

BIRDING ON A CRUISE TO THE AZORES, MADEIRA, LISBON & CORK

JUNE & JULY 2022

[NB – You can see a larger view of the photos by using the Acrobat Zoom function]

We had never visited the Azores or southern Ireland. So this new 14 day cruise on Fred Olsen's Bolearis out of Liverpool on 27th June was too tempting to miss.

The self-governing Portuguese Azores archipelago of 9 islands is out in the mid North Atlantic on a level with Lisbon. The smaller Madeiran archipelago is further south, on a level with Gibraltar and much nearer the rest of Europe. Though both archipelagos have a very limited population of European land bird species (only 36 breeding species on the Azores), there are reports of strong breeding colonies of the large Cory's Shearwater, smaller colonies of the much smaller Barolo Shearwater, various species of Petrel, Common tern colonies and a few elusive Roseate terns. Additionally there was a chance of seeing unusual American birds being blown across the ocean to the Azores by the prevailing winds.

Additionally for wild life enthusiasts like us, the Azores islands in particular are a hotspot for whale-watching. Now that the whaling industry, once a mainstay of the economy, has ceased there, this is reportedly an important industry. Of the 59 species of cetacean in the world (whales, dolphins and porpoises), the most spectacular resident around the Azores is the enormous toothed Sperm Whale, that reportedly dives down up to two miles to catch its favourite food – the Giant Squid of Jules Verne fame – but there are many other species too.

Whilst it promised to be warm and sunny because of the temperate climate, the temperature never got much over 70 most of the time but the skies were generally overcast (unusually for the time of the year according to the locals) until Lisbon. There the heat topped 98 degrees in the shade – a foretaste of the unpleasant heat wave we have experienced recently in the UK.

Apart from the many days at sea between ports other than in the Azores, the sequence of our itinerary was:

- Cork
- 3 islands in the Azores – ports Ponta Delgada on Sao Miguel (largest), Horta on Faial, and Praia de Vitoria on Terceira
- Funchal on Madeira
- Lisbon

Whilst we did not find any local birding guides in the Azores (no doubt due to paucity of species), I managed to find a short sea bird-watching trip in a zodiac boat from Sao Miguel island and later we had a great day with a professional guide in the Tagus estuary out of Lisbon despite the heat. In addition to sightings on those trips and incidentally elsewhere on land, this time we also had more success with sea-watching from the ship. So total species seen on the cruise was 72.

Additionally, two representatives of the charity ORCA were on board throughout the cruise to give talks on the work of their organisation protecting whales and dolphins, on cetaceans generally, and to provide help with identification of both cetaceans and sea birds we might see at sea from the ship.

Cork

Located in Ireland's south west, Cork claims to have the second largest natural harbour in the world. The city itself (third largest in the whole of Ireland) is interesting and beautiful, but we chose to spend most of our day on a trip to more touristy Kinsale (nearby and much closer to the coast). Whilst we saw our first Common gull, a Common tern and a Cormorant in the harbour at Ringaskiddy (Cork's main port), the birding prospects were better in Kinsale.



Kinsale also has a huge natural harbour. Hence it was long a major port from the earliest days of the British Empire. Here is a view from the huge so-called Charles fort (completed 1682) towards the town itself, the earlier medieval James fort (1602) and the inner harbour. Above the fort we saw our first Barn swallows.

In passing I include a shot of the impressive entrance to the Charles fort with its bridge over what was once a moat. Reportedly it is one of the best preserved star-shaped forts anywhere.



On the water in the inner harbour we later found a big flock of Black-headed gulls, lots of Herring gulls, a Heron and a Little Egret. In the grassy areas surrounding the inner harbour lots of Jackdaws and Rooks (no crows) foraged for tourist scraps and a juvenile Pied wagtail pursued and pestered its parent for food on the Actons Hotel lawn, where we stopped for lunch.

Of note also in passing, Kinsale is remembered for the tragic sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915 on its way to Liverpool, a tragedy rivalling that of the Titanic. It happened 11 miles south of Kinsale Old Head peninsular. Of the 1,962 on board 1,198 perished. The ship was hit by a single torpedo from a German U-boat. There was a secondary explosion too - attributed to its also carrying war munitions. Apparently only 6 lifeboats of the 48 could be launched successfully due to the state of the sea and the ship's list. It sank in 18 minutes. There is a small museum on the Old Head peninsula.

