

The one that got away

The Azores were full of natural wonders for **Danielle Demetriou** – minus the whales...

It vanished as quickly as it came: a sudden splash and a smooth surface caught the corner of my eye before disappearing under the water. Murmurs of satisfaction were exchanged as we congratulated ourselves on the combination of luck and quick-wittedness that led to us spotting the creature.

OK, so I confess, it was just a humble green frog in a rain-filled trough on a mountain path. But having spent several days trying to fulfil our ambitions of spotting a whale – and having failed even to step on to a boat – we had dramatically lowered our nature-spotting standards.

For many people heading to the Azores, a cluster of nine volcanic islands flung amid the rolling waves of the Atlantic, whale watching – as opposed to frog watching – is the raison d'être of their visit. As I flew across the Atlantic towards the archipelago, my mind had been awash with briny fantasies of oilskins, orange dinghies and perfectly formed whale tails disappearing into the waves.

The possibility that I might not spot a whale during my visit at the height of the whale-watching season, which runs from May to August, had not really entered my mind. After all, weren't these the largest creatures on earth? Unfortunately, the weather gods had other ideas.

The archipelago of the Azores is an autonomous region of Portugal which lies some 1,500km from Lisbon and 3,900km from the coast of North America. It also has notoriously changeable weather. This is both part of its charm – as reflected in its fertile, flower-filled landscape – and, I was soon to discover, a source of frustration amongst budding whale watchers.

Luckily, there are ample activities on the islands to ensure that visitors can enjoy an eventful break without ever glimpsing a cetacean. Arriving in the largest island São Miguel, it soon becomes clear why the island is known as Ilha Verde (Green Isle). Sloping green hills that would not look out of place in Wales or Ireland surround the neat black-and-white buildings that line the cobbled streets of Ponta Delgada, the capital of the Azores.

Tony, our guide, quickly breaks the news that poor weather has delayed our proposed whale-watching trip for at least a day. Ten faces drop, before slowly perking up at descriptions of the interior of the island: the promise of misty mountain peaks, turquoise lagoons and steaming thermal springs may well be enough to compensate – for one day at least.

White cloud cover hangs thickly above our heads as we set off. Peering through the fog, it soon becomes clear that the island is a riot of exotic flora. More than 500 of the archipelago's 850-odd plant species have been introduced to the islands as opposed to being endemic: the visual spectacle is like a long-running floral shopping spree. The hilly roadsides are lined with flowering ginger lilies and hydrangeas, agapanthus and orchids. Spiky New Zealand Christmas trees

with ruby-red flowers stand tall alongside poker-straight Japanese cedar.

Our first stop is a surreal tour of a tea plantation factory on a windswept cliff top: evidence of the Azores' status as Europe's only tea-growing region. With Victorian machinery clanking in the background, we nod sagely over paper cups of orange pekoe, before leaving for Furnas, a whitewashed spa town wedged into a volcano crater in the south-east. The eggy stench of sulphur hangs in the air and a string of steaming fumaroles bubble noisily. After tiptoeing around the scalding geysers (scarves firmly covering noses), we indulge in our second drink-tasting session of the day, this time swapping tea for mineral water.

Furnas lays claim to 22 different types of mineral waters, all expelled from the volcanic depths of the island and accessible via ornate taps lining the cobbled streets. I slurp a variety of these waters via large green leaves fashioned into cones. One variety is nauseatingly heavy with copper and results in an involuntary expulsion, but the best is thirst-quenchingly perfect: soft, clean and faintly carbonated.

Towering verges surround the still waters of Lake Furnas, from where a short lakeside stroll through a dense bamboo forest leads to another unusual highlight: the local outdoor kitchens. Holes are dug one metre deep in the ground; in these holes casserole dishes of raw food are buried and then collected around seven hours later. Heated slowly by the geothermal properties of the soil, the end result is a *cozido* (stew) – and after watching our lunch being pulled from the soil, we follow it being driven a small white van to Tony's restaurant nearby. Here, we tuck into a deliciously rich and smoky dish of chicken, sausages, black pudding, cabbage, carrots and potatoes which is the perfect companion with Azorean red wine and warm local bread.

Our whale-watching substitute for the afternoon is a visit to Terra Nostra, a regal 18th-century estate built as the summer retreat of the wealthy US merchant Thomas Hickling. Swan-filled streams and ornate grottoes weave among the lush groves of camellias, azaleas and rhododendrons creating the ambience of a magical secret garden. And at the heart of the gardens is a naturally heated thermal pool. I am not immediately tempted to swim in the brown and murky water. Fortunately, the warmth is as inviting as a hot bath – and soon I am swimming sedately around the pool, before stopping for a scalding-hot shower at one of the taps.

The next morning, my optimism at seeing a whale wanes the moment the hotel curtains open to reveal even cloudier skies. But keen to explore despite the weather, I jump at the chance to hike around Sete Cidades, a mythical spot on the island. It is here, local



My mind had been awash with fantasies of whale tails disappearing into the waves

legend dictates, that the tears shed by the thwarted love of a blue-eyed princess and a green-eyed shepherd led to the creation of two perfect crater lakes – one green and one blue.

As gale-force winds and pricking rain lash the windows of our minibus en route to our hike, I briefly question the sanity of venturing out in such inclement conditions. But the prospect of a bracing walk, albeit in the rain, seems infinitely more inviting than staying in the bus. So, dressed in industrial-strength waterproofs and armed with an umbrella that proves to be more decorative than practical, I set off with the others up a gently sloping country path.

