

# TERRA AZUL'S 2016 SEASON REPORT

During the 2016 season TERRA AZUL successfully accomplished a total of 502 tours - 347 Whale Watching Tours; 122 Swimming with Dolphins; 33 Private Tours. On the following Report we will exclusively ponder Whale Watching Tours sightings. They were most significant for the [MONICET PROJECT](#). This systematic project results from a long-term cooperation with University of Azores since 2009.

Every day Terra Azul's guides collect data during the sightings and insert it on the online platform. This is scientifically validated afterwards by a scientist from the Marine Biology Department. The data is then accessible on an Online Platform that is available for general Public and Scientists around the world with interest on cetacean studies. This is a direct contribution to improve the knowledge about Azorean Whale and Dolphin populations, distribution, feeding and nursery areas, etc.



Fig. 1 Sperm Whale (left) and TERRAZUL I (right)

We strongly believe on the benefits of Whale Watching for marine wildlife conservation. TERRA AZUL makes every tour a «research opportunity» because “no one will love something they don't know”! We are committed to Ecotourism, Education and Conservation, TERRA AZUL's key-values as a social responsible company.



## Sighting statistics

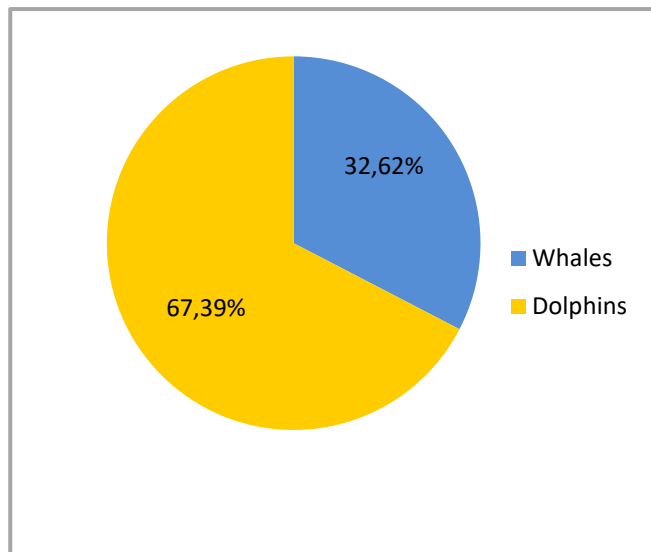
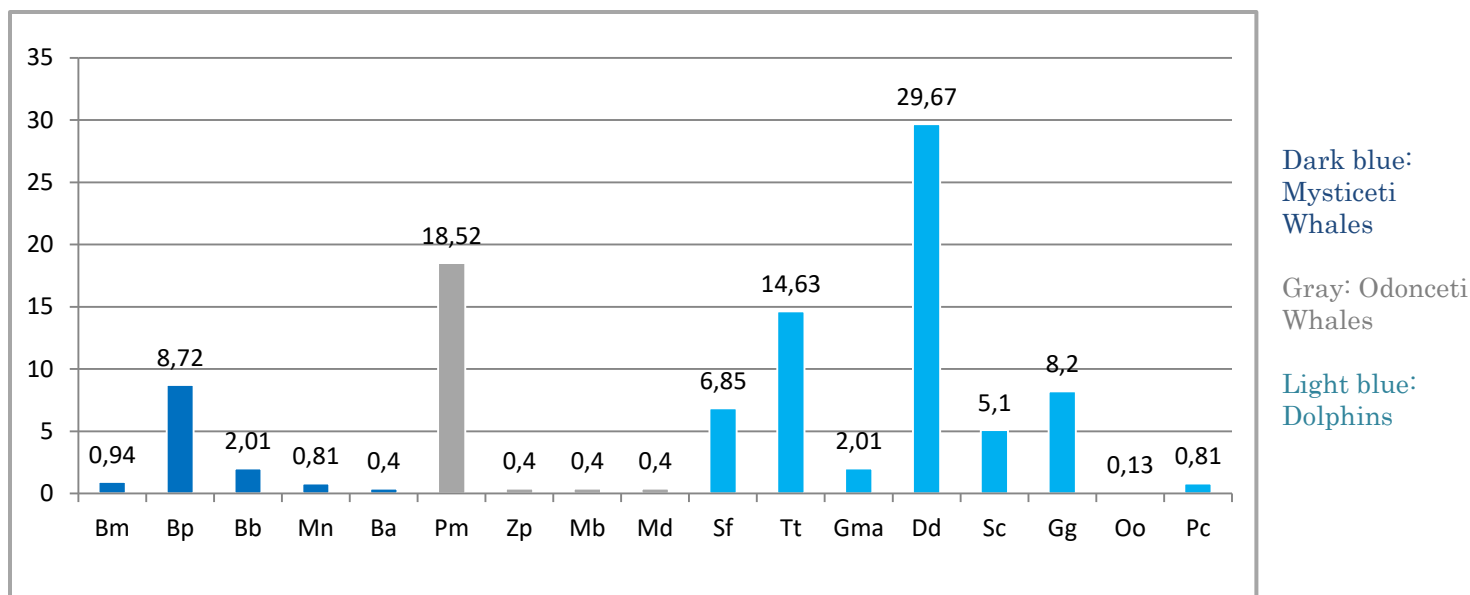


