



EXPEDITION DIARY Azores 2004

By David Moore

4 April

Here's my first diary entry from the Azores where we're all set for the arrival of the first group of expedition team members, due in tomorrow on the daily flight to Horta. I am here with Matthias at the apartments, which are going to operate as base camp during this expedition, getting set up for the first arrivals. Chris and Lisa, our two scientists, are down on their boat, together with their assistant, Pere, preparing the research materials and equipment. We also have our first expedition member, Martyn, giving us a hand getting everything set up. Tomorrow we should see everybody settling in and acclimatizing, before launching the boat on Wednesday to get everybody out and let them find their sea legs and start to get familiarized with the research procedures. And of course hopefully have the chance to monitor some of our target species!

I'll keep you updated of developments.

7 April

The weather and the cetaceans run the expedition life here in the Azores and since everybody's arrival on Monday we have been out along the coast of Faial where, despite the choppy seas, we were able to cruise along next to a group of common dolphins. Everybody seemed to handle the conditions on the boat pretty well. As the seas were too rough for spotting the whales and carrying out the on-boat research work today, we have been training on some of the data collection techniques, including how to input the whale flukes as 'fingerprints' on a database for matching whale sightings world-wide.

Happy Birthday, Sam, glad you like the dolphin cake!

11 April

With nearly a week of expedition work under our belts, the weather over the last three days has enabled us to get into the rhythm, leaving the marina at nine in the morning and usually getting back around three in the afternoon. The second part of the week has been calmer so we've been able to get out some distance, cruising along with a group of Risso's dolphins yesterday before heading further out to a couple of Sei whales. Other blows have been seen, but with no definite sighting. We've also had numerous common dolphin encounters as well a lonesome bottlenose. The roles which the expedition team members undertake each day bring their own challenges. Both Melanie and Graham have had a go at photographing dorsal fins (not easy to get an effective photo ID!) whilst others have been up top collecting data on any wildlife sightings along a fixed transect for the Fishery of the Azores' 'POPA' programme.

Those who are placed on spotting duty can end up pretty cold and wet, so expedition members from future slots should make sure they don't forget their waterproofs (and then remember to wear them!). Bring plenty of warm gear as well – though the temperature has been around 16 degrees, it gets cold out at sea.

12 April

I've been on shore today, and all the expedition team members have just returned with news of their sightings. Soon after departure they found themselves amongst a large group of sperm whales and were able to spend time close to them before the onshore lookouts radioed in with sightings further out at sea. Sailing out they came across minke whales before arriving at a group of both sei and fin whales (the second largest of the species). En route there were bow-riding schools of both common and bottlenose dolphins. I guess the cameraperson has been pretty busy so we're about to download the shots and get going on the data entry.

14 April

Forecasts have been warning for the last couple of days of a front moving in, but we've been pretty lucky so far. Yesterday we had some close encounters with a couple of sei whales out off the coast of Pico and we were pleasantly surprised when we woke up this morning to calm seas, sunshine and pretty good views of Mt. Pico. There had already been reports of sperm whales a little way out, so we headed over and were treated to quite a nice display by a group of passing striped dolphins on route. Though numerous, the sperm whales were less interested in our boat than the other day. They seemed to be waiting for some of their friends further down the channel and were passing their time lining up in formation as a way of socializing. With so many of them together, counting the blows proved pretty difficult, though we got some excellent shots of the flukes.

Good news – the database has already thrown up a match for Monday's sperm whales. He was spotted once before in the Azores back in 1997!

17 April

The last couple of days of the first slot offered the chance for a little more shore time as the sea was pretty rough. Fortunately the skies were still clear so it gave us a good opportunity to see some more of the islands. Some took the ferry over to Pico for a jaunt around the island while others spent time here on Faial, hiring a car to make a circuit of the island or walking up along the headland – Eva-Maria took a taxi up to the top of the volcano and found a route around it before walking down. At base-camp there was also scientific work to do, extracting whale flukes on the computers, inputting the cetacean sightings, log and blow rates and consolidating the photos. We also had a last venture out on the seas to say goodbye to the dolphins. There were no blue whales to wave the first slot goodbye, but Chris and Lisa and the team members feel impressed with the number of encounters we have had – important data, as it has never before been collected at this time of year.

'Blue' the (semi) stray dog has been adopted as Expedition mascot, so I'll keep you updated of his movements.....

24 April

Blue has made a dazzling impression on the second slot with several potential adoption candidates. She sneaked into my room one night and made herself at home on the rug, though has now been sent back down to the marina area so that she doesn't get too dependent on our company.

