

Atlantic action

The nine islands of the Azores provide plenty of diving adventure. Sitting right in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, divers may have to contend with high winds and high seas, but will be rewarded with excellent pelagic action, says **Jo Mattock**. Photos by **Nuno Sá**

MANTA MADNESS: up to 60 mantas have been seen at some of the deep water-pinnacles



InDepth

DIVE GUIDE

WELCOME TO THE BALL: the deep-water channels around the islands attract a host of cetaceans, from vast sperm whales to these common dolphins feeding on a bait ball





SITUATED IN THE middle of the Atlantic, 900 miles west of Lisbon and 2,400 miles east of New York, the volcanic islands of the Azores are perfectly positioned for dives with big, pelagic fish. Manta rays and whale sharks are regular visitors in the summer, blue sharks can be seen at remote sites, and 24 species of whale and dolphin live in or visit these waters.

But the archipelago's location can be problematic for divers. Exposed to big waves, high winds and fast changes in weather, popular sites can be blown out and plans have to be flexible to make the most of the conditions. You also need to have a stoical mentality yourself – set your heart on diving a particular site and you'll be disappointed if the weather is against you. But go in with an open mind, and you'll have some beautiful dives on interesting sites. The islands' isolation means the diving industry is quite small – there are few divers, and you'll have the dive site all to yourself.

This isn't the warm waters of the Red Sea, or the calm conditions of the Mediterranean. But for those adventurous enough to tackle waves and cool water, it's worth it. »



TEMPERATE TREATS: left, a blue shark beneath a RIB; above, dive boats in the marina at Vila Franco

São Miguel

São Miguel is the biggest and busiest of the islands in the Azores. Situated in the east of the archipelago, it has an international airport so is easy to reach and attracts the most visitors. There are several dive centres on the island, all situated on the south coast, where the best marinas are located.

I dived with Azores Sub, which is based in the town of Vila Franco do Campo. It has a well-stocked dive shop at the marina, as well as a dive centre with changing rooms, hot showers (which are very welcome after diving and windy RIB rides), lockers and space to store kit.

The closest dive site is 'Kitchen', on the coast of a small island just outside the harbour. The island is a volcano, the crater of which has been

filled by seawater to create a natural pool, popular for swimming. A ferry from the harbour takes visitors there each hour. The dive site got its name from the whaling industry – this used to be where whale carcasses were butchered. No sign of its grisly history remains, however, and it's a pleasant dive, swimming around boulders and through corridors between the rocks. Lizardfish hide on the sandy bottom, moray eels and slipper lobster in the cracks between rocks, and grey triggerfish hang above you. It's a gentle introduction to diving in the Azores.

Further west, close to the village of Caloura, is a site called Galera. Here, you can see the part volcanic activity has played in forming the island. A wall starts at around 10m and drops down to 40m. Back off a little from the wall, and you can see the way the lava flowed in thick streams, cooling to form rock. The top of the reef is

riddled with arches and caves and it's a great place to explore, swimming through rocky passages, while watching out for grouper hiding in the rocks and barracuda hunting above the reef.

A third popular site close to the island is MV Dori – a cargo ship that sank in the late 1960s near Ponta Delgada. At 100m long, it's a very large wreck – too big to get around in a single dive. We explored the stern, where the propeller sits on the sand at 18m and the wreck itself lies on its starboard side. Take a torch to peer into nooks and crannies to look for crabs and octopus.

Around 20 nautical miles from Sao Miguel is the offshore reef of Formigas. When the weather is good enough, it's a popular site where you may encounter mobula rays, manta rays and sharks – though it's a long trip on the boat. Dive operators also run trips to dive with blue sharks. The site is a seamount, but it's more than 100m deep, so you spend the dive hanging in the blue. It can be incredibly rewarding if the sharks make an appearance, but there's no guarantee that they will.

