



M/V POLAR STAR  
EXPEDITION LOG

# MACARONESIA ISLANDS



A VOYAGE FROM THE CAPE VERDE  
ISLANDS TO THE AZORES

2 - 19 APRIL 2009

Text and photographs by John Harrison  
Wildlife list and Map by Hannah Lawson

# Macaronesia Islands

2-19 April 2009

## Officers of the Polar Star

|                          |                       |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Captain                  | Slawski Leszek        |
| Staff Captain            | Milosz Lubkowski      |
| Chief Engineer           | Waclaw Kedziora       |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Officer  | Roberto 'Bobby' Sainz |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Officer  | Jerry Malapad         |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Engineer | Jan Mazur             |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Engineer | Michal Mis            |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Engineer | Marian Krucien        |
| Hotel Manager            | Florin Blaj           |
| Reception/Shop           | Irene Lao             |
| Head Chef                | Robert Ward           |
| Bar Staff                | Bartolemeo Orcullo    |
|                          | Ruel Merguita         |
| Doctor                   | Susan Newton          |

## Expedition Staff

|                   |                   |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Expedition Leader | Hannah Lawson     |
| Expedition Staff  | João Carneiro     |
|                   | Sally Gillies     |
|                   | John Harrison     |
|                   | Fernando da Silva |
|                   | Petra Zeitz       |

## Thursday 2 April – Praia, Cape Verde



*'How fresh was every sight and sound, on open main or  
winding shore!*

*We knew the merry world was round, and we might sail for  
evermore.'*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Report 18:00

Latitude 16°53.8' North, Longitude 023°30.5' West

Air temperature: 26°C

Pressure: 1016mb

Wind: NE F2

We came upon our new floating home, the *M/V Polar Star* at the dock in the bustling harbour of Praia on a bright, sunny afternoon. We had arrived from many countries to this small island in the eastern Atlantic Ocean, from which we were to embark on our expedition. After settling in and

exploring the ship, we received a warm welcome from Captain Leszek, the ship's staff and the Expedition Team whilst enjoying champagne and nibbles in the Observation Lounge. There was a mandatory Safety Briefing from Milosz, the First Officer, followed by lifeboat drill practice at which we found there were several different ways of getting into our life jackets!

We had advanced warning that one passenger had been held up but was on course to make the ship before midnight. It was at 02:12 in the morning that we loosed the cables and launched our adventure.

## Friday, 3 April – Fogo and Brava, Cape Verde

*'Watching the coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you – smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid or savage, and always a mute air of whispering, come and find out.'*

Joseph Conrad

Noon report

Position: latitude 14°54.8' North, longitude 024°30.3' West

Air temperature: 25°C

Pressure: 1017mb

Wind: NE F4

Light mist and cloud softened the sunrise but the sun soon burnt it away and in light winds and gentle seas we headed west to Fogo, the youngest of all the islands, whose name simply means Fire. This is because it has been volcanically active throughout historical time.



We dropped anchor off the small stone harbour of São Felipe on the west side of the island and lowered two Zodiacs. We landed beneath a fishing vessel at the jetty and headed for the minibuses to take us across the south of the island and then up to the caldera. Our local guides introduced us to some of the local crops at a brief stop where we saw cashew nuts, papaya,

bananas and potatoes eking a living on the low stone terraces designed to hold on to what little water is in the porous soils. Even patches of cabbages survived. There was also a silver-white plant, now only growing wild, but once cultivated to stuff mattresses and pillows. The land between was bone dry, and the grasses bleached by sun and desiccation to yellow and white. Water was once less scarce here, but the first occupations, principally by the Spanish and Portuguese led to loss of trees and naturally adapted vegetation. In less than a generation they saw fewer showers and mists.

Water is now garnered on concrete aprons and sold at 7 Escudos Cabo Verde for 25 litres and we saw a public wash-house where water was free for laundering. As we began to climb in earnest, green seeped back into the plants and we began to notice birds, especially grey-headed kingfishers which, despite their name, take mostly lizards and insects. But when they flew away and showed their iridescent turquoise-blue backs they looked all kingfisher. Domestic animals became more common, especially goats and donkeys.

In the fields there were many bushes of a bean which forms a staple part of the local diet; everywhere

we saw people sitting shelling the slender green pods. In the south it is called *congo*, but in the north: *elvilba*. There was also a tree called *purqueira* whose fruit was once boiled up to make soap for washing clothes. We stopped at a viewpoint at the entrance to the



Fogo National park for pictures and a spot of botanising. The land ahead of us was now much newer than the 1951 eruption which shaped much of the upper island. The black lavas and cinders dated from the most recent eruption which added a new cone to the Chã de Caldeiras in April 1995.

We drove on, surrounded by heaps of sharply angular lava, the type known as A'a, and smooth bosses of rock where the lava had pooled and solidified, sometimes with swirls at the edges, called rope lava. The last eruption destroyed many homes and a new settlement of Achada Furna was built to accommodate the people displaced, but many preferred to go back to the caldera to farm here at Portelo. It was astonishing to see shallow depressions in black cinders, with vivid green vines growing in them. They manage to produce 70,000 bottles of wine a year, but you can see why 90% of their food is imported. In the centre of the village was a small hotel where the promised cheese and wine had grown into a tempting table groaning with local dishes, wines, coffee, a very special marmalade and lots more. A small band played traditional dance music on guitar, fiddle, ukulele, a drum called a *tumba* shaped like one beaker on top of another, and an scratchy rhythm instrument known as a *reco-reco*.

### Caldera

A caldera (*caldeira* is the Portuguese) is a Spanish word meaning a cauldron or pot. It is a feature created after some major volcanic eruptions. When an eruption begins, molten magma has already risen up through the earth's crust forcing its way through weaknesses and creating enormous stresses. This may create a series of ring-shaped faults, forcing the crust to bulge upwards until the magma breaks through as lava and builds the classic cone shape as expelled material piles up around the centre of the eruption.

As the eruption relieves the pressure below, sometimes by cataclysmically blowing apart the main cone, the magma may no longer be able to hold up the bulge it created in the crust. The crust will then collapse downwards, shearing along the ring faults creating a depression where the high point of the volcano once was. It will be surrounded by a much lower, wider crater rim: more like a crown-shape than a cone. This is a caldera.



Some of us walked around the village meeting the friendly locals, before winding our way down the narrow stone roads, with kestrels overhead, for more food on board. During lunch the *Polar Star* relocated the short distance west to Brava. Although the wind had

picked up it had backed to the west and we benefited from the lee of the island. Captain Leszek spun the ship round in the tight harbour of Furna and dropped anchor. While locals rowed out stern lines to the quay, we found ourselves in perfect shelter a hundred yards from shore.

Waiting minibuses took us on a tour of this most westerly of the southern islands. It was capped by low cloud so we were soon in cool grey conditions and the mirador provided only tantalising glimpses of the earth below.



It was pointless to continue higher, so we drove out to the west in our convoy of five buses, through cuts into pale tuff of volcanoclastic deposits: volcanic ash with rocks embedded in it. There were several photo-stops, including a final view over the bay of Fajan de Agua, where palms softened the rugged cliffs and steep-sided hills rearing up from the westward-facing bay.

