

Inset. A sperm whale breaching the water's surface. Photo by Turismo dos Açores

Words
Judy Darley

Photography
As labelled

Location
São Miguel, the Azores

THE BIG BLUE

From slaughter to conservation. Judy Darley uncovers how the whaling heritage of the Azores has led to marine ecotourism that benefits us all



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The first impression of São Miguel island is of green – lots of green – surrounded by lots and lots of blue. One of the Azores’ nine volcanic islands, it’s set out in the Atlantic around 1,000 miles west of Lisbon, and roughly the same distance from Africa and Canada. Part of Portugal yet politically autonomous, the landscape is distinctly Jurassic, even if the only giants here live in the surrounding ocean.

The second impression, as you begin to get a feel for your environment, is of settling into a gigantic village – even the administrative capital Ponta Delgada feels sleepy and relaxed. Crime is low, the weather is mild, and the occasional rainstorm can’t dampen spirits for long.

Yet the people here are pragmatic, as they’ve always needed to be. Making a living on a few hundred square feet of hilly land certainly isn’t easy, and incomes must be made through the resources available. In the late 18th century, this included growing oranges and exporting them to England, as well as selling them to ships passing by on their way to the Americas. In 1872, more than 300,000 cases each carrying 1,000 oranges travelled to English shores via sailing vessels.

After blight wiped out many of the orange groves, tea production was introduced. Until that point, the Camellia Sinensis tea trees had been grown only for their pretty flowers, but

1. *Ominous skies on the coast of São Miguel. Photo by Judy Darley*

2. *Chá Gorreana tea plantation. Photo by Judy Darley*



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following advice from experts in China, Chá Gorreana was founded on São Miguel in 1883 and is still one of only two tea plantations in Europe. The other, Chá Porto Formoso, is just a mile down the same road.

More recently, pineapples have become a popular export, with pineapples grown in greenhouses at plantations such as A. Arruda, in the island’s southwest. And the dairy industry is flourishing, with locals joking that there’s a cow for every person living on the island of São Miguel.

But in the past, with so much ocean buffeting the land, whaling inevitably became a major industry here. Species passing these isles on their annual migrations include fin, humpback and blue whales. Even orcas make the occasional appearance. “In the 1760s, the whale boats came from Nantucket, Massachusetts, then followed the whales to the Azores,” says Carla Coutinho, head biologist with Picos de Aventura. “They found that the people of the islands had an aptitude

for whale spotting and hunting, so they would recruit here, while using the islands as harbours where they could reload with provisions.”

Before long the Azoreans had gained the skills to hunt these immense mammals alone, taking advantage of the islands’ geology which means that the land rises abruptly from the ocean floor. With volcanic isles like Pico, Faial and São Miguel shelving steeply, it was no great distance to row out to the deep waters the whales prefer.

Yes, seriously – row.

Azorean whalers were renowned amongst whaling communities for retaining the historical methods long after other countries had resorted to using boats with engines and harpoons with exploding tips. “Each whaling canoe had a crew of seven – one to steer, one to harpoon and five to row. It was hard work!” says Carla.



3. A whale watching tower in prime position on the island of Pico. Photo by aldeia_fonte, Turismo dos Açores

Every whale hunt began from inland, with experienced spotters watching out for any sign of the gargantuan animals, and then setting off a rocket, or, later, a siren, as soon as one was identified. “The best island for whalers were Pico and Faial,” Carla says. “With deeper waters closer to shore, the whalers only had to row three miles or so to reach their prey. Our whalers kept to the old methods and used handmade harpoons. They had their sail up until they were close, and would then row. The hardest part of it was hauling the animal to shore.”

There was one other big challenge. “The sperm whale was the main target, and these animals can dive for up to 90 minutes,” says Carla. “This meant a lot of time was spent just waiting for them to reappear for another breath.”

