

Santa Maria

Spectacular Diving in the Azores

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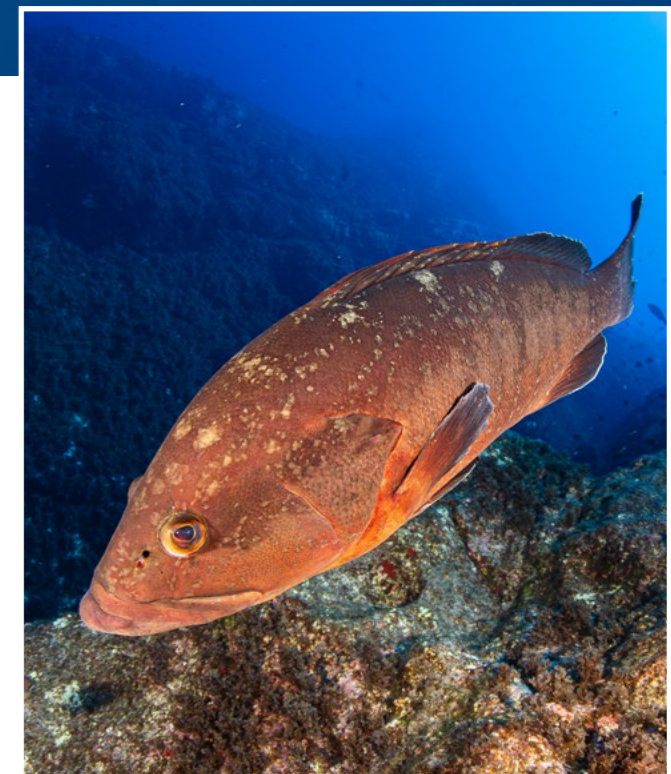


The autonomous Portuguese islands of the Azores, located in the mid-Atlantic, are a place of volcanoes and currents and a sea full of flying fish and mobula rays. Silke Schimpf shares a diary of her dive trip to the southernmost island of Santa Maria.

tectonic plates, warmed by the Gulf Stream and kept suspiciously green by Atlantic rains. That warm current is not just weather talk; it is the reason these seas nurture both temperate and subtropical life, and why Santa Maria, the archipelago's sunniest island, feels a touch balmy and more inviting than its island neighbours.

It is first light over the middle of the Atlantic, and I am already smuggling the island of Santa Maria under my skin. The Azores can feel like a geological postcard, a necklace of volcanic islands, threaded between three

Santa Maria is a small, beautiful island with an old soul. Vila do Porto, the island's sleepy capital, which is home to the 17th-century Forte de São Brás, is full of cobbled lanes and unexpectedly Venetian sunsets that make you slow your pace. Santa Maria's human story, the settlers and



Mobula rays at Baixa do Ambrósio, off the coast of Santa Maria Island in the Azores (above and previous page); Whale shark with pilot fish (top right); Dusky grouper at the Formigas Islets (right)



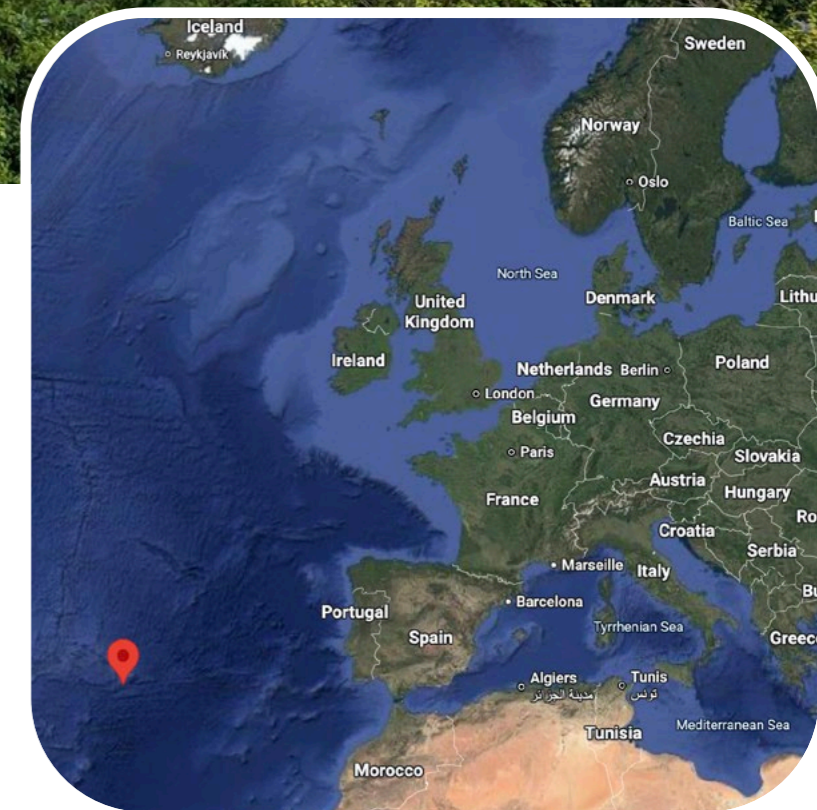
View over the harbour of Vila do Porto (left); White, low-roofed houses, with a view to the sea, were characteristic of the homes in Vila do Porto (top left); Picturesque landscape of Santa Maria Island (above); Map showing the location of Santa Maria in the mid-Atlantic (right)