Some of these ridges were radial dykes fanning out from volcanic vents, which are harder, and resist erosion. On the far side was a rare piece of flat ground, most of it intensely cultivated, but across it were the remains of a perilous-looking short air-strip. There was a stop in the town of Vila Nova Sintra, the home of poet Eugenie Tavares, where we could walk to the pretty square, down an avenue where the orange street lights were beginning to glow brightly in the dusk. It was dark at the dock when the Zodiacs took us to the welcoming circle of light at the gangway and up to our cabins and dinner. Afterwards Hannah briefed us on an adjustment to our itinerary, visiting São Vicente first. She also pointed out that we were not en route to it yet, but stationary, which was not planned. At first we thought fishing gear had become entangled around a propeller. It turned out the local pilot, who had assured us we had 20 metres of water under us, was wrong by about 14 metres, quite important for the *Polar Star* which draws 7 metres. Our starboard side was held on a soft bottom until the tide rose a little and we could power off. Petra optimistically continued to give us a potted introduction to the history, economy and ethnology of the islands. We were rewarded just before 21:30, when we sprang free with a single bound, and set sail on our twelve-hour cruise, moving from the dry leeward islands, to the arid windward group.

## Saturday 4 April – Mindelo and São Vicente, Cape Verde

*'The Cape Verde Islands have a very misleading name, for I never saw a single green thing, everything was dry and sterile.'*

Christopher Columbus 1498

Noon report

Position: latitude 16°53.4' North, longitude 024°59.9' West

Air temperature: 25°C

Pressure: 1017mb

Wind: NE F5



Dawn saw another sunrise with light cloud and some white horses on the wave tops. We breakfasted then relaxed out on deck as the western islands of the group came closer. As we came into the bay of Mindelo, the mountains on our starboard side resembled the profile of George Washington, though it has also been claimed for other

personages and a deity. It is the port and principal city of the island of São Vicente, named for the saint's day of its discovery on 22 January 1462.

Customs had to be cleared so it was around 11:30 that we descended the gangway to enjoy free time to explore what is now a busy commercial centre with ambitions to overtake Praia as the capital. It is a neat clean town with stylish buildings, both public and private.

After lunch, taken either in the town or back on board, there was a coach tour. It began with the city highlights. First the jail; our reputation must have preceded us. It was constructed as a fort against predations by English gentlemen adventurers, or pirates as everyone else called them. Joking apart, all other nations with significant maritime interest were in the same illegal trade, seizing goods and vessels. There were fine views over the port and city centre, and this no doubt has influenced developers to build a luxury hotel and casino there. It is to be hoped that one armed bandits prove better for the economy than pirates.



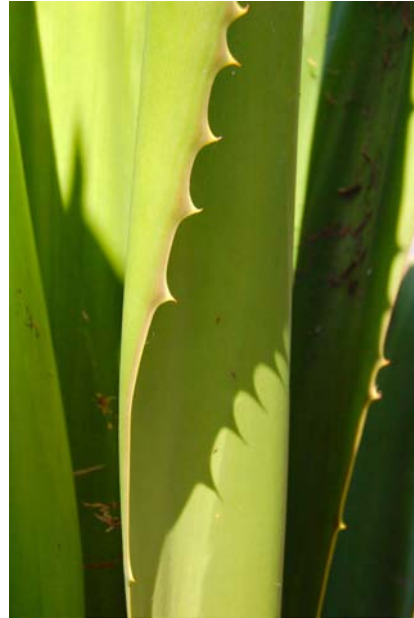
The town centre had quietened for the afternoon, and the British built former Customs House, now an exhibitions centre was closed, but the markets were still open and the fish market in particular was noisy and bustling. Heavy grey trunks of marlin and tuna lay about. Some were filleted and opened to dry in the sun for two days on the bottoms

of up-turned boats. Scarlet grouper fish and spotted eels lay by silver sardines while wistful thin cats gazed up in hope, but not much expectation. The city walking tour ended at the African market which had first been a salt pan, then, flat land being scarce been reclaimed for a cricket pitch before becoming a market now selling a modest range of clothes (which are expensive due to heavy import taxes), souvenirs, and the usual bric-a-brac of markets everywhere.

Our coaches then took us out of town into the parched interior. All the local water in the taps is now produced by desalination, as rainfall, always sparse, has diminished in living memory. Strips of dirt which, a few decades ago, produced potatoes, beans and maize, no longer receive the third rains that made them viable, and the hard-won terraces support only bare and barren dust.

When we descended to the coast, a shell beach and offshore surf illuminated the coast in turquoise and white. At a shady café (meaning cool, not dubious) traditional snacks and a choice of beverages were available including the famous sugar cane liquor ‘grog’ which in most countries would only be available on prescription for cases of assisted euthanasia. Some swam in the lagoon, others just chilled listening to the fine local band. It was time to return, but first we threaded our way through the village and saw men laying out sails made from rice bags. They make fine sails but quickly go brittle in the strong sun, so they have a short life, but the material is free.

After dinner, in briefing and recap, Hannah and Petra gave us an introduction to our visit to Santo Antão. Fernando spoke about island musical traditions and local star Cesaria Evora. She is a Cape Verde singer brought to wider notice and then international fame in middle age. It has made her rich, and we saw her fine house in town, but fame took her away to Lisbon, which she did not like, then Paris which she loves and still lives in. You can take the woman out of Cape Verde but you can’t take Cape Verde out of the lady or her music. Hannah played a selection of Cesaria Evora’s work and the Consuelo Velasquez classic *Besame Mucho* alone was enough to hook you.



## Sunday 5 April – Santo Antão, Cape Verde

Today’s quote is at the end – you’ll see why!

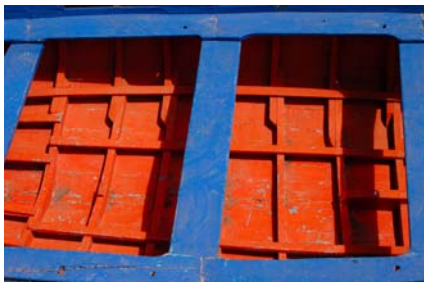
Noon report

Position: latitude 17°00.9’ North, longitude 025°03.5’ West

Air temperature: 22°C

Pressure: 1018mb

Wind: E F5



Our approach to Santo Antão belied the advertised greenness of this island, but we were approaching from the rain-shadow side. The dockside was reputed to be deep enough to leave about 2.5 metres of water under our keel, but we’d heard that before. The captain approached at dead slow, staff calling out depths and officers scurrying from

side to side checking our position. Occasionally the bow-thruster blew up sediment and the depth gauge went blank for tantalising minutes. The clearance went down to 2 metres, but the captain had already called halt, and we were alongside the dock.

Three minibuses took us with local guides through the principal town of Porto Novo and up into the interior. At first only the hardy native acacia trees struggled out of the dust and rocks. Even in the lifetime of the young guides, a village across the ravine had been abandoned, as rains no longer supported the crops which just a generation ago grew on the neat terraces. The vegetation grew richer and greener, with introduced pine trees and even Lombardy poplars among the native species. More domestic animals could be supported, and we saw donkeys, the ubiquitous goats, and even an occasional cow. We stopped at a curve in the road and stepped out to a magnificent view, with the ground falling away three thousand feet beneath and a backdrop of steep volcanic ridges all around. As high up as a human could safely tread, were pockets of fields growing potatoes, cassava, maize and other vegetables.

A short drive round the corner was a view down into a complete crater, where we stopped to see the floor level and cultivated. Two brothers once owned and farmed it all, but sold parts to absentee landlords who let it to landless workers who pay half their crops in rent. One handicap is that a local insect pest sometimes infests root crops and results in a ban on exports to neighbouring islands. Most of São Antão's trade is with nearest neighbour São Vicente.

A short way along the ridge that the road now followed was another fine *mirador* with cute children content to be photographed and giggle at their pictures on our digital screens. More coy were guinea-pigs, grown for food, so perhaps understandably shier about meeting people. The buses continued along until we came to a spot that was not for sufferers of vertigo. The road, which had been coursing along the flank of the mountain, in places cut out of the rock by hand, now ran along the top of the ridge with three-thousand foot drops on either side. It was a good place to observe the local falcons and ravens flying below us.

