

# The Galapagos Islands

These magical isles, which inspired Darwin's theory of evolution, are home to species you'll find nowhere else.

by Debi Lander

The Galapagos Islands, some 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, rank among the world's most distinctive and abundant wildlife destinations. Roughly 9,000 species live here and in surrounding waters. The mostly uninhabited isles are like a natural-history museum, except the animals aren't stuffed—they're wild. Exploring the Galapagos, I often felt as if I was walking in an exotic zoo without cages.

The islands' isolation and range of topography fostered a curious ecological system: flightless cormorants (birds), iguanas that swim, tortoises that weigh up to 500 pounds and a species of birds called boobies that flaunt red, blue or black feet. These are the animals that inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution after his 1835 visit.

Of the 13 main islands, only San Cristobal, Santa Cruz, Floreana and Isabella are inhabited by

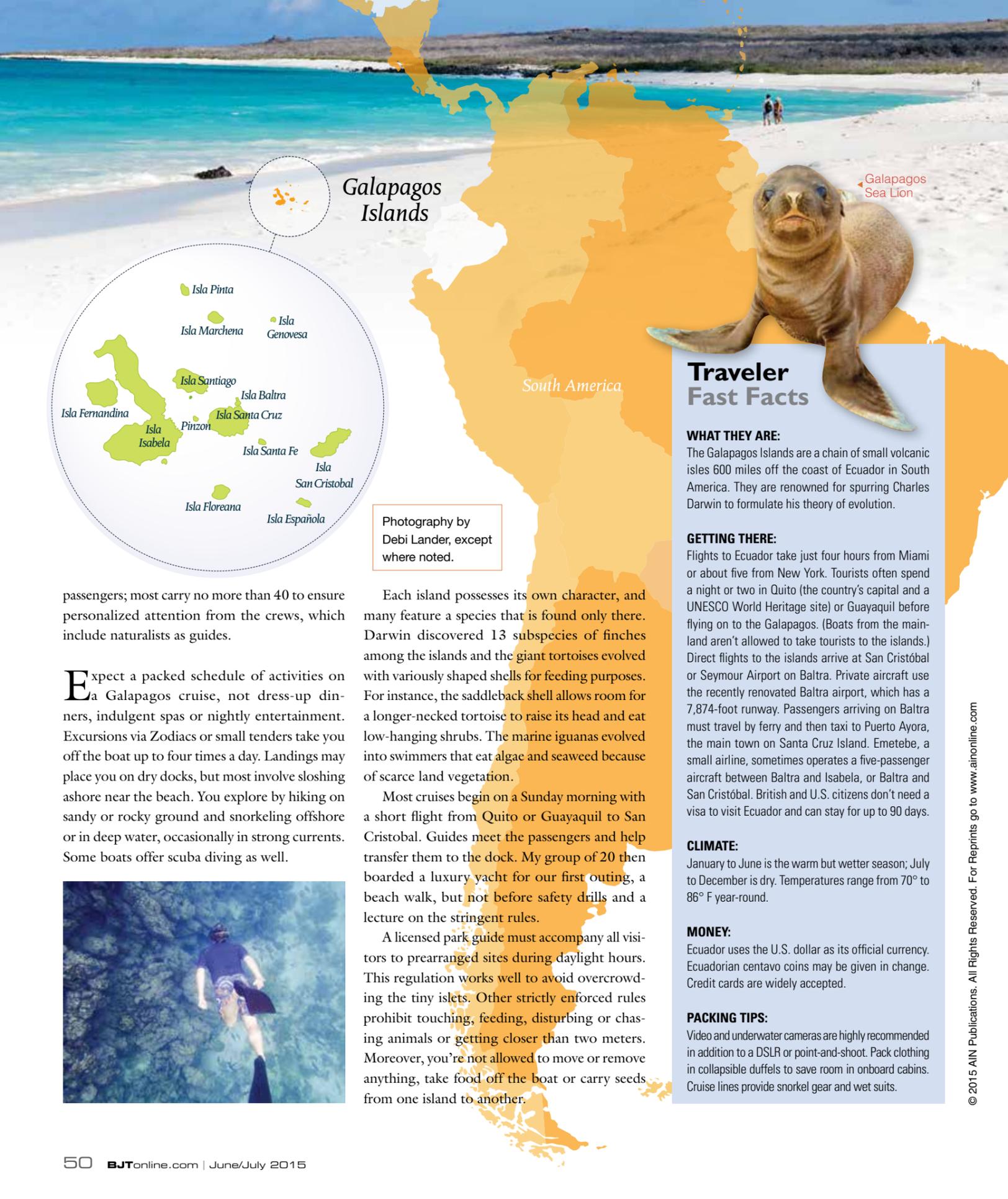
humans. Their combined population of around 25,000 predominately Ecuadorian residents live on just 3 percent of the land; the remaining 97 percent is protected as a national park, including 27,000 square miles of marine reserves. Visitors can stay in hostels or a few hotels, but with limited opportunities to explore the park sites.