Fig. 1 - Percentage of Whale and Dolphin Sightings

On this present season we were able to collect data on 248 tours out of 347 (on some days both boats were out on the ocean at the same time: to prevent collecting double data, only one boat and one guide were responsible for collecting it. Hence the 248 tours and not 347). A total of 745 sightings of which 243 (32,62%) were Whales and 502 (67,39%) were of Dolphins (included in this group are the Pilot Whales, False Killer Whales and Orcas, that scientifically are dolphins as they belong to the *Delphinidae* Family in the *Odontoceti* Suborder).



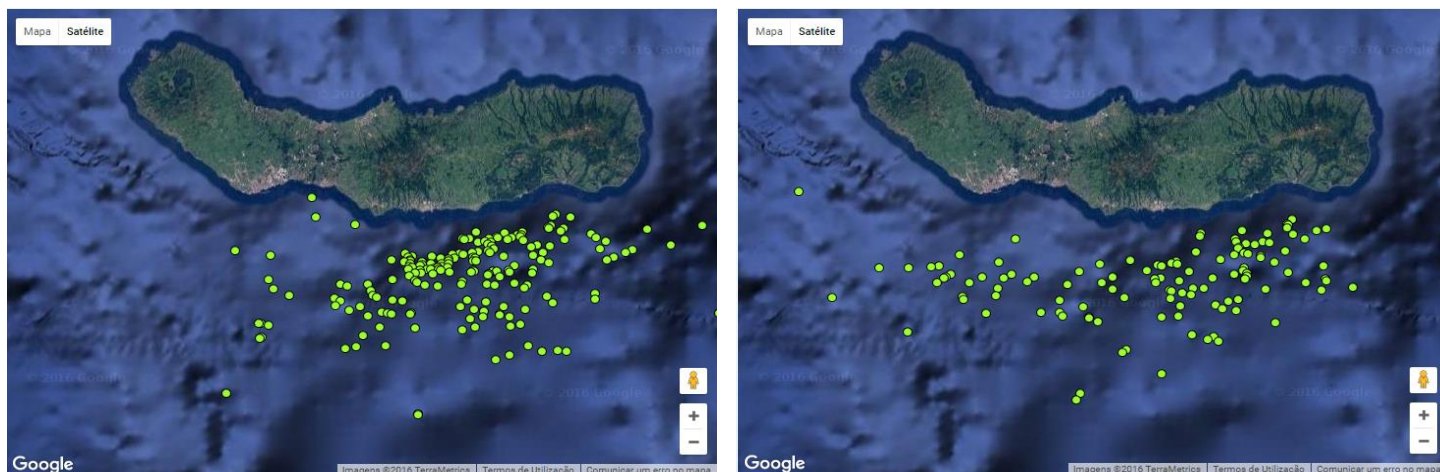
Bm – Blue Whale; Bp – Fin Whale; Bb – Sei Whale; Mn – Humpback Whale; Ba – Minke Whale; Pm – Sperm Whale; Zp – Beaked Whales; Mb – Sowerby's Beaked Whale; Md – Blainville's Beaked Whale; Sf – Spotted Dolphin; Tt – Bottlenose Dolphin; Gma – Short-Finned Pilot Whale; Dd – Common Dolphin; Sc – Striped Dolphin; Gg – Risso's Dolphin; Oo – Killer Whale; Pc – False Killer Whale.