We then descended into the landscape we had been overlooking from the mountains, hitting the coast

at the oldest village: Povoação. We had half an hour to stroll around the historic centre and look in on the Palm Sunday service at the church, over three hundred years old. As well as palms, the plant strewn before Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem, locals also carried fragrant herbs, especially rosemary.

Round the corner after a dramatic drive along the coast road, was the fishing village of Ponta do Sol. At the harbour, traditional fishing boats were drawn up out of the surging waters of the harbour, some were still equipped with a short mast and oars but they were



also fitted for outboard motors. On the quay youths cut and filleted eels. There were ruddy turnstones on the shore rocks but a surprising absence of gulls given the regular supply of tasty scraps. It was then time to walk up the hill to the new restaurant in the square where a youth festival was being held.

We were treated to a buffet of fish, chicken and local vegetables with tempting sweet deserts to



follow. An hour took us back along the scenic road to the quay where the local ferry captain had kindly moored askew, bow out in the bay, to allow us to remain alongside. Before 15:00 we were sailing away from the hospitable people of Cape Verde, to the Canaries.

We completed a leisurely afternoon of reading, sunbathing, napping or all three, before Hannah briefed us on the next few days. John talked about how educated people of the sixteenth century debated the morality of slavery. Sally explained why the island had two such different sides, and answered questions on volcanoes. As the sun set, Hannah took us through some of the birds we had been seeing ashore and others we hoped to see in passage north.

*'The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out :  
At one stride comes the dark;'*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

After dinner, the film *Deserts* was shown, part of the BBC *Planet Earth* series by living legend David Attenborough. We learned how to adapt if we were left alone on Fogo or Brava.



## Monday 6 April – At Sea for Canary Islands

*'Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing  
Beloved from pole to pole !  
To Mary Queen the praise be given !  
She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven,  
That slid into my soul.'*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Noon report

Position: latitude 20°08.1' North, longitude 022°35.0' West

Air temperature: 24°C

Pressure: 1020mb

Wind: NNE F4

A day at sea gave time to linger a little longer in bed before our lecture program began at 09:30 with Sally's presentation *Islands in the Sea – Part 1*. She gave a brief introduction to plate tectonics and the processes of the earth's crust before showing how these forces have created the islands of Macaronesia. Petra then outlined the history and geography of our next destination in *The Canary Islands*.

After lunch there was a showing of the movie *Deep Blue* with exceptional footage of the life under our oceans. Hannah then completed the talks with *Darwin and the Origin of Species*, the book published from the modest offices of John Murray opposite the Ritz Hotel in London 150 years ago. It sold out in a day and has been called the most powerful explanatory theory ever devised.



Happy Hour and dinner followed. *The Making of Deep Blue*, last night's film, a documentary of the documentary, was shown explaining how the scenes were recorded.

## Tuesday 7 April – At Sea for Canary Islands

*Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,  
The glorious Sun uprist :  
Then all averred, I had killed the bird  
That brought the fog and mist.'*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Noon report

Position: latitude 23°54.1' North, longitude 019°40.0' West

Air temperature: 22°C

Pressure: 1017mb

Wind: NNE F5



The steady weather continued. Though the breeze was fresher it was directly onto the bow which for most people gives a relatively comfortable motion. As we came north there was little more daylight each day but little in the way of wildlife. One of the benefits of smoking is that it does take you out on deck frequently, and it was thanks to our regulars that dolphins were spotted.

Our programme of talks continued with Sally's *Islands in the Sea – Part II*, describing the formation of our next three island groups: the Canaries, Madeira and the Azores. The rest of the morning was occupied with engine room tours. There is as much ship below the waterline as above, including the most important part: the engine room. Many of the crew are dedicated to keeping all this running smoothly, an unseen but vital task.

The wind was picking up steadily during the morning to Force 5, but still bringing the waves on our bow. Wave height grows with three things: the wind speed, the fetch (distance it has blown over sea), and the time it has been blowing. We witnessed factor three, as the waves built from 1-2 metres to 3-4 metres by late afternoon. Meanwhile we watched the film *Winged Migration* following the routes of birds which cover huge distances round the globe, often enjoying the wind to take them gliding, sometimes fighting it. Then John gave a presentation, the world premiere of his talk *Columbus - Re-drawing the World*, a look at the background and politics to the voyage, and the way it changed our perception of the world, and even of paradise.

Soon it was time to tread carefully to the Observation Lounge for Recap and Briefing. Hannah had the task of reporting that the weather was slowing us down and we would not, realistically, be arriving in Tenerife early next afternoon, despite using both engines to maximise our speed. Further details on timing would be subject to progress overnight, with the wind forecast to die down tomorrow afternoon. Hannah then gave us an unforgettable lesson in penguin walking, helping us to stay as stable as possible round the moving ship. John recounted the less than glamorous end to Columbus's voyage home, when, in the Azores, half his party were seized going to thanksgiving mass in penitential style, wearing only their shirts.

Dinner followed, with a few percussion effects from aluminium lids taking an excursion across the galley floor. The sea was definitely rising. There was an opportunity afterwards to see the documentary *Shallow Seas*, following a humpback mother and her calf on an epic journey, through shallow seas: another Attenborough special.

## Wednesday 8 April – At Sea for Canary Islands

*'And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he  
Was tyrannous and strong:'*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Noon report

Position: latitude 27°08.2' North, longitude 017°05.3' West

Air temperature: 20°C

Pressure: 1018mb

Wind: NNE F6



It was a disturbed night for many as the ship bucked and shuddered. We were asked for our own safety not to venture out on the decks, which become slippery and potentially hazardous when wet. Breakfast was less well attended, through a mixture of sickness and tiredness. Hardworking Sally was back on the microphone with *Adrift in Time*, an introduction

to the vastness of geological time and the mechanics of plate tectonics. Were we just hoping it was calming a little as Hannah took over the lectern for *Fins, Flipper and Flukes*: a look at the cetaceans found in these waters. We hope to see more as we approach the Canaries and particularly the Azores.

Lunch was still a little quiet but we have eaten well enough since we came on board not to starve in a day. The sky had lifted a little, having been rather grey during the morning. The bow was periodically punching sheets of spray into the air, the highest of which were whipping over the bridge. After lunch there was an additional feature film: *Master and Commander*, a fine adaptation of the novel by Patrick O'Brian.

At recap and briefing Hannah reported that the unexpectedly strong head-on winds had slowed us down considerably despite our switching to two engines. Added to the southward Canary current, this would delay our arrival in Tenerife until mid-evening: disappointing, but, like bad traffic on the roads for a landsman, something we had to live with. We were required to go to Santa Cruz de Tenerife to clear customs into Spain, and pick up fuel and an additional member of staff.

We had hoped that in late afternoon the ship would benefit from coming into the lee of Mount Teide which, at 3718 metres (12,300') was expected to give shelter. It didn't happen and it had become clear that our excursion on the island would not be possible, except as a walk for night owls around 22:30. So after dinner, there was a showing of the short masterpiece *Round Cape Horn*, a film shot by deck-hand Irving Johnson in 1930 on the four-masted clipper *Peking*. It is the only footage of a Cape Horn storm shot from the rigging. In old age, as a master mariner he added the quirky but brilliant commentary. It made you queasy just to watch. Around 22:00 the lights of Santa Cruz came up on our starboard bow and we docked at 22:30.