Preferring the old ways wasn’t the only thing that set the Azorean whaling industry apart. While factories on the islands transformed blubber to oil for lighting and ground the bones for use in animal additives, the meat itself was never consumed locally. “It was full of blood so needed to be cooked for a very long time to be edible,” Carla comments. “It didn’t taste good at all.”

Another difference was that whale hunting on the Azores was purely economically driven, which meant that as soon as demand for the products diminished, so did the industry. By 1974, the factories in Porto Pim, Faial, and on São Miguel had closed their doors, with Pico following in later years.

The European Union has prohibited all imports of whale products since 1982, and by 1985 most European nations had agreed to a moratorium banning commercial whaling. Now, however, the islands faced the challenge of finding a new source of income to support their residents. With the end of whaling in these Atlantic waters, whole villages had been made redundant.

Whale watching as a tourism activity offered the ideal alternative, with the added incentive of contributing to the conservation of the animal. A French yachtsman named Serge Viallelle launched Espaço Talassa in 1989. This was the first whale watching company in the Azores, and had a focus on research and sustainability from the start.

Viallelle had developed a passion for spending time out on the ocean with the dolphins and whales. In addition, the land-based cabins – or *vigias* – that the whale spotters used still existed, and the skilled men who’d worked for whalers were in need of new employment. It made perfect sense to utilise

these resources for the burgeoning whale tourism industry. Today, at least two men from the whaling era still work as lookouts.

Carla, too, carries out shifts in the old lookout huts. “The way those old whalers see things and the way they look over the ocean is something incredible. They scan from left to right, taking in up to 36 kilometres at a time. The key is not only to identify the animal (rather, say, than a bit of seaweed or driftwood) but to also understand from her behaviour where she will move to next.”

Other companies, including Pico de Aventura, soon followed, and before long travel agents in the UK and America were selling holidays on the Azores purely based on the possibility of glimpsing one of the gigantic beasts. “Over the past 30 years, whale sightings here have been booming,” says Carla. “And the numbers of people visiting to see them is growing too. It’s been really important to the economy.”

Marine wildlife conservation and research are a key part of the flourishing industry, with strict rules in place to ensure the whales don’t feel harassed. By law a distance of at least 50 metres must be maintained, and boats must approach from the side, rather than head on.

The Azores attracts biologists from mainland Europe and further afield who are keen to work with these great ocean mammals. Carla grew up in Lisbon, and came to the Azores to study biology at Universidade dos Açores. “I’ve loved whales and the ocean since I was a kid, so what could be better than working here on the Azores?” she says. “I’ve been doing this since 2001.”

There’s plenty of eco-tourism to be enjoyed inland as well. Azores GreenMark launched as a company maintaining and creating hiking trails in February 2015. Within six months, proprietor Nuno Costa had realised that his team’s knowledge of the trails and understanding of the archipelago’s ecology meant they were ideally equipped to guide tourists through the greenest areas. Conservation and environmental protection are at the heart of their touristic offerings, with tours aimed at showcasing the natural beauty while striving to sustain it as much as possible.

Many of the tours to Sete Cidades will pause at viewpoints such as Miradouro de Santa Iria and Miradouro do Escalvado, which offer fabulous ocean panoramas. At the latter of these, the whale watching huts still stand. “They are evidence of a different era for the Azores,” says Carlos Frazão, a tour guide



4. A fin whale passing by. Photo by Pately, Turismo dos Açores

5. Spotting dolphins from an excursion boat. Photo by Turismo dos Açores

6. Dolphins are frequently seen leaping out of the ocean. Photo by Carlos Duarte, Turismo dos Açores



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with Amazing Tours who still recalls those times. “Happily, common sense prevailed. Now we do a much more civilised thing and watch them instead.”