Fig. 2 – Frequency of species sighted – number of sightings of each species related to the total number of sightings (%).



A total of 17 species of Cetaceans- out of 24 possible to observe in Azores- were sighted. The Top 5 ranking species were the Sperm Whale (18,52%), followed by the Common Dolphin (29,67%) and the Bottlenose Dolphin (14,63%), the Fin Whale (8,72%) and the Risso's Dolphins (8,19%). In this report, we don't consider sea turtles as they are harder to record consistently, however Loggerhead turtles were regularly sighted when the water was warmer.

The species of baleen and beaked whale sighted and the number of trips we sighted them on stayed quite stable. The whales showing the biggest differences compared to 2015 were the Sperm whales: sighting numbers decreased a little bit (28,9% to 18,52%) and, although we continued meeting them close to Vila Franca, we had to go further West more often than usual to see them.



**Fig. 4 - Distribution of Sperm whale sightings in 2015 (left) and 2016 (center).**

This shift in distribution may explain the slight decrease in sightings as our lookout can't see so far West, having to communicate with other lookouts. The distribution change in itself it's harder to explain. It has been showed that the Azorean archipelago is a feeding ground for this species so they may be responding to the movements of their prey.



As for the dolphins, we registered an increase in the sightings of all but two species (Pilot whales and False killer whales). Dolphins tend to stay closer to shore than whales and this year, especially in August, there were quite a few days with poor visibility conditions. Low visibility means that Filipe, the lookout, can see the area close to land better than further offshore, having a better coverage of dolphin area than whale area – which may explain the trend.

Furthermore, we can see that the biggest increases were verified in the resident dolphin species - Bottlenose, Common and Risso's dolphins, possibly because for each of these species there was a group regularly using the area around Vila Franca do Campo.



**Fig. 5- Resident dolphin species: Risso's dolphins (left), Common dolphins (centre) and Bottlenose dolphins (right)**

Following comment is from MONICET researcher and Marine Biologist Marc Fernandez, regarding the Whale Watching 2016 season in São Miguel:

“It is possible to say that 2016 has been a different year, at least when talking about whales and dolphins sightings. This has been a great baleen whale season, especially when talking about fin whales. We had an excellent start with many sightings of fin whales and we still had many sightings of this species during the summer months. This already happened during 2015, however this year the pattern was clearer. On the other side the Sperm whales arrived later during this year, probably due to the later warming of the ocean waters temperature. The number of sightings was quite similar, however there was a small shift in the area used around São Miguel, we had more sightings close to Ponta Delgada and Caloura, which is not the usual trend. As always each year is different in the Azores, and this year wasn't an exception, just another different year in a very

On the diagrams below we present the ratio of Tours with either only whales (WHALES), only dolphins (DOLPHINS) or both whales and dolphins (W&D) throughout March- November.