We've just come in from a long day at sea where the calmer weather enabled several encounters: a varied selection of dolphins (including that lonesome one who appears to be resident), a couple of groups of sperm whales (being a bit stand-offish like last time), and a quite a fancy pair of fin whales, showing off their white underbellies as they swam past the boat. They were quite young ones so we mistook them at first for sei whales. Earlier in the week the weather wasn't great and we were only able to make a couple of sorties to spot common dolphins and Risso's, so everyone was pretty excited and trigger-happy today. Lisa was on form, keeping everyone in line with the data collection, while Chris was in his element behind the wheel, narrating events as they unfolded for Anja's report on Austrian radio. The training seemed to have paid off, and our 'POPA' data collectors up top, Andreas and Rosemarie, were a perfect picture of calm and efficiency. I think Lars took over a hundred shots on the Nikon, so we're about to have a look at them.

We have the vegetarian delegation in the kitchen tonight – think I'll go see how they're getting along.

27 April

The lookouts had reported whale sightings down on the west side of Faial, so we headed down first thing on Sunday. Unfortunately after a couple of hours we hadn't seen anything, so we had just decided to head over to Pico when a couple of dorsal fins were spotted. After a false beaked-whale alarm we realized they were bottlenose dolphins and part of a very acrobatic group of about 60. They are one of the study species for photo ID, so we spent over an hour with them as they performed their leaps in the air. Continuing on track up the coast line we came across our first loggerhead turtle which we were able to bring on board, measure, tag and check for worms. He was a fair size, one of the largest caught around here, and further down the channel we were able to capture one of his companions (who had a flipper missing) and give him the same treatment – they were both fairly docile, probably because of the water temperature at this time of year. The best was yet to come as we sailed across the strait towards Pico. We came upon a couple of fin whales only to find them accompanied by a humpback. Unfortunately I was stuck on the ladder looking in the wrong direction when it did its impressive triple breach, but I heard the cheer go up and found Debbie down aft a few minutes later, overcome with emotion, wiping away an emotional tear (let's hope the humpback puts on another display for her 40th birthday tomorrow). Apart from that it's been fin, sei and sperm whales (as well as an unusual spotting of a leatherback turtle who rapidly dived). We spent a lot of time with sperm groups today as they were spread out across the seas like a kind of whale soup. They were busy socializing and not feeding and though we moved eagerly from group to group with cameras ready we had only a few fluke ID opportunities.

30 April

We had reduced visibility to contend with on the boat on Wednesday as a front moved in and although it looked like we may have to return to shore, the weather stayed OK and the animals kept us busy with numerous dolphin sightings and a fin whale group. We also came across a baby turtle lunching on a Portuguese-man-o'-war as well as a breaching marlin. Yesterday most were ready for a break from the seas and enjoyed time in Horta or walking around the hills and over to the neighbouring beach. We're now about to head out on the waters for our last on-boat outing of slot two. The cloud is lifting from above Pico and the white cusps are smaller....I think the blue whale has been ordered for 3pm....

6 May

Since the arrival of the third slot we have all been profiting from the good weather and calmer seas. Blue has been gracing us with her presence - she's getting in the habit of hanging around by the catamaran every morning at 9am just in case we have a tasty morsel for her. We went out on Tuesday morning and spotted a large group of Cory's shearwaters flapping around on the surface and discovered that there was in fact a huge ball of fish near the surface into which the birds and dolphins were diving and feeding.

With everybody trained up on the research procedures we went out for our first full day yesterday. A couple of turtles were spotted (both two minutes before turtle watch) and there was no shortage of dolphin encounters, though I think the humpback stole the show again. He was feeding very close to the coast of Pico, diving down for about 10 minutes at a time. Given that he was also quite young we thought he may be the same one we saw last week, though examining the photos, he appears to be a different one.

The action continued today, making a busy day for the data sheets person. We were understaffed on the boat as Lisa was over on Pico giving a talk for a cetacean conference and a couple of the team members had gone with her.

Lookouts had spotted whales up on the north coast of Faial so we headed over and came across large groups of female sperm whales, many of them with their calves. We logged 20 encounters alone today, making a total of 49 so far this expedition. As they were diving and showing their flukes we were able to drive up behind and collect some skin samples which can be sent off for DNA analysis to get information about their feeding habits.

9 May

Two contrasting days: We had a full day out on Friday and followed various transects around Faial and Pico but came across little other than common and bottlenose dolphins. Although it was pleasant out on the boat, all was quiet on the seas.

We had calm seas with us again today but it was a different story with over seven different species of cetacean as well as numerous turtles, an exotic jellyfish and a sun-fish (a kind of diagonal diamond fish with fins). Along with the common, bottlenose, Risso's and striped dolphins, we went first in pursuit of three fin whales before heading off to track down sperm whales which had been spotted by the look-outs. Just as we thought we had arrived at the point indicated by the loud clicks heard on the hydrophone, we realized that we were in fact upon a pair of beaked whales. We got close enough to take some pictures, though shy of human presence, they dived before we were able to identify what kind of beaked whales they were – possibly Sowerby's. Eventually the sperm whales turned up accompanied by calves, one of which was suckling, and we obtained some fluke ID photos. The highlight of the day was yet to come when heading back towards Horta, 400 striped dolphins gave us a spectacular jumping and diving display with clear views of Pico in the background.

