

This article was originally written for the July 2002 issue of On The Hill magazine but was never published as the final issue of the title appeared in June 2002.

The Galápagos

“It is said that if you look into the eyes of the giant tortoise, you will see a gaze that is both mysterious and piercing. Tortoises can remain staring for long periods of time as if wishing to examine life and its purpose. The eyes, which presumably have stood witness for at least half a century, also carry years of experience which enables them to perceive the motives and ambitions of those visiting the islands: whether they come to destroy this peaceful refuge or simply to admire it. This slow, deep stare marks the approval of the visit or the new newcomer’s death; it is a safe welcome or a curse which will be carried out without fail in the most varied of circumstances.” From ‘The Curse Of The Tortoise’, by Octavio Latorre.

Vital Statistics

Religion: Predominantly Roman Catholic

Time difference: 6 hours behind GMT

Currency: US Dollar

International telephone code: (Ecuador) +593 (Galápagos local) 05

Language: Latin American Spanish

Orientation

The Galápagos is a chain of islands that can be found along the Equator, some 1000km off the coast of South America. Politically, they belong to Ecuador. Their total land mass is a little short of 8000 sq km, with a high point of 1707m. The Galápagos is internationally recognised as a National Park, Whale Sanctuary, Biosphere Reserve, and World Heritage Site. It is surrounded by a 133,000 sq km Marine Reserve.

Getting There And Around

The vast majority of visitors to the Galápagos arrive by air from the Ecuadorian capital, Quito, via Guayaquil. Flights cost around \$300 return, and are often heavily booked. If your flight is cancelled, you might be in for a wait of several

days in the peak season. A park fee of \$100 cash must be paid upon arrival. (People with student cards, and children, may want to enquire as to whether they are entitled to a discount). Contrary to rumours you might otherwise hear, over 90% of this money remains in the Galápagos: the various departments it is divided amongst are listed on a noticeboard at the airport terminal on the island of Baltra, the place where the majority of flights arrive. Remember to re-confirm all internal and connecting international flights with your carrier at least 72 hours before departure.

Check This Out: Ecuador & the Galápagos Islands. Rob Rachowiecki. Lonely Planet. ISBN 0864427611.

When To Go

January to April: wet and warm

Birds are feeding rather than nesting at this time of year. Although it may rain, temperatures are warmer.

May to December: dry and cold

Birds nest at this time of year, providing ample opportunity for close encounters.

The sea is cold and rough; something to bear in mind if you are a poor sailor.

'Dry' doesn't mean bone-dry: overcast weather and a damp (garúa) mist can settle for days at a time, especially in July and August.

During the transitional months of December and May, visitors can expect to enjoy the best of both worlds without too many tourists. In addition, the water temperature is pleasant and there is plenty of sea life.

Wildlife

This is what the Galápagos is all about. The scenery is impressive, but unless you want to see wildlife up close and personal, you might have difficulty justifying the cost of visiting the archipelago. So how close to the animals can you get?

Although National Park rules forbid visitors from touching wildlife, sometimes it is physically impossible to prevent creatures such as juvenile sea lions from running

up the beach towards you. Even when the wildlife does not make any effort to approach directly, care must be taken not to tread on dozing mammals and reptiles. It is interesting to note that the clearly marked visitor sites have been established on the islands for many years, yet birds continue to nest at the side – and even in the middle – of paths: surely, if they were fearful of man, then over the years they would have learnt to avoid these hotspots of human activity?

Check This Out! Galápagos Wildlife – A Visitor's Guide. David Horwell and Pete Oxford. Bradt. ISBN 1898323887.

On The Hill's Top 10 Galápagos Creatures

Entire guidebooks dedicate themselves to the various mammals, reptiles and birds that can be found in the archipelago: here is our 'Top 10' of some of the most popular, unusual and unique creatures that you can expect to encounter.

1. Boobies

There are three types of booby in the Galápagos: Masked, Red-Footed and Blue-Footed. Of the three, the blue-footed booby is the most widely-seen. Easily recognisable thanks to its bright blue feet, the bird's courting ritual involves dancing from foot to foot. The male 'whistles' while the female 'honks'. A faintly comical sight on land with its cross-eyed look, this seemingly odd expression hides a stereoscopic vision that allows the booby to look beneath the waves from a height of 15m and clearly target fish. A fleet of diving boobies is a sight to behold.