The options for whale watching tours are incredibly varied, with boats of all types and sizes. We booked our tour with Picos de Aventura via BigBlue Adventures, and opted for a half-day trip in a Zodiac. These powerful little rigid-hulled rubber boats are ideal if you like a little excitement served with your serenity – high speed rides are rambunctious, noisy and full of laughter, interspersed with the peace of bobbing on waves that lap almost within reach. The company offers hotel pick-ups, but with the harbour only a few minutes walk away, we chose to rise early and stroll along the waterfront, arriving in good time for our 8.30am briefing.

Our guide for the day was biologist António Ortolano, who told us all about the creatures we might encounter, and warned us to keep our cameras undercover whenever the boat rockets along. “You might get very wet!” Equipped with bright orange lifejackets and waterproof coats, we filed out to our vessel.

After bombing along the ocean for a while, our skipper halted – the first message had come in from a spotter, in fact from Carla, equipped with a walky-talky and compass. Immediately, our trajectory changed and we raced to the patch of Atlantic where a whale had been seen. “Here you

can see the whale’s footprint,” António said, pointing out a curious depression in the water. “Keep your eyes on that and maybe it will come up.”

Quiet descended as we watched, waited, hoped. I saw something strange surfing the waves – pinkish purple and curled like a piece of plastic waste. “Man o’ War!” António exclaimed. “One of the most venomous species of siphonophore. Not actually a jellyfish, but it’s closely related. The tentacles can be 10 metres below the surface.”

There was no sign of the whale, though. Before long, António made a decision. “This one doesn’t want to come up. We’ll move on now.”

Our next visitors are greeted with a chorus of “oohs”.

Pale grey common dolphins with creamy white bellies jumped through the water all around our boat. A baby leapt with the same grace and power of its parents. Nothing can compare to that thrill of seeing a fin appear just feet away from where you’re sitting, followed by an inquisitive nose. Shearwaters, like stocky, hook-beaked gulls, took off in annoyance as the dolphins playfully bopped them from beneath.

Another call came in and we dashed off once more, arriving in time to see a plume of water as a fin whale exhaled. Excitement ricocheted through the boat. After a moment, we

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saw the whale’s back curve it dived. “It could be gone now,” António warned us. “Usually they come up for air then swim away. We will wait for 10 or 15 minutes, which is how long they can hold their breath.”

In far less time, however, the waves to our right parted to reveal a large grey head and back, with the fin clearly visible. “This is a different fin whale,” António said. “This one is smaller than the other. They are the second-largest species of whale, with a maximum length of around 22 metres.”

The whale cut in front of us, showing the length of its body before dipping below the surface. Keeping our distance, we followed, saw it exhale once more and watched the vast creature dive.

And that was that, the end of our encounter. But not the end of our adventure. As we set off for shore, a pod of bottlenose dolphins appeared, cavorting above the sea to make sure they had our attention. Larger than the common dolphins, and darker in colour, they were equally extrovert.

“We see this group a lot,” António confided. “You can recognise them through nicks in the fins and other scars. They often approach the whaling boats. They are very nosy.”

For half an hour they flurried around us, performing the kinds of tricks you might see in an aquarium, but so much better

when witnessed in the great playground of the Atlantic Ocean. “People go out in the boats to see the whales, but it’s the dolphins they come back talking about,” Carla says afterwards. “Everyone loves the dolphins!” It makes sense to me. The whales are stately and detached, while the fun-loving common and bottlenose dolphins really seem to want to interact with us.

Today, around 25 varieties of whale and dolphin journey through this corner of the Atlantic. With guidance from spotters in the old hillside vigias, the chances of a magical encounter are just a boat ride away. It’s impossible not to be impressed by how far the Azorean people and their marine neighbours have come in little over 30 years. ●

Judy flew to the Azores via Lisbon with TAP (0345 601 0932; flytap.com). Tour company information: Picos de Aventura: picosdeaventura.com; Espaço Talassa: espacotalassa.com; Amazing Tours: amazingtours.pt/en; BigBlue Adventures: bigblue-adventures.com.