You might be lucky and encounter cetaceans while out and about on dive boats. Some species, such as sperm whales, are here year round and some, such as the baleen whales, are migratory, visiting the archipelago in the spring between May and June. The best way to see these animals is on a trip with a whale and dolphin watching tour such as those run by Terra Azul (www.terrazulazores.com), which is next door to the dive centre in Vila Franco. The day I went, we spent two hours watching common and striped dolphins. »

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ATLANTIC CROSSING:
loggerhead turtles
are common visitors;
below, the offshore
reef of Formigas



MIND THE GAP: Santa Maria is known for its spectacular swim-throughs

Santa Maria

Santa Maria is one of the smallest of the Azorean islands, and the furthest south. With a population of just 5,000 people, everyone knows everyone and the atmosphere is quiet and laid-back. It's an incredibly pretty island – all the houses are painted white, but each village paints a different colour around the doors and windows, and at the corners of the buildings.

From the highest peak, Pico Alto, it's possible to see the whole island – an excellent view if the weather is clear. In the evening head to the village of Anjos, which faces west and has a great view of the sunset. The restaurant above the seawater swimming pool does good food too.

There are few dive centres on the island. I was diving with Paralelo 37, a small but experienced crew based at Hotel Colombo, where there are changing rooms, showers and space to wash and store your dive kit. The centre's RIB is moored at the marina in Vila do Porto, a five-minute drive away, and this is where you kit up.

Around 15 minutes from the harbour, in front of the village of Praia, is a pretty site called Pedrinha. Two pinnacles reach from the 30m seabed to around 5-10m. The day I dived here there was a huge school of triggerfish. I could see it from the surface, and the school proved to be made up of several hundred individuals when I dropped in. Among them were a tightly-packed school of trevally – a spectacular sight.

At around 28m there are a couple of caves. At the first, you drop into the top of the cave and swim out through the side. The second is a narrower passage through the reef, where a few fish shelter. Keep your eyes open for grouper at this site. I spotted two, and they were the biggest I'd ever seen, but shy. There's a resident moray too, and occasionally turtles

are seen in this area.

More spectacular swim-throughs are possible at the site Blue Cave. Here, a passage goes through a peninsula of the island. The cave was formed by lava – the first section is completely flooded and there's no surface, though you can always see the exit. Continuing, the cave opens into a cavern, with light streaming in through a second exit and baitfish hanging picturesquely in the beams. Here you might see rays on the sandy floor. Ignoring the exit, you continue through the cave and pass through a narrow window, into a large, dark cavern. Continuing through the cavern, you turn a corner, into a corridor of rock towards the final exit. This corridor is open at the top, though the swell can be quite strong and you certainly wouldn't want to ascend here. This site can be a bit tricky with the swell, and isn't suitable for inexperienced divers, but it is good fun.

One of the most popular dive sites in Santa Maria is called Ambrosio. It's known for manta rays – up to 60 have been seen here at one time. The site itself is three miles from shore, a 40-minute sail from the harbour. The day I dived, the wind was strong and the waves were 2m high. I'm not a great sailor, even at the best of times, and kitting up in these conditions made me a little nauseous – but once in the water I forgot all about it.

As I dropped in, a huge school of barracuda were below the boat, and a shoal of amberjacks were hanging in the blue. There's a pinnacle here, but it's at 47m, so the dive plan is usually to stay at about 16-18m, close to the anchor line, and hope the manta rays turn up. I was in luck. Shortly after we descended, two rays, flying in formation, circled us before heading off into the blue. It was an incredible few moments, and I spent the rest of the dive hoping they would return. They didn't. This could be a frustrating dive, if the manta rays don't show – there's not a lot else to see. But it's worth the gamble of coming out here in case they do! »

CEPHALPOD CITY: a large octopus and diver





SHUTTERSTOCK

OCEAN CITY: Angra do Heroísmo is the oldest city in the islands

Terceira

Terceira is set in the central group of islands in the Azores. One of the larger islands, its main town Angra do Heroísmo is the oldest city in the archipelago. Its historic buildings have earned it the status of UNESCO World Heritage Site, and there is also some protection for the wrecks here as the bay has been designated a subaquatic archaeological park by local authorities.

In the bay at Angra do Heroísmo lie more than 40 historic anchors in a dive site known as 'the anchor field'. Some of these anchors date back hundreds of years, when this bay was a key stopping point for ships travelling between Portugal and Brazil or the Caribbean. They're encrusted with corals and sponges, and are all shapes and sizes. The deepest part of the reef is 35m and it's around 500m long. Watch out for morays, stingrays and grouper here.