2. Frigatebirds

The Galápagos is home to two species, the Magnificent and the Great Frigatebird. Virtually indistinguishable to the casual observer, both are easily spotted thanks to the large red pouch that hangs beneath the beak. The frigatebird is unable to take-off from water. As a result, it is possible to watch frigatebirds washing in freshwater lakes by appearing to come into land, making contact with the water, and then flapping vigorously in order to remain airborne. So if frigates cannot fish, why do they hunt over water? The reason is that they hassle other fishing birds, such as boobies, in order to frighten them so much that they drop any caught fish. The

frigatebird then swoops on the dropped food before it hits the water. Cunning. Frigatebirds often accompany ships: it is not uncommon to see a squadron of frigatebirds holding station just a few metres above a boat.

3. Iguanas

If this was any other part of the world, one species of iguana would be a magnificent sight. But on the Galápagos there are two, and whatsmore, they are endemic to the archipelago. The Land Iguana may weigh as much as 14kg and has been described by some people as looking like a dinosaur. It is certainly a memorable creature, with its scaly hide, a spinal crest and rolls of skin around the neck. By contrast, the charcoal-grey Marine Iguana is the only lizard in the world that goes into water. It can feed up to 10m below the surface for up to 10 minutes. It is usual to see hundreds of marine iguanas spread out over rocks early in the morning, soaking up sufficient heat from the sun, before they enter the water. After feeding, they laze out on the shore again in order to warm up.

4. Waved Albatross

With a wingspan of over two metres, all 12,000 pairs of Waved Albatross in the world nest on the island of Española. Ungainly on land, the waved albatross is a magnificent flying machine. To see these giant but beautiful birds gliding just above the ocean is a joy to behold. Mature birds mate for life, and their offspring look like a large bundle of cotton wool – with a beak! The adult bird's sleek lines, white head and neck, black eye and mustard-yellow beak make them one of the most eagerly sought-after birds for visitors and photographers alike. The waved albatross can only be viewed between May and December.

5. Galápagos Giant Tortoise

Arguably the most famous Galápagos animal, it is thought that there were originally 11 sub-species of Giant Tortoise, three of which are now extinct. A fourth sub-species is in imminent danger of being wiped out, as only one surviving example remains ('Lonesome George'). Giant tortoise shells can grow up to 1.5m, and the reptile may weigh as much as 250kg. In the 19th Century, many thousands of tortoises were hunted by pirates and sailors when it was discovered that a giant tortoise can survive for up to one year without food or

water. As a result, hundreds would be stacked upside-down in the hulls of ships in order to provide fresh meat for crews. Stories abound of deckhands coming on board to clean the vessels when they arrived back at port in England, only to find a few of these uneaten 'monsters' roaming around in the bottom of the boats! Today, the giant tortoise is a protected species, but remains afraid of man. Nevertheless, the stealthy observer is usually able to get to within a few metres of these wonderful creatures.

6. Galápagos Penguin

Unique to the archipelago, the Galápagos penguins that live on the northern coast of the island of Isabela are the only penguins that exist in the northern hemisphere. One of the smallest penguins in the world, they are closely related to the Jackass penguin. The total population is thought to number approximately 2500, and the survival of the entire species was thought to be in jeopardy when the Jessica fuel tanker ran aground in the Galápagos in 2001, although this threat thankfully receded when the oil spill drifted in the opposite direction to that which was predicted.

7. Galápagos Sea lion

A subspecies of the Californian Sea Lion, the Galápagos Sea Lion can be seen on most of the islands. Whilst baby and juvenile sea lions can be very curious about humans, and may want to 'play' with you in the water, it is important to resist the temptation to reach out and touch these amazing swimmers. At all costs, avoid attracting the attention of adult bull sea lions. These 'beachmasters' guard their harems of females very diligently, and may view humans as a potential threat to their kingdoms. If approached by a bull on land or in the water, move away quickly. This will demonstrate that you are yielding to his dominance.

8. Darwin's Finches

Perhaps the most famous family of birds in the world. Some 150 years ago Charles Darwin realised that these 13 types of finch all evolved from the same original species of finch (a realisation that has since been confirmed by DNA testing). It was this discovery that helped Darwin with his theory of evolution. All the finches have evolved to feed on different plants and in different habitats. The latter might

also be its undoing: due to the destruction of certain flora, the Mangrove Finch is in danger of extinction.

9. Flightless Cormorant

Instantly recognisable with its puny wings (that it holds out to dry after returning from fishing expeditions) the Flightless Cormorant is another bird that has adapted to the Galápagos environment. Without any natural predators on the archipelago, the cormorant found it did not need to fly away. As its wings made fishing less efficient, natural selection gradually shrank them. The flightless cormorant dives from the surface in order to feast on fish, octopus and eels. It is found nowhere else on the planet.