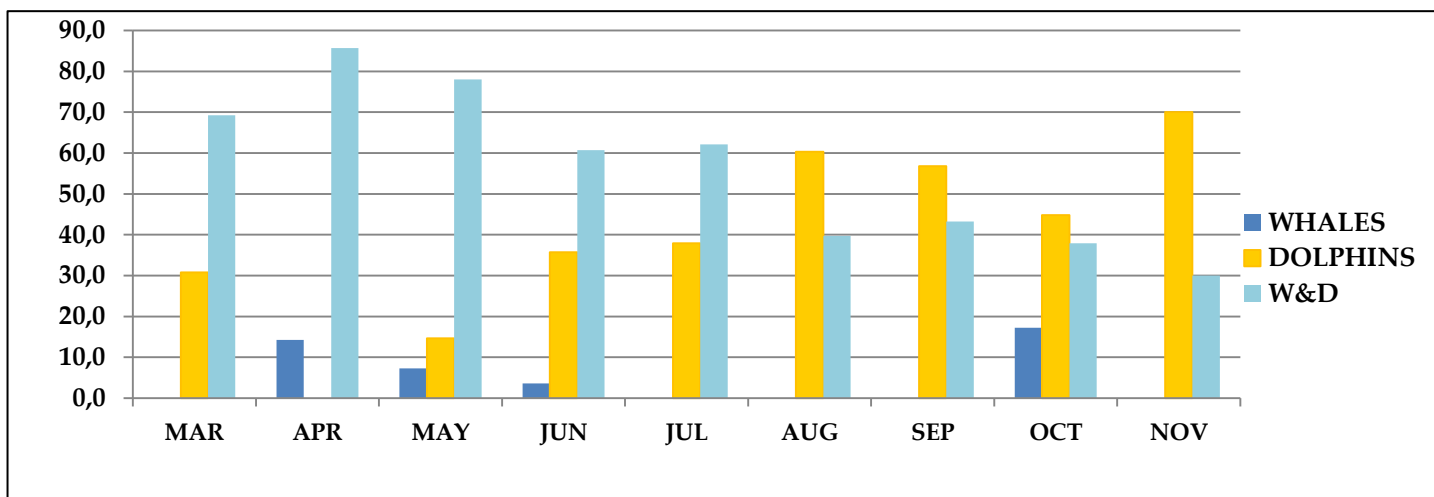


Fig. 6 - Percentage of trips with sightings of only Whales (dark blue), only Dolphins (yellow) and Whales & Dolphins (light blue) by month of activity

We can see that the months with the greatest presence of “only – whales” tours as the “Baleen Whale Season” months, i.e. March to July (when we saw our last baleen whale) and the highest peak was in April. This is consistent with the usual trends of the Azores and with the timing of whale migrations that should be passing this area of the Atlantic.

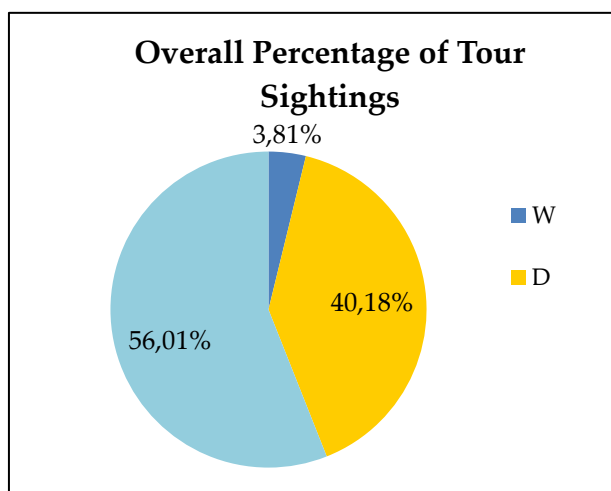


Fig. 7 - Overall percentage of trips with sightings of only Whales (dark blue), only Dolphins (yellow) and Whales & Dolphins (light blue)

However, we can realize on both displays (above and right) that Tours with both Whales and Dolphins is the greater one: 56,01%. They are the most stable, occurring throughout the year.



