



EXPEDITION DIARY Azores 2008

By Ronald Seipold

29 March

Hello everyone and welcome to the Azores 2008 diary. I'm Ronald, your expedition leader, and you will be hearing from me regularly over the next few weeks. We're packing up at the moment and next week Matthias and I will fly to Horta to set everything up for you. Matthias, by the way, is Dr. Matthias Hammer our founder and managing director who will be with us during the first few days.

I look forward to meeting you all in Horta soon. My Azores mobile number (FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY OR IF YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE LATE FOR ASSEMBLY) is +351 96 2338060 and I'll see you either at the airport or the Azores Ecolodge.

If you are still trying to swot up for the expedition, remember to read the published reports from previous expeditions available via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports.

So long

Ronald Seipold
Expedition leader

6 April

While I am writing this diary I can see the beautiful Pico mountain directly out of the window of my room. No clouds and a sunny morning. This has not always been the weather we've had during the last few days preparing our expedition. The weather is extremely variable (this is the Azores, you know ;) and to be honest the forecast for the next few days is not very promising, so we might have to stay onshore on Monday and Tuesday, using the time to really get to grips with the datasheets and jobs onboard and to do some data entry work for Lisa & Chris.

Anyway, everything is prepared and Lisa, Chris and I are looking forward to welcoming you "on board" to start this year's expedition in the Azores.

Save travels.

8 April

Team 1 has arrived safely on the island, albeit a couple of them without their luggage. Lucky then that the weather is so atrocious at the moment (see webcams on <http://www.climaat.angra.uac.pt/WebCams/main.htm> and click on Horta) that we can't go out, so today is given over to intense training on cetaceans, data collection, safety on board, how not to get blown away by the wind just by walking to the harbour, etc ;) The forecast for tomorrow is equally as bad, but we live in hope...

Anyway, the team has settled in nicely and as I write this are all ears for one of Lisa's talks on whales and how we are helping in their conservation here.

11 April

Yesterday we had to contend with another on-shore day, even though the sky cleared up in the afternoon. So we started to work on photo identification of pictures taken last year. We worked in the morning and then took some time off in the afternoon to look around Horta, for example hiking up to Monte Carneiro, a viewpoint hill next to Horta. And the lost luggage was finally found.

Believe it or not: eventually we were able to go out by boat on Thursday. After going through the safety instructions in the morning, we headed to the south of Faial when one of the lookouts on land spotted blows about 10 miles off the coast. Just a few minutes on our way, we ran into our first sighting of this year's expedition: two blue whales! What an amazing encounter to start with and more than ample compensation for the unpleasant weather conditions of the past few days.

Following blue whales quite some concentration by the whole team, because there is only little time left between spotting this species and the whales disappearing again for another dive. Just after about four minutes and three blows, they had gone again for the next 10 minutes dive. Following them slowly, the vessel was rocked around by the bouncy sea causing our first team member to take some time out to feed the fish ☺ and recovering in time to witness two groups of common dolphins in the afternoon.

Today we started into a clear, almost windless and sunny morning! Mount Pico was snow-capped and we enjoyed walking in the sun along the seaside to the harbour.

Our day out on the water started with a sighting of sperm whales! We followed them for quiet some time noting their blow rates. They breathe very regularly during their time at the surface (about 8-12 minutes) before they start a deep dive of around 45 minutes. Very often this dive is announced by a fluke sticking into the air, which is key for photo identification. After the sperm whales, we met several schools of common dolphins, bottlenose dolphins and even striped dolphins.

The afternoon was sperm whale time: about 10 different individuals along with 3 calves so the water was thick with these beautiful animals. "You can't see the ocean for sperm whales" was our motto of the day. Lisa and Anke were able to take perfect photos of all the flukes and, as a bonus on top of this already great day, one of the calves breached (i.e. jumped out of the water and made a big splash) three times pretty close to our boat! What a day!

