few minutes the calf had investigated us all it wanted and swam off to join the rest of the pod.

Unfortunately, during the trip time was limited and we didn't manage to include any dives in the itinerary. We also visited a little too early in the season for conditions to be ideal for diving, although



- 8. Spot was one of the most inquisitive whales that we spent time with in the water. We named him Spot after the white patch above the eye.
- 9. From a distance sperm whales look very much like a submarine, with a similar function being served by their shape.



An inquisitive pilot whale calf played with us for several minutes.

some local dives did go out whilst we were there. Several weeks after we left, in late June, trips to Princess Alice reef and shark feeds took place almost daily. Shark feeds take place in blue water off Horta island and attract blue and mako sharks by chumming the water. Princess Alice is a seamount an hour and a half by zodiac from the base on Pico but it sounds well worth the trouble. There is a resident group of devil rays, a diminutive relative of the manta, occasional sharks and huge schools of other fish. I definitely hope to return to the Azores in the future and do some diving there.

Different whale species arrive at and depart from the island chain depending on the time of year. Seasonal residents include several of the fifteen baleen whale species: humpbacks, sei, fin, minke and even the mighty blue whale. Many toothed whales including beaked and pilot whales as well as many dolphins are also common. Whaling officially ceased in the Azores in 1984 but commercial whaling had been a major industry in the islands prior to that. These days, the word has got out about the huge numbers and diversity of whales that can be seen around the islands and a large tourism industry has replaced whaling. Unlike the other European countries of Iceland and Norway that are pressing for whaling to be allowed once again, there are no such rumblings in the Azores. A vibrant tourism trade is much more lucrative than whaling ever could be and will certainly keep me coming back.



FURTHER INFORMATION:

Getting There Flights from Lisbon, Portugal, or Boston in the USA service the Azores. Internal flights may be required to get from one island to another. Euro is the local currency.

Best Time to Go For sperm whales and weather conditions, the best time to visit is May/June to September/October. Entering the water is not allowed, with or without permits, in July and August due to high tourist traffic.

Operators

Pico Sport Azores www.whales-dolphins.net
Cetacean Watching Azores
www.CWAzores.com