sailors who made a habit of making the most of what the sea provides, is written in the island's white, low-roofed houses and a handful of hotels, which can feel more like long-lost relatives than business ventures. The island boasts the Azores' rare white sandy beaches and the curious "Barreiro da Faneca" (a red-soil desert tucked inland), which, together, give Santa Maria a geography of pleasing contradictions.

Pico Alto in the distance: A volcano with a posture
Pico Alto, at ~590m, is the highest point on the island. It is of volcanic origin and offers, on a clear day, a stunning 360° panoramic view over the entire island from its summit. Santa Maria is around 8 to 10 million years old, making it the first island to emerge in the Azores Islands,

when the rest of the Azores still lay hidden beneath the Atlantic. Those same volcanic bones have created dramatic cliffs, underwater pinnacles and the seamounts that draw pelagic life from the blue. Seamounts, which I have learned, are magnets for the great visitors: mobula rays, manta rays, whale sharks and tuna.

The underwater pageant
In short, the Azores are one of the Atlantic's best-kept dive secrets. The pageant of underwater life is the reason why we have come. The mix of volcanic topography, the Gulf Stream and nutrient-rich currents produces seamounts and banks that host huge schools of pelagics and, during the season, true spectacles.



Five of the most talked-about dive sites you will hear about on every island-hopping itinerary include Baixa do Ambrósio at Santa Maria, Ilhéus das Formigas at the Formigas Islets, Banco Princess Alice (Princess Alice Bank) between Pico and Faial, Dollabarat Seamount and a few treasured wrecks, with SS *Dori*, near São Miguel,

Guests gather on a RIB in the harbour to be taken out to sites around Santa Maria (below). Pregnant mobula ray with remoras attached (right). At Formigas, a curious grouper eyes a diver (bottom).



being a classic. Each of these sites has a mood of its own, from the dizzying walls and blue waters of Princess Alice to the concentrated wildlife at Ambrósio and Formigas.

Five dive sites to buzz about: A brief guide

Baixa do Ambrósio is an offshore reef just a few miles from Santa Maria. It has “easy-ish” access and is

a pelagic magnet, ideal for photography and snorkel encounters.

Ilhéus das Formigas. Jacques Cousteau loved these islets for good reason, including the pinnacles, wrecks and clear blue waters far out in the Atlantic.

Dollabarat is another offshore seamount near Formigas, with superb visibility and a lot of big fish energy.

SS Olympia and local wrecks. The archipelago’s wartime wrecks offer a taste of marine archaeology with current and schooling fish.

The Baixa do Ambrósio story: Spin, circle, repeat

We headed out to Ambrósio on the third day of our trip, about a 35-minute boat ride on a RIB, which was similar to the whale-watching vessels used in the Azores but kitted with ladders for divers. On days with current, a security line was available to hold on to if needed.

Formigas is the place to see tame gag groupers (*Mycteroperca microlepis*). They come to take a look at the divers, not the other way around!