14 April

On Saturday we started the day setting our course for the south of Pico, where our vigia (onshore local lookout) told us there were whales. On our way we had to face more waves than expected. Because it would have been a long way to go and the weather forecast stated even more wind, Chris decided to return to the port.

Having no rain, we took the rest of the day off and rented a mini van for a tour around the island of Faial visiting several points of interest. Unfortunately the low clouds meant we didn't have any views from the top of the main volcano (the caldeira). But we did go for a vigorous walk to another caldeira in the far west of the island.

Strong winds during the night made it impossible to go out because of the big waves. So we stayed onshore doing more computer work. As one result of this photo-ID and data entry session we were able to identify 10 different individuals of sperm whales that we encountered Friday last week. Seven of them matched with sightings back to 2003 and hadn't been identified before. Needless to say that we were all pretty pleased with our days' work ;)

In the early evening a lovely smell was coming out of the kitchen. Chris started to prepare a meal with shrimps, chicken and curry - it was delicious. Thank you Chris.

This morning we started with fairly strong winds, but braved the waves anyway, staying within the shelter of Pico and Faial. No sightings were posted by the lookouts on land and because of the shallow sea in between the islands we could not use the hydrophone to locate the sound of whales, so no sightings to report for that morning and for the afternoon we had to return to the harbour because of the worsening weather.

After having lunch and a galao (milk with espresso) at Peter's Café, Chris decided to give it another try. We still had unpleasant weather conditions with cloudy sky and moderate visibility but the wind and waves had come down. That gave us the chance of going up to the very far north-west part of Faial. But again we did not have any sightings until we made it back to Horta. That's nature but, as Lisa said, this does not happen very often at all. And yet we are still in good spirits with a smile on our face, also due to Chris' jokes and stories that get more bizarre every day!

The weather forecast for the next two days looks promising, so we are all hoping for more results to come.

17 April

On Tuesday we were out on the water for the whole day. Without any information from the vigias in the morning, Chris set a course for the south of Pico when we had our first encounter. Two common dolphins showed up and some time after this, a single bottlenose dolphin jumped just in front of us and was not seen again.

With the help of our hydrophone we figured out that there were sperm whales around, when Lisa received a call from a vigia who had spotted baleen whales not too far ahead of us. On our way we had an unexpected encounter: the first fin whale of slot 1! While the whale surfaced for a pretty long time, we learnt to differentiate between a blue and a fin whale: besides the smaller size of a fin whale, it's mainly a bright patch near the jaw that is only located on the right hand side, as well as the colourisation of the back body is more even and darker in comparison with a blue whale.

After the fin whale left us, we continued to follow the direction of the clicks given by the hydrophone and finally succeeded in finding a small group of sperm whales. For photo-ID reasons and also for taking blow rates you have to decide which individual you want to follow. Then Chris manoeuvres the catamaran directly behind and we start our jobs on board. But then several times, shortly after we were ready to go, the chosen sperm whale disappeared for a shallow dive leaving us behind with no photos taken and no meaningful blow rate statistics. This kind of game continued in the afternoon when we had another encounter with sperm whales. Fortunately this time we got our opportunity and the photos turned out to be perfect for identification purposes.

Against expectations, Pico mountain was visible from Faial on Wednesday morning, surrounded by just a few fancy, reddish clouds on a sunny morning. Raring to go, we left Horta harbour, when we got thrown about by the sea leaving the shelter of the islands. Already heading back to the north, we came across approximately 150 to 200 common dolphins, spread out widely in several groups.

We still had to brave waves up to 4 meters in the very north of Faial, but the gap between them enlarged and the conditions became more bearable. Nevertheless it takes a lot of concentration to keep on looking out for any cetacean. As there was also no help from the vigias, our hope of being successful that day started to drop when Noor spotted a blow in the rough sea! And, believe or not, it was a sperm whale. Well done Noor. We counted four individuals, two calves and a young teenager.

Unfortunately the weather forecast for today proved true and we had to stay onshore because of high waves. Working on photo-ID in the morning, Lisa came had some good news: some of the sperm whales were identified as individuals known since 1999, an exciting result.

