



## Whale & dolphin research around the Azores

Pere Morera from Catalonia shares his experience of being a research assistant on the Azores project



When I first got in touch with the local scientist team, I never expected the amazing experience that was to follow. I had worked before as a research biologist running projects with international teams in other countries such as Norway, USA, Sweden or Spain, but I had yet to visit the beautiful Azores archipelago and its amazing marine biological diversity. It was also the first time I heard about an organisation that combines valuable scientific research with the participation in the project of non-biologists. There was something new for me out there, a new concept I was willing to experience.



An expedition team.

The aim of the expedition was to collect data on whales, dolphins and loggerhead turtles in order to map their distribution and abundance in the waters around the Azores archipelago, in an effort to elucidate the animals' life histories and migration patterns across the oceans and assist with the formulation of effective conservation strategies. My main responsibilities as a research assistant were to assist the resident biologist Lisa Steiner with all the scientific tasks going on onboard our research vessel, especially those involving the expedition members (data collection procedures and guidelines, analysis and interpretation), and also in talks and presentations at our base in Horta.



Humpback whale breaching.

To be honest, at the beginning I was sceptical about the value and reliability of the data collected in such a project by volunteers with very different educational backgrounds, knowledge and experience, but I soon realised I was completely wrong. Their open minds, positive attitude, and common passion towards the job that was being conducted there were more important than their lack of experience in the topic. Having worked with biology students in the field as their instructor, I can openly say that most of the expedition members I had the pleasure to work with in the Azores had a better predisposition for the field work than some college students. Maybe it was their knowledge of the fact that they were not experts, maybe their concern about making mistakes while conducting their tasks for the expedition, which kept them intensively focused on their job, often more focused than experienced scientists!

Working hand in hand with our scientists Chris and Lisa, their combined expertise, knowledge and enthusiasm about the marine wildlife, the waters and islands that constitute the Azores archipelago and its history, made the whole experience wonderful. I learned a lot about the Azores wildlife by being together with them every day out on the ocean. As a marine mammal biologist with field work experience in northern countries, I had only come with basic knowledge on cetacean biology. Together with them and the rest of the expedition members, I discovered for myself that the Azores archipelago is a unique place in the middle of the Atlantic ocean, perfect for a marine biology study and perfect for an expedition such as the one organised by Biosphere.

The wildlife of the Azores is spectacular, most notably the friendly common and bottlenose dolphins that had no fear of our presence, but also the rest of the whales, seabirds, and marine fauna, that were hospitable enough to allow us entry into their domains.



Striped dolphin leaping.

I consider my first experience with Biosphere Expeditions as something unique and very special. It is fair to say that Biosphere opened my eyes to a new way of understanding and conducting science that I like and admire as well. Everybody gets some sort of benefit by participating in such a project. The expedition members can experience how it feels to be a scientist in the field, increasing their knowledge of marine mammals and clearly understanding the ways in which scientific studies are undertaken. The scientist team gets funds to be able to develop its studies that could not take part without the expedition members' donation to the project, extra hands for the field work, and also often a fresh and new point of view of the study given by the volunteers.

After my time in the Azores with Biosphere Expeditions, after seeing how they give science and research a new meaning, and after experiencing what the organisation offers both to scientists and "ordinary" people, I had something new to work for and to keep as a model for my future professional plans. The expedition was a complete success to me; every aspect of it exceeded my expectations. I have to say that one of the most pleasant experiences was the quality and character of Biosphere's staff and their work, and I would consider their presence a plus and a good reason to join the expedition. I agree with all the expedition members who say that the success of these projects is ultimately down to the group, the human part, and all the people involved in the first Biosphere's expedition to the Azores made it an unforgettable experience for me.

> [More info on the Azores project](#)



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