

A world of Diversity

by Scott Portelli

Imagine a place where the most mysterious of marine mammals roam the deepest parts of the Atlantic Ocean. It's a place where transient giants journey across oceans to the sapphire waters of a remote archipelago. A place of factual imagination where the largest toothed-whale on the planet live off the Kraken of myths – giant squid.

What is this place? The Azores.

Almost halfway between North America and Europe this isolated group of islands still has a strong European influence. It is steeped in Portuguese flavours; with good food, fine wines and a relaxed culture. Once a whaling nation, The Azores' livelihood is now built on tourism and watching the resident Sperm whales.

The Azores were formed from the blood of the Earth. The archipelago consists of nine islands of which Pico is the youngest and was formed just 300 thousand years ago. With a mountainous peak – a signature of its volcanic origins - Pico has an imposing landscape. It is here that I base myself, for its easy access to the action on the water.

I have a direct line to what is happening on the water through our

vigia (the name given to the whale spotters). The vigia are ex-whalers whose job it was to sound the alarm to let the whalers know there was a whale ready for the taking. The once proud whale hunters now work for the local operators, to ensure sightings of whales and dolphins are relayed back to the skippers by radio. Although many of the old vigia's reminisce about the prosperous years of the whaling era, they now use their skills and experience for ecotourism.

When we visited our vigia, Antonio, he was still sitting in the cramped wooden lookout where he had sat for 40 years on a wooden stool. He has been watching the behaviour of marine mammals for so long that even from great distances he could tell you what species it was, how long a whale had dived, and pinpoint where it would surface.

Pico has an imposing landscape

Sperm Whales

Canon EOS 5D MK II, 15mm Fisheye Lens , Seacam Housing 1/400, f6.3, ISO 200





Sei Whale

Canon EOS 5D MK II, 15mm Fisheye Lens, Seacam Housing, 1/400, f4, ISO 400

There he would sit. His binoculars glued to his face. Endlessly watching: frozen.

Suddenly he would flick his arm out and point: a sperm whale, over 20 metres long! I asked a friend what all the excitement was about, and she translated; “This whale is worth a lot, it is a big whale, I would get good money”. He was referring to the whaling days when a whale this size would fetch a hefty fee to the spotter that directed the whalers to its location. A long-gone era but the memories remain.

The diversity of marine mammals is what brings most people to the Azores. The resident sperm whales, bottlenose and common dolphins ensure opportunities to interact all year round. But the rare encounters with species such as Cuviers Beaked whales, Northern Bottlenose whales, Pilot whales, Risso Dolphins and False Killer whales is what makes this place so unique. Each day presents the chance to see something new or rare. That is what excites me.

Even the floating rubbish drifting



Common Dolphin Pod

Canon EOS 5D MK II, 16-35mm Lens, Seacam Housing, 1/125, f7.1, ISO 320

across the ocean has its surprises. I quickly learnt that every bit of flotsam and jetsam floating around the Azores had a potential hidden gem, and I took every opportunity to jump in the water and see what marine life had made this their home. Whether it was Trigger fish living in a barrel, or crustaceans hitching a ride on an old fishing net, there was always something living beneath the surface. If it floated, there were fish. The sad irony is that if you remove the rubbish you are also potentially destroying the habitat of a number of animals relying

on this floating haven.

The currents bring debris from the North that travels around the archipelago distributing remnants of discarded waste. The clear indication of human impact, nylon fishing nets, plastic bags, rubber barrels, without any expiry date, is ever present. Our impact has a lasting effect and in some instances cannot be reversed.

As with many whaling nations, years of whaling had exhausted the stock of sperm whales. The last Sperm whale slaughtered in the Azores was in 1984. It is encouraging to see these



Mobula Rays, Princess Alice Pinnacle
Canon EOS 5D MK II, 1/160, f6.3, ISO 200

days that the sperm whale population is in recovery and they are now a part of the culture of the Azores.

