



A Whale *of a time*

The Azores, Portuguese-speaking islands in the middle of the Atlantic, are the best place in Europe to encounter many species of whale and dolphin

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“You might think that spotting the biggest animals in the world is easy,” said Eduardo, squinting his eyes as he scanned the ocean. “But the ocean here is so deep; it’s like finding a noodle in a haystack.”

His sun-creased features revealed nothing as to whether the noodle part was deliberate or a deadpan pun. But I had no reason to doubt his statement – Eduardo had over two decades of experience hunting whales in the Azores.

Whaling was banned here in 1986, leaving people like Eduardo perfectly qualified to work in the whale and dolphin watching industry, which has since become vital for the economy of these islands.

Sprinkled like dots in the middle of the North Atlantic, the Azores are the best place in Europe for close encounters with several whale and dolphin species. Perched on hills overlooking the ocean, a series of towers known locally as Vigias are also a

throwback to the days of whaling. Using powerful binoculars, the lookouts can see jets of spray rising from a whale’s blowhole several kilometres offshore and then guide the boats in that direction.

This is how we’d first got wind of a whale sighting; causing mounting excitement amongst the half dozen guests on board as we churned through the water. The news had focused all of our attention towards the front of the vessel until Eduardo slowed the boat and pointed “Dolphins!”

Surfing, jumping and playing in our wake – just a few metres from the back of the boat – were a huge pod of common dolphins. Personally I think there is a case for renaming these beautiful mammals. With white streaks on each side and an agility that gives the impression that they are solely intent on enjoying life, I now prefer to call them exquisite dolphins instead.

A splinter group peeled off and were suddenly right alongside the boat – swimming at our exact speed. Just below

the surface for a while and then one by one, breaking the water, and looking at us through inquisitive eyes.

“Today they want to play,” said Eduardo. “Sometimes they show avoidance behaviour and we leave them alone. It’s their choice to follow us.”

Our exquisite dolphin interaction lasted a few minutes – until, curiosity satisfied, they passed under the bow of the boat and veered off into the blue.

“We’ve found a whale; about 50 metres away,” said Eduardo pointing to one side of the boat. He slowed the engine and we bobbed about, scanning the water. “Just there,” said Eduardo, arm outstretched again. But I couldn’t see anything; just endless water twinkling with cracks of light. Then a jet of spray revealed its location – rising several metres in the air and accompanied by a deep blowing sound.

“It’s a Fin whale,” explained Eduardo. “The second largest animal in the world.” Very slowly, he edged his boat closer



Left: Sunrise over the Azores Above: Common dolphins Below: Fin whale



“The amount of marine life we saw was staggering”

until we had a good view of the huge mass of grey basking in the ocean. Spellbound, we watched in silence, until it lifted part of its tail fluke out of the water and slowly dived down, leaving just a few mini whirlpools spinning in the water.

During the course of my week in the Azores the amount of marine life we saw was staggering. Decent sightings of Humpback, Fin and Pilot whales were interspersed with daily interactions with several dolphin species. If watching from the comfort of a boat isn't enough for you, the Azores also offer opportunities to swim with dolphins in the wild. Such is the demand for this activity that it has caused considerable problems in several parts of the world. When unregulated, it can lead to several boats searching for the same pod of

dolphins and then competing to drop their passengers closer. The resulting interference can interrupt the dolphins' hunting and resting behaviour and cause considerable stress to the animals. The government of the Azores have an admirable solution to this problem. All operators offering dolphin swims must be registered and are required to observe a strict set of rules that include only two people in the water at any one time, with encounters limited to a maximum of 15 minutes.

With all this talk of whales and dolphins you could get the impression that there's nothing to do on terra firma. But if you can tear yourself away from the ocean you'll find a land ideal for walkers; with something to suit all abilities, ranging from a six hour trek to the summit of Mount Pico to an amble along a coastal pathway. But whenever you get a view of the ocean - which is most of the time in the Azores - you might find your thoughts returning to the gentle giants of its waters. ■

Need to know

Getting there: Between April and October, SATA fly directly to and from the Azores from Gatwick every Saturday. www.sata.pt | TAP Portugal have daily flights throughout the year with a change in Lisbon. www.flytap.com

Tourist information:
www.visitazores.com

Language: Portuguese

When to go: Several species of whales and dolphins are encountered year round. Larger Baleen whales migrate past the Azores in May and June making spring an ideal time to visit. Peak season for visitors is July and August.

Tours: www.dolphinandwhaleconnection.com

www.azoreschoice.com