In conclusion, this year there was definitely an increase of the presence of dolphins and Baleen whales stayed quite stable. This is the opposite of last year when there was a lower statistics on dolphins. It proves to show that Nature and the presence of wild animals can vary year-to-year. Let's see what next season will bring!

Of course this statistics produce a direct impact on clients' expectations. For most of "inexpert tourists" Whale Watching tours mean "the opportunity" to fulfill a lifetime dream to see Whales and other marine life as they feel that the sightings will be guaranteed! Witnessing nature doesn't work like this... It requires opportunity, perseverance and understanding associated with resources, professionalism and experience.

Ocean and marine wildlife tours are influenced by seasonality. We feel the effect of several factors including the wind, sea, visibility conditions, and tourism seasonality especially in Fall/ Winter. During this season the month of August was particularly challenging due to the weather conditions. Strong winds, poor visibility conditions and especially rough seas led to a lot of cancelled tours. However Terra Azul's team made its best to take every opportunity to go out!



Fig. 8 - Terra Azul's Lookout Point in Ponta Garça

[For more information about sightings and species Occurrence please visit:](#)  
[www.moniket.net](http://www.moniket.net)



## Season highlights

This season has been a very fulfilling one, filled with wow moments and surprises. But the most special and magical was for sure our only sighting of Orcas in 2016!

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, what started as a normal/average tour ended as one of the highlights of the year, which comes to prove what we always say: going to the ocean is always different and anything can happen!



**Fig. 9 – Male Orca close to TERRAZUL I**

As we were watching our always present and friendly Common Dolphins, Filipe says over the VHF radio: “I see tall black fins...” We get everyone on board ready and off we go speeding to the area. After a 10 minute wait in the area they finally show up!



**Fig. 10 – Female orca (left) and male (right) with TERRAZUL II and Terra Azul's team in the background**

The beautiful and powerful Orcas! A group of about 12 individuals, with females, calves, juveniles and at least 3 males (easy to identify due to their huge and straight dorsal fin that can reach 2 meters in height). Excitement breaks inside the boat and on the crew back in land. It was such a special moment that they all got on TERRAZUL II and went to see the Orcas as well. Even Filipe left the lookout and jumped on board!







**Fig. 11- Female orca and her calf**

Orca sightings are rare here in the Azores, but they can be sighted throughout the whole year. They have been sighted in February, even August in previous years. Also the number of sightings per year changes all the time, some years they are sighted 1 time, some others much more. For example in 2013, we sighted them 7 times in May. In 2014 there was no sightings, and in 2015 we sighted them one time briefly on one tour. This group was travelling but in a rhythm which was easy to accompany and see them well.

This season, we continued to participate in an educational project with a group of students from the [University of Central Lancashire](#) together with our [UK partners](#).

The group of 10 student publishers, writers, photographers, journalists and illustrators joined us on 4 tours to do research for their next book focusing on sea turtles and ocean conservation. We were very happy to show them the sought after sea turtles but also 4 species of dolphins, fin whales and minke whales!

The book for which they did research last season, “Whales Beneath the Waves”, was published in July 2016.



**Fig. 12- University of Central Lancashire student group**





Here at Terra Azul we love to share our knowledge with student groups that reach us but also to learn from our visitors that have been whale-watching around the world or that work with these fantastic animals. Whenever possible Tiago, our skipper/ media man, records these conversations in interview format so that we can share them with you.

From those we would like to highlight the conversation we had with [Mr. Fletcher Mingramm](#) who is a researcher and PhD student from Australia that shared his work and view of the Azores with us.

Also the conversation our Marine Biologist and Guide Catarina had with Dr. Kevin Riemer for his environmental blog [dieUmweltDruckerei](#) about whales and the threats they face.



Fig. 13 – Mr. Fletcher Mingramm



Fig. 14 –SPEA and Birdlife International tour with a raft of Cory's Shearwater Mr. Fletcher Mingramm

Furthermore we had the opportunity to learn more about birds while sharing what we know about cetaceans, with a special group from [SPEA – Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds](#) and [Birdlife International](#). This trip ended at the Vila Franca Islet with more birdwatching!

