

Las Islas encantadas

the Galapagos Islands rediscovered...

Walk in the footsteps of Darwin and rediscover the Galapagos islands which remain as timeless and mysterious as they were centuries ago.

by Ania Mudrewicz





This is one of the few wildlife sanctuaries left where animals have no fear of man and can be observed closely. You can swim with the sea lions, turtles and penguins, or get within wingspan distance of a waved albatross feeding her chick. Whether watching a giant tortoise slowly amble by or being befriended by a sea lion pup, your first encounter with wildlife will captivate you making it a truly magical and unforgettable experience.

The Galapagos archipelago lies on the Equator 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean and consists of 13 large islands with many smaller ones. First formed by giant volcanoes rising out of the sea about five

million years ago, they are influenced by both hot and cold currents helping to create a variety of marine life found nowhere else in the world. Since the islands have never been connected to the mainland, all species found there must have crossed 600 miles of ocean either by swimming, flying or perhaps floating across on vegetable rafts. Egg larvae or seeds could have travelled less conspicuously in animals stomachs or stuck onto birds feathers.

Thus, over many years, the animals and plants that migrated there have adapted themselves to Galapagos conditions and evolved differently from island to island in order to survive creating many endemic species. Today, over half the plants and most of the reptiles are found nowhere else in the world and 97% of the archipelago has been declared a National park, making it one of the most sought after and unique wildlife destinations in the world.

The islands were first visited by pirates who named them after English Kings, noblemen or sea captains. The earliest charts gave the islands both Spanish and English names and the Ecuadorian government assigned their official names in 1892 so an island can have a Spanish, English and official name. Galapagos means 'saddle back' in Spanish and is used to describe the shape of the shell found on a particular species of giant tortoise. Historically, buccaneers named them Las Islas Encantadas, 'the bewitched islands' because the strong and variable currents made navigation difficult and passing mists made the islands appear and disappear as if by magic.

They were officially discovered by the Bishop of Panama, Tomas de Berlanga in 1535 when during his journey from Panama to Peru, his boat sailed off course and arrived in the Galapagos. For the next 300 years whalers, pirates and sealers used them for shelter and fresh water taking thousands of giant tortoises on their ships to be kept alive for up to a year without food to provide sailors with fresh meat during their long periods at sea. Fur seals were mercilessly hunted for their pelts which decimated their population in the process.

The islands first came to world attention when Charles Darwin visited them during his world voyage in HMS Beagle in 1835. His book on the Origin of Species published in 1859 based on his observations made during his five week visit gave the islands the world reputation as the living laboratory of evolution.

With its spectacular wildlife and hauntingly dramatic landscape it is not difficult to see why these remote islands have served as an inspiration to both naturalists and scientists.

In those days the Galapagos were virtually inaccessible being very expensive and difficult to get to with no real means by which the traveller could comfortably see the islands. Also the interest in the natural universe and issues such as wildlife conservation weren't as widespread as they are now. Things have changed since then and today it isn't difficult to get to the islands at all with daily flights from mainland Ecuador.

The best way to see the wildlife is by taking an organised cruise as it is the only way to gain access to many of the landing sites which can



ECO NOTE

As early as 1934 the Ecuadorian government set aside some of the islands as wildlife sanctuaries but it was not until 1959 that the Galapagos was declared a National park. The Charles Darwin Research Centre on Santa Cruz Island opened in 1962, mainly to ensure the conservation of a unique ecosystem, preserve its wildlife and to encourage educational and scientific research. In 1986, the Ecuadorian Government granted further protection to the islands by creating the Galapagos Marine Resources Centre. A further law was passed in 1998 to control immigration from the mainland and to restrict tourism to smaller groups. Because of the increase in tourism, special guidelines were introduced to protect the fragility of the islands and their inhabitants. The rules are sensible and necessary, and will not impinge on the visitors' enjoyment of the Galapagos, but will ensure that they do not destroy the very wildlife that they have come to see.

TRAVEL TIPS:



Choosing a cruise: There are a variety of boats operating in Galapagos carrying from 12 to 100 passengers and itineraries may vary from boat to boat. The most exciting islands include Espanola, Genovesa and Fernandina, so ideally, your cruise should include at least two of these islands. Additionally, there are a number of specialist cruises, including birdwatching, photography and diving. There are a handful of comfortable liveboards that concentrate mainly on diving and visit the northern islands of Wolf and Darwin where whale sharks and hammerheads are prolific.

Visas: No visas required for UK nationals who automatically get 90 days on entering Ecuador.

Health: No inoculations are needed for Galapagos although if you are going to visit the Amazon or other areas of mainland Ecuador, certain vaccinations are recommended.

Flights: There are no direct flights from the UK to Ecuador although you can travel there with KLM via Amsterdam, Iberia via Madrid, American Airlines via Miami and Continental via Houston. Galapagos flights are automatically booked together with the cruise and these fly daily from Quito and Guayaquil. On arrival in Galapagos, your naturalist guide will be waiting for you to transfer you to the boat of your choice and embark on the experience of a lifetime!

