

## The Galapagos – An Unforgettable Adventure



The tagline for Tidewater Cruise and Travel is “Creating Your Lifelong Vacation Memories,” a goal we work toward with every trip we plan for clients. Nowhere is that description more appropriate than our trip to the Galapagos in the fall of 2023. Janet and I traveled with my sister Debbie and her husband Craig...the Galapagos has been a dream trip for both me and Debbie for a long time, and we all came away with memories that will last a lifetime.

Each day of our trip left us in awe of the stark beauty the Galapagos offers visitors. We marveled at the sights and pondered how the next day could possibly be better. Yet each day was. I’ve posted the pictures of me and Janet swimming with the sea lions, Galapagos penguins, sea turtles, sharks, and even a manta ray that nearly collided with my sister Debbie. And that was just the stuff in the water. We spent an equal amount of time on land hiking over lava fields, climbing to the top of what remains of several volcanoes, seeing blue footed boobies, Nazca boobies, frigate birds, flightless cormorants, marine iguanas, and the famous Galapagos tortoises. And now I wish to share some of the stuff that went into planning the trip and how it all came together, in the event any of you find the Galapagos on your list of places to visit.

### **Planning is a Must**

Making the most of a trip to the Galapagos requires doing some homework. You can’t see it all, so it is best to find a tour that hits as many of your must-see and do items as one itinerary can, and then be flexible when the inevitable unexpected crops up. That means you have to first know what you want to see. That’s your homework. Helping you find the best tour that will meet you’re your goals is mine.

Tours to the Galapagos are highly regulated by the Galapagos National Park Directorate (GNPD). This is not the place to go it on your own...if you try, you’ll come away disappointed. About 97% of the Galapagos is designated a protected area, and access to each protected area is tightly controlled by the GNPD. The only non-protected areas in the Galapagos are the populated settlements on the four inhabited islands, Santa Cruz, Isabela, Santiago, San Cristobal, Floriania, plus Baltra. There is no permanent settlement on Baltra, but as the location of the Galapagos’ main airport it is off the protected area list.

Tour groups visiting the Galapagos' protected areas are limited in size to no more than 16 people, and each group must be accompanied by a GNPD certified naturalist at all times. Tour groups are allocated a specific time and duration for accessing each protected area, and only one group is allowed in a protected area at a time. If you book the right tour, you won't have to worry about any of that...the naturalist your tour operator hires will make sure you stick to the rules while working with the GNPD to ensure the rules don't get in the way of your amazing experience. It makes the choice of tour operator and the type of tour you book critical.

## Getting There

Before you can embark on a Galapagos tour you first have to get there. The Galapagos is an archipelago in the Pacific Ocean made up of 13 major islands, 61 smaller islands, and many smaller islets. The Galapagos Islands are located 1200 km off the coast of Ecuador and are part of that country. The four islands with permanent settlements boast a total population of about 33,000 people. There are two main airports serving the Galapagos...Seymour Airport on Baltra Island, which is the main arrival point for most tourists, and a second, smaller airport on San Cristobal Island. It will take three or more flights to get to the Galapagos regardless of where you depart from in the U.S. It takes at least two flights just to get to mainland Ecuador, and a third to get from the mainland to the islands...there are no international flight arrivals at either of the Galapagos airports. Flights to the Galapagos originate from either Quito or Guayaquil, and flight schedules are such that you'll likely have to spend at least one night on mainland Ecuador before heading over to the islands.



## Types of Tours

There are multiple modes and styles of travel to see the Galapagos. The best way to see all the wonders the islands have to offer is on a cruise, but even with cruises there are multiple options. We opted for a 7-night cruise with Canadian based tour operator G Adventures. I highly recommend the experience.

## Land-based Touring

On a land-based tour you will visit one or more of the populated islands in the Galapagos and stay in land-based lodging. You'll tour the protected areas of that island with a naturalist and maybe do some island-hopping using ferries, always returning to land for the overnight stays. I can't share any specifics about the land touring experience since our trip was a cruise, but I can say that there are no luxury hotels in the Galapagos. At best you will stay in what Americans would consider to be a 2-star hotel, or you could stay in either a guesthouse or hostel.

