

whale of a time

RUTH ROSSELSON goes whale spotting in the Azores

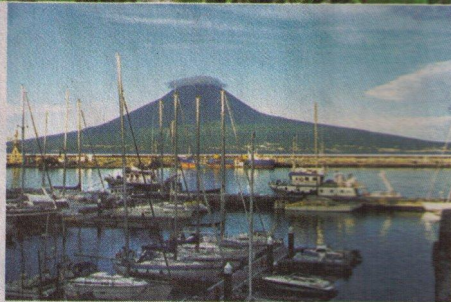


Scouring the horizon, we wait for the telltale signs of the whale – a blow hole, a fin or a tail. It's not the best day for whale watching as the swell is quite considerable. This not only makes it difficult to distinguish whale movements from the sea's white horses, but also makes my stomach flip and turn in an internal acrobatic display. Suddenly, a cry from the skipper and everyone rushes to the front of the boat. My nausea is momentarily forgotten as I look ahead, focusing on the spouts of the whale ahead of us, the water spiralling up into the air. The closer we get, the more we can make out. Not just her spout but her head and her fin as she swims just ahead of the small boat. The excitement on board is palpable. Just before she dives, the skipper shouts and most of the passengers turn into amateur wildlife photographers ready to take the iconic photo as her tail flips the surface.

It was not the only encounter. We saw two more, one with a baby. Soon afterwards, a sound made everyone turn their heads to the right, just in time to see the massive splash in the distance as another whale belly-flopped back into the water after a breach. Just as soon as we turned back, a flash of black caught our eye as another huge beast launched itself right out of the water. The boat headed off in their direction, but by the time we got there they'd both gone, deep under water.

The Azores is one of the best spots for whale watching in Europe. I saw sperm whales at the end of the season. But come at the right time of year (summer months) and you could also see humpbacks, fin whales and even a blue whale. There are also huge schools of many different species of dolphin around.

If it's parties, beers and nightclubs you want, then you're on the wrong set of islands. The package holiday hoards haven't yet discovered



the Azores. Even *Rough Guide* and *Lonely Planet* haven't quite got here yet. If you want to come off the beaten track, chill out and recharge your batteries, then these are the islands for you. Found in the middle of the Atlantic, halfway between Europe and the Americas, their remote location, as well as the lack of local pollution, is the reason that the air is noticeably cleaner than anywhere else on mainland Europe. I spent a week on Faial and Pico, two islands within close proximity to each other.

Although seeing the whales was great, the islands have other highlights. Faial's caldeira is an impressive 400 metres deep and 2km wide. Although you can get taxi tours up here, probably the most fun is to take a bicycle tour where you get driven up to the crater and can freewheel back down. Faial's other volcanic attraction is the site of the 1957 eruption. It's great to walk along the desolate volcanic ash, a stark contrast to the lush greenery of the rest of the island.

Pico's volcanic attractions are more dramatic. The village of Lajido, one of the island's first, was built from the black basalt rocks of the volcano. On the one side, there are the old tumbling walls of 19th-century vineyards. On the other, a wild angry sea, battering rocks made from ancient lava flows. The volcano that spawned this bleak scenery is the island's main draw and climbing it when the day is clear is one of the highlights of the Azores. Taking a guide is recommended as

the path isn't always easy to stick to, especially if the cloud comes down as it did for me.

Mass tourism hasn't yet hit the Azores. The people are friendly, the pace of life is laid back and the focus is on enjoying the outdoors, on land or sea. Faial is home to one of the world's most famous pubs (apparently) and Peter Café Sport is a fine spot for an evening of drinking and exchanging tall tales. As I headed off to bed one night after a few glasses of local wine, I looked up at the sky. As the stars shined back at me, for once not obscured by buildings or light pollution, I was reminded that I was half an ocean away from the hectic, polluted life of London.

crucial info



Ruth Rosselson visited the Azores with Archipelago Azores who offer organised and tailor-made trips to the Azores; www.azoreschoice.com. Call 017687 75672 for more information. Allow around £8 to £20 per person per day. **FLIGHTS:** Flights with

TAP Air Portugal and SATA go via Lisbon. **RECOMMENDED READING:** *The Bradt Travel Guide to the Azores* £12.95 www.bradt-travelguides.com or the *Sunflower Landscapes of the Azores* £9.99 www.sunflowerbooks.co.uk.