

GETAWAY

Dolphins and whales, exotic isles and extinct volcanos are all part of **NIGEL HEATH'S** holiday at sea

A POD of dolphins joined us for breakfast on the first morning of our voyage to the Azores, a cluster of nine Portuguese volcanic islands far out in the mighty Atlantic.

They came leaping and diving across the waves towards the classic Fred Olsen cruise ship Black Watch as my wife Jenny and I gazed excitedly down on them from our picture window restaurant eyrie.

Was this a lucky omen for the whales we hoped to spot around this spectacular archipelago 900 miles off mainland Europe?

We were off on a two-week voyage that would take us on from the Azores to the holiday island of Madeira and then to Cadiz before sailing on to Lisbon and Oporto and home again.

There's always something special about stealing in from the ocean in the early morning to make landfall amid a cluster of remote mountainous islands.

So it was when Black Watch reached the Azores. A crowd had quietly gathered on the observation deck and there followed a collective gasp as we were rewarded with a spout and the surfacing of a sperm whale close by.

We went ashore at Horta, on the island of Faial, and wound our way up by coach to visit its long-extinct giant caldera and other dramatic volcanic sites before sailing overnight to Ponta Delgada on the main island of San Miguel.

Here, we headed to the remote Furnas valley with its picturesque lake, tropical gardens and hot springs before returning to the ship and sailing away with one personal illusion shattered.

I'd always thought of the Azores as being rocky and barren when, in fact, they are temperate isles, lush and subtropical, growing sugarcane, tobacco grapes, pineapple and other fruits.

Another relaxing spell at sea brought us to Madeira and the dawn sight of a mountainside, covered with the lights of the capital Funchal, rising from the sea.

Here, we wandered around the town with its wide promenade and myriad side streets, although we could have taken an excursion into the mountains or visited the botanical gardens.

The Spanish port city of Cadiz has always held a place in my imagination from schooldays when I learned that it was here back in 1587 that Sir Francis Drake 'sing'd the King of Spain's beard' by sending in fire ships to scatter and destroy his fleet. Now Black Watch, and sister ships Boudicca, Balmoral and Braemar, all converged on the port.

It was only the second time in the Norwegian company's maritime history that all four of its ships had been in the same port at the same time and was marked by a day of celebrations.

All aboard for an Azores adventure



A sperm whale off the coast of Faial



Black Watch joined her sister ships at the Spanish port of Cadiz



Furnas Valley tropical gardens



Landfall at Horta in Faial



Cadiz Cathedral



Central Porto

The ships were all able to tie up within a couple of minutes' walk from the old walled Andalusian city with its ancient watchtowers, churches, monuments and maze of cobbled streets on a peninsula jutting out into the Bay of Cadiz.

We enjoyed a fascinating morning wandering its streets and plazas, visiting its stunning baroque and neoclassical cathedral, one of the most impressive I've ever seen.

An exhilarating treat was in store that afternoon when we boarded one of Black Watch's two new high-speed 12-man RIB boats for an exciting alternative to traditional shore excursions.

Then it was back onboard for a farewell deck party as all four ships fell into line astern and sailed their separate ways.

Next for us was Lisbon. We sailed up the River Tagus in the early morning, passing the monument to Prince Henry the Navigator and all the famous Portuguese explorers before passing under the great

suspension bridge modelled on San Francisco's Golden Gate to reach our berth in the commercial port.

Here, I had a sense of déjà vu. I'd last visited Lisbon as a 17-year-old with a wanderlust who'd bought a one-way rail ticket from London.

That was more than 50 years ago but it was from this very quay that I'd boarded an Italian ship for my return voyage to Southampton.

The yellow trams that rattle up and down the narrow and hilly streets, and the green-topped taxis are still there, too, and I couldn't resist a

nostalgic ride a lifetime later.

An overnight passage brought us to Leixoes, the maritime gateway to Oporto, and we sailed in amid an aerial display by hundreds of gulls attracted by the local fishing fleet.

The undoubted highlight of our Oporto city tour was our visit to the opulent Stock Exchange Palace, a UNESCO World Heritage site, built at the end of the 17th century. Then

it was back to Leixoes to follow the example of those hungry gulls by diving into a fish restaurant just outside the port gates.

Back onboard, our captain announced that Liverpool was 900 nautical miles away, a two-day sea voyage that was a perfect opportunity for relaxing, enjoying all the ship's facilities - and writing these words.

NEED TO KNOW

■ **NIGEL HEATH** was a guest of Fred Olsen, whose four classic cruise ships sail from Dover, Southampton, Newcastle, Liverpool and Rosyth to a host of destinations in 2019. For further information, itineraries and rates visit fredolsencruises.com or call 0800 0355242.



Inside a caldera on Faial

The Azores might be volcanic but they're not the barren, rocky islands Nigel had imagined