



Please Don't Step On *The Iguanas*



Michael DeFreitas straddles the Equator with the wildlife of the Galapagos Islands

Wisps of fine spray, backlit by a low sun, pierced the morning air along the black rocky shoreline of Punta Espinosa on the north-east coast of Isla Fernandina, the youngest and third largest island in the Galapagos Archipelago. The shoreline marked the edge of a vast lava field that stretched down from the island's massive active volcano, Volcán La Cumbre, 10 kilometres away.

As we headed toward shore in our panga (the local word for Zodiac), I couldn't help but wonder what Charles Darwin must have thought about these strange wisps when he first approached these shores in 1835.

As it turned out, those tiny mysterious plumes turned out to be "sneezes" from thousands of black, 4ft marine iguanas blanketing the rocky shoreline. It seems the iguanas ingest lots of salt water when they feed on sea algae and eject the excess salt (water) from their bodies by collecting it in their nasal passages and sneezing.

Our panga driver picked a clear landing spot between the iguanas and, before we stepped ashore, our naturalist park guide, Harry Jimenez, warned: "Be careful on the sharp lava and please don't step on the iguanas." It was a necessary warning – they were everywhere and their black bodies blended perfectly with the black lava.

And it wasn't only iguanas we had to contend with. During our first two-hour shore excursion, we also had to dodge scurrying sally light-foot crabs, flightless cormorants, playful Galapagos sea lions and lava lizards.



Except for maybe Antarctica, no other place on earth offers such spectacular and easily accessible wildlife experiences. With its unique natural wonders and the rare and intriguing wildlife that played such an important role in Darwin's theory of Natural Selection, it is no wonder the

this natural treasure, UNESCO declared the islands a World Heritage Site in 2001.

Straddling the Equator about 600 miles off Ecuador's west coast, the Galapagos have attracted visitors since their initial discovery in 1535. However, most of the early visitors were whalers and buccaneers who

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Galapagos Islands are one of the most celebrated places on earth.

Since the islands rank high on many cruisers' "must see" list, the Ecuadorian government designated 97 per cent of the archipelago and the surrounding waters a national park in 1959. In an effort to further protect

basically used the islands as a giant larder.

They slaughtered an estimated 300,000 giant tortoises and thousands of other animals for food. By the time Darwin arrived, a number of the region's unique species had already become extinct, including some giant tortoises.

No animal is more synonymous with the Galapagos than the giant tortoise. The islands got their name from the tortoise's giant saddle-shaped shell that reminded early Spaniards of a woman's riding saddle, called a *galapago*.

Of the original 15 tortoise species, three were extinct by the time Darwin arrived. Today, only 10 species remain (not counting the sole surviving Pinta Island tortoise). The islands also lost a number of bird, mammal and marine species, and presently have 15 species on the critically endangered list (including the flightless cormorant, mangrove finch and penguin).

Five of the 13 main islands are populated and most cruises depart from Baltra, Santa Cruz and the San Cristóbal islands. In order to protect the park's fragile ecosystems, visitor traffic is highly regulated. This means that ➤



not every cruise vessel sails to the same islands and itineraries change frequently, so it's best to check various operators if you want to visit particular islands.

About 70 vessels now cruise the islands, so you can usually get to any island you want. Vessels come in all shapes and

screens for movies and informative lectures and two laptops for you to review your digital photos. There's a Jacuzzi and bar on the second deck and the 1,200sq ft top sun deck sports carpet and comfortable reclining deck chairs. A rope net hung between the cat's bows provides an ideal platform to catch an ocean breeze or watch dolphins surfing in the wake.

The almost 1:1 crew-to-passenger ration translates into a more pampered, personable and educational experience. By the time you have finished breakfast, you'll find your cabin cleaned, your upscale biodegradable Aveda toiletries and basket of chocolates restocked, and fresh towels, arranged like various Galapagos animals, adorning your queen bed.

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sizes, from 8-passenger sloops to 100-passenger cruise ships (park rules limit vessels to a maximum of 100 passengers, though). Some landing sites are not available to the larger ships because of the number of passengers allowed ashore at any one time.