In between these two days on the boat, we had a shore day when most people went around the island and up to the top of the caldera in cars. Mark became, I think, the first team member of the year to swim in the seas – apparently it's not as cold as it seems!

14 May

The mixed weather this week has provided a variety of opportunities: It was so calm on Monday that five of the team members were able to jump in the water following the diving sperm whales and dive down with snorkels in an attempt to collect skin samples. Although the winds have since been stronger, causing us on Tuesday to take shelter over in Madalena on Pico for an hour, we've nevertheless been pretty fortunate with our encounters: we're surprised by the number of humpback encounters. Data has never been collected on them during the months of April and May and they are not normally seen later in the year. Yesterday afternoon, after leaving a feeding frenzy of dolphins with thousands of birds we came upon large groups of sperm whales out towards São Jorge. Rumours have been circulating within the islands of blue whale sightings earlier in the week, though the official word is they were just large fin whales!

21 May

Tuesday was a gentle introduction for slot 4, bouncing around on the strait between Faial and Pico with bottlenose dolphins, while Wednesday turned out to be a pretty exciting full day: two turtles for tagging on board, several different fin whale encounters, and our first blue whales of the expedition: "More blue whales than you can shake a stick at!" We spotted five different individual blue whales, the largest male being an estimated 25 metres in length. It is thought they pass by the Azores at about this time of year as they head North as part of their annual migration. They may be the largest mammals on earth, but their dorsal fins are small, so the photographers were focusing on the differing mottling effect around their fins for ID purposes.

Yesterday was calm so the look-outs sent us out to a single male sperm whale, feeding fairly close to shore and diving for up to an hour at a time. After spending time with him the hydrophone led us further out to different groups of female sperm whales with calves. One of those seen out yesterday has been noted in the same location on three other occasions during the last ten years. With the water now up to 19 degrees, attempts were made at skin collection, though the divers on this occasion came back without any positive samples.

Today we have been out with sei whales and are now back on shore sheltering from the Easterly winds which, predicted for the last few days, have finally arrived.

By now Pere will have passed via Barcelona to be up in northern Iceland working on his next project. Best of luck Pere! Welcome back to Nathalie who, here for slot 1, is here with us to experience the Azorian marine life for a second time....

26 May

Monday was certainly our most impressive day out on this slot when we encountered eight different cetacean species during the course of the day as well as an excess of passing turtles and sun-fish – the surface water temperature got up to 20.9 degrees. Along with the bottlenose encounters and striped dolphin displays, we came across a mixed group of common and striped dolphins jumping together. It was also our first chance to see short-finned pilot whales travelling in a large group together with the bottlenose. We also came across a lone Risso's dolphin and a juvenile minke - even a pygmy sperm whale popped her head up briefly.

Although Sunday was a quieter day focused more on dolphin encounters, we had a nice surprise late afternoon when we came across a mother-calf pair of fin whales. After the mother had dived the calf approached the boat and circled us several times before being joined by the mother who also came close up to the boat. After a few circles they displayed their flukes and swam off.

Today we have been out in a deep bay along the coast of Pico where a large group of sperm whales have been making their way along the deep water contours. There were also reports of a humpback feeding just out from Horta, though he was not to be seen by the time we returned this afternoon.

May 30

Last reports from your expedition leader at Horta International Airport where I am enjoying my last galão after a successful slot 4! The flag is down from the Physeter and fog permitting I'll be back at Biosphere Expeditions HQ by tomorrow morning. We've just said goodbye to Chris who treated us to a chorus of "Whale meet again, don't know here, don't know when...." Lisa was last spotted heading in the direction of Modello to do some shopping for a group of visitors arriving any moment.

We have been impressed by the amount of marine activity around the islands during this Spring period: Each slot encountered between 8 and 11 cetacean species and experienced quiet days as well as very active and exciting ones, whether in the form of the blue whales in slot 4, the striped dolphins of slot 3, the humpback of slot 2 and the scientist-overboard scenario of slot 1! From our sperm whale encounters we have five matches to previous years, and no doubt more will turn up. As the sperm whale extraction work is now very close to completion, it looks like next year's team will set to work on bottlenose dolphin photographs.

Thank you to everybody who has contributed to the project over the past two months, whether by spotting, data entry, taking pictures, extracting flukes, cooking, shopping or all the other ways which have helped to make it a success.