Land-based tours will mainly focus on the islands of Santa Cruz, San Cristobal, and Isabela where lodging is readily available and ferry schedules are reliable. Floriana, though home to a

resident population of humans, suffers from an unreliable ferry schedule and most land tour itineraries skip it due to the uncertainty of getting there. Land tours aren't limited to exploring the land...some offer snorkeling excursions, and some allow you to can kayak. Even though we didn't do any kayaking, I would say it is a great way to get up close to the Galapagos' coastal bird population, but it isn't the best way to see the Galapagos marine life. For that you have to get *into* the water, not just on it.

### **Adventure Cruises**

These are 7 to 14-day cruises aboard ships holding 16-32 guests. Adventure cruise ships offer basic accommodations. Most will offer private rooms with a bathroom, but it will have marine toilet where you put your soiled toilet paper in a wastebin rather than flush it, and it may or may not have showers that may or may not provide something close to hot water with enough pressure to make it worth stepping into. Our ship had private showers in each guest room, but the water was never more than lukewarm. There are no in-room televisions on most adventure cruises, and no onboard entertainment other than nightly planning sessions for the next day's excursions led by the naturalist. The ships are small, meaning you will get tossed around even in only slightly rough waters. Our



ship held 16 passengers with a crew of seven. Those prone to motion sickness (me) should come prepared with whatever remedy works best for them...you'll likely need it, and I certainly did. I use the scopolamine patch for motion sickness and didn't have any issues on our cruise, in spite of seas so rough at times I was nearly tossed out of bed...more than once.

Food service on an adventure cruise is also basic, served buffet or family style. If you have any dietary restrictions, it is important to ensure the tour operator you choose can accommodate them...not all can. The GNPD and the Ecuadorian Department of Agriculture strictly regulate food items shipped into the Galapagos so on small adventure cruise ships you'll be eating as the local do...basic chicken and seafood dishes with some beef or pork. The good news is it will all be fresh and locally sourced. If you aren't a fan of coriander or cilantro you can count on having to pick it out of nearly every dish...they put that stuff on everything.

An adventure cruise is a destination intense experience...it is all about the wildlife and the environment of the Galapagos. On the most active cruises, as ours was, you'll typically get four excursions per day, each ranging from 1-4 hours duration (on days with longer excursions you'll get fewer of them), and each guest have the opportunity to participate in all of the excursions. With the diversity the Galapagos Islands offer, more excursions don't just mean more opportunities to see the same stuff. Each time you head out you will enter a unique ecosystem where you'll encounter wildlife and land vistas that will be different from anything you've encountered up to that point.

A Galapagos adventure cruise is not appropriate for anyone with mobility impairment or serious health concerns...the environment is too unforgiving. At the same time, you don't need to be a

mountain climber or adventure junkie to enjoy it...Janet and I both did fine, and we survived to tell about it!

### **Comfort Cruises**

Celebrity, Silver Sea, and Lindblad Expeditions operate larger ships on Galapagos itineraries with a capacity of 48-100 guests. Celebrity and Silver Sea built ships specifically designed to cruise the Galapagos. These cruises are for tourists who want to say they've been to the Galapagos but don't want to give up all the comforts of a traditional ocean cruise. I call them comfort cruises. Comfort cruises offer gourmet dining, nightly entertainment, TVs in your room, fully stocked bars in well-appointed public lounges, and showers with hot water.

Excursion groups visiting protected areas on a comfort cruise are still limited to 16 people with the required naturalist. To provide meaningful experiences for ships of that size, the cruise lines limit your excursion opportunities to half of what you get on an adventure cruise, and you won't get the same opportunity to take every excursion as you do on an adventure cruise. On a comfort cruise you'll spend more time on the ship and less time seeing the Galapagos.

### **Other Travel Styles**

For the really adventurous, you can book a dive tour (SCUBA) or a camping tour. The dive tour will be similar to any live-aboard dive boat experience where you spend most of your time diving. You may get the opportunity to take a few land excursions as you off-gas between dives, but it will be in an area close to your dive sites, which limits what you'll see on land. Camping is another type of tour you can book, but the experience will be the most limiting of all travel styles as there are only a few areas where camping is permitted, and only on the inhabited islands. There are a couple of luxury tent camps on Santa Cruz and San Cristobal Islands, but honestly the Galapagos and luxury are not all that compatible. You'll spend a lot of money and see very little of what the destination has to offer.

