

Pelagic West Africa

Praia, Cape Verdes – Funchal, Madeira

PLA35

May 05 – May 13

08 nights

aboard Plancius



The Cape Verde Islands lie 375 miles off the coast of west Africa and are all volcanic in origin. The islands display a variety of landscapes from the spectacular rugged mountains of Santiago, Santo Antao and São Nicolau to the flat salt pans of Sal and Maio. The Cape Verde Islands were 'discovered' by the Portuguese between 1455 and 1461. An interesting account of the history of the Cape Verde can be found in the museum in central Praia. The isolation of the Cape Verde islands has resulted in a number of endemic species, particularly of birds including Cape Verde Swift, Raso Lark, Cape Verde Warbler and Cape Verde Sparrow. Another point of interest for naturalists is that on 16th January 1832, Charles Darwin landed on Santiago (recorded as St. Jago in his diary) and noted a layer of white shells in a cliff face at Porto Praya. An observation

which later led to one his less well known theories of 'raising continents' and 'sinking ocean floors'!

Please note that the following itinerary should be treated as a guide only, not an exact program. Flexibility is the key to all our cruises and our exact route and program will depend on such factors as weather conditions, wildlife encounters, the experience of the expedition leader and the advice of the ship's captain and crew.

Day 1 (May 5): In Praia passengers embark MV Plancius at 14.00 hours. Praia is located on the southern island of Santiago, one of the largest of the 10 islands (plus 8 islets) that make up the Cape Verde archipelago. From Praia we cruise along the west coast of Santiago and north towards the small island of Raso, approximately 120 miles from Santiago, a journey that will take the rest of the day and much of the night. We will, however, be crossing prime seabird and cetacean waters and there will be plenty to enjoy en route, especially in the evening when the shearwaters and other seabirds begin to return to the islands after a day feeding out at sea. With the volcanic cone of Fogo off to our port side and flying fish scuttling over the waters surface in front of our ship, we will be looking out for the Cape Verde Shearwater - an endemic race of Cory's Shearwater-plus North Atlantic Little (Boyd's) Shearwater, Fea's Petrel and Bulwer's Petrel. These waters are also home to an exciting variety of cetaceans including Short-finned Pilot Whale, Bottlenose Dolphin, Common Dolphin and perhaps Pan-tropical Spotted Dolphin and Sperm Whale.

Day 2: We will spend this morning circumnavigating the small rugged island of Raso, located in the north-west of the archipelago between the larger islands of São Nicolau and São Vicente. Cape Verde Shearwaters are common here and nest in large numbers on the island along with Little (Boyd's) Shearwater and both Madeira and White-faced Storm Petrels. Our main target this morning, however, will be the beautiful and graceful Red-billed Tropicbird which also nest on Raso and can be seen here and gliding along the precipitous slopes of Branco. Brown Boobies are another key species frequently seen around the islands. Locating one of the endemic Raso Larks from the zodiacs has been proven to be a possibility. Mid-day we head northeast, away from the Cape Verde Islands and towards the continental shelf off West Africa. We have a chance to see the Western Palearctic's only Magnificent Frigate birds. There will be plenty of commoner seabirds to

enjoy, plus and opportunities to look for dolphins, pilot whales and perhaps some of the larger cetacean species.

Day 3: At sea. Today will be spent mostly over deep water cruising from the Cape Verde Islands to the West African shelf edge off Mauritania. Seabirds and cetaceans will be the order of the day and we hope for an interesting selection of seabirds as we head east.

Days 4 – 5: We reach the shelf in the morning near Nouadhibou and will spend 2 days cruising north along the shelf edge off Mauritania and Western Sahara. Here we should expect the unexpected, for these rich waters are rarely visited by naturalists. We hope that by ‘chumming’ (a potent mix of fish scraps and oil) at key points along our route we will enjoy close views of plenty of the commoner species plus, we hope, a few surprises! All four species of Northern Skua - Great, Arctic, Long-tailed and Pomarine - should be common. Groups of Grey Phalaropes are also a common sight here, along with flocks of Sabine’s Gulls, European Storm-petrel, Kittiwakes and Black Terns. These northern breeders are joined from the south by Wilson’s Storm-petrels, plus Sooty Shearwater and - for the fortunate - perhaps even South Polar Skua; a species recently shown to head north into these waters during our spring and summer months. Any of the rarer seabirds breeding on the Macronesian Islands are possible, along with an exciting range of cetaceans which may include Fin Whale, Sperm Whale, Northern Bottlenose Whale, Curvier’s beaked Whale, Common Dolphin and the outside chance of rarer species such as Rough-toothed Dolphin, Blainville’s Beaked Whale and Pygmy Sperm Whale. Other pelagic wildlife to look out for includes Sunfish and even the occasional turtle.

Day 6: We will explore the deepwater channels around Gomera in the Canary Islands. A known hot spot for whales and dolphins. The inaugural 2011 voyage saw Sperm and Short-finned Pilot Whales plus a number of dolphins including Rough-toothed. We will now be in range for Barolo’s Shearwater, another recent species split (from Little Shearwater) plus we should expect more Cory’s Shearwaters, Bulwer’s Petrels and White-faced Storm-Petrels today too.

Day 7: In the afternoon we reach the remote Selvagens, where we first see Selvagen Pequina and where we will spend an evening cruising around Selvagen Grande. These isolated islands, which lie 80 miles north of the Canaries, are perhaps the ultimate destination for anyone interested in Western Palaearctic ‘tube-noses’. Huge numbers of petrels and shearwaters breed here including approximately 15,000 Cory’s Shearwaters, 5,000 Bulwer’s Petrels, 2,000 Little (Barolo’s) Shearwater, 60,000 White-faced Storm-petrels and 1,500 pairs of Madeira Storm-petrels. Since many of these species gather off shore in the evening before returning to their nest sites after dark, our evening cruise here should be one of the ornithological highlights of this holiday. If conditions permit we will launch the zodiacs for an evening zodiac cruise to enjoy the seabirds and cetaceans at close range.

Day 8: In the second half of the day we will sail by the Desertas Islands. The Desertas belong to the Madeira archipelago. In 1990 they became a Nature Reserve, comprising the islands themselves and the surrounding sea to a depth of 100 metres. The reserve is divided into two protected zones of which the southern half of **Deserta Grande and Bugio are strictly forbidden to visitors even by boat**. On Deserta Grande there is a permanent research station with three wardens, who are the only human inhabitants on the islands today. The Desertas were designated as Special Protection Area for their important seabird populations. Cory’s Shearwater, Bulwer’s Petrel and Madeira Storm Petrel all breed here along with Fea’s or Desertas Petrel. along We will observe an exciting selection of cetaceans including Common Dolphin, Bottle-nosed Dolphin, Short-finned Pilot Whale and perhaps a Fin or early Bryde’s Whale. Sperm Whales are the mostly frequently seen large whales in these waters and spend most of the year here feeding on squid from the deep water canyons and trenches that surround the islands. A population of less than 100 Mediterranean Monk Seals also live around the Desertas.

Day 9 (MAY 13): The morning will find us about 20 n.miles north of Madeira in an area where Zino’s Petrel (endemic for Madeira) is known to forage. Midday we arrive in Funchal, the capital of Madeira, where you will disembark the MV Plancius and transfer on your own to the airport to catch an afternoon flight home (flight not included in cruise rate).