## Thursday 9 April – La Gomera, Canary Islands

*'Away with systems! Away with a corrupt world!  
Let us breathe the air of the Enchanted Island.'*

George Meredith

Noon report

Position: latitude 27°08.2' North, longitude 017°05.3' West

Air temperature: 20°C

Pressure: 1018mb

Wind: NNE F6



George Meredith's quote is apt because, due to strange currents between the islands, the Canaries were known by early navigators as the Enchanted Islands. We left the harbour of Santa Cruz at 04:00 having lost a little time to the *mañana* work ethic of the port authorities and saved a little by taking in 100 tonnes of fuel rather than 200, plenty to take us through to the Azores. The wind blew us swiftly down the east coast of Tenerife but was against us once more as we turned north-west towards La Gomera. The Canaries have adopted a 'Keep the Mornings Dark' time zone so we put forward our watches one more hour at 09:00 and enjoyed visits from three cetacean species. Off the resort of Los Cristianos at the southern tip of the island we had common dolphins alongside and Cory's shearwaters gliding swiftly overhead. Soon there was a call for pilot whales, distinguished by their rounded and crumpled-looking dorsal fins. They seemed to be logging, or dozing on the surface.

Shortly after bottle-nosed dolphins came bow riding, up to three at a time. As we lost the limited shelter of the west end of Tenerife the bow deck became suitable only for amphibians and we retired higher to watch the pilot board and the *Polar Star* enter San Sebastián.

A coach with local guide Diana was waiting to take us on our tour of the botanically most interesting island of the group, with the Garajonay National Park at its heart, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The town of San Sebastián has a population of 9,000



people employed mostly in the port, tourism and a small service sector. Our road climbed steeply through hairpins taking us west through thickets of prickly pear, brought here to support the cochineal insect which was unfortunate enough, when crushed to yield the best scarlet die before the days of artificial chemical colourings. Until the early twentieth century it reddened scarlet hunting jackets

and the red coats of the Redcoats of the British army. The agave cactus was used for sisal, a tough fibre, and we saw goats which on Gomera are milked for a fine local cheese, often mixed with a little sheep's milk and smoked to help preserve it.

The slopes were also graced by date palms, *Phoenix canariensis*, which can be topped to yield syrup known locally as *guarapo*. Trees can only be kept for one year or two or they die, but those which have been harvested can be recognised even after the top grows back by a constriction in the trunk at the place they were cropped. The tree is the official botanical symbol of the Canaries. We stopped at a viewpoint with vistas back down the valley to San Sebastián before continuing higher into cool breezy conditions. Our next stop was dominated by two volcanic plugs towering above, the harder rocks which cooled more slowly and resist erosion better than the surrounding lavas and ash.

Higher up, and truly in the clouds now we stopped for an hour's hike along a trail through the lauri-silva environment, a laurel forest. This is the largest and best remnant of a once extensive type of damp forest; it still covers more than 6000 hectares (15,000 acres). As soon as we entered it was remarkable how the mosses trapped and held moisture.

Beneath the canopy were many of the endemic plants of Gomera: plants which grow here and nowhere else. The Canaries have 20% of the endemic plants registered in the European Community, and half of those are in Gomera.

Lunch was overdue, and we took our packed lunches to



Laguna Grande, conspicuous by there being no visible laguna or lake. But there were restaurant facilities and a picnic area, attended by the beautiful blue variation of the male chaffinch, which varies from one island group to another.

We continued through landscapes dominated by deep ravines. La Gomera is the third oldest island (after Lanzarote and Fuerteventura) at around 12 million years old, and has not suffered volcanism for two million years. Moreover it has a high interior rising to

1487 metres (4460 feet), so river erosion has played an important part in shaping the landscape. We descended to the valley and village of Hermigua, through plants whose sap was used to make a rubbery, latex-like substance which could be used to seal barrels. In Spanish rubber is Goma, and this is one theory of several as to where the name Gomera might come from. Also prominent along the river was a local species of willow: *Salix canariensis*. Willow bark is the original source of aspirin. Views to the north-east were now affording sight of the peak of Mount Teide on Tenerife and we stopped by the roadside for photos, in view of an old banana quay, now just concrete piers. The road on which we crossed the mountains was itself a huge labour, it took 35 years starting in 1914 to cut through the rocks and pave it in stone.

At the craft shop at Hermigua we found, among the usual postcards and trinkets, local cheeses, the red and green *mojo* sauces, liquors and liqueurs. Those who bought the local aguardiente and tasted it, may feel it is the ideal present for the person who promised to water their lettuces while they were away, (if they return to find them brown and three feet high).

We came down to San Sebastián again and some folk were dropped off in town, to sight-see, take a relaxing drink or eat ashore. Although few businesses were open it was a pleasant walk, past quiet *Tascas* or bars and cafes. The only people hurrying were locals late for mass inside the warm red walls of the old church. On board dinner was at 19:00 and at 20:30 there was a brief recap and briefing. Hannah outlined our plans to tour La Palma, one of the quietest of the Canary Islands. Petra told a dark tale about Columbus's 'alleged' mistress Beatriz. As, legally, you cannot libel the dead, let's go for it: mistress.



From the red stone and whitewash tower in the park on the shore she wrote to Spain telling of her husband's murder by the natives for taking a Guanche princess to his bed. In vengeance she killed all the men of the island. More cheery was the evening film *Ocean Deep* from the BBC Planet Earth series, looking at deep water life.

There was time to go back to town before our sailing time of midnight, but after a long day there were few late night revellers. Our pilot came on board at 23:42, and we were away.

## Good Friday 10 April – La Palma, Canary Islands

*'Where lies the Land to which yon Ship must go?'*

William Wordsworth

Noon report

Position: latitude 28°40.5' North, longitude 017°45.9' West

Air temperature: 17°C

Pressure: 1022mb

Wind: NE F4

We slipped alongside as breakfast was ending and, as our coach was early, we disembarked as soon as the gangway was in place. A young woman in charming traditional local dress welcomed us and we climbed on board with ex-pat Englishman Robert to guide us for the day. First we stopped in the centre of another Santa Cruz,

also discovered on the festival of the Holy Cross: 3 May, in this case in 1493. We walked through stylish streets to the church of the Salvador, the Saviour. Construction began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the naves and aisles are still substantially of that time. The details were remodelled between 1818 and 1840, and it was very sympathetically done.



We continued to the seafront where we found a row of traditional houses with balconies, overhanging ovens and, unusually for Spanish, buildings, sash windows. Potted plants spilled in profusion over the balconies. Along the street were attractive small trees, with large round leaves and silver trunks, called sea grapes. The coach took us up through the town past a wooden clad concrete version of the *Santa María*, and along streets lined with the attractive orchid tree. We drove past Columbus's flagship, fine wood hiding a concrete base, past a faux-fort and up into the country to a devotional church: *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*, Our Lady of the Snows. This incarnation of the Virgin was seen near Rome and has proved a popular shrine since a procession ended a severe drought in 1676. She is kept behind a red curtain at the top of the altar and taken in

procession every five years; the next event is in 2010. On the walls were votive gifts of paintings giving thanks for delivery at sea.

We stopped for an overview of the harbour and then headed for the National Park. Unlike the majority of the Canaries, the main economy of La Palma is agriculture and not tourism (La Palma has approximately 150,000 tourists a year compared with the same number each week in Lanzarote or Tenerife). The reliable rainfall has produced a fertile island that is a major producer of fruit, particularly bananas, avocados, mangos and lychees that are exported mainly to Europe. Tobacco is also an important export and there is a long tradition on the island of hand-rolling high quality cigars. Winston Churchill was an aficionado of La Palma cigars.