Cruise itineraries range from four to 14 days, with eight to 10-day itineraries being the most popular. On a typical 8-day cruise, you can usually expect to visit seven or eight islands with at least two tendered shore excursions each day. A park guide must accompany all shore excursions (with up to 16 passengers per park guide).

The *M/C Athala*, one of two luxury catamaran yachts operated by Haugan Cruises, is one of the most stable, safe and comfortable ways of exploring the islands. The wide-beamed, smooth-sailing cats are equipped with a crew of 11 and the latest electronic safety and navigational equipment. The boat boasts eight spacious 185sq ft, air-conditioned cabins with large portrait windows and balconies on the lower deck cabins.

The lounge is equipped with plush couches, a small library, two 40-inch flat

But what really separates the *Athala* from other Galapagos cruises is the feeling of family I got from the crew and other guests. Dining on the *Athala* was reminiscent of a casual family get-together instead of lunch in a school cafeteria.

There were no long buffet lines or loud chatter from dozens of strangers. The dining room's large, custom-made mahogany table – where most meals are served – seats all 16 guests and you get a choice of dinner entrées (salmon, tuna, filet mignon, etc.) prepared to your liking.

The intimate feeling spills over into the shore excursions that feel more like family outings than the usual crowded day-trips on most ships. The specially designed stern boarding platforms provide easy and safe *panga* access, even for less agile passengers.

You're issued walking sticks, beach towels and snorkel gear and, after each shore foray, you're greeted back on the boat with fresh fruit, snacks and cold juices. Just for good measure, the crew washes your shoes/sandals and rinses your snorkel gear so it's ready for the next time. ➤

THE GALAPAGOS NATURE CALENDAR

The Dry season is officially July-December, but it is still largely dry all year. Brief rain showers occur in the afternoons during the Wet season.

The best weather/wildlife is typically April-June, but natural events occur on all islands every month. Here's the full list:

JANUARY – Green sea turtles arrive on most beaches to lay eggs. Land iguanas start mating on Isabela.

FEBRUARY – Marine iguanas start nesting on Santa Cruz. Greater flamingoes start nesting on Floreana.

MARCH – Marine iguanas nest on Fernandina. Waved albatross starts arriving on Española.

APRIL – Green sea turtle eggs start hatching on most beaches and the waved albatross starts courtship on Española.

MAY – Blue-footed boobies begin their courtship on North Seymour Island.

JUNE – Beginning of the nesting season of giant tortoises on Santa Cruz; magnificent frigates start mating on North Seymour.

JULY – Good month to see blue-footed booby's eggs, chicks, juveniles and sub adults on Española.

AUGUST – Sea-Lions start pupping throughout the islands. Galapagos hawks start courtship on Santiago.

SEPTEMBER – Galapagos Penguins start courting on Bartolomé.

OCTOBER – Giant tortoises collect in lowlands and start laying eggs. Fur sea-lions start mating.

NOVEMBER – Good visibility for snorkellers and playful sea-lion pups.

DECEMBER – Hatching of giant tortoise's eggs begins. First young waved albatross fledged.



ISLAND HOPPING

From the sea, most of the islands look similar, but the similarities end once you step ashore. As Darwin discovered, each island has its own unique ecosystem and only a few creatures share more than one island. The following list gives a snapshot of the main islands.

Bartolomé: The signature landmark in the Galapagos Islands is Pinnacle Rock. We spent an afternoon hiking up to the top of a nearby hill for panoramic views of the pinnacle and the surrounding moonscape of lava formations. Before heading back, we piled into the *pangas* to check out the penguins along the beach below the immense pinnacle.

Isabela: We spent a morning snorkeling and riding in the *pangas* near Vicente Roca, the largest and most volcanically active island in the chain. Other Isabela stops include narrow Tagus Bay, where the names of dozens of whalers and pirates still adorn the rocks at the landing site, and Urbina Bay to see the golden land iguanas.