Cruising offers the best chance to see as much as possible. Yachts house between 10 and 100



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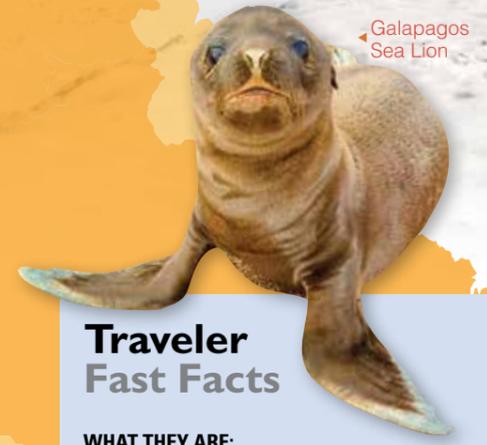


## Galapagos Islands



South America

Photography by Debi Lander, except where noted.



Galapagos Sea Lion

### Traveler Fast Facts

**WHAT THEY ARE:** The Galapagos Islands are a chain of small volcanic isles 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador in South America. They are renowned for spurring Charles Darwin to formulate his theory of evolution.

**GETTING THERE:** Flights to Ecuador take just four hours from Miami or about five from New York. Tourists often spend a night or two in Quito (the country's capital and a UNESCO World Heritage site) or Guayaquil before flying on to the Galapagos. (Boats from the mainland aren't allowed to take tourists to the islands.) Direct flights to the islands arrive at San Cristóbal or Seymour Airport on Baltra. Private aircraft use the recently renovated Baltra airport, which has a 7,874-foot runway. Passengers arriving on Baltra must travel by ferry and then taxi to Puerto Ayora, the main town on Santa Cruz Island. Emetebe, a small airline, sometimes operates a five-passenger aircraft between Baltra and Isabela, or Baltra and San Cristóbal. British and U.S. citizens don't need a visa to visit Ecuador and can stay for up to 90 days.

**CLIMATE:** January to June is the warm but wetter season; July to December is dry. Temperatures range from 70° to 86° F year-round.

**MONEY:** Ecuador uses the U.S. dollar as its official currency. Ecuadorian centavo coins may be given in change. Credit cards are widely accepted.

**PACKING TIPS:** Video and underwater cameras are highly recommended in addition to a DSLR or point-and-shoot. Pack clothing in collapsible duffels to save room in onboard cabins. Cruise lines provide snorkel gear and wet suits.

passengers; most carry no more than 40 to ensure personalized attention from the crews, which include naturalists as guides.

Expect a packed schedule of activities on a Galapagos cruise, not dress-up dinners, indulgent spas or nightly entertainment. Excursions via Zodiacs or small tenders take you off the boat up to four times a day. Landings may place you on dry docks, but most involve sloshing ashore near the beach. You explore by hiking on sandy or rocky ground and snorkeling offshore or in deep water, occasionally in strong currents. Some boats offer scuba diving as well.

