



Out on the Atlantic, collecting data on sperm whales.

High Time to Sea

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"The *vigia* radioed this morning to say he saw some fins. We'll head there first, make a little tour, and see if we can find ourselves some whales." I look up from the nautical map and smile at Chris Beer, the red-bearded cheery captain of the *Physeter*. The vessel is a whale-watching and scientific two-hull catamaran, and for part of the year, Chris and his wife Lisa lead scientific expeditions into the Azorean waters.

The Azores, more than 1500 km off Portugal's coast, are basalt tips rising thousands of meters off the mid-Atlantic ridge. This archipelago includes nine major islands and eight small islets. Smack in the middle of a Northbound Gulf Stream, the waters churn around the islands with incredible biodiversity.

Turtles, sharks, countless fish and sea mammals call the Azores home. Nearly 30 percent of the world's known whales and dolphins, known as the cetaceans, have been spotted in the Azores, including blue whales, fin whales, false killer whales and a host of dolphins.

Chris and Lisa met nearly 20 years ago while gathering sperm whale data, and with the pace and poise that comes from running a hands-on eco-tourist service to volunteers from around the world, their lives are a hustle to survey the waters and provide unforgettable experiences.

Lisa explains that the *vigia* are the lookouts who scan the waves and help find whales. "They're amazing," yells Lisa, as the wind and rumble of the

powerful engines pick up as we leave the harbor, “they can spot whale blows from nearly 40 km away and also tell us what species they are!”

As the *Physeter* pitches in the waves, Chris yells down, “Risso’s!”

All eyes jump to where he’s pointing, 30 meters off the port side. Although we’re barely out of the harbor, five of the gray-and-white marked dolphins cleave the waves up ahead. Since Risso’s are less extroverted or abundant than the bottlenose or common dolphins, they haven’t quite made it into the dolphin spotlight.

With Chris expertly maneuvering the vessel so we’re never too close, Lisa and some of the volunteers make photo after photo of the quietly socializing animals. The Risso’s gray to white color also flashes turquoise when it hauntingly streams below the water surface. It’s an incredible sight that isn’t easily forgotten.

“Wait until you see a blue whale,” says Lisa, snapping photos all the while. “When they shallow dive, they can skim at 15 knots or more below the surface and their skin flashes light-blue past the boat.”

The blue whale, the largest animal that has ever lived—surpassing even the dinosaurs in terms of size and appetite—has haunted sailors, whalers and now eco-tourists like no animal before it. That the whale is longer than the 30-meter catamaran is hard to imagine. After half an hour, Lisa gives Chris a signal and he points us back towards where the whales were seen by the *vigia*.

The boat holds up to 15 people, and with this many hands on deck, the researchers have maximized the carrying capacity for both quality cetacean spotting and data collection.

Thanks to Biosphere Expeditions, the pair welcome a stream of eco-volunteers for hands-on research. Everyone pitches in for recording position, sea state, water temperature and other variables, as well as monitor the hydrophone and help with photo-ID.

The couple also takes visitors out on whale-watching tours. Given the biodiversity and animal traffic, whale and dolphin lovers find the Azores a treat like nowhere else on the planet.

“BLOW!” yells out one of the volunteers from her starboard lookout. “Fin whales and a sei at 2 o’clock!”

Sure enough, we spot three clustered blows about half a kilometer away. Chris immediately aims the boat in their direction and we beeline

through the Atlantic whitecaps. Chris yells down that we're also entering a massive bloom of krill, thumb-sized shrimp-like crustaceans the whales love to eat.

The waters are teeming with krill and the thousands of mackerel that dart through the swarms in a feeding-frenzy of silver and green.

Suddenly, everyone feels the jolt of excitement as the maw of a whale breaks through the surface of the water, swallowing hundreds of gallons of seawater and krill. Again and again, for over an hour, the whales surge and lunge from below, gulping the most incredible mass of water and food.

As the jaws gulp, they distend enormous folds of skin. The whales then push out the water with their tongues to filter out the tons of krill and small fish. What used to be a massive swarm is reduced to nothing. The waves soon settle to their deep-blue cadence across the ocean.

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"Now we take today's fluke-photographs," says Lisa from the small office at the lodge, "and we see if the sperm whales were a re-sighting or new to the area."

The day was productive. After the Risso's encounter and the fin and sei whale feeding, we discovered a pod of sperm whales heading through the Faial-Pico channel. An hour later, we found a group of 150 bottlenose dolphins.

The Azores are amazing. Thirty percent of the world's known whales and dolphins live in or travel through the Azores.

This was the first time that Lisa's seen sperm whales in the channel, so she's curious to see if these were already in the database. Each of these whales has a different-looking fluke, since the tissue gets worn away or damaged in unique shapes, leaving each whale with a unique profile that makes them ideal for photo-identification.

Spermies, as they are affectionately known, will typically stay at the surface, inhaling and exhaling at regular 12-second intervals. After 10 minutes, they'll point their heads down to the depths for as much as an hour. In making

their dive, the fluke clears the surface and gives the researchers a quarter-second to photograph the tail.

Sitting at the desk and reviewing the digital photos, all the day's data and photo-IDs have been logged. Chris announces that everyone's invited to Peter's Pub for a celebratory round. This was a great day and he wants to celebrate with his new friends.

Walking down the cobblestone streets, we're ushered forward by a gentle breeze. Salt spray in the air, the cliffs frame the open ocean that leads to the horizon.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This article, story or other document was written by Ran Elfassy as part of the Shooting it RAW podcast.

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