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SOUTH AMERICA

Darwin's Delight

Explore the Galapagos Islands' wild wonders from a small cruise ship

BY DAN FELLNER

On a black volcanic rock formation in a remote part of the Galapagos Islands, a pair of resplendent blue-footed boobies need little coaxing from fellow travelers who want the marine birds to remain perched while we photograph them.

With few natural predators, there aren't many places on Earth where the wildlife is as unafraid — and even welcoming — of human visitors as the Galapagos. The result is an

unparalleled chance for nature lovers to see up close everything from 5-foot-long iguanas to pink flamingoes to tortoises more than 100 years old.

If Charles Darwin were alive today, he would find this archipelago in the Pacific Ocean — 600 miles west of Ecuador — little changed from his historic journey here nearly 200 years ago.

Today, visitors can experience the same access to birds, animals and marine life that Darwin documented during his five-week visit in 1835 on the HMS Beagle.

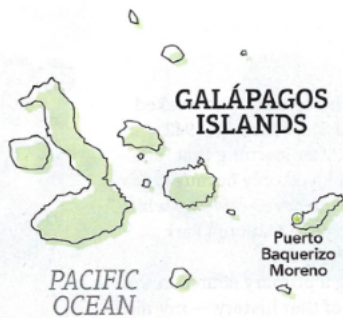
SETTING SAIL

I recently visited six islands in the Galapagos on a one-week cruise aboard the Ecoventura Origin, named after Darwin's landmark 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*. Our sailing was at full capacity with 20 passengers (all Americans) and 14 Ecuadoran crew members.

The Origin's sister yacht, the Ecoventura Theory, was often visible in the distance as it traveled roughly the same itinerary. We were on the northern and western route; on alternate weeks, the two boats take the



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southern and central route through the islands.

Twice a day, we were ferried by one of the Origin's two blue dinghies to an island for a nature walk. Many of these visits involved "wet landings" in which we would step off the dinghy into shallow water and walk ashore. There were plenty of opportunities for snorkeling, kayaking, paddleboarding and viewing marine life on a glass-bottom boat also available aboard the Origin.

"You don't see in other places what you see here," says Yvonne Mortola, one of the Origin's two onboard naturalists, who has been guiding tours in the Galapagos for 37 years. "Things happen just in front of you. And it's safe. None of the animals wants to eat you up."

We also saw sharks, whales,



dolphins and the Galapagos penguin. It's the only species of penguin found north of the equator.

ISLAND LIFE

Governed by Ecuador, the Galapagos consist of 13 major islands straddling the equator. We crossed the equator six times during the trip.

Only four of the Galapagos are inhabited by humans; the entire population is less than 30,000. Nearly half live in Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island, the largest city in the Galapagos. During a stroll down Charles Darwin Avenue — the city's main drag — we needed to step aside for a pair of sea lions, indifferent to our presence as they waddled down the block to the fish market looking for scraps.

The Galapagos are volcanic

islands — there have been eruptions as recently as 2020. We hiked through black lava fields and red sand beaches created from volcanic ash, visited an underground lava tube in the highlands of Santa Cruz Island and sailed at sunset past the dramatic Kicker Rock, the remains of a volcanic cone.

Even though the Galapagos are near the equator, the climate is surprisingly temperate. The cool Humboldt Current and steady trade winds kept temperatures from surpassing the mid-70s most days, and I needed to put on a sweater when going out on deck to watch the stars after dinner.

GETTING TO THE GALAPAGOS

The remoteness of the islands, which helps to protect the wildlife from predators, makes the Galapagos a challenging destination to reach. There are no international flights into the islands; visitors need to fly to one of mainland Ecuador's two largest cities, Quito or Guayaquil, then catch a flight into one of the small airports serving the islands.

We flew into Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, the provincial capital city of the Galapagos on San Cristobal Island. There also is an airport on the island of Baltra (also known as South Seymour Island), the site of a U.S. military base during World War II.

You could stay in a hotel in the towns near both airports and take day trips on small boats, but a weeklong cruise is more ideal.

To commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, the Ecuadoran government in 1959 designated 98 percent of the Galapagos as a national park. There is a one-time \$100 national park entrance fee, payable upon landing at the airport.

Blue-footed boobies roam the Galapagos Islands; visitors can kayak near volcanos.