Each island possesses its own character, and many feature a species that is found only there. Darwin discovered 13 subspecies of finches among the islands and the giant tortoises evolved with variously shaped shells for feeding purposes. For instance, the saddleback shell allows room for a longer-necked tortoise to raise its head and eat low-hanging shrubs. The marine iguanas evolved into swimmers that eat algae and seaweed because of scarce land vegetation.

Most cruises begin on a Sunday morning with a short flight from Quito or Guayaquil to San Cristobal. Guides meet the passengers and help transfer them to the dock. My group of 20 then boarded a luxury yacht for our first outing, a beach walk, but not before safety drills and a lecture on the stringent rules.

A licensed park guide must accompany all visitors to prearranged sites during daylight hours. This regulation works well to avoid overcrowding the tiny islets. Other strictly enforced rules prohibit touching, feeding, disturbing or chasing animals or getting closer than two meters. Moreover, you're not allowed to move or remove anything, take food off the boat or carry seeds from one island to another.



Land Iguana

### The islands' isolation and topography fostered a curious ecological system: flightless cormorants, iguanas that swim and tortoises that weigh up to 500 pounds.

Mornings on our cruise began with a 7 a.m. wakeup call, 7:30 buffet breakfast and 8:15 transfer off ship. Divided into two groups of 10, each with a guide, we hiked above Punta Pitt to a natural overlook that afforded dazzling views of the Pacific. Our guide pointed out several red-footed boobies that, unlike the blue-footed and Nazca types, are found only in trees and bushes.

An afternoon kayaking adventure introduced us to Sally Lightfoot crabs. The strange, mesmerizing red-rock crustaceans tiptoe along but can rapidly change course. Adorned with brilliant red, blue and yellow designs, they look as if a preschooler has scribbled on them with markers.

Hundreds of Nazca boobies emerge as the stars on Española, the chain's southernmost

Another day brought us to the magnificent—and deserted—Gardner Bay beach. How reassuring to know that beach chairs and piña colodas will never spoil its pristine shores. At Gardner, tourists laze in the sun on towels near colonies of sea lions and are entertained by inquisitive mockingbirds that try to open backpacks to get to water bottles.

Our group fell in love with the exuberant sea lions. The awkward, shuffling mammals allowed us to sit nearby as they jostled their heads in care-free abandon or settled in for naps. We watched in amazement as large adult sea lions surfed the rolling tide along with local teens. They even waited to catch the biggest wave.

Human drama distinguishes Floreana, the island with a history of unsolved murders. The documentary film *The Galapagos Affair: Satan Came to Eden* tells the true and bizarre story of several 1930s German settlers who hoped to find a piece of heaven but endured hellish hardships instead. Floreana showcases an old barrel that serves as a sort of post office: letters and cards are deposited and supposedly picked up by other travelers, who pay them forward. There's no telling whether or when that will happen, though.

The islands' name comes from the Spanish word *galápagos*, meaning tortoise. On Santa Cruz Island, you travel by bus up winding roads to the highlands, where you can watch the slow-motion giant tortoises as they maneuver their elephantine limbs to climb out of shallow ponds, then lumber forward to munch grass. Only 25,000 of these giants remain on the planet, here and in Seychelles. Before the 19th century, hundreds of thousands of tortoises thrived worldwide, but pirates and buccaneers raided them. They kept the huge reptiles aboard ships for fresh meat because the tortoises can survive without food or water for a year.

The Darwin Research Station, also on Santa Cruz, is working to save the species. New



Sally Lightfoot Crab

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hatchlings and miniature tortoises not yet ready to be repatriated are on view. Females abandon the nest after laying their eggs, so scientists dig them up, incubate them and nurture the babies, which weigh as little as 1.8 ounces. They're kept for approximately five years, until they're big enough to fend for themselves.