10. Sally Lightfoot Crabs

One of the most colourful creatures in the region, this bright orange crab is one of the first animals that visitors encounter at most of the landing sites. They normally scuttle away in order to avoid being crushed underfoot. Whilst your fellow sightseers zoom off to spot larger fauna, why not loiter awhile to watch these crustaceans fighting and jumping from rock to rock?

Check This Out! The Charles Darwin Research Station works to protect the native species of the Galápagos. For more information visit www.darwinfoundation.org. You can support this work by joining the Friends of Galápagos. The UK and European office is run by The Galápagos Conservation Trust, 5 Derby Street, London, W1Y 7HD. www.gct.org.

The Islands

With over 30 major and minor islands, the number of options for cruise itineraries are almost limitless. Cruises may be as short as three days, or as long as 15. A minimum of one week is recommended. When you book your cruise, make sure that you receive notification in writing of the name of the boat you are booked on. Check that if for any reason this boat becomes unserviceable before or during the cruise, you will be transferred to a boat that has a similar (or better) standard of accommodation and facilities. If you are a poor sailor, you might prefer to avoid cruises on small boats that visit the northern islands such as Genovesa. This is

because the crossing to Genovesa can take as long as 14 hours; in rough seas this can prove to be somewhat unpleasant. All tourists must confine themselves to designated landing sites, marked trails and beaches on each island: most guidebooks include a description of the various sites that can be visited.

Check This Out!

Wildlife of the Galápagos. Fitter, Fitter and Hosking. Collins Safari Guides. ISBN 0002201372.

The best island in the Galápagos?

Galápagos resident, divemaster and naturalist guide Gabrielle Ribadeneira reveals his favourite place in the archipelago.

“My favourite island is Española. Most of the examples of sea life in the Galápagos are here. Sea lions, albatross, boobies, frigatebirds and finches. There is a big biodiversity and the landscape is fantastic and beautiful. The walking is easy, and there are good sites for snorkelling. Española has an open beach. There is not much damage that people can do. Normally we have to stay on trails to prevent erosion, but this open beach is a place to relax from long journeys and to enjoy the sea lions, the view and the clear water. It is very nice. I like to leave the best island for last. If you start your cruise from Española then your expectations will be too high. So I prefer to start at the island that has the least amount of wildlife.”

Where To Stay & Eat

Five of the islands are inhabited: Baltra, Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, Isabela and Floreana. Of the four, Santa Cruz is the most frequently visited by tourists as it is relatively close to the main runway on the neighbouring island of Baltra. The town of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz offers a variety of cheap and expensive hotels; there is something here to match every budget. Even in the peak seasons, you should not have too much difficulty in finding accommodation to suit your needs, as most tourists arrive on the island on the first morning of their cruise, and fly out on the afternoon of the final day. As a result, the towns can be surprisingly quiet: good for visitors who want to spend an extra couple of days in the Galápagos to savour the experience, but bad for local revenue. So why not

support the local economy and linger awhile after your (possibly tiring) cruise? If you do, then the following restaurants (all of which are within a 10-minute walk of each other) are suggested:

Tacos Galapeños

Mexican-style fajitas, burritos and tacos on a first floor balcony overlooking the harbour. Tasty food and good value.

Media Luna

Simply enormous create-your-own pizzas. The 'large' varieties are certainly sufficient to satisfy the most ferocious of appetites.

El Chocolate

Great-tasting hot chocolate drinks. Cakes, chips and good-looking hamburgers.

Tia Juanita

Inexpensive, tasty and filling kiosk-food.

Tikki Takka

Bakery with cappuccino, backgammon and magazines.

Capricho

Slow service, but great juices and toasted sandwiches. A good selection of books – the cheapest prices in town.

Cruises

The only effective way of visiting the islands and reaching the landing sites is by joining a cruise. It is worth bearing in mind that if you choose a small boat during the months of July and August then your voyage may prove to be more a test of endurance than a leisurely cruise: people who are prone to sea sickness might want to think about booking on a larger vessel. Cruises can be booked in the UK, on arrival in Ecuador or even in the Galápagos (see 'On The Cheap' later in this article). An increasingly popular way of arranging your cruise is to book on the

internet through an Ecuadorian company that offers boats from a wide range of different operators.

Check This Out: The author arranged his flights and cruise through the internet with Sangay Touring in Quito, which is run by Briton Martin Slater. Sangay promote a number of different tours from a variety of companies and so are well-placed to match both requirements and budget. www.sangay.com. tel: +(593) 2 255 0176/0180. email: m Slater@accessinter.net.

