

## DESTINATIONS

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**The Galapagos** Archipelago is a bit like a lost Eden. Situated some 975 km off the Ecuadorian coast, it comprises a cluster of 19 enchanting isles adrift in a blue tropical sea. Within it, a veritable eco-tapestry teems with the colour and life of nature's untouched splendour. One finds gigantic tortoises, flightless seabirds, seagoing lizards, blue-footed boobies, red-throated frigate birds and four-eyed fish well-protected within the boundaries of a national park.

Then there is the land itself. Fractured and forbidding for most parts, these islands were recently formed by volcanic cataclysm. Situated at the confluence of the Pacific, Cocos and Nazca tectonic plates, the archipelago is a highly active geologic area. The youngest of the islands, Isabella and Fernandina, remain especially volatile and were blistered by major volcanic eruptions as recent as in 2005. Major ocean currents bathe the islands, contributing to the tremendous diversity of species that congregate here, including over 500 species of fish, 800 species of mollusks and 430 varieties of flowering plants.

Visiting the Galapagos is both a terrestrial and a nautical adventure. One flies in from Guayaquil or Quito, Ecuador. After that, the island-hopping is done by boat. There are a number of excursion vessels that can be booked, mostly converted motor and sailing yachts. Typically carrying 20 or fewer guests, they're based at marinas on both San Cristobal and Santa Cruz Islands. Airports on both islands also handle passenger traffic from the mainland.

I arrived for my voyage on San Cristobal. There, I was met by crew members from Ecoventura Cruises and then promptly escorted to Eric – one of three identical 20-passenger motor yachts owned by a family-run company. Quickly settling into one of its cabins – the yacht also comes with plush salons and spacious decks for wildlife viewing – we sailed into a warm breeze for our Galapagos discovery.

# NATURE STUDY

Leap straight into a National Geographic Channel and discover what Adam missed out on with a visit to the Galapagos Islands off Ecuador



A blowhole spouting seawater on the north coast of Espanola Island



The local markets and shops on the sleepy Santa Cruz island offers a nice touristy respite



Mediterranean beauty abounds in Puerto Ayora in Santa Cruz Island



The islands' well-preserved ecosystem allows travellers to get up close to rare exotic species including tropical penguins, fur seals, lava lizards, giant tortoises and marine iguanas



At the cruise's end, we docked in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal Island. Here we shopped for freshly roasted Ecuadorian coffee, enjoyed lunch at a sidewalk cafe and then toured the impressive new Galapagos National Park Interpretation Centre. Funded largely by a grant from the government of Spain, the Centre features three state-of-the-art galleries devoted to the natural and human history of the islands and to the conservation of natural resources.

For nature lovers, though, a visit to these islands is a once in a lifetime experience. After all, it is not every day that one gets to snorkel with playful sea lions, graceful sea turtles and complacent reef sharks. I've witnessed the mating dance of the blue-footed boobie, great waved albatross with a wingspread that of a Piper Cub, and a 300-kg tortoise lumbering as if in a Jurassic vision among the lush highlands of Santa Cruz Island. I also contemplated delicate Sally Lightfoot crabs skittering about the lava shores of Isla Santiago, photographed rare tropical penguins, a Galapagos hawk (the world's most endangered raptor), marine iguanas, mockingbirds, lava lizards and Galapagos fur seals. These indigenous exotics have no fear of humans and would elicit immense curiosity elsewhere. In Galapagos, however, they are the stuff of everyday beauty.



**MORE INFORMATION:**

Weather in the Galapagos is cool and dry between June and November, and warm with brief but heavy rain from December to May. 2010 rates for Ecoventura's motor yachts Eric, Flamingo and Letty range from US\$3,225 to US\$3,925 (per person, double-cabin) for an eight-day, seven-night voyage. Galapagos National Park entrance fee (US\$100) along with transit/departure taxes, airfare and gratuities are extra.●

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The week-long voyage takes guests on a well-charted course through the archipelago covering Genovesa to the north of the Galapagos, Fernandina in the far west and Espanola at the southern extreme of the archipelago. We managed to visit nine islands, all equally distinctive with their own beguiling charm and peculiar mix of flora and fauna.

In Darwin, for instance, I found myself privileged to observe nature at such close quarters that even the island's namesake scientist might never have dreamed possible. The experience is made even richer thanks to the insights of our accompanying Ecoventura naturalists, Ivan Lopez and Harry Jimenez. One not only observes this exciting ecosystem, but interacts with it by way of guided hikes, swimming, snorkeling, diving and kayaking – with Ecoventura providing all the necessary gear.

While taking a backseat to Mother Nature, there is a considerable human dimension to life in the Galapagos. Human settlement is largely contained to the San Cristobal and Santa Cruz Islands. In fact, it is only in the populated areas of these two islands that visitors are permitted to roam about without a National Park guide. We called on Santa Cruz to view the Galapagos tortoise in the wild and to visit the Charles Darwin Research Station.

Along the picturesque harbour of Academy Bay en route to the Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora, we encountered a bustling fishing port where men filleted their catch under the watchful eyes of sea lions, boobies and pelicans. Amazingly enough, all waited patiently for the occasional toss of a scrap. Farther afield is a tourist market offering everything from Colombian emeralds to cheap T-shirts.

The main attraction, however, is the Charles Darwin Research Station. This is where tourists get their prized photo taken with the island's famed giant tortoise that bears a striking resemblance to Spielberg's ET. Guides told us the most important work of the Station at the moment is to grow the population of these endangered creatures through a captive breeding program.