



Galapagos Giant Tortoise

Exploring the Galapagos Islands

Article & Photos By Ann Nelson

Visiting the Galapagos Islands will touch your soul, open your eyes, and force you to look at the world in a way you never have before. There is simply no other place like it on earth. Everyday is filled with sheer joy and profound sadness. Everyday is filled with life and death. The natural cycle of life is intense and happens right before your eyes. I wanted to reach out and save the creatures that were helpless, but I couldn't. Nature was taking its natural course.

The Galapagos Islands first captivated Charles Darwin's attention in 1835 and provided the backdrop that enabled him to develop his theory of evolution. Since the islands have never been connected to a continent and lie 600 miles off the west coast of Ecuador, they have evolved in relative isolation. Gradually, over many hundreds of thousands of years, animals and plants arrived from the sea, and as time went by, they adapted themselves to the Galapagos conditions.

We were delighted when we found out about the weather patterns in this equatorial region. The Galapagos are not hot

and humid. The islands lie instead in one of the Pacific's "dry zones" where temperatures remain abnormally low, cooled by upwelling in the sea. The Galapagos cycle is made up of two distinct seasons: the warm/set season (January to June) and the cool/dry season (July to December).

One of the most practical and enjoyable ways to explore the islands is from the comfort of a first-class motor yacht. We chose the Eric because it had everything we were looking for, plus it meant alot to my husband and me that the company we chose was a member of The Smart Voyager Program, an eco-certification program that complies with requirements to tread lightly on the fragile ecosystem. To learn more about the standards of this program and the very real negative impacts of travel to the Galapagos Islands and elsewhere, visit www.rainforest-alliance.org.

Our boat was designed with only ten guest rooms, all with huge windows. We felt like we could make the place our own since there were only 20 guests,

and no waiting lines for meals or activities. We enjoyed plenty of personal service. Each room has its own bath with showers, bottled water and plenty of fresh towels.

The people we met on board literally came from all corners of the world. We shared meals with a food and beverage manager from a large hotel in Las Vegas and his wife, a Public Relations Director for the city of Las Vegas. We went snorkeling with a Kibbutz manager and his girlfriend from Israel.

Each morning we were treated to fresh exotic fruit juices, cereal, and cooked-to-order eggs. Lunch featured a buffet of healthy pastas, meats and vegetables. Evenings were spent watching the sunset while sipping a glass of wine from the view deck. Later we enjoyed grilled seafood, ceviche, creamy soups, and tasty deserts.

Our days were filled with shore excursions, island hiking, swimming and photography. The Eric provided a menu of two or three excursions a day via motorized zodiacs. Educated and knowledgeable guides provided us with details about the history of the islands. There is one guide provided for every ten passengers.

One afternoon my husband and I spent playing tag with a baby sea lion. That afternoon, hands down was one of the best afternoons I've ever spent. Sheer joy! Sheer simplicity! Sheer fun!

Another enchanting way to spend part of the day is to go sea kayaking. The islands are filled with protected bays, and little coves. Skirting along the water's edge is the perfect way to discover the beauty of the islands.



Land Lizard

Underwater volcanoes created the islands about four to five million years ago. The wildlife my husband and I experienced during our one short week forced us to pop our eyes wide open. We saw 400-pound land tortoises; marine iguanas literally piled on top of each other, blue-footed boobies, dolphins,

penguins and hundreds of sea lions and their calves.

The Galapagos Islands are home to the highest proportion of endemic species in the world. This astonishing ecosystem contains more than 3,000 kinds of plants and animals of which 20% are found nowhere else in the world. Penguins, fur seals and manta rays all live together in harmony.

All the Galapagos tales are not happy ones. Many industrial boats now target sharks, either to process shark meat or to remove only the shark fins. Such wasteful, illegal and inhumane practices are considered destructive in any environment, but in the Galapagos, they are a particularly significant threat to the complex and fragile marine ecosystem. Currently, the Galapagos National Park Service lacks adequate funding, trained personnel, and equipment to prevent the illegal fishing.

As we began our journey back to the mainland, I watched with regret, as the islands grew more and more distant. I would have loved to spend more time exploring these time capsules. The variety of marine and land creatures we encountered during this week only whetted our appetite for further exploration of these islands. We also became absolutely convinced of the need to preserve this paradise and others like it.

The March/April 2007 issue of Awareness Magazine featured a story about Toyota International supporting a Teacher Program to help save the Galapagos and other fragile places in the world. Another valuable fund that has a positive impact on this area is the Galapagos

Land Lizard

Blue Footed Booby



Marine Biodiversity Fund. This fund is administered by The World Wildlife Fund to help support the Galapagos National Park. You can find more information about this fund by inquiring at www.ecoventura.com.

Traveling to the Galapagos from San Diego was actually simpler than I thought it might be. Our jumping off point was L.A. We spent the night at the Crown Plaza LA International



Writer Ann Nelson playing with one of the baby sea lions.

Airport Hotel, and left early in the morning for Miami. We decided that would be much less stressful instead of doing a marathon flight from San Diego. The hotel shuttle picked us up and dropped us off at the airport. We felt prices starting at \$129.00 a night were quite reasonable. Please contact www.crownplaza.com for more information.

After arriving in Miami, we flew to Quito, Ecuador and spent two nights at the mid-priced Grand Mercure Alameda Hotel. The hotel was centrally located and within walking distance to most shops and restaurants. Contact www.accorhotels.com for more information. My husband and I recommend spending two nights in Ecuador to rest up before taking the flight to the Galapagos. We spent our days visiting old churches and browsing around incredible markets filled with colorful handmade handicrafts.

One of the largest and oldest indigenous craft markets is located in Otavalo, about an hour's drive outside of Quito. This is the perfect place to purchase everything from Panama hats, wool sweaters, paintings, sketches, woodcarvings, pottery, stoneware, and handcrafted jewelry. Gary and I hired a driver to take us to Otavalo, and we stopped at remote villages, ate grilled corn out of the husk

at a roadside stand, and visited places that only locals would know about. We have found that hiring a driver is a wonderful way to explore when you're not familiar with the area.

When it was time to leave, my husband asked me if I'd rather stay at the best hotel in Paris, or return to the Galapagos. Hands down, I'd rather go back to the Galapagos!

Not a day goes by when thoughts of the Galapagos don't enter my mind. Seeing the Galapagos made me realize that I really want to make a difference in this world before I die. The rain forest, the jungles, and hundreds of species of animals are becoming extinct each year. In the meantime, the world population is exploding, the demand for huge "mega-mansions" and consumer goods have never been higher.

As for myself, the simple life is fine. I'm a small part of this big world. I don't need a lot. And yes, we can all make a difference. We are in this together. Isn't it funny that

so often we truly value something more when we stand to lose it.

It is true — tourism does have a downside. Tourists unwittingly bring alien species that compete with native plants and animals. The growing number of tourist requires more boats and other resources that put pressure on this fragile environment. Ironically though, tourism has been a primary reason for conserving the Galapagos Islands. Travelers are an important source of jobs and foreign exchange. Without visitors there would be little defense against the industries that would likely exploit the islands.

There is a saying "If we can't preserve the Galapagos Islands, what can we preserve?"

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Ecoventura, the operator of motor yachts Eric, Flamingo and Letty. Prices include 7-night cruise, all meals, snacks, guided shore excursions, snorkeling equipment, wet suits and more. Visit www.ecoventura.com.

Galapagos Network sales and reservation office: (800) 633-7972.

Prices range from \$2,450 - \$2,995 for double occupancy through January 2008.

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