Now, heavily protected by the Azorean government, the marine life around the Azores is abundant. It consists of permanent residents as well as many migrating species of whales, dolphins and bird life. In the winter months the baleen whales come to the Azores in search of food. Blue whales, Sei whales and Brydes whales all feeding on bait balls of small fish.

Each year restrictions are in place between July and August, which is the peak of the whale watching season. But often these are the best times of year to document the behaviour of a multitude of species migrating to and from the Azores. The protection of the marine mammals in these waters is partly due to continued effort and collaboration between operators and the government. It is in the best interest for the operators to educate their clients, but it is clear that they also have a passion for the marine environment and seek to protect these



Sperm Whale
Canon EOS 5D MK II, 1/400, f6.3, ISO 200

Eye of the sperm Whale
Canon EOS 5D MK II, 15mm Fisheye lens, Seacam Housing, 1/400, f5, ISO 200

Portuguese Man o War
Canon EOS 5D MK II, 16-35mm Lens, Seacam Underwater Housing, 1/160, f13, ISO 320

natural resources for more than just commercial purposes.

Our Skipper is a true Azorean and anyone that meets him can tell he has a passion for this amazing place and its marine life. Every day he teaches me about people, the islands, the weather and the animals we encounter. He calls me 'the lucky one', as I tend to be on the boat when we encounter something rare.

I recall one evening we were out on the water. The sun was low, around 8pm at night. The water was calm, glassy. It felt like I was alone on the ocean. We spotted something – just a shimmer in



the distance - and decided to stop the boat.

Suddenly, a pod of beaked whales sheared alongside the boat. The undulating pod was so close I could reach out and touch them. The Skipper watched amazed, and murmured 'in all my years, I have never seen the beaked whales behave in this way'. Time simply stopped.

The Azores brought me luck on another occasion. I was chatting to some divers and photographers in the bar and they were talking about subjects they wanted to see and photograph while in the Azores. The recurring theme was that they were looking to see a Mola Mola (Sunfish) and they had been trying for a few years with no success. Well as fortune might have it, a skipper on another boat radioed to let us know he'd found a Mola Mola. The large sunfish was feasting on the abundant Portuguese Man-o-War. I slid into the water and watched as the huge fish slowly sucked the purplish-blue tentacles into its mouth. Despite being stung vigorously myself, I was determined to stay in the water as long as possible as who knew when the opportunity would present itself again. Sunfish are the largest boned fish in the ocean and look awkward as they move along the surface but their technique seemed to be effective.

When I got back to the bar that night, news had already got around that we swam with the Sunfish and there were a few envious punters that were determined to find their own Mola Mola. I tried not to look too pleased with myself. I wished them luck. Two days later I came across another sunfish and managed to get in the water again. I was a little reluctant to step foot in the bar that night, because apparently I was the only person to swim with a sunfish so far that season and twice in a matter of days would just be rubbing it in.



Risso Dolphins, spy hopping
Canon EOS 5D MK II, 100-400mm Lens, 1/500, f10, ISO 200

Despite the positive impact on the marine mammal populations, there is an ongoing challenge to ensure that the waters around the Azores stay protected. Fishing is still a substantial part of the community's livelihood. The fishing boats with their sustainable fishing practices leave the harbour, toting fishing poles to catch tuna, but I was informed not all is what it appears.

There is still a risk of overfishing in the area and the risk of long-line fishing which is decimating shark populations. But again local operators have started to explore the alternative and now shark diving in the region is starting to grow and the value of a living shark versus a dead shark is becoming more prominent.

Before I arrived, I had an ambitious wish list. The Azores delivered on it entirely. There is so much more to explore and protect. Truly an underwater world of diversity.



Mola Mola (Sunfish)
Canon EOS 5D MK II, 16-35mm Lens, Seacam Housing, 1/320, f3.5, ISO 200

Note: All images taken under a special permit granted by the Regiao Autonoma Dos Acores, Secretaria Regional Do Ambiente E Do Mar, Dreccao Regional do Ambiente.

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