### **Our Cruise**

Tours of the Galapagos are labeled based on the islands they visit. Most tour operators use a compass direction convention, North, South, Central, East, and West islands. Celebrity Cruise Lines labels their itineraries Northern Loop, Southern Loop, Inner Loop, and Outer Loop, but the itineraries are roughly equivalent to the other operators. Our cruise with G Adventures was a 7-day North, Central and Western Islands itinerary.

From Seymour Airport in Baltra, land-based tourists will board a bus for the short ride across a bridge over the narrow channel separating Baltra Island from Santa Cruz Island. Cruisers will board a bus for the even shorter ride to the Baltra Island boat dock. Our tour started in Baltra, but I can tell you there wasn't much to see there. The landscape is flat and desolate. You may encounter the occasional land iguana from the bus, but that's about it. The wildlife sightings begin when you arrive at the boat dock, and they don't end until you return at the end of your trip. The first thing you see when you reach the dock are Sally Lightfoot crabs scrambling over the rocks, and sea lions lounging on the docks. We also saw sea turtles cavorting (ie mating) in the water, and marine iguanas sunning themselves on the rocks surrounding the dock.

The Baltra Island boat dock is a commercial facility where the material necessary to sustain the permanent settlement on Santa Cruz is received. There is no passenger terminal for cruise ships, and cruise ships don't dock at the pier. Instead, the ships anchor just offshore and deploy semi-rigid inflatable boats (RIBs or Zodiacs), known locally as a panga, to pick up passengers and their luggage. After a safety briefing and a short lesson on how to board a panga, tourists don a life jacket and scramble aboard the panga...the crew loaded our luggage on a separate panga. Boarding a panga for the first time can be a bit unnerving, but our tour operator provided a firm hand and forearm to ensure everybody made it into the panga without getting wet. You get used to getting in and out of the pangas very quickly...they are part of every excursion you take. Life jackets are mandatory at all times when in a panga...even the crew members wore life jackets. The only time life jackets come off is when you reach your ship, dock at a landing point during an excursion, or when you are ready to slide into the water on a snorkeling excursion. Some tour operators impose a minimum age restriction, and I have to say anyone traveling with kids younger than 16 years old should consider a land tour.



### **The Central Islands – Santa Cruz, Santiago, and Surrounding Islands**

Our cruise started with the central islands, specifically Santa Cruz, Santiago, and some of the nearby smaller islands and islets. The Galapagos' central islands are perhaps the best, and easiest, spots from which to witness the full scope of the archipelago's incredible natural diversity. While close together, each of these small islands has developed in isolation from its neighbors, spawning an amazing collection of plants and animals.

After boarding our ship and getting settled in, the crew pulled anchor and made the short cruise from Baltra to our first Galapagos excursion, Bacha Beach on Santa Cruz Island. The pangas weren't allowed to land on the beach so we made a semi-wet landing, hopping into the calm surf and wading onto the beach. Once on shore we took a short hike inland from the dunes to salt ponds that attracted a variety of bird species. We got our first sighting of the Galapagos finches that Charles Darwin studied. In the salt ponds we watched as a black necked stilt went fishing, and then headed back to the beach. We explored the sand and surrounding lava formations, enjoyed the



antics of more Sally Lightfoot crabs (lots more), a few lazy sea lions, and saw some marine iguanas sunning on the lava rocks. One of the more interesting sights we encountered on the beach were freshly made sea turtle nests, interesting because it was unexpected. Sea turtle nesting used to be a singular event, occurring over the course of several days in January. Our visit was in early November, and Raul shared that over the past decade the



nesting period has become a four-month event, beginning in November and extending into February, because the El Nino weather pattern brought an unusual amount of warmer water into the region.

Our second day was supposed to be an exploration of Genovesa, the northern portion of our itinerary. Genovesa is also known as Bird Island, for its diversity of bird species. Unfortunately, Genovesa's bird population was experiencing an outbreak of bird flu at the time of our visit. To limit possible vectors for the virus to infect the bird population on other islands, the GNPD implemented a quarantine, closing the island to all tours. It is one of the many unexpected things that can crop up on any Galapagos itinerary, and when these things happen, don't expect any compensation from the tour operator...it won't happen.