Santa Cruz: Most Galapagos residents live on Santa Cruz, the archipelago's second largest island. The island's main attraction is the Charles Darwin Station, where you can observe giant tortoise research and breeding programmes and see the world's rarest animal – Lonesome George. He is more than 100 years old and it's likely his parents were around when Darwin visited the islands. Of course when he dies, the Pinta tortoise species will become extinct.

Fernandina: This is the youngest of the five big islands and home to the largest marine iguana colony in the Galapagos as well as one of the only places to see the flightless cormorants. Also a good place for penguins.



Santiago: Once called fur seals, 1905 fur traders hunted the Galapagos fur sea-lions to near extinction. They have since made a dramatic recovery and Santiago now provides a safe habitat for almost 40,000 animals. They are still a bit timid of humans, though, and tend to hang out in the grottos and rocks along the shore near Puerto Egas.

Rabida Island: Located about 3 miles south of Santiago, this tiny reddish-maroon islet is home to a red sand beach, large populations of sea-lions, pelicans and flamingoes. The birds feed in the large salt-water lagoon and get their distinctive pink hue from feeding on the pink brine shrimp in the lagoon. On the far side of the island is a white sand beach, a favorite nesting spot for green sea turtles

San Cristóbal: The most eastern of the islands, San Cristóbal is home to the oldest settlement in the Galapagos. Its highland cloud forests are ideal habitat for giant tortoises, and shore excursions usually



include a visit to the Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado tortoise breeding center.

Española: We made two landings on the archipelago's southern-most island. In the morning, we stepped ashore on to Gardner Bay beach, a magnificent sensual arc of soft, white sand with a resident colony of sea-lions. We also went snorkelling with sea-lions near the two small islets just off the beach. In the afternoon, we landed at Suarez Point, to visit the major breeding colony for most of the world's 12,000 pairs of waved albatrosses. It was fascinating to watch their elaborate beak-slapping courtship ritual. The island also teemed with mockingbirds, blue-footed and masked boobies, Darwin finches, Galapagos doves, hawks and reddish green marine iguanas.

Genovesa: Off the beaten track of most cruises, this island is home to the region's largest red-footed booby colony and a large magnificent frigate bird colony. You can usually get to within a few meters of the nesting



frigates, some with bright red, inflated throat pouches (about the size of a soccer ball!).

This tiny island is a true bird-watcher's paradise and its sea cliffs provide ideal nesting sites for swallow-tailed gulls, storm petrels, tropicbirds and the elusive short-eared owl.

Galapagos wildlife is so fearless of humans, you can enjoy the famous blue-footed booby's two-step courting dance within touching distance. Mockingbirds will hop on to your shoes and peck at your shoelaces, and playful sea-lions will perform figure eights around you while you're snorkeling.

In short, you don't have to sneak up on the wildlife in the Galapagos...but you do have to watch where you step.



FACT FILE *Galapagos*

There is a \$100 park fee (cash only) upon arrival in the Galapagos. There is also a \$40 airport departure tax (cash only) when leaving Ecuador.

M/C Athala

Built: 2007	Passengers: 16
Beam: 37ft	Length: 98ft
Decks: 3	Max speed: 12 kn
Draft: 4.6ft	Crew: 11

HAUGAN CRUISES offers 4-, 5-, and 8-day itineraries starting at \$2,100. Itineraries change every year, according to park schedules, so check the website to see which islands are being covered.

MORE INFO: In the US, call 1877 268 9402, or 020 8144 9243 in the UK, www.galapagosislands.com and www.haugancruises.com. Or see the Adventure Cruise Collection - www.cruiseline.co.uk/p-1d/adventure-cruises or 0800 008 6677.

You will have to overnight in the city of Quito before and after your cruise. The reasonably priced SWISSOTEL QUITO, with its modern luxury accommodations, convenient location close to the Old City and free airport shuttle, is an ideal choice.

While you're in Quito, plan on spending an extra day to explore the Old City's 16th and 17th century architecture. Look up www.swissotel.com or call +593 2 256 8260.