

Wildlife and Adventure on Sao Miguel

Whale-watching, birding and walking on Sao Miguel Island



Explore the largest island of the Azores, Sao Miguel, on this one-week adventure itinerary with an emphasis on wildlife-watching and walking. Sao Miguel is a haven for marine life, bird watching and year-round outdoor activities, though travel is perhaps best between March and May, when the weather is mild and both the whale-watching and birding are at their peak! On this private tour you will be accompanied by an experienced walking and wildlife guide throughout, along with additional support from specialist guides for the birding and whale-watching excursions.

Day 1 – Arrive Sao Miguel Island

Arrive Ponta Delgada airport on Sao Miguel Island, the largest island in the Azores archipelago, where you will be met and transferred to your apartment at the Hotel Gaiivota, which offers comfortable en-suite apartments.

Formally named after its guardian, the Archangel Michael, Sao Miguel is also known as Ilha Verde, or “the Green Island”, owing to its emerald green tea plantations. The largest of the Azores islands, Sao Miguel is also the most cosmopolitan, and offers the widest range of hotels and restaurants, as well as lots of outdoor activities from canyoning, diving, fishing, kayaking, birding and hiking. In recent years, the Azores have become especially popular for whale watching, with most tours taking place from Sao Miguel. (This has prompted the local government to put in place guidelines to protect the whales; please ensure you follow the guidance from your wildlife guide at all times.)

Day 2 – Full-day Jeep Tour to Sete Cidades caldera & the Lakes (B, L)

After breakfast, meet with your guide and depart Ponta Delgada for Sete Cidades volcano and caldera.



Sete Cidades is the most photographed site in the Azores, and with good reason – the views here are simply stunning! The twin crater lakes (one blue, one green) are located within a 3-mile wide caldera, surrounded by richly fertile hills and valleys, carpeted with wildflowers and pockets of cedar forest. Perhaps nowhere else on Sao Miguel is the biodiversity of the Azores more visible than at Sete Cidades. At first glance, the emerald green waters of the caldera and richly fertile volcanic landscapes that surround it might make one think of the tropics, but the vegetation – a mix of wildflower meadows, tall cedar forests, and arable pasture – are a reminder that you are still in the temperate climates of Europe!



The rich birdlife of the Azores is also on full display at Sete Cidades, with native birds such as the Western Azores goldcrest often sighted here, as well as many migratory birds.

You'll have the chance to explore the landscape around Sete Cidades today, taking in the views from various vantage points. On a clear day, the views extend as far as the ocean. The jeep tour ends at Sete Cidades village, on the shores of Lakes Azul and Verde, where you stop for lunch.

After lunch, continue your exploration of the region with kayaking on the lake and by cycling on the surrounding trails. The kayaking and cycling will be at a leisurely pace, and accompanied by your guide.

Late afternoon, you will be returned to your hotel in Ponta Delgada, with the rest of the evening at leisure.

Day 3 – Morning whale & dolphin watching; afternoon visit Lagoa do Fogo (B, L)

The seas around the Azores are among the cleanest on the planet and home to spectacular marine life, including several varieties of whale. Indeed, their numbers are so plentiful that the Azores has become one of the most renowned destinations in the world for whale watching, as you'll

discover this morning when you embark on a 3-hour whale and dolphin watching expedition from Ponta Delgada.

Your marine expedition starts in Ponta Delgada Harbour, where you'll have a briefing with the marine biologists who will accompany you on the tour, before setting sail. You'll be sailing on a catamaran vessel, which you'll share with other guests (up to 70 per tour).



You can hope to see a variety of whales during your tour, with the following species all present in the waters of the Azores (note that many types of whale only appear seasonally in the Azores):

Blue whales - these magnificent whales are the largest creature in the world. Their dimensions are staggering. They can reach 100 feet in length and weigh upwards of 200 tons. Their tongues alone weigh as much as a fully grown elephant (the world's largest terrestrial), and their hearts are the size of a car. The blue whale gets its name because beneath the water their colouring is blue, whilst on the surface it is blue-grey.