It sits only a few nautical miles off Santa Maria’s north shore, and rises

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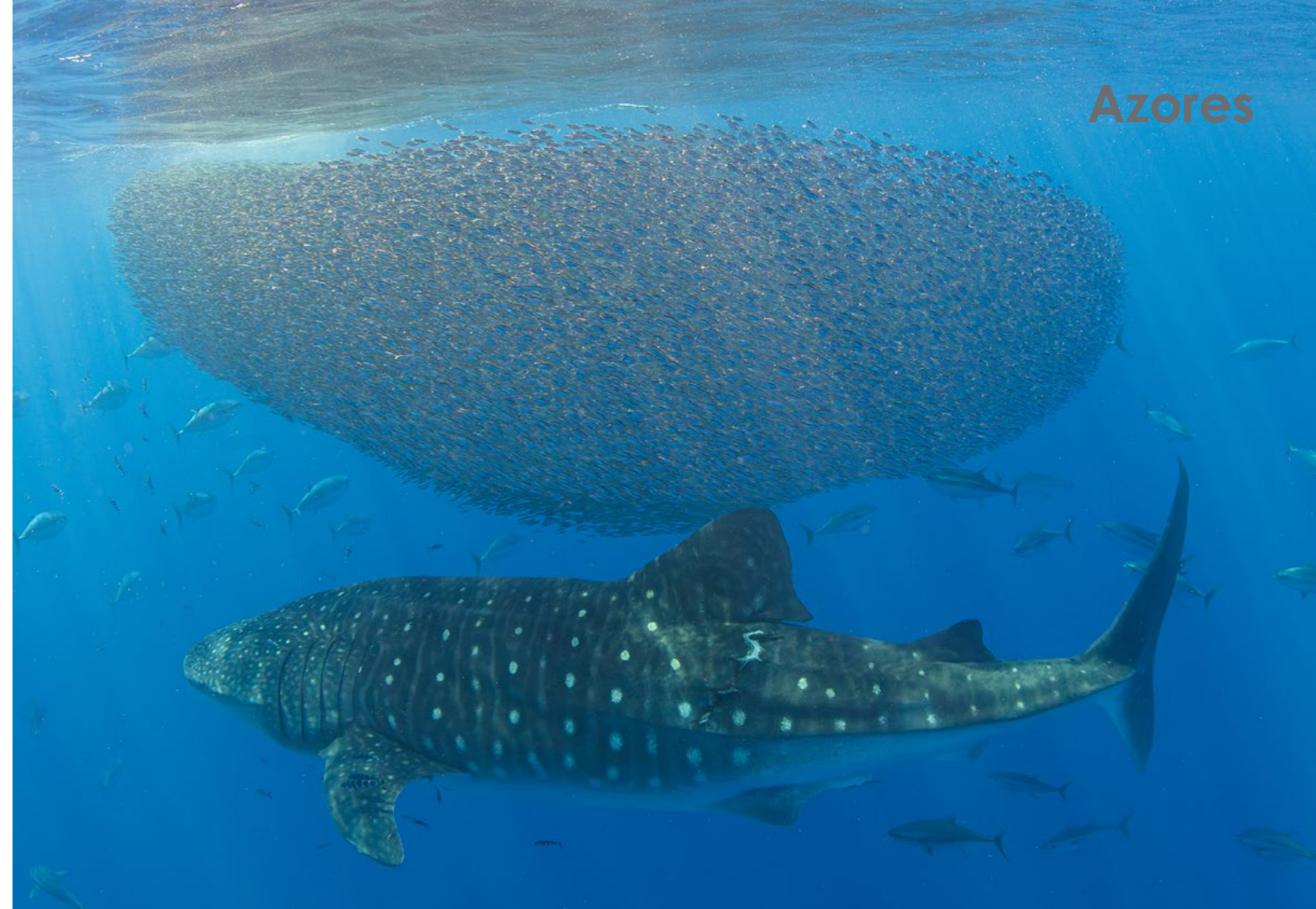
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A fever of mobula rays at Ambrósio (top left); Whale shark with bait ball of small fish (above); Grouper and divers at Formigas Islets (right); Mobula ray with remoras attached (left)

like an island from the deep, a classic seamount that pushes plankton up and invites big swimmers. Ambrósio is protected and famously abundant. Divers can regularly find dozens, sometimes scores, of devil rays and manta rays spiralling in the current, and it has become the island's most reliable "get-in-the-water-and-gasp" spot. Even whale sharks come by regularly in season (from July to August).

**The mobula fact file:
The performers**

The "manta-like" visitors here are mobulids. Think of them as the aerialists of the sea. Around the Azores, researchers and observers have reported several species, including

the sicklefin devil ray (*Mobula tarapacana*), the spinetail devil ray (*Mobula mobular*) and, occasionally, the oceanic manta ray (*Mobula birostris*). These animals congregate at seamounts roughly between June and October. Ambrósio's gatherings often include mature adults and, tellingly, many heavily pregnant females—a behavioural clue that these seamounts may be important for mating or birthing.