Along the way, Robert explained a little about the history of the people of La Palma. The original inhabitants of the Canaries had been the Guanches, a Berber people originating from North Africa and arriving in the islands about by 200AD possibly as long ago as 500AD. They were a primitive people living in caves and using only stone tools. However they got here, they never had, or soon lost, the arts of boatbuilding and navigation. Their society was dominated by the women elders who acted as advisors to the democratically elected kings and queens. Isolated from the rest of the world, the Guanches had developed little by the time the Spaniards arrived about 500 years ago. It took the Spanish about 150 years to conquer the islands and the Guanche peoples were annihilated in a further 50 years, their blood surviving only through mixed liaisons.



An odd-looking building was visible in the valley, and that usually signals a visitor centre. But inside it contained a fine introduction to the national park. We then climbed up to the little car park where we began our trail walk. The beautiful Canary Island pines perfumed the air. They have thick bark which allows them to survive forest fires and regenerate quickly. There was a choice of route for the return, most of us opting for the narrow more demanding trail which turned out to be less scary than advertised by our guide but rather more physically demanding. On the ridge we could see white dots which were part of Europe's top astronomical observatories, one of which has the largest optical telescope on earth.



Hungry stomachs called us to the Restaurante Balcon de Taburiente where we could fill the gap left by looking at the stomach-dropping view below us. Local tapas delicacies including croquettes, tortillas and cheeses were delicious and soon disappeared, but the pork crackling in a hybrid local flour, which looked more like a DIY product than a food, was still available for take-aways as we left.

We then dropped down the hill to the ship, some going directly into town, some directly to siesta. Dinner was put back to allow time to see the beginning of the procession from El Salvador church. In recap we saw pictures and video clips of strange hooded figures in chains. That was just the staff. As dinner started we loosed our lines and set sail for the Salvagens, described for us by Hannah and Hugo. The wind was still stiff as we left harbour, and the moon fighting to be seen.

## Saturday 11 April – Salvagen Islands

*'One of the gladdest moments in human life, me thinks  
is the departure upon a distant journey to unknown lands.'*

Sir Richard Burton 1856

Noon report

Position: latitude 27°08.2' North, longitude 017°05.3' West

Air temperature: 20°C

Pressure: 1018mb

Wind: NNE F6

Hannah's wake-up call was made in darkness now we were on Canaries time. During the night the sea had not let us forget the swells. It had also slowed us and we had time after breakfast to watch our approach to the remote and seldom visited Salvagen Islands, back in Portuguese Macaronesia. What we saw was grey low islands guarded by rugged islets and long reefs on which the surf exploded.





We approached slowly seeking some shelter, and Hannah, Hugo and João went in a scout boat to reconnoitre the sea conditions and the landing site at Salvagen Pequena. We rigged both gangways to give the best opportunity of manageable boarding conditions. We were soon boarding, taking our time and waiting for the quiet spells between waves to step into the Zodiac. Then there was a long ride, surrounded by Cory's shearwaters, our

drivers going easy to minimise the spray, before we turned into a sheltered rocky shore and gathered ready for a short walk led by Hugo. We took care to mind the open nests of the terns (one common tern had laid its clutch of three eggs in a shallow scrape in the sand) and to keep off the turf, which was honeycombed with petrel and shearwater nests. Hugo fetched a white-face petrel from its burrow and showed us the yellow flashes of colour on the webbing of the feet, and the tubenose that helps them secrete salt without having large heavy kidneys. The beach was strewn with the remnants of the twenty-year-old wreckage of a cargo vessel, and a disappointing amount of light floating garbage.

Before returning we had time to see a beautiful buff and yellow sea-slug and red crabs brightening up the rock pools. Soon it was time for more fun and games at the gangway before an early noon lunch, after which we continued north a short way to Isle Grande.

We dropped anchor at 13:40 and lowered a scout boat and two other Zodiacs. The anchorage did not benefit from as much shelter as we had hoped and while the scout party reported safe conditions onshore where the two national park staff were no doubt delighted to meet not just

three Portuguese speakers, but a case of fine Ushuaia beer. However the gangway was a different story, neither port nor starboard offered the protection we require for safe Zodiac operations. The captain took the ship as close to shore as he dared, assisted by Sally taking her Zodiac ahead to watch out for uncharted surprises. After nearly two hours trying



Hannah reluctantly decided we could not run an operation with the safety margins necessary and we abandoned the landing. There was an opportunity to enjoy the Cory's shearwaters all around, a few yellow-legged gulls overhead and, as we sailed away, a small group of dolphins showing off. We set a course for the Ilhas Desertas just south east of the main island of Madeira, hoping the trade winds would prove a little less reliable in the coming week!

At 17:30 there was a reception in the Polar Bar for the Elderhostel group and then recap and briefing for our arrival in the Ilhas Desertas and Madeira. Hugo explained what might be open over Easter Sunday, and how you could hike at night to hear, maybe see, Zino's Petrels. They are similar to the regular Madeiran petrels but have broader bills. Sally talked about today's geology; we had even seen fragments of coral overlain by later basalt deposits.

## Sunday 12 April –Desertas Islands and Funchal, Madeira

*'What is travelling? Changing your place? By no means!  
Travelling is changing your opinions and your prejudices.'*

Anatole France

Noon report

Position: latitude 32°34.9' North, longitude 016°34.4' West

Air temperature: 16°C

Pressure: 1024mb

Wind: NNE F4

Easter Sunday morning brought some typical British weather to this distant corner of Europe, with cool temperatures and a brisk breeze. We lowered the Zodiacs beneath the steep slopes of the long slender island of Deserta Grande, and a scout boat headed for the shelter of the beach occupied by the national park wardens, in the lee of an old rock fall.

The fresh red rock exposed above them told us before the *vigilantes* did, that the climb up the cliff might not be an option. Just a week before they had experienced a series of falls just to the north of their little complex. A large section of the path which made an already precarious passage up to the ridge had been swept away. But we were free to make our way over the boulder beach and round the paths where Cory's shearwaters were nesting among the rocks, but not showing themselves. As they do not yet have eggs both of the paired birds may still go out feeding during the day. But there were pipits, barn swallows and sparrow making a living in the limited area of vegetation, which was replete with now familiar flowers. The centre was well set up with a small shop and a seal hospital. There can be few human settlements where a local population of thirty has its own hospital, so the Mediterranean Monk Seals would be well looked after if unwell.



Before returning to the ship there was time to explore the coast and its caves, hoping for a glimpse of these rare animals, here making a comeback from a low of eight individuals. There are other colonies on the African coast and in the Mediterranean Sea, but these animals, long hunted unsustainably, are not assured. David, Sally Suzie and Hannah were briefly endangered after an impromptu dip in the caves to prove you couldn't swim right through. Shortly after 11:00 we were sailing to the large island visible, most of the time, from our anchorage: Madeira. After lunch we approached the harbour of Funchal, the only city on Madeira, containing half the island's population. Red pantile roofs were scattered all over the steep hills, and we slid into harbour alongside a very modern vessel, the large German cruise ship *Aida*, and a short distance from a more old-fashioned rig: a replica of Columbus's flagship the *Santa María*.



We had the afternoon and evening free to explore the city on our own. It has grown and modernised itself hugely in recent years, with heavy investment in roads and other infrastructure, the European Regional Development Fund being a major investor. The historic core has been renovated but not lost, and away from the squares, vivid with the purple blooms of jacaranda trees as well as startling orange flowers and bird of paradise orchids, there were small side streets busy with traditional shops. Sé do Funchal, dominates the east end of Avenida Arriaga, and once had the largest diocese in the world, as the huge territories of the New World were administered from this cathedral.

### **Dividing the New World: The Treaty of Tordesillas 1493**

When the Genoese, Christopher Columbus, from the north of modern Italy, returned from his first voyage of discovery to the Spanish Court which had sponsored him, he was forced to put in to a Portuguese port. So Spain's competitors were the first to hear his news. He soon found out one piece of good news. Soon after Columbus had left Spain, on 10 August 1492, Alexander VI Rodrigo de Borgia, father of Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia, became Pope. He was Spanish, and corrupt; he had bought his way to the Papacy.