Listen to their experience [here](#)!



We were also part the festival [Oceans and Flow](#) by providing the means and professional guidance and help for the participants to contact with nature, and feel the wonderful experience and sensation of sharing the ocean with wild dolphins. And a lift to the Islet of Vila Franca do Campo where the participants experienced the magnitude of the unique geology, structure and marine life that surrounds the islet making it such a special protected area.



Fig. 15 - Oceans and Flow event on the islet

However fascinating, life is not just about whales and dolphins, and so, following it's social responsibility policy, Terra Azul tries to give back to the community and this season we had some special tours with very important and lovely children in partnership with Lar mãe de Deus and Terra dos Sonhos.

The 2016 season also saw the continuity of our volunteer presentations at our [local hotel partners](#).

The goal of these weekly presentations is to reach out to people and possible clients about the Whale Watching world. These presentations are conducted by a guide/naturalist that will accompany our clients on the tours. We believe that forming a bond even before the tour creates more personal, better, unique and unforgettable experiences as we always aim to accomplish.



This year, “Senhora de Fátima” the Traditional Whaling Boat built in 1945, was ([Bolsa de Turismo de Lisboa](#)) from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> of March, as an *icon* of Azorean culture and heritage, connecting people with the ocean.

The goal was to show the world this very special and [important part of Azorean culture](#) but also a lesson to the world: that it is possible to continue to “use whales” without killing them! Visitors could learn more about Whaling, traditional boat building and how we transitioned from Whaling to Whale Watching. It is important not to forget that Whaling is how the Azores got here today.



**Fig. 17 - Whaling boat 'Senhora de Fátima' at BTL in Lisbon**



**Fig. 18 - Senhora da Fátima sailing off the Vila Franca Islet**

When back from its short Lisbon adventure, the Whaling Boat came back to the marina of Vila Franca do Campo resuming its weekend sailing trips with local people and tourists alike to promote the knowledge of whaling tradition.



We would like to share with you how proud we are on our [Trip Advisor 2016 Certificate of Excellence](#) award. As a team we are very gratified to provide an excellent service to each and every Whale Watcher. TERRA AZUL always has and will aim to keep high quality service standards.



Fig. 19 – New whale watching direction post at the Vila Franca do Campo marina

We had a team project that added a new interest point to our marina as well... A direction post!

With directions to important Whale Watching places all around the world, including the way to our partners in Pico, [Espaço Talassa](#).

Something small and different to brighten up the marina a bit more! And look at the lovely handy work from Filipe and Ana Rita! Did you know that besides a lookout Filipe is also a carpenter? And Ana Rita has painting and drawing as a hobby? You mix that with Whale Watching and here it is the result! ☺



This season also met some new crew members that joined Terra Azul's Team! Catarina came as the new main guide and marine biologist, and as part of our volunteer program we had Cornelia as a guide and Cristina to give a helping hand in the office.

During the winter, our vessels TERRAZUL I and TERRAZUL II, and all the equipment we need to make our tours possible will go under maintenance to ensure that next year's tour safe, reliable and comfortable for our passengers.

In 2017 , TERRA AZUL will come back stronger and readier than ever to continue to share our passion and provide the best experiences to our clients on the big blue with our friends the Whales and the Dolphins! ☺

The Whale Watching base will close from 15<sup>th</sup> of December to 12<sup>th</sup> of February for staff vacation. For information during this time call Miguel Cravinho at +351 917 282 921 or send an email to [b2b@azoreswhalewatch.com](mailto:b2b@azoreswhalewatch.com)



And now we leave you on a farewell note. See you next year for another brilliant and filled with Cetaceans 2017 Season!!

Join us at: [www.azoreswhalewatch.com](http://www.azoreswhalewatch.com) and [www.facebook.com/azoreswhalewatch](https://www.facebook.com/azoreswhalewatch)

