

venture into the wilds

ECOVENTURA GUIDES GUESTS THROUGH THE MAGNIFICENCE OF THE GALAPÁGOS ISLANDS

Pink flamingos snooze on one stick-like leg in their lagoon on Bachas Beach on the north shore of Santa Cruz Island. Blue-footed boobies face each other down, clicking, honking and whistling through a stylized mating dance, on the rugged, windswept lava rock island of Española. Flame red-orange Sally Lightfoot crabs scamper across craggy black volcanic rock on multiple islands, while the giant tortoises, for which the Galapágos are named, mate in the verdant highlands of Santa Cruz. And these are just a few highlights that a visitor might see above the surface.

Below the sea, snorkelers and divers become part of an aquarium where the intensity of color dazzles, and the grace and speed of its denizens is breathtaking. Penguins and sea lions swim circles around divers, spotted eagle rays and green sea turtles glide by, and brilliant magenta sea stars cling to the rocks. To say the Galapagos Islands are a feast for the senses is to greatly understate the experience.

Yet a trip to this far-flung archipelago, 600 miles west of Ecuador, is also a feast for the mind, for with each island approached, the lessons of Charles Darwin become crystallized. The concept of species adaptation and survival of the fit may be second nature to us now, but these were radical concepts in 1835, when the *Beagle* arrived for just five weeks. Simply by observing nature with an open mind and spirit of awe, the 26-year-old naturalist was led to certain conclusions. Specifically, he noticed the beak structure of finches varied from one island to the next, designed to optimize food gathering in each setting. The realization that these and other adaptations were passed on to the offspring led him to write "The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection" in 1859, almost 25 years later.

Expert naturalist guides with Ecoventura point out the specific adaptations made by flora and fauna on the dozen or so islands visited aboard the company's three 20-passenger motorized yachts, the *Eric*, *Flamingo 1* and *Letty*, or the *Sky Dancer*, its custom-designed, dive live-aboard.

Weeklong cruises allow passengers to unwind, unhook from civilization and begin to truly understand the concept of evolution.

On daily hikes, adaptation becomes clear in countless ways. When a guide asks group members to touch the prickly pear cactus and no fingers are pricked by needle-like spines, all are relieved, if bemused.

"There are no reptiles to protect against on this island, and soft spines allow birds to land here," says Harry Jimenez, a 32-year-old island native and dive master. Jimenez, along with Orlando Romero, a senior guide with Ecoventura since 1995, are two of the experts that make



FLAME RED-ORANGE SALLY LIGHTFOOT CRABS SCAMPER ACROSS BLACK LAVA ROCK.

an Ecoventura trip more than just the thrilling chance to see exotic wildlife unafraid of humans, in settings of stark and varying beauty. Their training and intelligence mean that no opportunity for learning is wasted. Their passion is infectious, and it instills in everyone on board a desire to help insure the survival of the Galapágos, both as a living laboratory and as a visitor destination.

In a recent speech, Ecuador's new president, Rafael Correa, elected in January, declared that the Galapágos Islands are suffering a "huge institutional, environmental and social crisis." With his threat to temporarily suspend tourism permits and impose population restrictions, it's more important than ever for travelers to choose an operator with sound environmental practices.

Ecoventura's participation in the "Smart Voyager" environmental certification program ensures that its vessels, passengers, and crew members are committed to preserving the Galapágos National Park and respecting the fragile ecosystem that, worldwide, is recognized as a "living laboratory of evolution."

The program was developed by the Rainforest Alliance and the Corporation for Conservation and Development, an Ecuadorian conservation group, to give an ecological certificate or green seal of approval to tour boats in the Galapágos. Ecoventura was one of the first recipients of the SmartVoyager seal of approval in this voluntary,

eco-friendly program. Among other standards, passengers must be given maximum opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the islands and close encounters with wildlife, while leaving no trace of their visit.

In 2006, Ecoventura became the first “carbon neutral” company in Ecuador by measuring the carbon dioxide emissions from its four boats (and sales offices) and reducing them wherever possible. The unavoidable emissions are offset through a portfolio of climate-friendly projects including reforestation in Chiapas, Mexico; sustainable energy projects in Sri Lanka; and methane recapture in the United States.

Ecoventura’s 20-passenger boats are an optimal size, both for the onboard camaraderie that invariably develops, and for the minimal impact each onshore arrival brings. Two pangas, or motorized zodiacs, shuttle between the boat and shoreline, ensuring an ideal ratio of one guide to 10 passengers for every hike, swim or snorkel expedition.

Daily briefings in the lounge before dinner cover what conditions to expect for the following day, what wildlife will be viewed and whether to prepare for a wet or dry landing. For example, Day One on bird-rich Genovesa Island, in the northeastern portion of the archipelago, brings the only chance of the trip to see red-footed boobies, perched on branches in the palo santo trees; and the short-eared owl, unique for its habit of hunting by day.

At a cove on stark Fernandina, the youngest and most pristine of the islands, hundreds of dark grey marine iguanas sunbathe on the black pahoehoe lava, while pairs of flightless cormorants prepare their nests. Both are prime examples of species adaptation. The former evolved from land iguanas who sought food by going deeper into the water for algae; the latter became more efficient hunters without wings, which then atrophied over time.

On Bartolome Island, a 30-minute climb to the summit of a once-active volcano leads to a sublime panorama of surrounding Sullivan Bay, as well as the spatter cones, lava tubes and other volcanic features that define the landscape.

The rhythm of each day revolves around an early-morning and late-afternoon excursion at a different island to hike, swim, snorkel or kayak. Highlights might include a walk through a lava tube, or the chance to watch a male frigate bird balloon out his chest like a giant red tomato to attract a female. They could be as simple as watching the pattern of green sea turtle prints in the sand, or as dramatic as watching an orphan sea lion pup rejected by another’s nursing mother. Always the mating dance of the boobies is a joy to behold.

The snorkeling, whether deep sea or off the beach, is thrilling, especially when your companions are white-tipped reef sharks. Jimenez can free-dive so deeply that he’s often mistaken for another sea creature. He’s always



IN THE GALAPAGOS, PHOTOGRAPHERS CAN GET UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH WILDLIFE LIKE THIS IGUANA.

seeking treasures from the deep to point out to his charges. Snorkeling along ledges lined with chartreuse, coral and orange sea horses; anemones; mollusks; and more is akin to browsing the most exquisite underwater jewelry display.

The return to the boat after a full morning or afternoon excursion is always met with a welcome tray of drinks and snacks. Compact cabins serve for sleeping and dressing; the sundeck, teak lounge and bar are the main gathering places on board. Meals are plentiful, with multiple choices of healthful cuisine. Local dishes such as ceviche and platanos are perennial favorites.

The sundeck is the preferred place to gather, to stargaze at night, or to enjoy a cocktail and conversation at sunset. Multiple copies of “The Beak of the Finch: A Story of Evolution in Our Time,” “The Voyage of the *Beagle*: Charles Darwin’s Journal of Researches,” and other books that help explain the mysteries encountered in these islands are read and discussed on deck, on hikes and over dinner. Sightings of dolphins or pilot whales generate further excitement, as the boat travels on to its next island destination.

One young veterinarian on a recent cruise said, “It seems like we went to ‘eco college’ for two weeks. What a vast amount of experience and learning took place, sometimes without even realizing it!”

Ecoventura is offering agent fam trips on selected departures in September and October at 25 percent off cruise rates. Family-oriented cruises in summer and school holidays cater to the company’s strong family market. 2007 rates for the eight-day/seven-night cruise start at \$2,450 per person, based on double occupancy. ☎

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