When to go: As Galapagos is on the Equator, there is something interesting to see all year round, although air temperatures are at their highest from January to April sometimes reaching 32 degrees! After June the weather gets a bit cooler and the sea becomes a little choppy from July to October, with sea temperatures dropping as low as 18 degrees; it is at this time that marine life becomes more prolific and it is the best time to see whale sharks. Due to variations in sea temperatures throughout the islands, a 5-7 mm wetsuit is recommended.

These remote islands offer spectacular wildlife and hauntingly dramatic landscape



only be visited with a guide from the Darwin Research Centre. There are many categories of boats ranging from economy to luxury carrying from 12 to 100 passengers. Luxury boats are more spacious with ample dining areas – often eating ‘al fresco,’ have roomy, air conditioned cabins and are generally more comfortable at sea. However, which ever boat you choose, whether an elegant traditional sailing yacht or a motor vessel, the single most important influence on your cruise will be your naturalist guide who will be vital in introducing you to the islands.

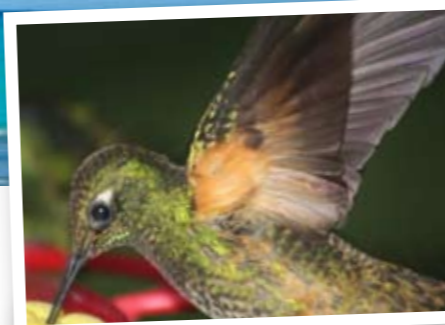
A typical day on board might consist of going ashore after breakfast by dinghy or ‘panga’ as they are known locally where you will have a dry or wet landing depending on the particular site and on occasion you may be greeted by a friendly sea lion.

The prolific bird life includes blue and red footed boobies and magnificent frigatebirds with their inflated red pouches which they display

during courtship in a bid to attract a passing mate. Nicknamed ‘pirates of the sea’ they will often bully smaller birds into dropping their food which they will then swoop in mid air to catch the stolen meal. This happens because frigate birds have very small preening glands and are not able to secrete enough oil to waterproof their feathers and are therefore unable to dive underwater to catch their prey. Their seven feet wingspan combined with the largest wingspan to weight ratio of any bird provides aerobatics which never fail to entertain. Blue footed boobies equally impress with their fantastic rocket dives which they do in groups in perfect synchronisation.

These islands are truly an ornithologist’s paradise. Photographers will enjoy the tameness of the animals and will have countless opportunities to get some of their best shots without ever having to reach for a zoom lens.

On returning to your boat there may be time



for a pre-lunch swim and afterwards sailing to another visitors site – perhaps up to two hours away – an opportunity to a siesta on deck until you reach your destination. Dolphins may often accompany your boat riding the bow wave in twos and threes. Each shore visit is a few hours long giving plenty of time for snorkelling during

the day. Swimming in the Galapagos can be full of surprises – a harem of sea lions may gracefully weave their way around you often coming up to your mask with the playfulness of a dog!

The uniqueness of the Galapagos islands is reflected underwater where almost one quarter of the marine life is found nowhere else in the world. Encounters with sea turtles, spotted eagle rays or marine iguanas will be numerous and you will usually see these swimming alongside reef fish and penguins darting in front of you searching for food. Diving enthusiasts will not be disappointed and will see something different on every dive where the unexpected happens on a regular basis – like seeing up to eight whale sharks in one week! It is not unusual to find yourself surrounded by a school of hammerheads whilst observing the gracefulness of a giant manta ray slowly gliding by. Life is never dull and the friendliness of the Galapagos sea lion ensures that you are accompanied by at least one or two on almost every swim.

Life on board is relaxed and informal and by the end of your cruise you will have become quite a specialist on bird, marine and reptile life found in these waters. Most cruises last for about a week although shorter and longer ones are available on request.

All flights to Galapagos go via Ecuador so it is a good opportunity to sample some of its cultural heritage with its beautiful churches, cobbled streets and colonial haciendas. It is one of the smallest countries in South America containing the richest concentration of birds, orchids and butterflies and you don’t have to go far to see them. It is possible to combine a cruise with a visit to the Amazon rainforest where you can stay in an Eco Lodge and relax in your hammock, after a day’s activities and listen to jungle sounds or contemplate the world.

Another option is to explore the Avenue of the Volcanoes or trek to nearby snow-capped Cotopaxi, the highest active volcano in the world. You may want to do something more relaxing though, like an Andean railway trip along the Devil’s Nose or a visit to a local market where you can see wood carving, textile weaving or the making of Panama hats.

Whatever your choice, whether alone or in a group, trips are tailor-made to suit individual requirements. You will not have time to see everything on your first visit – wildlife enthusiast, photographer, holidaymaker or diver, the Galapagos will inspire you in many of the ways it did Darwin and your understanding of the natural world will take on a different perspective leaving you bewitched and wanting to return to these unique, enchanted islands once more.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ania Mudrewicz first visited Ecuador in 1977 and her love of wildlife, sailing and photography naturally drew her to the Galapagos Islands. She established Galapagos Classic Cruises (www.galapagoscruises.co.uk) over 15 years ago and continues to visit the islands regularly where she loves to swim with the penguins and sea lions. A donation is made on behalf of every passenger who travels to the Galapagos and this is used to promote all conservation issues on the islands. She also organises cruises hosting BBC Presenters and on these trips, passengers have the additional benefit of joining a celebrity at no extra cost.