The Azores – first stop Ponta Delgada on Sao Miguel



After two days at sea on the Atlantic we reached the island of Sao Miguel.

Looming out of the mists is a shot of our first sight of the island. In the distance is the port of Ponta Delgada – the capital of the whole archipelago.

Because there are so few land breeding birds in the Azores, this blog includes more images than usual to show the beauty of the landscapes and the flora (there are very few mammal species).

We visited, for example, Setes Cidades national park – two lakes (one appearing green and the other blue) in an immense crater. I am borrowing an aerial photo of the scene from Audley Travel advertising. My shots from the viewpoints do not do it justice.



Down in the village, seen distantly in that image, is a typical row of wild hydrangeas (introduced long ago from Japan). Along with introduced tall blue Agapanthus, the hydrangeas grow in profusion along the borders of almost every road on the island.

Here also is an image of the Gorreana tea plantation, producing both black and green types. This is one of the two still active on the island – those being the only places in the whole of Europe where tea is cultivated. The only birds we saw here were ubiquitous and noisy House Sparrows and some Collared Doves around the factory buildings.



One other bird we did see several times on the island is the Common Buzzard, the only raptor resident in the Azores and quite common. For the first time ever I saw one of these birds appearing to hover for quite a while, high in the sky, like a kestrel (a raptor absent from the islands). I now read that they can do this by turning into the wind and flapping their wings.



Interestingly, the name Azores derives from the Portuguese word for Goshawk “*acores*”. Apparently when people first settled on the islands, they misidentified the raptor. As they were so common, the islands became known as the islands of Acores.

We did eventually see other common land-based birds in the Caldeira Velha natural park, a lush tropical valley with warm waterfalls and thermal pools for swimming in (much in use too as this shot shows).

Here we heard and saw Robins, Blackbirds and the Azorean subspecies of Chaffinch (common throughout the islands). This fine specimen conveniently alighted in front of me to eat a snack dropped by a tourist.



As can be seen, the colours are slightly different from our UK version – paler breast, more blue grey on the head, the green on the back more prominent.



My best birding experience in this island was, however, an early morning birding trip on a zodiac boat out of nearby Vila Franca do Campo. Here is a shot of the tourist beach there and the island on the edge of the beach that holds a sizeable Common Tern colony.

This close-up shot shows lots of the birds on their nests and some in flight. The birds do not seem at all bothered by the proximity to the beach. Apart from the much rarer Roseate Tern this species is the only tern that nests in the Azores.



I was the only passenger on the zodiac (max 12) along with the skipper and a birding expert. As the maximum speed is supposedly around 30 mph and there were so few of us on board, the whole trip was fairly hair-raising. At full speed the boat bounced on the waves. I had to hold tight to my hat. When I briefly took away my hand, away it went ! Fortunately, the skipper stopped the boat, amazingly spotted it floating under the water and retrieved it with a pole.

In the shot above we are headed out initially to the islet called the Princess Ring, the remains of a long extinct volcano.

Here is an aerial view of the islet copied from Windows 10 Spotlight on the web (where there are numerous similar photos). It is advertised by the tourist industry as one of the top places to visit in the whole archipelago and even in the world (supposedly). It is true that its structure can only be fully appreciated from the air. My own photos that follow in this report make more sense too.



The idyllic islet (now a separate nature reserve) is a very popular venue for tourists because of hiking trails, as this shot shows, and for snorkeling in the sizeable shallow salt water crater lake (e.g. 27 species of fish and 74 degrees water temperature apparently). Also every year since 2009, the famous Red Bull Cliff Diving athletes come to the Azores to jump (men jump 27 metres into the sea) from the top of this islet and perform impressive acrobatics. It is a very important stage in the

competition of the World Series that goes from France to Australia. It takes only 10 minutes to get there on an hourly ferry service from the mainland.

But it is also a nesting site for Cory's Shearwaters and the ubiquitous Yellow-legged Gulls (the only gull resident in the Azores).

One of the adult gulls posed for me on a docking post.





More surprising here was sighting a pair of Grey Wagtails that seemed to have nested in one of the many rocky holes near the waterline and well away from the tourists. Also present was a pair of Little Egrets that potted about on the rocks near the sea in that image. We were then alerted by their song to the presence of Canaries in the grassy areas. I found one eventually and took this shot.