On the noon flood tide of 15 March 1493, Columbus crossed the Saltes bar at Palos, Spain 224 days after leaving. His advanced report included all the classical myths a traveller was required to see, if his account was to be credible: Amazons born with tails, cannibals, and no bad news. Columbus was summoned to court at Barcelona and received well. By mid-April a copy of his report was in Rome, with a petition from Ferdinand and Isabela seeking confirmation from the Pope of their rights over the new lands. Alexander VI did so on 3 May, but, mindful of respecting Portugal and her possessions in the east, he drew a line down the map of the world as he knew it. To the west of this line all new possessions, seen and unseen, belonged to Spain. Any to the east were Portuguese. This high-handed division of spoils led King François of France to demand to 'see the clause in Adam's will which entitled the Kings of Castile and Portugal to divide the earth between them.' One Indian chief who had the Pope's arrangement explained to him, listened patiently to how someone who had never seen his land could divided it between two people the chief had never met and remarked 'Well he must have been drunk at the time.' But the treaty was valued by its two beneficiaries, and Argentina continues to cite it in support of its own claims to the Falkland Islands.

If you were quick, there was time to take the eleven-minute journey in one of the forty-one eight-seater gondolas and rise over the city at alarming heights before being deposited at the gate of the Botanical Gardens. It has a large range of plants, especially from South Africa, as Britons returning from service in that colony would stop at Madeira to help acclimatise gently to the weather back home. The cleverly laid out paths take you round the steeply sloping site, and the museum and gallery which was housing a large exhibition of Zimbabwe sculpture.



## Monday 13 April – Day Tour of Madeira

*'Pass the Madeira, M'dear.'*

Comic lyric, Flanders and Swan

Noon report

Position: latitude 32°38.5' North, longitude 016°54.8' West

Air temperature: 24°C

Pressure: 1023mb

Wind: Light airs

The weather down at sea level was promising but we took an extra layer onto the waiting bus, knowing how quickly the air on these islands cools with altitude. Nanda our local guide began a full day tour with a ride to the top of Pico da Torre commanding views over Winston Churchill's old haunt from 1950: Câmara de Lobos, where he kept busy painting watercolours: he was a very talented amateur. This was the village that made the 1998 reconstruction of the *Santa Maria* in the main harbour.

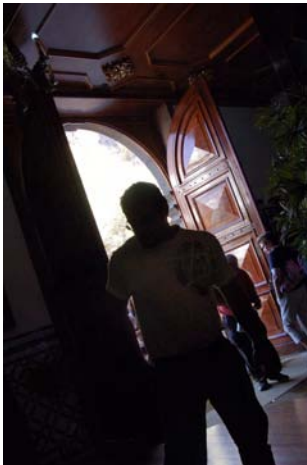
The land around here was bare and dry until the construction of the irrigation channel the Levada do Norte in 1949; it is mostly under cultivation for bananas. But it is a natural plant, fennel, wild and abundant here, that gave the capital its name. More cities should be named after herbs! A short distance down the coast we stopped at the top of



the highest sea cliffs in Europe at Cabo Girão; only some show-off location in Taiwan exceeds them on the world stage. 580 metres below fields lay like a child's model. Lizards scuttled over the walls, living and dying without knowing the danger lurking nearby. We could see the Deserted Islands on the horizon. Our next stop was in Ribeira Brava, a quaint small town with a well-preserved church and quiet

narrow streets with a pleasant mixture of local and tourist shops. Hannah, never missing a trick, spotted dolphins out to sea.

We began crossing to the north side of the island and Nanda pointed out the African Lilies or agapanthus flowers at the roadside, locally known as Henry's Crowns after Prince Henry the navigator. We were soon at a viewpoint in the cool edge of the clouds where both sides of the island were visible. Heather trees and Lily-of-the-Valley trees



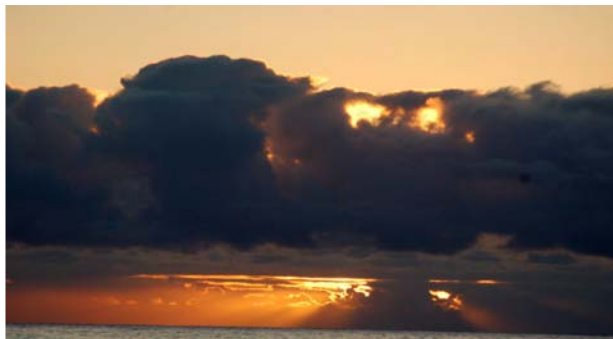
were in evidence in the laurel forest as we began to fall down to the north west coast. Waterfalls cascaded over the cliffs, making life interesting for people driving convertible cars. We stopped at the Vêu de Noiva, or Bride's Veil, which also had fine views west down the coast and a souvenir shop selling more or less anything that had ever come ashore or been made in Madeira. Judging by the amount of thick knitwear, locals feel the cold more than visitors.

Before lunch we met up with Hugo one final time to walk along a valley floor seeking the endemic local bird, the laurel pigeon. A few were lucky, seeing one briefly in flight. At the stream flashes of the Madeiran firecrest could be seen, crossing the stream at photo-defying speed. Nearing two o'clock with famine descending, we made the pretty resort of

Porto Moniz, famous for its natural bathing pools, and the Orca restaurant. We chose between a beef main course and the local scabbard fish which is a deep-water creature caught between 1400 and 1800 metres, with a black skin and very white flesh. It came in batter with a wide choice of extras to fill hungry stomachs, and two Portuguese wines to aid digestion.

A final look at the coast came at Calheta with its white sheltered beach and warm sunshine. A burst on the only motorway, flying over high bridges and diving through tunnels brought us back to Funchal.

A few jumped off in town for last minute shopping or communications, but most came back to the ship for 18:30 dinner and a cruise along the coast, departing a little earlier than programmed to guarantee punctual arrival, and enjoy the coast before darkness. We loosed the lines at 19:08 and watched the light leave the ridges round the bay. A small group of common dolphins toyed with the idea of escorting us out but decided it was nicer to stay in the bay. We passed Cabo Girão which looked no smaller from the sea, and, our bows pointed to the warm grey bank of cloud cut through with orange streamers, we took our leave of a beautiful island, our spirits assisted by a post-dinner happy hour.



## Tuesday, 14 April – At Sea to Azores

*'And the sun went down, and the stars came out far over the summer seas,'*

*The Revenge, Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

Noon report

Position: latitude 34°05.9' North, longitude 019°45.2' West

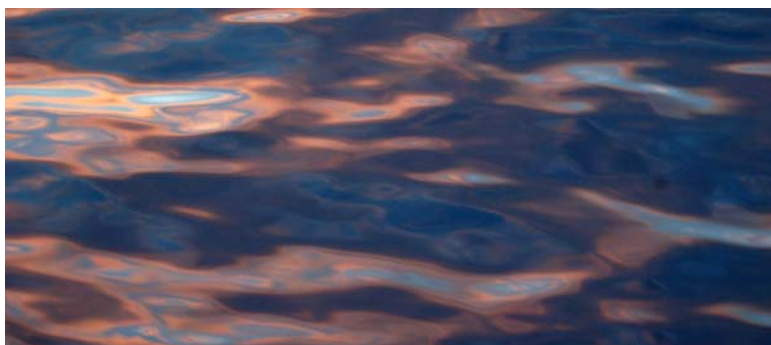
Air temperature: 18°C

Pressure; 1023mb

Wind: NW F5

The swells have returned, coming in off our starboard bow. There was time to review pictures, watch for wildlife and slip in a lecture or two. Hannah kicked off the morning's presentations with *Life on Earth*, a look at classification and the wonders of animal life. Sally then began a theme running through the day with *The Burning Truth About Global Warming*. The evidence is there for those who want to see it. It's unusual to retire as a politician and become less popular, but Al Gore arguably did this, in Republican eyes at least. He has been on the campaign trail arguing for better understanding of climate change and we showed his documentary stating the case: *An Inconvenient Truth*.