Continuing a Biosphere Expeditions tradition, we took the chance a clear sky in the afternoon to start our 2008 mural in the harbour of Horta. Up to now we have produced a unique piece of art: a white rectangle J. This is just the start and hopefully it will be completed by the team members of the next slots.

19 April

We started Friday by celebrating Anke's birthday with a whale-shaped cake. With swells of over 4 meters it was the one and only cetacean we got to see that day :(

Today we went out for one last time and following a vigia's advice and using our hydrophone, we had the first encounter in 2008 with male sperm whales, not very far south of Faial. Even though there was not much time to follow each of them, we got our fluke photos. What a great farewell! Many thanks to Lisa and Chris.

And here is the summary of our encounters during the first slot:

Bottlenose dolphin: 4 / 18 (encounters / no. of animals)
Common dolphin: 9 / 408
Striped dolphin: 1 / 4
Beaked whale: 1 / 1
Blue whale: 2 / 2
Fin whale: 1 / 1
Sperm whale: 25 / 41

Thanks everybody for your contribution, enthusiasm and your excellent work.

We are now going to prepare everything for the next slot and Lisa, Chris and I look forward to meeting the new team members starting on Monday.

23 April

After all the introductions team two left Horta harbour yesterday in the late morning. Our first encounter was a large school of common dolphin with up to 200 individuals. Widely spread out into several smaller groups they were feeding by circling fish. Several hundred shearwaters tried to benefit from the feeding frenzy by stealing fish.

With the boat bobbing up and down a lot whilst collecting data, many of us got seasick and suffered for science ☺ and we also came across 30 to 40 bottlenose dolphins. Gerard and Lisa did a great job and got lots of good pictures of dorsal fins for photo identification. On our way back to Horta we came across a whole bunch of jellyfish and some flying fish. Further on we saw more common dolphins.

The second day out brought more common and bottlenose dolphins and a loggerhead turtle during turtle time! The first sighting of 2008. Well done Gabi and Lisa now has to buy that round she promised.

We ended our day relaxing in the sun outside Peter's Café.

P.S. for slot 1: the unidentified bird of last week was a Manx shearwater (smaller than a Cory's with a black and white colouration).

26 April

We spent some hours on computer work, cropping and matching photos, until we made it out to sea again in the afternoon. Almost back from an afternoon without a sighting and close to the harbour, a vigia radioed in, reporting that he had seen a humpback whale two miles from the coastline north of Faial, close to Ponta dos Cedros. Chris decided to give it a try. Leaving the shelter of the island it became choppier and we were not able to find the whale, so disappointed had to turn around. Close to the eastern lighthouse suddenly a blow was spotted, belonging to two humpback whales that surfaced just 300 meters away from our boat. This is the first sighting of a humpback this year and only the second time ever that Chris and Lisa have seen two of them together. We stayed with them for almost an hour, close to the coastline in shallow water, watching them surface several times after a dive. They were kind enough to show us their tail flukes, getting us photos number eight and nine since from the Azores for identification. You should have heard Lisa cheering when she the pictures later.

The day had to come eventually and it was today: nice warm, sunny and calm. We started quite early when Lisa got a call from a vigia just before 8 o'clock, reporting that there are sperm whales south of the islands. So we left the harbour heading directly towards that area to find ten (!) sperm whales. Team members of the first slot may remember Lisa and Chris mentioning how rare it is to see two male sperm whales close together. But today was our day because 1.) all ten whales were males, 2.) six of them stayed very close to each other, socializing for a long time, 3.) they even came close towards the boat and 4.) we got a fluke photo of every single individual whale (= 10 in one day!) for photo-ID. Even one of these points would have been a rare incidence and Lisa said that outstanding sightings like this will more than likely just happen once in your life. Not a bad day then ;)

29 April

Sunday was another sperm whale day. We spent almost four hours with the whales south-east of Pico. On checking the ID-photos, Lisa found that we some of the sperm whales were the same as the day before.