The islet also holds a small Common Tern colony. The boat managed to get very close to a pair of adults that alighted on some rocks just off the edge of the islet. Here is a great close-up of the pair.



Also of interest are these Red Rock crabs (*Grapsus adscensionis*) chilling out on the islet's rocks just above the water line.

Whilst the rest of the trip followed the coast to watch mainly masses of Rock Doves nesting in the many holes in the rocky cliffs of the island's coast, our skipper found this big raft of Cory's Shearwaters resting on the sea. He explained that it is common practice for the Shearwaters to do this in between their fishing trips.





He also managed to get the boat close enough for me to take this close-up. The tube noses on the top of the bills (to expel salt) are very visible.

The Azores – next stop Horta on Faial island



Our short stay on this island was spent on a whale-watching trip in a zodiac boat similar to the one for my sea bird trip the previous day. Here is a shot of a companion boat. Zodiacs are not recommended for those with back or neck issues (see my earlier comments). So we were instructed to sit at the back in front of the skipper (or could stand when stopped).

It was all worth it. First we saw a pod of Long-fin Pilot whales, then a Loggerhead Turtle, and finally a Sperm whale surfaced for air before it dived. Below is a shot of the top of this enormous animal. Note the short stubby dorsal fin. Unfortunately, I was not quick enough to capture the enormous tail fluke. The tail fluke stood briefly perpendicular but promptly disappeared below the surface.

Male sperm whales are reported to be the largest toothed predator on the planet. They can grow to 50 feet in length and can weigh up to 35-45 tons. Apparently they consume a ton of food every day.

We also saw several pods of Spotted dolphins and a few much larger Bottle-nosed dolphins. Unfortunately, they were generally not minded to jump out of the water for a decent photo.



Once again the trip found big rafts of Cory's Shearwaters resting on the surface. In one raft the guide identified a single Sooty Shearwater in the flock. In some cases the dolphin pods were accompanied by Shearwaters, which seemed to be using the dolphins to help locate fish. Individual watching birds would suddenly land on the water to seize their prey, as in this great close-up.



The Azores – final stop Praia da Vitoria on Terceira island



Our day on Terceira was spent doing a full day cruise line excursion exploring the island.

Initially we visited these seawater geothermal pools at Biscoitos on the north coast - another reminder of the volcanic origin of the island.

Plenty of small birds flitting about but they all turned out to be House Sparrows again ! Though we did see a flock of Goldfinches (the Azores subspecies) from the coach just after we left.

In one pool we also saw these colourful Portuguese Man O' war, washed up by the tide. We had seen lots the previous day on our Whale-watching trip, as they floated by our boat, driven by their sails that stick above the water. The sting from the hugely long tentacles is of course deadly.





Thence to the Biscoitos wine museum for a visit and a tasting. A whole series of grape varieties were on show outside, planted in the seemingly inhospitable lava debris. The only birds were yet again House Sparrows and the odd Blackbird.

From here we drove across the island (almost the whole island is a nature reserve) to Angra on the south coast. Once the capital of the whole archipelago, this ancient city was once a key staging post for Portuguese traders visiting their colonies all over the world. It is now a world heritage site.



In the city centre you can relax in the lovely Duke of Terceira gardens and watch some local wildlife such as the croaking frogs or this Madeiran Wall Lizard.



The site of the city is guarded by huge fortifications on the peninsular of Monte Brasil, the remains of an extinct volcano. The mountain is cloaked with thick forest, especially laurel. There was plenty of bird sound at the summit (623 feet) but none showed itself, other than these 3 Helmeted Guineafowl. Those I suspect belonged to a farm.



Our final destination was to the mountains of Serra do Cume. From here we could view the rich patchwork of green fields all the way down to Praia da Vitoria in the east and our ship docked in the harbour.

As we watched, another Common Buzzard flew past and this Chaffinch foraged in a field just below one of the viewpoints.



Funchal on Madeira



We had been birding on Madeira several times before. So we spent our day there wandering through the city, shopping and admiring its monuments, like this one in the centre, a statue of the founder Zarco.

And its beautiful promenade.



And lovely traditional blue Portuguese tiles like this one on the front of a restaurant.

As to birds, from the old fort at the far end (beyond the cable car) we watched another Common Tern fishing and three Atlantic Canaries briefly alighted on a telephone wire.



