

TRAVEL

Galapagos Island tour an awesome adventure

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SPECIAL WRITERS

Where can you find penguins, impenetrable forests, and the highest capital city in the world? Give up? Ecuador. It's home to the Galapagos Islands, the rain forest, and Quito - which is perched atop an active volcano that towers nearly 10,000 feet above sea level. We guarantee you'll get your money's worth checking out this awesome threesome.

Charles Darwin put the Galapagos Islands on the map when he brought back his observations of animal adaptations from this unusual place. He saw iguanas happily swimming in the salty Pacific Ocean, penguins thriving far from home, and unconcerned cormorants airing their tiny, useless wings. Imagine animals so unafraid of predators that nesting birds and mothers of newborn penguins don't flinch when humans approach, plants and animals thriving in the absence of fresh water, finches with a multiplicity of beak shapes, each adapted to feeding on specific plants or seeds to eliminate competition. His explanation of these sights became the reasoning for his theory of evolution.

Fantasy adventure
Darwin saw all of this (and more) hundreds of years ago, and not much has changed. This is a fantasy adventure to exotic and

remote islands, untouched by pollution, where preserving the native fauna and flora is a primary consideration. Two organizations work together for the conservation of the islands. The Galapagos National Park works to preserve and protect the natural resources of the islands and the Charles Darwin Research Station, founded in 1959 under the auspices of UNESCO, conducts and facilitates research in the Galapagos Islands.

Aboard the Galapagos Explorer II, owned by Canodros S.A. of Ecuador, stellar service and ambiance mix amazingly well with shorts, sandy toes, and sunscreen. This 100-passenger ecotourism cruise ship offers nothing but beautiful, large, outside rooms, with all the frills, including 110-volt electricity. They are so conscientious about protecting the environment, they even supply you with an excellent biodegradable soap and shampoo. And here's a secret - the lowest deck has the largest rooms, with walk-in closets and sitting rooms. Even better, it's the smoothest sailing and has adjoining rooms - at the lowest price on the ship.

This is not a party cruise, it is ecotourism at its finest, an educational sightseeing trip, and the clientele reflects that difference. That doesn't mean it's not fun. You don't need to be an athlete for this trip. Seniors and those with injuries joined ranks with the jogging set on the islands. Guides

are very accommodating, and if walking is deemed too rugged, you can tour the exterior of the island by Zodiac. While our counterparts grunted their way to the top of an island in search of an elusive owl, we saw schools of graceful stingrays, puffer fish and herons in shallow, serene lagoons, and dolphins, humpbacks, penguins, and making sea turtles in open water all from the comfort of our dinghy. There are also plentiful opportunities to snorkel, sunbathe or learn more about the islands in the library aboard ship.

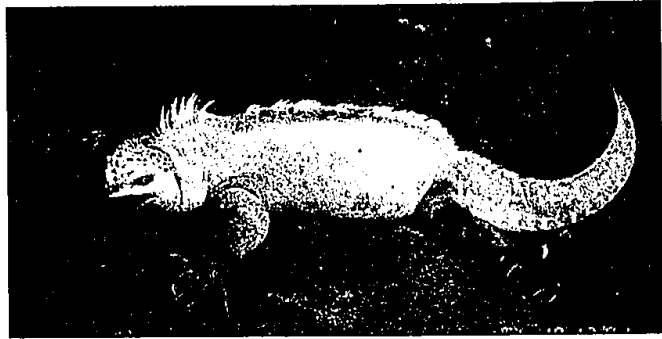
Highlight

Bartholomew Island was the highlight of our trip. Take the hike for breathtaking views, and don't miss snorkeling here. Each island has its own plentiful treasure-trove of exotic animals based on the specific food and shelter available. Exotic wildlife abounds, from clownish boobies (blue-footed, red-footed and masked), mammoth albatrosses, and thieving frigate birds, to playful fur seals and sea lions.

Despite their equatorial location, it is remarkably comfortable year-round in the Galapagos Islands due to the Humboldt Current, which travels north from the Antarctic. Temperatures range between nearly 90° F to the mid-60s. The best time to visit is December through April, but whenever you come there will be twelve hours of daylight to brighten your mood.

Located 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos Archipelago consists of thirteen large islands, six smaller islands, and over forty islets. The islands, many resembling craggy moonscapes and scrubby flora, are the result of volcanic eruptions three-to-five million years ago, and are in one of the most active volcanic regions of the world. Four of the islands are now inhabited, with a total of 16,000 people, along with the domestic animals they brought.

The only direct flights to Quito take 4 hours from Miami and are offered by American Airlines. It is the most economical and comfortable, with wider seats and more leg room. Other airlines servicing Quito are LanChile and Continental. Make time to see Quito, then



Sun bath: Adult marine iguana warms himself on sunny volcanic rocks

use it as a departure point for the Galapagos and Canodros' other gem, Kapawi Ecological and Reserve in the Amazon Rain forest. Ecuador, and its nearly two-mile-high capital Quito, is full of pleasant surprises. Ecuador is on Eastern Standard Time, the U.S. dollar is the national currency, and the electric power (and plugs) are the same as in the U.S. Drivers are very courteous to each other and pedestrians and taxis are cheap. The southern part of the city, the Old City, has the largest Spanish Colonial district in the Americas, and in 1978 it became the first UNESCO site designated as a World Heritage City in order to preserve its colonial structures. The northern part of the city is very modern with skyscrapers, condos, hotels and the airport.

A short drive from Quito is the Equatorial Monument considered "The Middle of the World" by Ecuadorians. It's fun to watch visitors mug for the camera while straddling "the line" (painted yellow) that puts one foot in each hemisphere. A visit to Quito is incomplete without a tour to Otavalo, a large open-air market. This day trip takes travelers on a breathtaking ride through the mountains, past volcanoes (twelve or more), lakes, and miles of greenhouses, where flowers and roses are grown for export. Continue on to Cotacachi

to shop for fine leather goods, and then stop at scenic Cuichocha Crater Lake for lunch.

This is a great way to relax before being transported back in time in the Amazonian Rain forest of Ecuador.

Norma and her daughter Wendy Schonwetter enjoy globe trotting together. Norma is a Farmington

resident. Tell us about your travels. Send stories and photos for consideration on our Travel page to Keely Kaleski Wygonik, Assistant Managing Editor of Features, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150. E-mail information on a text file, or copy and paste into e-mail to kwygonik@ec.homecomm.net.



For the birds: Blue-footed boobies can be spotted in high-up rocky outcroppings

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