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SELECTION

AN ECOVENTURA LUXURY EXPEDITION YACHT VOYAGE OFFERS INTIMATE INTERACTIONS WITH GALAPAGOS WILDLIFE

by OTTOCINA RYAN
As the sun rises over the Galapagos, a sea lion swims up to my window, playfully leaps into the air like it's the best day of its life, then jets under the yacht. Exactly the nudge I needed to get out of bed.

My friend Johanna and I pad upstairs to the Darwin deck of Theory, one of Ecoventura’s two 142’ luxury expedition yachts. Each allows maximum twenty guests, barely justifying calling it a cruise. For the next eight days, the floating Relais & Châteaux hotel is our retreat amidst the Galapagos archipelago, notably where Charles Darwin developed his natural selection theory. 100 miles off the coast of Ecuador, the volcanic islands are host to the most bizarre, hearty, friendly animals I’ve ever encountered. In the hands of Ecoventura, we get to experience and learn about the Galapagos, while coming back to bright coastal interiors, wood floors, airtight safety measures, top-notch service, and panoramic ocean views.

We assemble asci bowls at the breakfast buffet and sit amongst the guests we met yesterday afternoon. “Which animal are you most looking forward to seeing?” is the go-to icebreaker. “Hammerhead shark!” doesn’t make me many friends. Apparently the acceptable answer is penguins. I redeem myself by agreeing we use the onboard gym as a swimsuit drying area and overflow luggage storage. Neither of which are necessary as our cabins are perfectly situated and accommodating...but neither is the gym when we snorkled twice a day.

At 8:30 sharp we set off in two pangas to San Cristobal Island. Me and Johanna, the sixteen other passengers (couples of all ages, girls’ trips and families, spanning several nationalities), and the naturalists Sofia and Fernando. We disembark on a white sand beach teeming with life. Sea lions nurse their young. Scarlet crabs scuttle over black rocks. White tipped reef sharks and diamond rays patrol the shallow crystal water. All nonchalant as if they’ve never been threatened by a human, enabling us to observe their natural hunting, mating, and eating habits. I lay on
the sand and a finch hops up to me as if we are the same species. Welcome to the Galapagos.

Throughout the week we explore a few undeveloped islands—the same as they were centuries ago when only animals, pirates, and Charles Darwin walked the beaches. Our personable guides shed an encyclopedia of knowledge about the endemic species, transplanted animals, and plants. Fernando is from the Galapagos and Sofia has been a naturalist since 1897, when female naturalists were as rare as hammerhead shark sightings. She shares, “All the species here are opportunistic. They do what they have to to survive, even the typically vegetarian iguanas will eat birds.”

On Espanola, red and turquoise “Christmas” iguanas, some well over 20 pounds, sprawl on boulders, hug each other for warmth, waddle across our paths, and never flinch when I sit beside them. We learn iguanas were Darwin’s least favorite. He thought they were ugly and threw them into the water by their tails (so not allowed anymore). They’re my favorite though. I’m just as excited by the hundredth petite dinosaur as the first.

Each island offers a different ecosystem and we encounter new creatures daily. The animals are always welcoming, as if to say, make yourself at home, we’ll be over here if you want to take photos. Our camera rolls increase by a hundred photos when we spot a pair of penguins posing on a rock beside a sea lion and a crab. Bonus: Fernando offers his wildlife photographer expertise for getting the best shots.

On Bartolome we snorkel with penguins and turtles. I dive off the panga, head first into a rainbow of fish. I wear just a bikini, everyone else opts for the supplied wetsuits. The water’s warm enough without them. Besides, who wants to dress like shark bait? Everyone else. Not me. I’ve learned a thing or two about natural selection.

Returning to Theory after each outing mimics checking into a five star hotel. Scarlett the concierge hands us fresh juice and collects our snorkeling gear. Between adventures Johanna and I read on the daybeds, the sun searing through our SPF 30. We also soak in the hot tub at the bow of the yacht and jump from the upper deck. The staff anticipate every need—bringing our favorite drinks unprompted, returning sunglasses I forgot, steaming our dresses for us. When WiFi cuts out, manta rays springing from the expansive ocean bring me back to how incredible this splattering of islands is and that to-do’s can wait.

The food onboard is impressive, and plentiful (it is a cruise after all). BBQ lunches with fresh ceviche on the sun deck, sunset hors d’oeuvres and cocktails (The Wolf is a must-try), four-course white

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tablecloth dinners highlighting Ecuadorian specialties, and a snack bar, complete with a vase of Dramamine we never needed.

Pre dinner each evening we bring our cocktails to the salon for a briefing of tomorrow’s activities, always leaving room for surprises. One night as dessert is served, murmurs flutter through the room that Galapagos Sharks are swarming outside. One by one, we abandon our creme brûlée and gather at the stern, mesmerized by 30 sharks fishing through the water after flying fish.

We navigate at night, falling asleep to the wake and brilliant stars, in anticipation of awakening to a new island, usually not a boat in sight.

The exception day five I open my eyes to dreamy pastel skies and a harbor off Santa Cruz. Every boat seems to have a pet sea lion lounging on the deck. We take a bus to the highlands to see giant tortoises; the desert and beach landscapes we’re used to segue into lush overgrowth. The gorgonian toothless creatures number about, rushing grass and guavas, sleeping under bushes, wading through ponds, fighting over who gets to sleep under the bush... we’re easily amused by their mundane habits. On the way back, we walk through a lava tunnel, learning more about how the islands formed.

We spend the last day on North Seymour Island. The air is thick with the scent of Palo santo and several bird species’ mating calls. The post-apocalyptic landscape is covered with dry trees inhabited by frigate birds wooing potential mates with red pouches ballooning from their necks, the only color on the island.

That afternoon, we snorkel amongst an acrobatics performance put on by turtles, vibrant fish, and sea lions. It’s not so much the exotic nature of the animals as it is their playful and relaxed demeanor that makes them unforgettable. Dolphins jumping into the sunset with enthusiasm (best watched from the shower window), 60 black tipped reef sharks sleeping on the seafloor, penguins waddling across lava rocks... at each anchor it’s something new and incredible. And, on Theory you don’t necessarily have to leave bed to see it.