In the afternoon a vigia spotted some Risso's dolphins in a bay close to the coastline, an area where Risso's are seen quite regularly to jot down another first encounter of the year. The team was fascinated by these big dolphins (up to 3 - 4 meters) that are so different: older Risso's dolphins get almost white bodies and bright noticeable marks (scars that stay) on their darker dorsal fins appear very artistic and make a unique pattern on each dolphin. They also have a round head that gives them a kind of permanent smile. Gerard and Lisa got loads of photos of the dorsal fins as the animals were so close to the boat.

On our way back to the harbour, we met two smaller schools of bottlenose dolphins, two individuals jumping acrobatically just in front of the boat.

After three long, busy days and a forecast for choppy seas, the team had the day off yesterday, exploring Faial. Besides the almost mandatory visit to the caldeira and the volcano dos Capelinhos, we took the chance of inspecting a vigia viewpoint. We also met one of them by coincidence in a tiny bar, in the middle of nowhere. Up to this moment a vigia was to us nothing more than a anonymous voice on the radio.

Today we went out to sea again, to the very far west of Faial. Lacking information from the vigias, we used our hydrophone. Unfortunately not a single click or whistle of a cetacean was located the entire day. And yet we had another exceptional encounter: Angelika spotted our second loggerhead of the slot! This big turtle allowed us to watch it for a while but then took a deep dive when we came too close. It didn't take long and we sighted a second one, so now this slot holds another record: two turtles, within turtle time, in one slot! Well done everybody.

2 May

On Wednesday we left the house early to be witness an unusual event: there is a boat out to set a new world record for a powerboat to circumnavigate the globe, running on 100% renewable biodiesel fuel, and with a net zero carbon footprint. Whatever you think of biodiesel, the start of this attempt was April 27 in Sagunto/Spain and the very first refuelling stop on their way around the world was Horta. We had just left the harbour to meet the spaceship-like 24 meter tri-hull boat ('Earthrace') out at sea when it came around the pier.

After meeting up with Earthrace and having a good look around the inside of the boat, we switched back to Phycet for work. Using the hydrophone, it took us a while to locate clicks of whales and then managed to follow several sperm whales that were joined by a smaller school of bottlenose dolphins later. It was very special to watch the dolphins playing amongst a female whale with a youngster by her side. By the time we got back, Earthrace had already left, heading for Puerto Rico, 2315 nautical miles away, where she is expected for the next fuel stop (after only 121 hours out at sea) on 5 May.

The weather conditions on Thursday forced us to stay onshore. Besides some data entry and matching photos, everybody enjoyed a relaxing day. In the evening Chris cooked for us and again it was a delicious meal.

Today was our last day out at sea – time is flying by. Chris manoeuvred us directly south of Pico to an area where a vigia had spotted a sperm whale. With the help of the hydrophone we were able to locate the whale underwater, also hearing him coming up from a deep dive. About ten minutes we followed him by also noting the blow rates, when this big male sperm whale went down into the abyss again, showing us his huge fluke.

Just some minutes before 'turtle time', Lisa spotted a big loggerhead turtle! Chris tried to catch it, but every time the boat got close, it took off. That's part of the game, I guess.

Some time later we received another call from a vigia who had seen a baleen whale about 15 miles out at sea. Although we tried hard to find the whale(s), we couldn't. On our way back towards the coastline of Pico we came across a school of Risso's dolphins. About 40 animals, widely spread out around the boat, kept the camera persons busy. As a special farewell, one dolphin showed us several breaches in a row – very close to the boat. Thank you for another outstanding day.

4 May

Time is flying by and I haven't yet realized that another slot is already over. Thank you everyone for the last two weeks of work! I think we all have some unforgettable moments to take away such as the encounter with the big male group of sperm whales socializing as well as our two encounters with this very special species of "stoned" (as we named the Risso's) dolphins. And don't forget the new record of turtle sightings.