The guides speak reverently about Lonesome George, the last tortoise found on Pinta Island and the last of his species, who became a symbol of conservation. Researchers tried unsuccessfully to mate him with close subspecies before he died from heart failure in 2012. It is believed that like many other giant tortoises he had lived more than 100 years. Preserved by taxidermists to look as he appeared in life, George was recently on display at New York's Museum of Natural History. His remains will soon be returned to the Galapagos.

On a tour of Sombrero Chino, the landmass shaped like a Chinese hat, we spied a few Galapagos penguins. These are the only wild penguins to

Male Frigate ▼



live north of the equator. We also witnessed two pink flamingos in the sky. And while snorkeling at Sombrero Chino, I was observing a huge school of tropical fish, a ray and four white-tipped reef sharks when suddenly a group of penguins bulleted by. I was swimming with penguins! This magical memory remains a souvenir I will always cherish.

The last full day of cruising brought us to South Plazas, a desolate flyspeck of an isle with unusual 15-foot high Dr. Seuss-like cactus trees. These cacti appear to grow between cracks in rocks where only a dusting of dirt arises. South Plazas also harbors a spotty ground carpet of orange Sesuvium plants and lots of golden land iguanas.



Giant Tortoise ▲

Later, we stopped at North Seymour Island, the mother lode of breeding birds. Finally, we encountered the elusive blue-footed boobies, including a mating pair performing their courtship dance. The ritual began with a loud whistle, then the ruffling of feathers. Next, the male moved its feet up and down while slowly turning in a circle. The female looked on demurely, pointing its head down, then up. Watching this spectacle felt like sneaking into a forbidden performance.

Continuing inland on North Seymour, we saw hundreds of magnificent black frigate birds along with their large chicks, which resembled growth-spurt teenagers attempting to control their gangly limbs. These ominous-looking acrobats with five-foot wingspans soar around the cliffs and the males inflate scarlet throat pouches to attract females.

Astronaut Buzz Aldrin claimed that walking on Bartolomé Island was like walking on the moon. Crater-like barren lava hills are inhospitable to most plants and animals, although we did spot a camouflaged snake. National park employees have constructed a wooden ramp with 364 stairs leading to the top that rewards climbers with a panoramic view of the bay and teetering Pinnacle Rock, the best-known landmark in the Galapagos.

I felt lucky to be here—and glad I'd come when I did. Rumors abound that the Ecuadorian government wants to triple the number of visitors to the islands, which many fear will negatively impact the environment as well as the quality of a visit. They could be right, so if this sounds like a trip you'd want to make, you'd be wise to make it soon. **BJT**

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## Traveler Report Card

### ACCOMMODATIONS (B+):

Cabins on Galapagos cruises are typically small, but lounges, dining areas and open decks are spacious and comfortable. I cruised aboard the Ecoventura line, which operates three 20-passenger yachts and claims to maintain the lowest passenger-to-guide ratio in the Galapagos. The company offers seven- and 14-night itineraries and prices cover excursions, guides and meals plus wine and beer at dinner. National Geographic Expeditions offers similar cruises on two ships, which hold 48 and 100 passengers, respectively. Quasar Expeditions also offer luxury yachts.

### FOOD (A):

Fabulous, fresh cuisine is served while cruising; breakfast and lunch are typically buffet style and dinner is a three-course delight. Gourmet dining on my cruise was far superior to what I've encountered on major ocean liners.

### ACTIVITIES (A):

A Galapagos cruise includes numerous outings each day. Hiking, snorkeling, swimming and photography are the main pursuits. Kayaking and diving are options. But the most pleasurable activities here may be simply watching the animals and witnessing the stunning equatorial sunsets.

### QUIETUDE (A):

Internet and Wi-Fi weren't available on our yacht. For me, this felt freeing and was in line with my desire to take a break from the modern world in extraordinary surroundings.

The author paid for her airfare, visit to Quito and national park admission. Ecoventura provided the cruise in the Galapagos.