Jumping over puddles and surveying our limited vista of rows of green hedgerows on either side of the path, we listen to Tony describing the beauty of the lakes in fine weather. It transpires that we are walking along a country path spanning the caldera walls that peak at 500m. Slipping into a peaceful rhythm of walking and talking, we head past lush green farmland, through pine forests and across grassy verges.

And all the time, the rain continues to fall. As we reach the highest point of the caldera wall, the swirling mist continues stubbornly to block our views, so we find ways to entertain ourselves as we trudge along the country paths (the sight of that leaping frog being one such distraction). As with the best of walks, one of the highlights is our arrival at a tiny local café. We leave a trail of puddles as we venture across the threshold, then gratefully warm up over strong coffee and Portuguese custard cakes.

My whale-sighting ambitions had not yet been extinguished completely. The following morning, I fly to my final destination: Horta on the island of Faial. It was

in Horta's bustling port that a flourishing whaling trade was in place until the 1984 ban led to a surge in whale-watching tourism. And so it is with some optimism that I ignore the drizzling skies to present myself to a gentleman called Norberto and ask whether he will, finally, take me to see a whale.

With his long, sun-bleached hair, red bandana, weathered face, piercing green eyes and dog Simba, Norberto would not look out of place in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. But after a long pensive stare and a stroke of the chin, Norberto shakes his head: "No, no, Not today. Bad weather."

MY LIFE IN ACTIVE TRAVEL

IAIN PERCY, OLYMPIC SAILOR

'You get a huge rush of adrenalin'

First holiday memory?
Learning to fish on a trip to the Scottish Highlands. I grew up on the south coast, so Scotland felt a long way away!

Best holiday?
Snowboarding, anywhere with good snow. I love it.

Favourite place to sail in the UK?
Hayling Island, Hampshire. I sailed at Hayling Island a lot as I grew up, it's a great dinghy racing venue which regularly hosts international events. There's open water between France and Hayling so when there's a strong southerly wind blowing, you get great breeze and big waves – brilliant sailing conditions.

Favourite sailing abroad?
I'm lucky in that through my Olympic and America's Cup sailing I've had the opportunity to sail in hundreds of venues all over the world. My favourite has to be Cape Town. Amazing sailing and a fantastic backdrop, with Table Mountain in the distance.

What have you learnt from your travels?
That England is the best place to live in the world. I have recently spent time living in Italy and have a flat in Valencia, Spain, but for me, England will always be the best place to live.

Ideal travelling companion?
With a big crowd of mates.

Why be an adrenalin junkie when you could be a beach bum?
I guess some people might describe me as a beach bum anyway, but for sure I am an adrenalin junkie. When you're out on the water and the heat is on, you get a huge rush of adrenalin, whether it's racing for a gold medal at the Olympic Games, glory at the America's Cup, or sailing in crazy conditions.

Better to travel or to arrive?
To arrive.

Best place to switch off?
Serengeti, Africa. Amazing.

Greatest travel luxury?
Noise cancelling headphones, I take them everywhere I go. If you ever need to drift off into your own world, and get away from what surrounds you, they are perfect.



Ian Percy (top) and Andrew Simpson in training on *Edition*

Most remote place that you've been?
I have been to two very remote places – the top of Mount Kilimanjaro and the middle of the ocean.

Holiday reading?
Novels.

Where has seduced you?
Thailand. I can't wait to go back and visit again, I'd love to stay a while and delve deeper, beneath the obvious touristy stuff and beaches.

Ski, surf or bungy?
Ski. Snowboarding is one of my favourite sports, and snowboarding holidays are one of my getaways from the world of sailing.

Best meal abroad?
Seafood on Koh Samui, Thailand.

First thing you do when you arrive somewhere new?
Have a beer! Once you wind down from your journey, you

can get settled and figure out what to do next.

Where next?
I'm currently in Miami, having competed in the Bacardi Cup, one of the big regattas for the Star class ahead of the Olympic Games. From here I go home to London for a quick break, and then head back to Miami. We have the Star World Championships coming up here at the beginning of April, so Andrew (Simpson, Iain's crew in the Star) and I have spent half the winter out here, training. After that, we have a couple of events in Europe, before Skandia Team GB travel out to Qingdao, China, where the Olympic sailing regatta will be hosted at the beginning of August.

Interview by
Anne Giacomantonio

Olympic gold medallist Iain Percy MBE will be competing at the Olympic Games this summer. Follow his progress at: www.skandiateamgb.com



It probably appears as though I am about to burst into tears. Norberto certainly begins to pace anxiously around before theatrically raising his hands: "OK. I need to go to the next island and you can come with me. Maybe no whales, but you will at least go on a boat."

And so, dressed in comically large yellow trousers and jacket, with Simba by my side, I happily climb into Norberto's motor boat and we bounce over the choppy waters en route to nearby Pico island. Tearing over the steep waves, I am too busy trying to avoid flying over the edge of the boat to even think about whales. But it's an exhilarating feeling finally to be at sea. Norberto cries out when he sees a flying fish skimming above the waves. Then, as we approach a flock of Cory's shearwater birds, he slows the boat down, the sun breaks jaggedly through the grey skies, and we sit surrounded by thousands of sea birds. For 15 minutes, we bob in the water in silence. Even Simba the dog seems transfixed. Suddenly I don't feel deprived at the non-appearance of whales: with or without them, the Azores are still full of surprises.

The writer travelled with Explore (0844 499 0901; www.explore.co.uk), on a five-day Azores Whale Searchtrip. Departures between May and August 2008 from £725 per person, including TAP Portugal flights from London Heathrow via Lisbon, transportation, four nights B&B accommodation in hotels and the services of a tour leader

Tails of the unexpected:
(from top) the flora-filled volcanic landscape; searching for cetaceans, and an elusive whale
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