From our evening dinner table at the Bierhaus we watched these 4 Muscovy ducks doing their thing in the harbour. No doubt ornamentals from one of the nearby parks. Maybe they had just fancied a change of scenery?

Lisbon – the Tagus estuary



From a birding perspective, our day in the Tagus estuary with professional guide Amelia Almeida (from Birds & Nature Tours Portugal) was the highlight of the whole cruise.

Amelia took us first to the private farm estate Quinta de Atalaya, which has many lagoons, canals, reedbeds and cork trees. In the lagoons we saw several Little Terns, a Common Sandpiper, a Little Grebe, a big colony of Little Egrets, a Moorhen, a Coot, and several Black-winged Stilts. One pair of

Stilts had produced a couple of tiny chicks. They are paddling furiously over to their parent in this shot.

Here is a good shot of one of the parents. Constantly calling, both parents were nervous about our presence.



Hidden in the midst of a reedbed lurked 3 Night Herons. Hopefully you can make one out in this shot.



More surprising in such a location was a Booted Eagle perched in the top of one of the cork trees. From the colouring, Amelia guessed it was a juvenile.

My best photo from this site is undoubtedly this colourful male Yellow-crowned Bishop, clambering quite close amongst the reeds. The species is native to sub-Saharan Africa but has been introduced in various countries like Portugal and Spain.



We went in search of Azure-winged Magpies among the trees on the farm but, unlike the Common Magpie, this species generally hides from view. So we had only brief glimpses as they flew for tree to tree.

Better views were had of other species on this site, including Greater Flamingos, Goldfinches, Cisticolas, a Nuthatch and several Cattle Egrets sporting some of their nuptial plumage.

The tide was in on the estuary. So we then went to the salt flats at Samouco. There we found a surprising variety of species : Kentish Plovers, Avocets, Little terns, a Gull-billed tern, Redshanks, a Spotted Redshank, a Turnstone, a sizeable group of Black-tailed Godwits prodding away in the water, 2 Mediterranean Gulls, and one Slender-billed gull (unusual here said Amelia). All too far away to photograph unfortunately!



After lunch we went to the nature reserve Sitio das Hortas overlooking the Tagus estuary, in search of the magpies again. Here is a shot of the edge of the site. The estuary is huge – great for bird-watching in the winter particularly, said Amelia.



At the top of a tree with bare branches were perched initially 2 Corn Buntings. They flew off but these 4 Bee-eaters suddenly alighted.

Then our guide spotted a magpie's tail sticking out of a two feet high nest of twigs hidden in the centre fork of a tree. Out it flew to give us a good view of the colours.



Off we drove again – this time to a pool at Ribeira das Enguias, where we could get closer views of the Flamingos, such as in this shot.

After that, our final visit for the day was a great finale – the rice fields at Paul de Rilvas .

Apparently Portugal is one of the largest producers of rice in Europe. Our guide mentioned that the rice fields there have been invaded, as in other parts of Europe, by the Louisiana prawn. The creature is actually a large crayfish (a sort of mini lobster) which dominates indigenous species. Whilst the rice producers do not welcome the invader because of damage it does, the birds really seem to like its being there.

On one side of the track through the middle of the fields, masses of White Storks filled the fields along with a few Spoonbills and Grey Herons. Here are two that we got closest to.



In the distance some are standing on their huge nests built on top of the electricity pylons.



On the other side of the track were these masses of Glossy Ibis also foraging in the fields. Quite a sight!

Sea-watching

Because of the itinerary there were many days at sea throughout this cruise.

We saw the inevitable Gannets quite often, sometimes overhead and keeping pace with the ship. Near the Azores we saw many Cory's Shearwaters skimming the surface of the water and, at long last as we left Terceira, a pair of the smaller Macaronesian Shearwaters. But we did not see any other species until we sailed up the Welsh coast in the Irish Sea towards Anglesey on the way back to Liverpool.

There we saw our first Manx Shearwaters, a Fulmar, and a Common Guillemot sitting on the water plus 3 others in flight.

Dolphins we also saw there. At one point a Common Dolphin pod seemed to be swimming very riskily straight under the bow of the ship. But Richard of ORCA reassured me that the creatures are so agile they would come to no harm.

These sightings were all very encouraging until we hit a bank of thick fog. For the rest of the day it became impossible to see beyond the bow of the ship. Every few minutes the ship sounded its foghorn. What a change from 98 degrees in the shade!

Peter Morgan
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