

MV Polar Star

The Essence of the Azores

28th April – 5th May, 2007



Cruise log by Gary Kochert, Photography by Gary and Joyce Kochert

MV Polar Star

The Essence of the Azores

April 28 – May 5, 2007

Saturday, April 28, 2007 – Ponta Delgada, At sea

Today in Ponta Delgada most of us got our first look at the Polar Star, the ship that will be our home for the next eight days. During this short time, our ship will visit each of the nine islands of the Azores, and we look forward to an exciting adventure.

We boarded the ship in the late afternoon, and at first the many interior passageways and exterior decks were confusing indeed. With the help of the smiling stewardesses, we managed to find our rooms, and then we made our way to the fifth floor Observation Lounge where snacks and champagne awaited. At 5:15, we were introduced to many of the ship staff. Captain Jacek Majer welcomed us to the ship, Hotel Manager Rita Hivekovics, told us about day to day operations, and our Expedition Leader Hannah Lawson introduced us to the expedition staff and to the ship owner, Mr. Martin Karlsen, who will be accompanying us on our Azores cruise. We are also fortunate to have three residents of the Azores accompanying us, and they will provide expert local knowledge. After the briefing, we were all invited to the bridge to witness our departure.



A mandatory safety briefing was next on the agenda. Chief Officer Jędrzej Marsz showed us how to don our hefty life jackets and find our way to the assembly stations where we are to go in case of an emergency. The Captain sounded the alarm for a drill, and we all marched outside and lined up in the prescribed positions on the fourth deck under the huge orange lifeboats.

Shortly afterward, we were called to dinner and were treated to our first meal on the ship. Chef Paul McDougall and his staff had prepared a fine dinner for us. After dinner, most of us were happy to head back to our cabins after a long day of travel. Tonight we will steam overnight to Graciosa Island, where we will make our first landing in the morning.

Sunday, April 29, 2007 – Graciosa Island

When we awoke this morning we could see the island of Graciosa straight ahead. The weather was cloudy with an intermittent drizzle, but it improved during the day. Our morning landing was scheduled for the Baia do Folga on the southwestern part of the island. The coast in this area is dominated by high cliffs made up of lava flows alternating with ash beds from the many volcanic eruptions that have constructed the island. The conditions were not the best for zodiac riding...there was a big swell at the ship, and the tiny harbor provides very

little shelter. We launched zodiacs for a trial run, but the conditions seemed to get somewhat worse. Rain was approaching and the wind picked up. After another inspection of the landing site, Hannah decided it would be too dangerous to attempt a landing.



The ship weighed anchor, and we headed for Carapacho on the very southern tip of the island. There was a big swell here also, and the landing site was also exposed to the waves to some extent. However, we decided to give it a try. This was our first experience with zodiac operations, but we had been well-briefed by Hannah just after breakfast. To board the zodiacs it is necessary to walk down a narrow gangway onto a small platform. Then

one steps onto the pontoon of the zodiac, onto a wooden step, and then into the zodiac. This is not always easy, because, unless the sea is very calm, the zodiac moves back and forth and up and down. However, the seamen who helped us and the zodiac drivers are very experienced, and we boarded without serious incident. Our landing site was a set of stairs formed in the side of a concrete jetty. Getting off the zodiacs proved to be more of a challenge than getting on! The driver would approach the jetty, hand the bow line to Gary on the jetty, and pass a stern line to Paulo. With Gary and Paulo holding the zodiac, Hannah, Carlos, and the zodiac driver helped us off. This was tricky! The boat was moving in all possible planes. Water was sloshing up onto the small platform at the base of the stair, and Hannah got soaked to the waist.

After we all were on land, we boarded one of three buses and headed off on our tour. From the bus windows we could see a multitude of stone walls dividing all the small fields and garden plots. It must have been



a very great effort clearing this land for agriculture. Most of the land was in pasture for herds of Holstein cattle, but we saw some goats, burros, and chickens also. Grapes and bananas were growing in small plots enclosed by high stone walls, and there were a variety of vegetable crops, with potatoes being the most plentiful. Hydrangeas lined many of the roads, but they were not yet in bloom. There

were plenty of calla lilies, crinum lilies, and native viburnum shrubs in bloom, however. This must have been some sort of special Sunday, because there were religious processions taking place at several sites that we passed on the bus. There were musicians and people carrying

banners and flags. Small children were being fitted with giant silver crowns that were much too big for their heads. It was quite a sight!