When it comes to numbers, here's a summary of our encounters during the second slot: Bottlenose dolphin 6 / 142 (encounters / no. of animals), common dolphin 3 / 255, Risso's dolphin 2 / 60, humpback whale 1 / 2, sperm whale 40 / 56.

The team members of slot 2 have now left and we are getting everything prepared for the next slot. I look forward to meeting all team members and hope for a lot of sightings. With wildlife you never know what's next...

8 May

Slot 3 left the harbour of Horta Thursday afternoon and our first encounter was a school of bottlenose dolphins welcoming us with an acrobatic show. What a promising start.

It's a tradition that we celebrate a team member's birthday with a whale-shaped cake. Wednesday it was Marcia's turn – congratulations. Unfortunately I had forgotten to brief all cetaceans around the Azores about Marcia's birthday, with the result that we had no sighting that morning ;(Because of the choppy sea we had to return early. Lisa took the chance of telling us more about how to identify the different species of cetaceans.

Sometimes you have to be patient before getting your reward. Such as today, when we couldn't spot any cetaceans for the entire morning, until we finally spotted a loggerhead turtle. Shortly afterwards a tremendous flock of Cory's shearwaters caught our attention. It must have been more than a 1000 birds! Getting closer we saw an uncountable number of common dolphin, spread out widely. Then we noticed a splash two hundred meters away and, believe it or not, it was a humpback whale. This was number 3 of this year's expedition and only number 10 ever in Lisa's humpback catalogue. Accompanied by umpteen birds the whale and several dolphins hunted fish, probably mackerel. Several times we noticed the smell of fish as well as fish oil on the surface of the sea. And then to top it all off, the whale started his acrobatics show close to the boat: breaching, jumping, lob-tailing – just incredible! One explanation for this behaviour is that the whale tries to get rid of the annoying dolphins – good for us.

On our way back, we met a big, old windjammer that sported the skull and crossbones. What a beautiful ship and perfect end to a great day!

11 May

Friday morning a vigia radioed in that there are baleen whales around the south coast of Pico. So we went out to encounter fin whales, a total of four adult animals. From a distance it's not easy to tell fin from blue whales. The best way to identify a fin whale is to get parallel to the whale on the right hand side (and only on this side!). If the jaw on that side is white, you've got a fin whale. So we followed them at a distance of just 50 to 100 metres as they surfaced several times after a dive.

As we were told by a vigia about some sperm whales on the north side of Faial, we took the long way through the channel up to the north. With the help of the hydrophone we listened to their vocalisations. Our patience paid off and we eventually got four new IDs on three female sperm whales and a calf.

As a result of a weather front the waves started to pick up, so Chris decided to manoeuvre the catamaran into the shielded area close to the coast of Faial. Just before heading back to Horta, Tammy and Lisa saw a big splash in the distance, probably of a breaching whale. Despite all our efforts of spotting the animal again, it was not seen again.

Yesterday the team had a day off. We rented a car to go around the island hitting most of the sightseeing spots. Everybody appreciated this change and got a pretty good look around Faial.

Today we had a warm and sunny day but the waves around the islands prevented us from leaving the harbour. So we took the chance to finish off this year's annual Biosphere Expeditions painting at the dock. In the afternoon all team members worked hard cropping photos of flukes and dorsal fins, so they can be used for matching with other database entries. In the evening we had dinner at base and then some drinks in a bar.

The forecast is promising and we are ready to take to the sea again. Hard life this ;)

14 May

The weather improved, so we started on Monday with calm seas and just a bit of wind. Not knowing what to expect of the day, we came across an enormous group of bottlenose dolphins. We estimated about 150 (!) individuals – a group size that is very unusual with bottlenose dolphins. Then there were three (!) turtle encounters. But unfortunately no turtle allowed us to capture it. Finally we had another encounter with a small school of common dolphins on our way back. Not a bad day's work!

Yesterday the weather was perfect with no wind and a calm sea. Following the advice of a vigia we headed north-east towards Sao Jorge. We did not have to wait long until the first blow of a sperm whale was spotted. On our way to the whale, some common dolphin showed up. It took us a while to recognize that there were hundreds of dolphins around, widely spread out and moving into all directions.