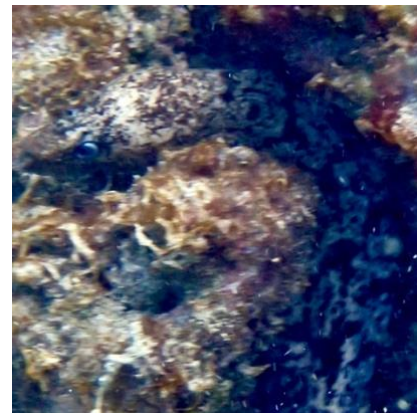
At the same time the GNPD closed Genovesa to tourists, they reopened access to Punta Bowditch. The Punta Bowditch beach and surrounding area was closed for 10 months after damage sustained from a typhoon/hurricane in 2022. When the GNPD closed Genovesa to tours, Raul coordinated between the GNPD and our ship's Captain to adjust our itinerary, swapping our time in Genovesa with a stop at Punta Bowditch and snorkeling in nearby Eden Islet.

Instead of heading north, after exploring Bacha Beach we backtracked past Baltra and anchored off Punta Bowditch on the northwest side of Santa Cruz. We spent the morning on a panga tour



of the area, getting our first encounter with the Galapagos blue footed boobies. After touring the area in the pangas, we headed back with snorkeling gear and enjoyed a morning dive. The area was rich with colorful marine life...schools of yellowtail surgeonfish, spotted boxfish, the vibrant king angelfish and...our first experience swimming with a shark. It was a rather large Galapagos shark which are nocturnal feeders who prefer to chill out during the day as this one did...at a very comfortable distance away on the bottom.

We spent the afternoon on two excursions exploring Eden Islet. We started with a snorkeling excursion where we enjoyed more colorful marine life. The highlight of this excursion for me was catching sight of a jeweled moray eel with his body wrapped through the twists and turns of a hunk of lava rock. The body was well camouflaged against the rock it was hiding in, but its sharp blue eyes gave it away. Overnight we again backtracked, cruising past Baltra for the third time and then headed north for the short jog up to the small islands of Bartolome and North Seymour.



The Central Islands of the Galapagos offer spectacular vistas, and we were in for a treat on Day 3 as we took a hike up to an observation point on Bartolome Island. The park service has built steps and walkways into the volcanic rock, not to make it easier for tourists to climb to the top though it does that, but to reduce the erosion associated with tourist activity. While it looks like an arduous trek from the water, it really isn't. The peak elevation is just 374 feet and the steps and boardwalk installed by the park service, along with periodic observation platforms that double as rest stops, make it a relatively easy hike. Access to the landing is assigned by the GNPD and tour groups are assigned tightly controlled time slots. Our time slot had us making



the climb at sunrise, which meant a 5AM wake-up call. We all complained about having to get up ridiculously early to make sure we were at the landing point at our assigned time, but the complaints disappeared once we saw the stunning sunrise views as we climbed. We had about 30-40 minutes to climb to the top, enjoy the view for a few minutes, and then retrace our steps back to the panga landing point. Bartolome Island is also home to Pinnacle Rock, a well-known and often photographed structure that served as a target for guns aboard U.S. Navy ships during WWII.

In the waters surrounding Bartolome Island you can swim with the Galapagos penguins and sea lions. The penguins are an anomaly as they have adapted to survive in an equatorial waters, helped out by the cooler Humboldt current that keeps the water a chilly 70 degrees. We first



encountered the Galapagos sea lions in the water while snorkeling around the base of Pinnacle Rock. No matter how much you prepare yourself for the encounter, it will still take you're your breath away. As I swam around the base of Pinnacle Rock, the first clue I got that something special was about to happen were the strange noises I was hearing in the water. Almost as soon as I realized the sounds were coming from sea lions', they were on us. The sea lions swam up to us as a group and as individuals,

with no fear and tons of curiosity. They played with each other and attempted to engage us in their games. You aren't supposed to interact with the wildlife in the Galapagos, but these guys made that difficult. Try as we might to avoid them, the sea lions kept coming at us, playing, blowing bubbles and almost daring us to reach out and touch them. And when I didn't, one of them brushed my face with his whiskers before dashing away and challenging me to chase him. Our encounter with the



sea lions lasted about 15 minutes, but it is something I will never, ever forget. We would have similar encounters with sea lions throughout our cruise and it never got old, but this first encounter was magical.