At Santa Cruz, the largest village on the island, we toured a local museum and wandered around the central cobblestone plaza. Some dragon trees were growing in the plaza next to some very tall *Auracaria* (Norfolk Island Pine) trees from the South Pacific. Next we drove into the high caldera that dominates the island. The caldera is reached after a long uphill drive, and a passage through a tunnel in the caldera wall. The tunnel was constructed in 1953 entirely by hand. Once inside the caldera, the road makes a twisting and turning descent into the base of the caldera to the Furna do Enxofre (Cave of Sulfur). There was a small parking lot, and an attendant selling post cards and snacks. The cave is entered through a deep pit. Fortunately, an enclosed circular stairway of 184 steps was constructed in 1939, again entirely by hand. So we were able to descend into the cave quite easily. The cave is one enormous room with a large lake on one side. From the bottom, we could look up at the two large collapsed pits that allow light to reach the floor of the cave.



We returned to the ship for a late lunch and a short break before our afternoon program. Sei whales were spotted, and some came obligingly close to the ship. Later, we had a zodiac cruise along the shore front of the town of Praia and around the large island just off shore. Several fishing boats were moored inside the harbor, and there were three windmills close to the shore. The island had many common terns and some pigeons. Huge breakers were rolling in onto the shore of the island, and our drivers kept us carefully away from them.

At 6:30 we were introduced to another daily activity, the evening briefing. Hannah told us about our program for tomorrow, a visit to Flores and Corvo islands. Then various staff members briefly discussed some of the interesting things we had seen today. Mick played two recordings, one of a mud pot in Furna do Enxofre and the other of a Chaffinch singing. Just then some common dolphins were seen approaching the ship from the port side, and we had a brief pause while the dolphins gave us a show. Carlos told us the significance of the processions we had seen on the island. Apparently they derive from some sort of Holy Ghost cult that was established long ago in reaction to excesses by the clergy in the middle ages.

After dinner, Gary gave us a lecture on the geology of the Azores, and we learned how the islands had been formed by a long series of volcanic eruptions. Right in the middle of the lecture, Hannah bonged us up to inform us that a blue whale had been spotted from the bridge! We all rushed outside, and those of us who went to the bow got very good views of this huge creature. What a great treat to see the largest creature that has ever lived. After the excitement settled down, we returned to Gary's lecture. He finished by describing the 1957-58 eruption at the western end of Faial that added two square kilometers to the island.

Monday, April 30, 2007 – Flores & Corvo Islands

We sailed all night across an active sea that moved us around in our beds and arrived early in the morning at Flores. Our landing site was at Lajes, a small village on the southeastern side of the island. There was wind and a big swell, but we were able to take the Polar Star alongside the jetty, so no zodiacs were necessary. Before we started our bus tour, we were free to walk around the village. After a steep walk up the hill, it was possible to visit the local church. This was in top notch condition, and was obviously carefully maintained by local people.

School buses were used to take us on our bus tour. Flores is a rugged island, with very little flat land. Near the highest point on the island, we needed to turn onto an even smaller road to visit two crater lakes.

The turn into the small road was too sharp for our bus, however, so we had to go past our turn, turn the bus around at a crossroad, and come back to the small road from the other side. The two crater lakes were worth all the maneuvers, however. From our vantage point on the crater wall, the lakes could be seen several hundred feet below. The lake water was dark and deep looking. It was cold and misty...very atmospheric.



The next destination was the village of Faja Grande. At a viewpoint on the way we could see Faja Grande far below along the coast. The road wound down the cliff around many sharp curves. The village is located on a faja, or flat area of land along the coast at the base of the cliffs. These are created by a lava delta or by a landslide. At any rate the site of Faja Grande was magnificent. The village, with its whitewashed houses and red tile roofs, was squeezed between sheer cliffs and the sea. Very high, very feathery waterfalls descended from the tops



of the cliffs behind the village. Excellent coffee was available from a small café near the waterfront.

On the way back to the ship a stop was made at Rocha do Bordo. At this site, a lava flow midway up a cliff shows a columnar jointing pattern that developed as the lava cooled. This is the same sort of formation that occurs in the Giant's Causeway, the Devil's Tower, and Fingal's Cave.