Also in the bay lies an easy wreck dive. The Lidador is just 8m deep and so close to land that it's a shore dive. This 70m-long steamboat sank in 1878 after striking a reef. The wreckage doesn't rise far from the sea bed, except at the bow, but it attracts quite a bit of life. Look out for octopus on the small reef created by the ship's ballast stones – it's a popular place for them to hide – and nudibranchs on the hull itself.

The dive centre Anfíbius at the Hotel do Caracol is well equipped and professional. They offer tuition and tech diving too. »

ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO

The best time of year to dive in the Azores is July and August. The weather is more settled, though the water can still be cold, particularly at depth.

WHAT TO TAKE

A 7mm wetsuit and gloves, as the water temperature can be as low as 18C. All diving is from RIBs, so a dry bag is a good idea for valuables. Even when the weather's cool, the sun is strong, and there's no shade on the boats – take high-factor sun screen.

GETTING THERE

There are direct flights with Sata from London to Ponta Delgada on São Miguel. From here you can connect to the other islands via short flights, also with Sata.

GETTING AROUND

It's a good idea to hire a car while you're here, to see something of the islands and to get to restaurants for dinner. Some of the hotels are rather isolated, and taxis aren't always available late at night on the smaller islands.

WHERE TO STAY

Caloura Hotel, São Miguel. Set in beautiful gardens, with exceptional views over the sea. www.calourahotel.com

Hotel Colombo, Santa Maria. A quiet, comfortable hotel with sea views. www.colombo-hotel.com

Hotel do Caracol, Terceira. An international-style hotel with pool and dive centre. www.hoteldocaracol.com

Gracipescas, Graciosa. A family-run pension-style B&B. www.gracipescas.com

DIVE CENTRES

Azores Sub, Sao Miguel. www.azoressub.com

Paralelo 37, Santa Maria. www.paralelo37.pt

Anfíbius, Terceira. www.anfibius.com

Nautigraciosa, Graciosa. www.divingraciosa.com



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PARK LIFE: above, an anthia; left, a red scorpionfish, below left, a triggerfish

Graciosa

A short hop from Terceira, the tiny island of Graciosa is quiet and picturesque. The centre of the island is dominated by volcanic craters and the little fishing villages cling to the coast.

The dive operation I dived with, Nautigraciosa, is a simple set-up – a lock-up at the marina and a RIB to take you out.

One of the best dives here lies just outside the harbour – the wreck of the Terceirense. This cargo ship came to grief on a reef close to the island. It tried to limp back to harbour but sank just before it reached its destination. The site is sheltered by a small islet in front of the harbour entrance, and I dived here despite some terrible weather.

The 70m-long wreck lies at around 20m on its starboard side. The stern section is the most intact, standing proud of the sea – abed by 4m to 5m. The propeller is particularly photogenic here – it sticks out into mid water, a couple of metres from the sandy bottom.

Dusky grouper can be seen here, and the wreck is covered with colourful wrasse, scorpionfish and fireworms. »



THE DARKNESS BEKONS:
Entering the Gruta Azul
cave in Santa Maria



TOUR OPERATORS

Regaldive (01353 659 999; www.regaldive.co.uk) offers tailor-made diving holidays to the Azores, including twin-centre island combinations such as São Miguel with Santa Maria, Pico or Terceira. The company recommends diving in the Azores during July, August, September and October. A week's holiday departing 25 August costs from £923 pp (two sharing) including seven nights' B&B at the Hotel Sao Miguel Park, transfers, five dives and direct flights (Gatwick) to Ponta Delgada (Sao Miguel) with SATA International.

Sunvil Discovery (020 8758 4722; www.sunvil.co.uk/azores) offers tailor-made, multi-centre itineraries to all nine islands of the archipelago. A week's holiday in September costs from £900 pp (two sharing) including direct flights (Gatwick) to Ponta Delgada (Sao Miguel), seven nights' B&B (three at the Hotel Colombo on Santa Maria, four at the Hotel Caloura on São Miguel), inter-island flights, transfers on Santa Maria and car hire on Sao Miguel. Sunvil Discovery can also arrange activities (additional cost) including diving, whale & dolphin watching, island tours (by taxi or jeep), geological history tours and golf. ●