After spending the morning at Bartolome, we headed over to Sullivan Bay on Santiago Island for a lava walk. The lava fields on Santiago are the result of lava flows from multiple volcanic eruptions that have occurred over centuries, the most recent having solidified in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our naturalist gave a fascinating explanation of the geology, how the lava flows created the island, and how subsequent lava flows reshaped it. As with all parts of the Galapagos, access to the lava flows on Santiago is strictly controlled by the GNPD.

Naturalist guides escort tourists along a tightly controlled path and only one group is allowed on the flows at a time. Our day ended with another snorkeling excursion, in Sullivan Bay. More marine life, in addition to the usual parrotfish, hogfish, surgeonfish and triggerfish, I encountered a Tiger Sea Snake slithering across the bottom, and an interestingly colored whiptail ray with vibrant green wavy streaks running along the body from nose to tail.



### **The Western Islands -- Isabela & Fernandina**

We left Bartolome and North Seymour behind and cruised southwest toward the western islands of Isabela and Fernandina. These are the largest, youngest, and less visited of the Galapagos Islands. They contain some of the archipelago's largest colonies of birds and marine iguanas, and Isabela Island is home to five of the Galapagos' largest volcanoes. Our schedule for Day 4 was for two, longer duration excursions in Isabela Island. We started the morning with a trek up to the top of Sierra Negra, a 3,867-foot shield volcano that last erupted in 2018. I should say, Janet, Debbie and Craig did. I was suffering from a cold and decided to take a break and stay on the ship. A van took our group from the panga landing to the trail entrance which is well over halfway up the volcano. From there the trail to the top was about 3.5 km each way. The trail was wet and slippery from rains, and the entire group came back with muddy shoes. On a clear day from the top of Sierra Negra you can see the entire base of the volcano as well as all five of the Galapagos' largest volcanoes, but what starts as a clear day doesn't always end that way. And on the day of our tour...it didn't. By the time our group arrived at the top it was so foggy you couldn't see much of anything, though Janet did get a great picture...of the fog.



After returning to the ship, cleaning the mud off everyone's shoes and enjoying a hearty lunch, we headed back to Isabela to see the Galapagos tortoises. Almost all Galapagos tours offer the



opportunity to see tortoises, and though we didn't go to the Darwin Research Center, we did visit the Giant Tortoise Breeding Center on Isabela Island. Seeing the tortoises, knowing some were older than me...by a lot...was impressive. But if I'm being honest, this was the only part of our Galapagos tour that didn't wow me. The tortoises at the breeding center were all in captivity, which was not all that different from seeing them at a zoo at home. I will say visiting the breeding center gave me the opportunity to learn more about the tortoises than I ever would at a zoo, and it was interesting to see them throughout their life cycle...from egg to hatchling to mature tortoise munching on leaves.

We cruised around to the opposite side of Isabela overnight, and the next morning took a panga tour of a mangrove swamp in Elizabeth Bay. The point of this excursion was to see some of the native bird species. And we saw plenty of them, including a lone striped heron standing guard over the mangroves like a Beefeater at the Tower of London. But what caught everyone's attention was a sea lion who popped up next to the pangas and decided to put on a show. It was so demanding of our attention that our naturalist gave up on



pointing out birds and just watched and laughed with the rest of us. We had to move on eventually and headed deeper into the mangroves. I didn't expect to see much once we reached the heart of the mangroves, but with water clear enough to see to the bottom we were able to watch a hawksbill sea turtle cruising around. He (or she) swam around our pangas in a large circle, alternating slow cruising with fast spurts, occasionally breaking the surface for air. It was mesmerizing. So much so I almost missed the fever (school) of spotted eagle rays that cruised through the area. They were so graceful to watch, and surprising to see in such shallow water.



We spent the night anchored off Isabela Island and the next morning headed into Tagus Bay for a land tour. Tagus Bay was a 19<sup>th</sup> century whaling ship anchorage where crews went ashore in search of the Galapagos tortoises, which they used to make tortoise soup. When the whaling ships visited, the crews carved graffiti into the rock wall surrounding the landing point. The landing became a popular place for 20<sup>th</sup> century locals and visitors to mark their visit with their own graffiti wall tags, usually with paint. The GNPD banned the practice of graffiti tagging when they took over regulation of the area, but they left the existing tags in place. We then hiked up to the top edge of the sunken caldera that formed Tagus Cove for some great



views of the area. As we paused to catch our breath, we decided to take a few “we were there” pictures before heading back down to the pangas.