John broke the trend with a lecture on the most famous sea poem in English, and arguably its greatest narrative poem. *The Birth of the Ancient Mariner* told the story of the creation of the poems, as it developed an idea during a country walk, to a classic. Poetry can make you very thirsty, but it was only a short wait until Happy Hour, then dinner. The formal entertainments were concluded with Hollywood's version of global warming: *The Day After Tomorrow*. But if Hollywood thinks global warming is real, surely it isn't?



## Wednesday, 15 April – At Sea and Santa María, Azores (Portugal)

*'Who hath desired the sea? The sight of water unbounded  
The heath and the halt and the crash of the camber wind-bounded'*

Joachim du Bellay

Noon report

Position: latitude 35°43.3' North, longitude 023°30.1' West

Air temperature: 18°C

Pressure: 1024mb

Wind: NW F5

The morning began with the now familiar Force 6 winds, or if you wake up when the ship's noises change, it began a little earlier when a blockage in a fuel pipe at 03:30 caused the main electrics to shut down until a second generator was started at 04:00 and normal service was resumed. The breakfast turnout was impressive, and carried on to the morning lecture programme. John began with a talk on *Whaling* with special reference to the unique shore-based sperm-whale fishery of the Azores. He passed around a replica tooth showing the scrimshaw work we will see in the Azorean museums. Petra continued the programme with *Islands of the Wind – The Azores*, a round up of the nine islands in the group with insights into those four we will visit on our cruise. The greenery was a real contrast to our starting point in Cape Verde.

After lunch there was a showing of the classic Gregory Peck version of Herman Melville's novel: *Moby Dick*, based on the sinking of the whaleship *Essex*. The sea sequences were filmed off Cardiff, south Wales, which makes it less frightening for me as I live there. At 16:45 Hannah sighted common dolphins which came to the ship to bow-ride, then, in less time that it takes to turn around in a telephone booth, she was in the Observation Lounge giving a fascinating talk on *The Polar Star Year* showing the various destinations our vessel visits during the year, from the Antarctic to the Arctic via the Atlantic Islands. Then it was Happy Hour, and, at 18:45 a brief update on progress. The persistent northerlies, which had eased only a little to Force 5, had prevented us making Santa María for an evening cruise but as the sun set we could see the island on the horizon. Nevertheless the sea was smoother and visibility good, and tonight and tomorrow morning there would be fine opportunities to see more wildlife, especially cetaceans, which enjoy the local up-wellings from the mile deep waters around these volcanic islands. At her command a large whale appeared on the starboard side, then it was time for dinner.

The day closed with a fun classic film based on a true event: the Ealing Studios comedy *Whisky Galore*.

## Thursday, 16 April – Terceira, Azores

Noon report

Position: latitude 38°30.0' North, longitude 027°12.2' West

Air temperature: 15°C

Pressure: 1018mb

Wind: WNW F5

*'The shining was shing on the sea,  
shining with all his might:'*

Well we can hope. *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, Lewis Carroll.



The local sea gods obviously watched Hannah's talk on the *Polar Star's* year and are intent on training us for the Drake Passage. A Force 6 or strong breeze freshened, as mariners blithely say, to a Force 7 or near-gale. This was at a time when better weather had been forecast. Breakfasters were not daunted and we continued to hatch plans for our landing at Terceira.

The morning's wildlife watching was confined to seabirds as conditions made it difficult to see cetaceans unless they actually came to our cabin door and knocked loud enough to be heard above the wind. Late in the morning we battled into the bay off Angra do Héroisme. The name means Bay of Herosim, for here a small party of a few hundred locals defeated an invasion of thousands of French by luring them into attacking up a steep, tiring hill before loosing hundreds of bulls on them.

Over lunch we anchored 4 cables (0.4 nautical miles) off the dock and, as our Zodiacs were lowered, the weather Gods finally came round and the wind dropped, the sky cleared, and the sun came out. We motored into a smart new marina and disembarked on a quay beneath the steps leading up to the lilac-coloured Misericórdia Church. There



were walks guided by João and Fernando through the pretty streets whose traditional three and four-storey buildings still displayed beautiful balconies, and a palette of pastel colours. There was wealth, too, a red Ferrari snarled up the street. The Convent de São Francisco gave access to a large and very fine church where one of the Corte-Real brothers was buried, both famous explorers. There was a very varied museum with carriages, the Ferraris of yesteryear, guns, a feature on Portugal's role in the Great War, and startling pictures of one of tomorrow's destinations: the new peninsula created by the Capelinhos eruption. There were cool parks and pleasant squares, and cafés to rest at in between.

At 17:00 there was a walk guided by John and Fernando, with Sally, up to the fort and, for the energetic, on to the heights of Monte Brasil. Many now headed back to the ship for dinner but some

stayed ashore to dine at the fine seafood restaurants. The last Zodiac departed into the dusk and wrapped up a day that had ended with much more satisfaction and enjoyment than the blustery morning had promised.

In the bar, a caucus of penguin lovers persuaded Florin to show the film *Happy Feet*, and it was with happy feet we went to bed, since, at 23:00 we could put back our clocks to 22:00 and steal another hour's sleep.

## Friday, 17 April – Horta, Faial, Azores

Noon report

Position: latitude 38°31.9' North, longitude 028°37.2' West

Air temperature: 18°C

Pressure: 1022mb

Wind: SW F5

*'when one tugs at a single thing in nature,  
he finds it attached to the rest of the world.'*

John Muir

At 08:20 we came alongside at Faial with views to port of the pretty town cascading down the hill to lines of expensive yachts. We went through the light rituals of clearing customs before boarding our bus for a tour of the island of Faial at 09:00. The local guide was indisposed, but Fernando took the mike on an island he knows well. We picked our way out of the docks through the rush-hour traffic disembarking from Pico on the *Cruzeiro do Ilhas* ferry. We soon left the port of Horta behind us and drove between lush banks, past fields green enough to past muster in Ireland, except the frequent sugar cane hedges gave the game away. We were soon among scattered traditional buildings built of volcanic stone and whitewash, some of which still bore the scars of the earthquake of 1998. Others had been left structurally unsound, or in a few cases abandoned by families unwilling to return. This part of the island supported frequent copses of an imported tree: *Cryptomeria japonica*. It grows well here but its wood is so soft you can score it with your finger nail, so it is used only for cheap undemanding purposes like boxes for packing.

Fernando pointed out what looked like a conventional chapel, apart from the glazed tile



exterior, but it was a place of worship for the cult of the Holy Spirit, signified by a crown and a dove. There are superstitious practices which continue alongside Catholicism. In fishing communities, like sea-goers in general, superstition often puts down deep tap roots. Daily life is affected by so many powerful forces, like the weather and the sea, that superstitions fill the gap where humans lack real power. In times of deep hurt or anxiety, perhaps formal religion is

not enough, and something older needs to be satisfied, some feeling closer to the blood. Then services will be held, and sacrifices made of animals, especially bullocks. The meat is distributed to the poor, so if nothing else, the prayers of the hungry are answered.