**"Guaranteed" sightings:
Marketing or miracle?**

Here's the honest truth every travel writer must whisper: Commercial operators market the Ambrósio season hard. Local dive centres frequent-





Scenes from the dive with mobula rays at Ambrósio

ly describe the summer months, from July to October, with July to early September often billed as the absolute peak, as almost certain for big mobula ray encounters, and some operators even use the word “guaranteed” in season.

The tour operator, Expert-Tours, which runs dedicated expeditions to Santa Maria, combining Ambrósio, Formigas and offshore seamount day trips, reports near-certain sighting rates on its in-season charters. Internal expedition logs and guest reports often back this up. If you need a number on a poster, the operators will oblige, but, as a reporter, I must note that biology is never literally 99.9% predictable. Still, I recommend going in peak season and packing your widest lens.

Operators: Local dive centres and the expedition team

On Santa Maria, you will find two well-established local dive centres; Mantamaria and Haliotis are two resident outfits that run daily trips to nearby pinnacles and Ambrósio. For those wanting a single, curated expedition that threads Ambrósio, Formigas and other seamounts into one Atlantic sardine-run-style adventure, Expert-Tours runs small-group charters and specialist expeditions led by experienced guides and photographers, a practical choice when weather windows matter and sightings are the aim.

The final bubble: Why this place gets under the skin

You can research the figures and currents in any textbook, but the

Azores’ real power is theatrical. It is the way a pinprick of an island organises the sea around it, and how the sea answers with a ballet of mobula rays and jacks, and the occasional whale shark.

Days on Santa Maria end with fish in the belly. Restaurants are plentiful, offering everything from seafood to pizza. A great variety is available, leaving you with red dirt on your

shoes as you stroll to the eateries.

As night falls, you will find yourself plotting a return before you have even unpacked. If the sea writes the invitation, Santa Maria and its Ambrósio dive site will sign your name in the spray.

If you ask for my recommendations, as your slightly sunburned reporter, I suggest you book with a team that knows the islands and



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Scenes from the dive with mobula rays at Ambrósio

the weather, and aim for July to early September for peak pelagic theatre. Bring a camera that loves the blue. If you are going with Expert-Tours, ask about its full-charter options, which stitch Ambrósio, Formigas and Dollabarat into one salty week. This is how we saw the show at its best on our trip.

Additional notes

Protected reefs and diver limits.

Not every reef here is free game. Some of the Azorean seamounts and reefs, including areas around Santa Maria and the Formigas, are legally protected against fishing. It is a quiet but vital move by local authorities to keep these pelagic magnets alive for the

long run. At Ambrósio itself, dive operators also follow a slot system of time windows for boats and groups to avoid a circus of bubbles and too many humans in the water at once. It keeps encounters calmer, safer and much more magical.

Jorge Fontes' manta research.

Marine biologist Jorge Fontes has been running one of the most elegant, non-invasive tagging projects I have seen. Instead of drilling or bolting tags, his team uses a soft cord to attach a small satellite tag to mobula rays and manta rays. The cord dissolves naturally in less than 24 hours, leaving no scar or permanent gear on the animal. The result? Scientists

SANTA MARIA TRAVEL TIPS

- The best flight connections through Lisbon, with a direct flight to Santa Maria, are offered by TAP Portugal Airlines.
- Lodging: Hotel Colombo and Charming Blue. Prebooking is essential.
- In tour packages with Expert-Tours, hotel, breakfast and snacks on the dive boat are included.
- A rental car is essential! ■

get precious movement and behaviour data while the rays swim on, unharmed.

The great migration.

Here is the headlining fact: Many of the mobula rays spiralling around us at Ambrósio have travelled staggering distances. Studies suggest that they migrate seasonally from the Cape Verde Islands, about 1,400 nautical miles to the south. Imagine flying "wings" almost the span of a



surfboard, crossing the Atlantic basin to arrive at this tiny underwater mountain—and then finding yourself face-to-face with a diver's astonished grin. ■

REFERENCE: WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Expedition leaders and guides Silke and Rainer Schimpf run Expert-Tours in South Africa. For more information, visit: expert-tours.com.

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