The buses arrived back at the ship just in time for our lunch, and the ship started off for Corvo while we were in the dining room. The sea was quite rough on the way, and there were whitecaps on all sides. As we approached the only village on the island, Vila Nova do Corvo, it was apparent the landing was going to be difficult, if not impossible. It turned out to be impossible! So we circumnavigated Corvo and enjoyed some great views of the sheer cliffs that bound the island on all sides except the region immediately around Vila Nova.

In the late afternoon, Carlos gave us a lecture about the history of the Azores. He covered a great span of time and made everyone realize how rich the history of the Azores has been. At evening recap and briefing we learned about shearwaters from Mick. This was very appropriate, because large numbers of these graceful birds were around the ship during our trips around Flores and Corvo.

After dinner, Hannah announced that she would give a lecture on one of her favorite topics, whales and dolphins. However, before her lecture could even start, she announced that there were dolphins approaching the ship. For the next hour, we had almost continuous sightings of various cetaceans. There were Common Dolphins, Striped Dolphins, Sei Whales, and two more Blue Whales! What a great evening! The moon was nearly full, the sea was rolling us around, there were lots of dolphins bow riding, and there were almost continuous whale spouts visible. At about 9:15, when it was too dark to see any more, Hannah was able to give an abbreviated version of her lecture. It was a very full day.

Tuesday, May 1, 2007 – Faial Island

This morning the Polar Star was positioned in the channel between Pico Island and Faial Island just outside the entrance to Horta Harbor. The ship maneuvered to a position just outside the harbor breakwater, and soon we heard the familiar rumble of the anchor being lowered. Conditions were much better, because we were sheltered from the wind, and there was hardly any swell at the gangway. The ride to the jetty was enjoyable. Horta is scenically located between Monte de Guia, an inactive volcano, and steep hills covered with the now familiar stone walls and pastures. The zodiacs landed at some stone steps near the ferry terminal. Two large buses were waiting near our landing spot, and we started off right away on our bus tour. We proceeded west along the south road toward the western end of the island. Our first stop was at the now abandoned Capelinhos Lighthouse. Beyond the



lighthouse we could see a large mound of volcanic ash with basalt boulders and bits of scoria scattered over its surface. This marks the site of a huge volcanic eruption that took place in 1957-58. The lighthouse was originally at the top of a cliff marking the western end of Faial. It is now partly buried in ash from the eruption, but it is being excavated to convert it into a museum. The eruption added

about two square kilometers of new land beyond the lighthouse, extending the western tip of the island for a considerable distance. Even now, almost 50 years later, very little vegetation has managed to colonize the volcanic slopes created by the eruption.

Most of our party then hiked a short distance downhill to the seashore to look at the remains of a fishing village that was destroyed by the eruption. It is still possible to see the walls of some of the houses, but they are buried in ash up to the gable ends.

On our way back from the lighthouse, we stopped at the small museum commemorating the eruption. There were a lot of dramatic photographs, and colorful diagrams explaining how

the eruption took place and how buildings on the western part of the island were partially buried in the ash. A video presentation showed the eruption and its aftermath.

We had brought along a sack lunch from the ship, and we stopped at a botanical garden near Horta to eat our lunches and to look at the plants. The garden has a collection of plants indigenous to the Azores, and it has a nice fern gully where different species could be observed. There were many birds singing in the garden also, and frogs were croaking in a small pond, so it was a very pleasant stop.



Then we returned to Horta, and there was plenty of free time to look around the town. Horta is an internationally renowned stop for yachts from all over the world. Visiting yachts often paint a colorful panel about 3 feet square displaying the ship's name and the names of some of the crew on the seawall near the harbor. These were very interesting to look at. There were a lot of imaginative ship names and interesting comments about

the places the owners had been. The famous Peter's Sport Cafe is located in Horta near the harbor, and it is the place to go for visiting yachtsmen. The scrimshaw museum above Peter's Sport Cafe was well worth a visit also. There were many amazing examples of this art form on display.

It was Labor Day in the Azores, so there was a festive atmosphere. Lots of people were out strolling around or fishing from the jetties. At a park near the football field, there was a festival. People were dressed in interesting costumes, and there was lots of beer-drinking, picnicking, and dancing. Pico Mountain, across the channel on Pico Island, finally shed its mantle of clouds, and we could clearly see the summit of the highest peak in the Azores, indeed all of Portugal. Off to the north, one could see São Jorge Island, and in the distance Graciosa Island, which we visited two days ago.