Our first stop was a perfect example of another unstoppable force in Azorean life: volcanoes. They take away, but sometimes they give: in this case, a new peninsula at Capelinhos. In 1958 the peace of the sea just offshore became disturbed and then shattered, as explosive under-sea eruptions began. They built a crater, then material connected it to the shore, while searing ash and hot rocks rained down on the lighthouse and the village below it. The village was destroyed as roofs caught fire and walls collapsed; it has never been renovated and we saw the meagre ruins, where John found a iron shaft belonging to a harpoon or killing lance, with the socket still attached. He took it to the museum. The lighthouse, a massive structure, was buried up to first floor level. It has been excavated and a brand new museum, open just six months, built alongside and in it. The concept was highly imaginative, not just digging away the ash and re-using the old building but building deep, extending into the buried ground floor, and covering it up once again to preserve the changes of the eruption. It is a symbolic acceptance of the fact that these islands are made by volcanic activity, and eruptions are ultimately constructive.



### Lighthouses

Lights to guide sailors returning to shore date back at least as far as the lighthouse of Alexandria, a gigantic structure built at the entrance to this Egyptian port in 290BC. It gives its name to the word for headlights in many Romance languages. The last part of it did not collapse until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The Romans built towers on which fires were lit, but it is unfortunate, if logical, that in bad weather, when you most need a guiding light, it is hardest to maintain a strong fire. Dover in England still has the remains of Roman light towers. Into the Middle Ages fires were lit on towers, cairns and wooden cradles. Oil burning lamps replaced them and in 1738 the use of reflectors greatly increased the brilliance. The Fresnel catadioptric lenses of 1829 were a giant step forward and the model for modern systems. Rotating lights were introduced: the first one in Carlsten, Sweden. At first they were clockwork, then, after 1956, electric. Paraffin was replaced by petrol vapour in 1893 in Portuguese lights, and later, electric halogen lights. Gadgets need people to work them. Monks kept the first lighthouses, then there was a government service: centralised in 1738. The Azores were demanding, mainland Portugal once employed 66 for the whole coast while the Azores employed another 38. Capelinhos dates from 1903, not long before a school for lighthouse work opened in 1926. The military have had responsibility for the service since 1976.

We returned along the same road, noting old windmills, and turned inland again on the edge of Horta to visit the village of Flamengos, or the Flemings, and the *Jardim Botanico do Faial*. It is a small but cleverly laid-out collection in two parts, either side of the little visitor centre where an interpretive video was available to see. On one side was a collection of native plants, clearly labelled in Portuguese, English and Latin (I speak little else at home). On the other was a garden with familiar herbs mixed in with the common cultivated plants of the island. There was one more stop above the town, firstly to try and stand up, and then to release your hands from a fixed object long enough to take a panoramic photo. Then it was back to the ship, through the docks past the delightful pink *canoas* or whaling boats, now used for rowing races. To make one takes six months and costs €35,000. The Club Naval owns seven of them.

After lunch a bus ran shuttles to take us round the town and out to the old whaling station, now a museum. There was also the famous Café Sport, an island landmark which still provides the weather reports, money changing facilities and other practicalities for passing sailors which have made it an institution since it was founded in 1918. Upstairs was a scrimshaw museum and it is hard to believe there's a better one in the world: it certainly puts Massachusetts' New Bedford collection in the shade. The number of works, the span of time and the quality of execution were all exceptional. As we returned a Swedish three-masted barque the *Gumilla* motored into port.

We had special treats in store. Best of all was obviously recap and briefing where Hannah detailed the delights of Pico, Sally explained tsunamis, and John read poetry by himself and passengers, including parodies of the Ancient Mariner influenced heavily by (obviously) Coleridge, but also by sea-sickness, which the master strangely omitted from



his epic. The local group *Fado* came aboard to play traditional music, singer Raquel was supported by Gaspár and Isaac on guitar and Portuguese guitar. The latter has six double strings and is a little like a large mandolin. There was a BBQ dinner in the Observation lounge served on deck by the magnificent Bob and his team. Raquel had to leave for another engagement but the instrumentalists stayed on and there was dancing and gaiety.

## Saturday, 18 April – São Roque, Pico, Azores

Noon report

Position: latitude 38°31.8' North, longitude 028°19.2' West

Air temperature: 24°C

Pressure: 1020mb

Wind: NW F3

*'We shall not cease from exploration  
and the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And to know the place for the first time'*

T S Eliot

Morning broke clear and breezy with fine view of the pico or peak of 2351 metres after which the island is named. Our bus left promptly for an island tour, climbing from São



Roque do Pico, a quaint small town, up the hairpins onto the plateau below the volcano. Café-au-lait coloured cattle, a Charolais breed, grazed with their sweet young calves. The island is famous for its cheeses, best eaten as soon as they are made. We had a quick photo stop at each of two views of the high cone, stopping by walls furred with rich grey lichens. Cloud rolled swiftly down Pico's west flank, explaining the quickly changing weather on the way up. The

dominant tree of this landscape is the heather tree, *Erica azorica*, and the views are unspoiled by development; no building is allowed.

The cloud was back when we stopped for a visit to Hermit Matthew's cave, a lava tube where the holy man lived with his secret fairy Nuff. Fernando wouldn't lie to us, would he? We descended into a narrow entrance which broadened out so we could stand upright and walk through to a section where the roof had collapsed. We could exit here or continue on slightly less easy ground to a second section, part of which had a ledge running right across, the remnant of a first top to the lava tube, later over-run by a second flow. We descended back into sunshine and the west coast village of Madalena. Fernando explained the small fields which had been made to provide shelter from the wind and trap the sun. This landscape is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We pulled up near a large *Araucaria* tree, an old and primitive tree in a very small genus, and a relative



of the monkey-puzzle tree. In the yard were still more remarkable trees: the dragon tree, *Dracaena draco*. This strange tree grows to a great age, there is one in Lanzarote that is supposed to have been seen by Columbus. But our call was at the winery and distillery where the grapes grown in the hard-won fields were made into wine and refined into liqueurs and spirits. There was a wine tasting, an opportunity to buy. One czar of Russia is said to have

favoured Pico wines and had a ship on full time duty fetching it. There were cheese chunks, conserves and delicious local bread to eat with it.

There was a final stop to see a stone dog, created by nature with a little help from local hands, it appeared. The surrounding village was beautiful, almost entirely composed of traditional houses, and the coastline had dramatic inlets cut into the cliffs where the sea surged far below. There was also a small store selling home-made liqueurs, proving Fernando's point that the islanders could make alcohol out of anything. We returned to the *Polar Star* for lunch before setting out again for a final visit, a short coach trip to Lajes; it houses a new whaling museum. Outside Fernando pointed out one of the powerful small launches that used to tow the *canoas* or whaling boats out after the whales. The museum showed a short film from the whaling days, recording the hunt from the man strolling to the *vigia* with his sandwiches, to the hunt and kill. Other rooms showed fully kitted *canoas* and other memorabilia of whaling days. Soon we were back up on top of the island, through the clouds and down to the *Polar Star*, bathed in sunshine. Shortly after 16:00 we were away, sailing towards the shore of São Jorge in the usual stiff breeze. We sadly left the tip of the island, Ponta do Top astern and sailed for our morning destination of Ponta Delgada on São Miguel and disembarkation.

The Captain's farewell and final briefing in the observation lounge brought us together for a toast before a revised schedule allowed us 45 minutes extra sightseeing. The ship came close to a dramatic waterfall set in beautiful coastal scenery. The Farewell Dinner followed, and then a viewing of the slideshow of the voyage put together with flair and hard work by Sally using pictures from all the expedition team.

In the morning we wish you the traveller's benediction.

*May your God and your luggage go with you!*

We sailed 2450 nautical miles together.

Best wishes from all the team at *Polar Star* and we look forward to sailing with you again.



It's having fun that counts.