Like all large whales, blue whales belong to the baleen family (they have a filter feeding system either side of the mouth). They feed by gulping down huge amounts of water and then forcing it out, leaving behind thousands of krill (small crustaceans) which are then swallowed, their stomachs holding up to a ton of krill. They are slow, graceful swimmers, but can move at over 20 miles an hour if necessary. Blue whales are also the loudest animals on the planet, and it is believed that in the right conditions they can hear one another up to 1000 miles away. They are usually solitary mammals but occasionally can be seen in pods of 2-4. Although protected since 1966, these whales have made a very slow recovery and remain on the endangered species list.

Blue whales appear in the waters of the Azores for a brief window each year between April and June.

Fin whale – also known as “razorbacks”, the Fin whale is so named because of the conspicuous hooked dorsal fin near their tail. They are the second largest whale on the planet (only the blue whale is larger) and can grow to 85 feet in length. Though usually solitary, pods of 3 or 4 may be seen. Their powerful sounds carry over vast distances, allowing them to communicate easily with one another.

Like their larger sibling, the blue whale, Fin whales occur in the waters of the Azores between April and June.



Sei Whales – Though smaller than the Blue and Fin whale, Sei whales are also members of the baleen group. The female is slightly larger than the male and can grow to just over 60 feet long and weigh up to 28 tons. These whales tend to form small pods of 2 to 6 – unless there is plenty of food when they will form large pods of up to 50! Sei Whales are on the list of endangered species. They occur in the waters of the Azores between April and June.

Sperm Whales – these renowned “masters of the deep” are found all year round throughout the Azores. Weighing up to 50 tons, they are the largest of the toothed whales. Their heads are enormous, as they possess the largest brain of any mammal on the planet. Their society is matriarchal, typically consisting of pods of 15-20 whales. Males are solitary and tend to move from pod to pod. Sperm whales feed constantly and are

attracted to the plankton rich waters of the Azores. Their favourite meal is giant squid, in search of which they can dive to incredible depths of 3,000 feet.

Minke Whale – the diminutive Minke whale belongs to the baleen group. There are two species of Minke – the Common Minke Whale (found in the Azores) and the Antarctic Minke whale. They are mostly solitary but can sometimes be seen in pods of 4 to 6 during the summer mating season. Because of their size, they were rarely hunted by whalers and are now one of the most common species and, thankfully, not on the endangered list. Minke whales are sighted in the Azores only rarely.



Pilot whales – there are two species of Pilot whale - short-finned Pilot whales (which are the species found in the Azores), and Long-finned Pilot whales (this species prefers colder waters). They are in fact large dolphins, second only in size to orcas. Their preferred food is squid but they will also eat fish. They are gregarious and sociable creatures, and live in groups that range in size from twenty to many hundreds. They form strong bonds and researchers think this is possibly one of the reasons they beach (however there are many other theories as to the reason for beaching). Pilot whales typically appear in the waters of the Azores during the summer months – from May through to September –remaining in the waters longer than the baleen species.

In addition to whale watching, these excursions will reveal a variety of dolphin species frolicking in the warm waters. Bottlenose dolphins, Risso's dolphins, common dolphins, and occasionally Fraser's dolphin may be seen in the Azores.

After your exhilarating whale watching expedition, return to Ponta Delgada for lunch in a local restaurant before heading off with your driver/guide to visit some of the many beautiful spots on the island. First is a visit to the nature reserve of Lagoa do Fogo (Lake of Fire). This crater lake and its surrounding region are a protected area and very beautiful. It is also among the highest spots on the island, and on a clear day offers panoramic views of the coast. The caldera has steep sides but there is a well-marked path to the bottom, where several endemic species thrive. Between March and September, this is a great spot for birdwatching, attracting colonies of yellow-legged gulls, Azores buzzards, kites, seagulls, blackbirds and common tern.



Continue your tour with a visit to the hot springs of Caldeira Velha, hidden amidst the laurel forested slopes of Fogo Volcano. Enjoy a soak in the geothermal waters, which are naturally heated and minerally rich, before returning to Ponta Delgada via Riberea Grande (the second largest town on the island).