Zodiacs were running on a regular schedule all afternoon, so we could go back to the Polar Star whenever we wished. In the evening, Chef Paul and his staff put on a magnificent barbecue for us. They set up a large grill on the deck outside the observation lounge, and cooked ribs, steak, chicken, salmon, and a variety of vegetables. Inside there was a salad and cheese bar. Many of us handily replaced all the calories we had burned up during a long day ashore.



At our evening recap John Van Opstal, a local artist, gave us a short talk about scrimshaw. He had examples of his work with him, so we could get a close look. He even demonstrated how he does the work. After the barbecue, we were entertained by local musicians who presented some traditional Portuguese Fado music. There were three musicians, two playing Portuguese guitars and one a traditional guitar. Two ladies sang passionate Fado songs. One of the musicians played and sang his original composition about Pico Island. One singer explained that her shawl with a wheat pattern was made with actual wheat stalks threaded through the material. Hannah and Martin started the dancing to music with a polka beat. The Captain and many other passengers joined in. What a wonderful day!

Wednesday, May 2, 2007 – São Jorge and Pico Islands

Today we started our activities by cruising along the north shore of São Jorge Island. The island is a long thin sliver of land trending northwest to southeast. The coast opposite our ship was a continuous strip of high cliffs. Up on top we could see an occasional village and many fields surrounded by stone walls. A succession of lava flows could be seen in the cliffs, and there were many small recesses where birds could nest. Several jellyfish were spotted sailing along with their transparent bladder-like sails and tentacles dangling beneath. At three spots, waterfalls dropped for more than a hundred feet, and our drivers maneuvered the zodiacs near to the base of each of them. We boarded the ship in time for a short rest before lunch.



Our afternoon port of call was Lajes on the southwestern side of Pico Island. This is the site of a whale factory that was active until after the middle of the 20th century. Our first stop was the whaling museum, and we were able to see some of the famous open boats used for whaling in the Azores as well as harpoons and lances. After the museum, it was onto the buses for a tour of the island. We drove west along the south shore of Pico, and we were able to get close looks at some of the tiny grape fields

surrounded by stone walls of black basalt. A special stop was made to look at twin, very large dragon trees (*Dracaena draco*). Eventually we arrived at Madalena, a town at the western end of Pico. Across the channel was the island of Faial and the city of Horta, which we visited yesterday. Near Madalena we stopped at a wine museum, where samples of the famous Pico wines were offered for tasting (and purchase). Fresh breads and cheeses were offered for sampling. There were some huge dragon trees on the museum grounds and some very large wine presses. A pavilion had been constructed out over some traditional grape fields, so we could get an aerial view of the vines.

Our bus took a different route back to Lajes. We went right down the high spine of the island through a very pastoral landscape. Part of the way along, we stopped at the edge of some pastures and walked up a lane toward the hilltop. At this point it was very misty and the general atmosphere was mysterious. Curious cows watched us closely to see what we were

up to. Soon we arrived at a pit in the ground, and on closer inspection we could see that it was a lava tube cave. The entrance to the cave was a short distance away, and it was very lush with ferns, mosses, Selaginella, and many liverworts. We found we could walk through the cave passage and come out at the pit we had first seen.



We arrived back in Lajes with a bit of extra time, so some passengers got off to look at the local cemetery. The rest of us got right onto the zodiacs to go back to the ship for dinner. In the early evening we had a wonderful view of the sun setting behind Pico Mountain. Next on the program was the second half of Carlos' lecture on Azorean history. This brought us right up to date on happenings on the Islands. Tomorrow we are off for Terceira.

Thursday, May 3, 2007 – Terceira Island

Dawn found us approaching Monte Brasil and the entrance to the harbor at Angra do Heroísmo on Terceira Island. The weather was about as perfect as it is possible to be. We anchored outside the breakwater, and enjoyed a zodiac ride over flat calm water through a labyrinth of anchored yachts to a jetty just near the center of town. A large pastel blue and white church overlooked our landing point. Our morning was given to tours of various lengths through the town. We visited the local museum, the botanical garden, and local churches and convents. There was plenty of free time for shopping and coffee breaks. The town is very picturesque with narrow streets lined with tiny shops. Gary led a hike up to the crater on Monte Brasil, and eight hearty individuals joined him.