Diving And Snorkelling

The Galápagos is a popular destination for divers, who often combine dives with landings on the islands. The best months for diving are from July to November, especially the northern islands where it is possible to see huge schools of hammerhead and whale sharks. The wider season of May to December provides reasonable diving conditions throughout the archipelago because there is good visibility and a lack of strong currents. Two of the top dive sites are around the remote islands of Darwin and Wolf, where schools of 200-300 hammerheads, as well as whale sharks, mantas, sea lions and dolphins can be seen. Up to 1000 sharks have been sighted during a single dive. Note: there is no re-compression chamber in the Galápagos. Take care to leave the appropriate period of time between your dives and boarding an aircraft. Because of the strong currents that operate around some dive sites, novice divers may wish to gain sufficient experience in less turbulent waters before visiting the Galápagos. For the less experienced but nevertheless enthusiastic aquanaut, snorkelling is a viable option at all times of year, and the better-equipped boats have masks, snorkels and wetsuits. Otherwise, bring or hire your own.

Galápagos On The Cheap – Is It Possible?

Galápagos has been traditionally viewed as an expensive destination, and of course there are plenty of pricey berths on well-equipped ships. However, it doesn't have to be this way. For people who are both enthusiastic sailors and prepared to put up with less comfortable surroundings, cheaper cruise boats can be found. If you take this option, then you can expect to be accompanied by a less experienced naturalist guide (who may or may not speak your language).

Food will probably be basic: make sure that unlimited purified water is included in the price of your berth.

Another cruise option is to fly to the islands and find a boat when you get there. However, this could take a few days or more (and waiting in a hotel will eat into your budget) so it is always worth checking out boat prices on the internet before departure and on arrival in Quito. During certain months (such as July, August and Christmas/New Year) it might prove impossible to secure a berth on any ship if you wait until you get to the Galápagos. By contrast, during the quieter months the competition might be fierce to win your custom; shop around!

Finally, it is possible to tour some of the islands without taking a cruise. You might succeed in finding a berth or seat on a local boat, or get enough people together to charter your own. Regular inter-island boat services are unlikely to stop off at any of the visitor landing sites, and the more remote islands (which often have the most wildlife) do not have a human population and so will not be visited by residents. However, independent island hopping will give you additional opportunities to relax and meet locals in-between sailings. It might also prove possible to fly between Baltra, Isabela and San Cristóbal. For the wildlife enthusiast who has limited time, island-hopping is definitely not recommended.

[Check This Out] Independent Traveler Galápagos Handbook. Christy Buchanan and César Franco. Flying Fish Productions. ISBN 9978413537.

Health

At the time of writing, malaria was not a hazard in the Galápagos, although other parts of South America that you may be travelling to or from might require a preventative course of medication to be taken. Therefore, you may find yourself needing to take a course of malaria tablets during your time in the Galápagos, even though there is no direct threat in the archipelago. Sunburning is a major problem, especially when snorkelling: some people have become so burnt on the back and legs that they have been forced to wear clothes on subsequent immersions. A full-body neoprene wetsuit and sunscreen offers protection; prevention is better than cure. Ensure that all the water you drink or clean your

teeth with is purified. People who suffer from sea-sickness will want to investigate preventative treatments and remedies before departure. Always visit your GP to check on the malarial situation and vaccinations that might be required.

What To Take

Long-sleeved shirts and trousers as well as shorts, swimsuits and t-shirts. Dress etiquette on most boats is informal. A wide-brimmed sunhat, sunglasses and high-factor sunscreen are essential. Boots with ankle protection are strongly advised as some of trails are quite rocky underfoot. A pair of sandals for wet landings is a good idea. Many women find a sarong is a useful piece of clothing. Cameras need to be protected from salt spray, and a lightweight waterproof jacket and umbrella are worth packing in the bottom of your bag. A daysack with shoulder straps will leave your hands free when transferring from the boat to your panga (dinghy) for the ride to shore. Wetsuits can be hired on Santa Cruz. Enquire as to whether your boat is equipped with masks and snorkels.

Communications

Internet has recently become available in Santa Cruz. However, satellite connections to the web are expensive and may be unreliable. Telephone calls are also expensive.

Further Reading

The Curse Of The Tortoise, Octavio Latorre. ISBN 9978820906

The Galapagos Affair, John Treherne. ISBN 0141001305

The Origin Of The Species. Charles Darwin. Penguin Classics. ISBN 0140432051

The Voyage Of The Beagle. Charles Darwin. Penguin Classics. ISBN 014043268X

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