We cruised over to Fernandina Island over lunch and spent the afternoon snorkeling off Punta Espinoza. We were joined in the water this time by green sea turtles who were so into feeding



they completely ignored us. One even bumped into me, despite my best efforts to avoid it. It didn't seem to notice the contact, other than giving me a bit of an irritated look as if to say “how dare you interrupt my lunch.” I've swum with sea turtles before, but it was nothing like this experience. These turtles didn't notice, or didn't care, that we were so close. This was also where we got to swim with the Galapagos marine iguanas....another first for me. I even watched an iguana hitch a ride on the back of a sea turtle...quite the sight.

### **The Southern Islands – Floreana and Española**

Our tour didn't make it to the southern Galápagos islands...you can't see it all in a week. The southern islands are home to volcanic bays and unusual land formations that provide shelter for a variety of birds and marine life. On land, perhaps the most popular spot is Post Office Bay. The site got its name from the whaler tradition of leaving letters to home in an empty whale oil barrel for returning whaling ships to pick up and deliver. Today's tourists are invited to keep up the tradition by selecting post cards from the barrel with addresses close to their home that they hand deliver upon their return, and then leaving their own postcards, without stamps, for others to deliver.

### **The Northern island - Genovesa**

The northern Galapagos islands are more distant and spaced further apart than the rest of the chain. Few tours will take you to the northern most islands, Wolf Island and Darwin Island. If you can find a tour that does go that far north, plan your trip for between June and November. That's when the whale sharks hang out and you have the best opportunity to snorkel with them.

### **The East Island – San Cristóbal**

The island of San Cristobal is one of the five inhabited islands in the Galapagos chain. Our itinerary did not include the eastern islands, so we missed San Cristobal. The island offers every bit as much diversity under water as above, but the main thing we missed was seeing the red footed boobies who call San Cristobal home. The landscape of San Cristobal is also worth including on your itinerary. It is best known for Kicker Rock, a formation that juts up from the ocean with sheer vertical cliffs. Tours will also stop at Cerro Brujo, a white sand beach where you can make like a marine iguana and soak up the sun.

## Time of Year

There is no bad time to visit the Galapagos. Each island is a unique ecosystem with its own pattern of life, making the Galapagos a worthwhile destination throughout the year. There is a warm and wet season which runs from January through April, but that's also the time of year when some of the land wildlife are at their most active, with mating and calving at its peak. Air temperatures will max out at just under 90 degrees and the islands will see between 4-5 inches of rain...per month. The cool and dry season runs for the rest of the year, though it is more dry than cool. Max air temperatures will be 80 degrees but rarely dip below the low 70s at night. The rain will be nearly non-existent which is the reason so much of the Galapagos looks like a desert.



## That's A Wrap

There was so much that made our trip to the Galapagos memorable that it is hard to distill the entire week into a few snippets. There were several excursions during our trip that stand out, but perhaps the one that stand out the most was on our last day, which was fitting since this one



excursion highlighted everything we had seen up to that point. It was a snorkeling excursion to Bucaneers Cove off the coast of Santiago Island. We started with a panga tour of a cove and cave where we saw more birds, and then returned to the area for snorkeling. We were deep into the cave when we entered the water, and all you could see were shadows. One shadow was unmistakable...a Galapagos shark cruising along the bottom. We were joined in the cave by some frisky sea lions who played a bit then escorted us as we swam out of the cave. At that point, a manta ray decided to play a game of chicken with my sister

Debbie. The manta ray won, but Debbie got some great video of the encounter. Once clear of the cave we explored the surrounding cove which was full of rocky outcroppings rising up from the bottom, and one black tip reef shark. After admiring the black tipped reef shark from afar, I got to see a pair of white tip reef sharks up close...almost too close. White tipped reef sharks are not known to be overly aggressive, but when one got close enough for me to reach out and touch...I didn't...I was relieved when they moved on. It was an amazing time.



And that's all I have to say about that.