Zodiacs were on hand to take us back to the ship for lunch, but we also had the option of staying in town for lunch with

the last zodiac being at 2:30. When all of us were back, we set off to begin our transit to Santa Maria Island. During the afternoon, we had engine room tours for those who wanted to see the inner workings of the Polar Star. During this time, Chief Spotter Hannah kept an eye out for whales from the bridge. Soon she announced that whale spouts had been seen in the distance. The ship turned to approach, and we came upon a very small sperm whale. Hannah announced that it was a baby that had stayed on the surface while its mother made a dive. In the distance three more sperm whales surfaced. These were two adults and one large calf. As the ship approached the whales, we were able to see their curious angled blows, their large

heads, and their stumpy dorsal fins. The whales made a deep dive just in time for Hannah to start our recap and briefing. Tomorrow is our last day of landings. We hope to land at a small village on Santa Maria Island, and then do a zodiac cruise along the coast. There is even a possibility of entering a sea cave by zodiac!

After dinner, Gary gave a lecture “Pursuing Leviathan” about open boat whaling in the Azores. We all noticed that not one life jacket was in evidence on any of the men in the whaleboats depicted.

Friday, May 04, 2007 – Santa Maria Island, The Formigas Rocks

This morning we arrived at the beautiful São Laurenço Bay on the eastern side of Santa Maria Island. It was a beautiful sunny day, and the sun rising in the east gave terrific light on the white houses and on the terraces for grapes rising up the slopes behind the houses. Soon after breakfast, the zodiacs were lowered and we landed on some stone steps near the northern part of the village. From there, it was a pleasant walk toward the center of the village along the sea shore. To the right, the land rose very sharply toward the interior plateau of the island. This slope of land was terraced with dry stone walls. Some still had grapes growing, but many had been abandoned and were filled with ferns and weeds. Some taro plants were growing in the ditches that ran down the slope. Fernando told us that most of the houses were summer residences. There were no businesses open in the village.



Next on the program was a long zodiac cruise along the waterfront of the village and down the coast toward the south. It was a wonderful day for a cruise. Our route south of the village followed high cliffs, which we could see were made up of a long succession of lava flows. Some flows exhibited columnar jointing, and some pillow lava that looked like big black alligators could be seen near the base of the cliffs. In many places we could see the openings of lava tube caves. Some were right at the water’s edge, and one was large enough for us to drive the zodiac right into the cave. The last place we visited was a small bay at the foot of high overhanging cliffs. The bay could be entered between two lava headlands. Once inside, the water was calm and clear, and a curious translucent green color. All the zodiacs gathered there, and the drivers turned off the engines so we could talk and hear the noise of the waves lapping on the pebble beach at the head of the cove.

After the Polar Star relocated to pick us up, our course was toward the northeast and the Formigas (Ants) Rocks. On the way to the rocks, small groups of common dolphins would join the ship from time to time. When we reach the Formigas, the Captain took us close by the shallow banks and exposed pinnacles that make up the rocks. The sea was very calm and the waves made only small breakers on the shore.

The final leg of our voyage was the run northwest back to Ponta Delgada on São Miguel Island, where we started our cruise just a week ago (although it seems much longer than that).

During this cruise we have visited each of the nine islands of the Azores. Our trip has included whaling museums, scrimshaw museums, a wine museum, a wine tasting, botanical gardens, caves, and volcanic craters and calderas of every size and description. We have ridden about in zodiacs and a variety of buses. Entertainment has included lectures and briefings by our expedition staff and a night of Fado music by local artists. Dolphins and whales, including the great blue whale, have crossed our bows. Thus, we have sampled a variety of the many attractions offered by this “crossroads of the Atlantic”, and we leave with a better understanding and appreciation for this unique place and its friendly people.

SPECIES LIST - ESSENCE OF THE AZORES

Birds	Date /Location							
	28th	29th	30th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
	Sao Miguel	Graciosa	Flores & Corvo	Faial	Sao Jorge & Pico	Terceira	Santa Maria	Sao Miguel
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>							
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Macaronesian Shearwater	<i>Puffinus baroli</i>							
Yellow Legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	X	X	X	X		X	
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>					X		
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			X				
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	X					X	
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				X			
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					X		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>							
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>						X	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>						X	
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>				X	X		
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinera</i>							
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		X		X		X	
Marine Mammals								
Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>							
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>			X	X			
Sei Whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>							
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>					X		
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus capensis</i>			X	X	X		
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coerulealba</i>			X		X	X	

