



Roam Free: The Galápagos



agos Islands

Wildlife and nature fuse into one
on Ecuador's secluded isles.

BY NELLIE HUANG | PHOTOS BY NELLIE HUANG | 77



Out in this remote area of the Pacific Ocean, there is silence except for the occasional sounds of penguins mating and pelicans soaring through the sky. Sea lions lounge lazily on the beaches while giant marine lizards meander on black lava rocks.

Famed for its rich and extraordinary wildlife, the Galápagos provides a unique opportunity for us to observe – without the use of binoculars. You’ll find yourself darting lava lizards, swimming alongside playful penguins and inching past giant tortoises. These animals have been isolated from humans for so long that they are virtually unaffected by us.

Many of the archipelago’s residents are prehistoric and endemic creatures – found nowhere else in the world. Its secluded location from continental Ecuador guarantees a safe and quiet home for these protected animals.

Unlike many tourist-developed places in the world, the Galápagos has managed to steer clear of large-scale hotel buildings and commercialization. Instead, raw landscapes and exuberant greenery dot the islands – a rare sight in today’s world.



Cruising the archipelago

Made up of 13 major islands, the archipelago covers an expansive area. The best way to experience it is by boat. Most travelers hop on cruise tours to explore various parts of the archipelago in comfort and style. Sailing by night, cruise passengers arrive on a different island each day, accompanied by a naturalist guide. Gay cruises range from economic to superior class.

Each island has its own distinctive landscapes and inhabitants; here are some of the archipelago's highlights:



Santa Cruz Island

Despite its small size, Santa Cruz packs almost all the Galápagos has to offer on one island – from the island's volcanic interior to the wildlife reserves along the coast. To soak in nature, traipse around the lava tunnel (Tunel del Mirador) in the remote highlands and swim with reef fishes in the clear freshwaters of the rocky crevices, Last Grietas.

For commodities, expect to find restaurants and hotels in the bustling town of Puerto Ayora, but don't be surprised by the sea lions and marine lizards lazing at the town's waterfront. Nearby, the Charles Darwin Research Station gives visitors a chance to creep up to the giant land tortoises.

THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS

Isabella Island

For volcano lovers, the main draw of this island is its dramatic skyline, created by five young and intermittently active volcanoes. Sculpted with haunting landscapes, Isabella is not only the biggest island in the archipelago but also the most picturesque. Take a thrilling hike to the foot of Volcan Darwin, passing through Darwin Lake, a gorgeous saltwater lagoon. Volcan Sierra Negra erupted in 2005, so be careful where you thread.



Diving Floreana

The waters off Floreana make for some of the best diving in the archipelago – flapping manta rays and hammerheads dominate its underwater territory while sea lions dance playfully in shallow waters. Further inland, you can hike or catch a dingy ride to the tropical rainforest in the mountainous area. Scout for flamingos at the stunning lagoon in Punta Cormorant. If you're there from June to October, don't miss the chance to catch their mating dance.

North Seymour

Bird watchers alert: this islet is home to huge populations of nesting blue-foot boobies and gigantic frigate birds. These unique birds barely flap a wing as you wander along the trail. It's easy to spot male frigates attracting females with their inflated red sacks or yellow land lizards cooling off in a cactus' shadow. The island is kept in pristine conditions, and can only be visited with a guide.



Quick Tips:**When to go**

The dry season (January-May) sees tropical climate with high temperatures while wet season (June-December) means rain and rough seas. The best time to visit is during the low tourist period (May 1-June 14; Sept. 15-Oct. 31) when the islands are less crowded and airfares cheaper.

How to get there

The only transportation to the Galápagos is from mainland Ecuador (Quito or Guayaquil) by plane. Only two airlines TAME and Aerogal fly the route. Cruise tours can be booked online, although you can find some last minute deals on the islands. Check out www.galapagosgay.com for gay cruise offers.

Distance

American Airlines, Continental Airlines and COPA Airlines fly regularly from California to Quito with one stopover. The journey takes over 10 hours with a layover in Miami or Panama City.

Budget

Travel costs are considerably higher here than on continental Ecuador. Upon arrival, foreigners have to pay a national-park fee of \$100. Cruise

tours usually cost \$200-500 per day, including all food and boarding. Extra expenses might include alcoholic beverages and activities (like scuba immersions). On land, restaurant prices are comparable to US standards.

Contact Information:

TAME www.tame.com.ec

Aerogal www.aerogal.com.ec

Galápagos National Park Official Website <http://www.galapagospark.org/>

Sources:

Low tourist season provided by TAME.

General information obtained from Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galápagos_Islands

EXHALE