Day 4 - Full-day bird watching (B, L)

Enjoy a full day (approx. 10 hours) of birdwatching on Sao Miguel. During this private tour, you'll be accompanied by a specialist birding guide in addition to your main tour guide. Binoculars are provided for your use today.

Birdwatching is good all year round in the Azores, but the months of March to May are the perfect time to spot migratory species alongside endemics such as the priolo, or Azorean bullfinch, one of the rarest birds in Europe.

Your birdwatching tour will not follow a fixed itinerary, but rather will be adjusted by your guide depending on the time of year and your own interests. Areas you might cover include Nordeste on the north-east coast of Sao Miguel, where you will encounter spectacular coastal scenery as well as good opportunities for sighting many different seabirds; Furnas Lake, one of three caldera lakes

on the island, where ducks, waders, egrets and herons can be seen; and Caloura, a tiny fishing harbour on the southern coast of Sao Miguel that is sheltered by high cliffs where common and roseate terns nest.



Lunch at a local restaurant is included during today's tour. After the bird-watching, you will be returned to your hotel in Ponta Delgada, with the rest of the evening at leisure.

Day 5 – Full-day guided hiking tour of Serra Devassa and Nascentes do Canario (B, L)

Today will see you explore Sao Miguel on foot in the company of your guide, as you follow a 10km circular route beginning and ending at the “Coal Wall”, or Muro do Carvão. Following an established walking trail, you'll trek through the Serra Devassa to reach Eguas Peak, one of the highest points on the island at 870m. Along the way, you'll pass a number of lakes, as well as the crumbling and overgrown remains of the Carvao (coal) Aqueducts, which present a wonderfully atmospheric sight, especially on a cool and misty day!

After lunch and time to rest at Eguas Peak, your walk will continue to the famous viewpoint of Grotta do Inferno, where you will be greeted with far reaching views over the lakes and ocean. The trail then leads to the lakes of Empadadas, before arriving back at your starting point. From here, you will be returned to your hotel in Ponta Delgada, with the evening at leisure.



Today's walk is a moderate hike of 10km, which will be conducted at a leisurely pace. Good walking boots are essential! Longer or shorter walks can also be arranged. Walking poles are provided.

Day 6 – Whale-watching expedition (B, L)

Today will be spent whale watching, going out in the morning and returning to the harbour for a light picnic lunch, before heading out again in the afternoon.



The Azoreans hunted whales until the 1980s, becoming experts at spotting the creatures. To assist in spotting the whales, they used towers (vigias) placed high on the cliffs. Each vigia had an opening where the spotter would sit with binoculars and watch for whales; once spotted, they would send a smoke signal to the whalers. Today the vigias and spotters serve a very different role. Their skill in spotting whales enables visitors to observe and enjoy these beautiful creatures, with radio communications having taken the place of smoke signals.

You'll be returned to Ponta Delgada harbour at the end of your whale-watching tour, with the rest of the evening at leisure.

Day 7 – Cycling on Sao Miguel (B)

Today we have included cycle hire so you may explore the island independently, perhaps revisiting some of the many beauty spots you visited earlier in your itinerary or venturing further afield.

Day 8 – International Departure (B)

Breakfast and pick up for transfer to the airport for your international flight out.

Price Guide:

*The cost of this itinerary is **£1,750 per person**, based on two travellers and travel in high season (May-Oct; Christmas/New Years).*

For low/shoulder season costs, and for larger group sizes, please [contact us](#).

Includes:

- Accommodation in one-bedroomed apartment for 2 persons sharing
- Apartment is on B&B basis, but lunch is included on days 3-6 inclusive
- All activities as detailed in itinerary (on a private basis with the exception of the whale-watching, which is a shared activity)
- Services of qualified guides during excursions
- Airport transfers

Excludes:

- International flights – please ask us for a quote
- Lunch and dinner to own account except where stated otherwise in itinerary
- Travel expenses
- Travel insurance
- Personal expenses and tips