After we took our photo IDs of the sperm whale's fluke, we continued our way towards Sao Jorge coming across another group of sperm whales and then more as our day was dominated by sperm whales with 20 encounters, 35 animals and, as Lisa figured out later, 16 (!) different IDs in total. Apart from the large numbers, we were lucky to see two big males, a mother and a calf fluke together and also a sperm whale breaching several times in a row!

But that was not all. On our way back to Horta we had an extraordinary encounter: Curvier's beaked whales! These animals are extremely shy and therefore very rarely seen (it was only the third sighting of Curvier's since Lisa and Chris started working in the Azores). Totally out of character, all four whales came towards us, close enough to identify the characteristics of this species easily: 5 to 7 meters long, grey-brown body and a bright to almost white, head shaped like a goose. Two teeth protrude from the male's lower jaw. What a busy and extraordinary day!

Today was an on-shore day for the team and everybody took the opportunity to visit Pico. Pretty exhausted from walking but happy to have seen another part of this beautiful island, all team members were back in time for dinner.

16 May

Thursday we left the harbour with information from a vigia about sperm whales that were spotted south of Pico. On our way, we were welcomed by a very big school of common dolphins and about 1000 shearwaters. Following the coastline of Pico several miles out at sea, we were told by a vigia that a baleen whale had been spotted nearby and soon after we spotted a blue whale – the first encounter of slot 3 with this species! But unfortunately Chris didn't get the time to manoeuvre the catamaran alongside the whale to ensure the best spot for photo IDs as the whale disappeared for a dive. Despite everybody's effort, we lost the whale that might have changed its direction under water to surface again far away from us.

Back on track to find the sperm whales, Doris spotted a big blow in the distance – it must have been "our" blue whale, but again we were not able to get close. But then we almost ran into a group of pilot whales (30 adults and 10 calves), the first encounter of this year! Pilot whales are toothed whales, reach a size of 4 to 7 metres, have round head (no beak), are almost black and show a very calm behaviour and are therefore easy to observe. A little later we spotted two more pilot whales staying together with two common dolphins – they must have lost their own groups :)

And, believe it or not, here comes more: following information from a vigia who spotted baleen whales, we had another remarkable encounter as we spotted two fin whales! Allowing us to follow them close for a pretty long time, we were able to get an excellent impression of their size and Lisa and Bart got excellent photos. Just another incredible day!

Today was our last day out at sea and it was again a special day, as we had 45 (!) encounters of sperm whales, counting 48 adults and 12 calves. Now Lisa has a lot of work to do checking the number of IDs. What a brilliant farewell.

Tomorrow I will come back to you to summarise the encounters of the third slot.

17 May

Perfect timing: today is Lisa's birthday with a little celebration at the end of this year's expedition.

I would like to give you a summary of the encounters during slot 3: Bottlenose dolphin 2 / 175 (encounters / no. of animals); common dolphin 10 / 1026; humpback whale 1 / 1; sperm whale 69 / 103; fin whale 2 / 6; pilot whale 1 / 40; Curvier's beaked whale 1 / 3; blue whale 1 / 1; unknown beaked whale 1 / 1.

All in all this slot was lucky to see six different species of whales! And for sure our encounters with the rarely seen Curvier's beaked and pilot whales and a breaching sperm whale will be unforgettable.

More information and results will come along with the Biosphere Expeditions Azores Report within the few next months, so watch this space.

I hope you will agree with me when I say that it was a great experience, with fantastic sightings. I would like to thank all team members who helped making this expedition possible and a success due to your patience and hard work. And not to forget Lisa and Chris: special thanks to a special two-person-team that helped us being part of an amazing maritime project.

I myself have to realise that it's all over now. Perhaps see you on another expedition sometime in the future. It would be a pleasure! So good-bye everybody, I hope you've enjoyed the diary, take care and 'Merry Christmas' ;>

Yours

Ronald Seipold
Expedition leader