

Animal Nature

Swim with sea lions, climb volcanoes and perhaps even discover a new species in the Galapagos Islands.

| By Bret Love |



I'm on a Boat!

With every crashing wave, every tilt of the ship, every roller-coaster moment of catching air before slamming down with an audible thump, I'm trying not to lose it.

We're aboard the M/Y Eric, the 20-passenger flagship yacht of ecotourism operators Ecoventura, on a weeklong adventure through the Galapagos Islands. We will eat, sleep and gaze out on this vessel for the next seven days.

On our first night, we're sailing north from the capital city of San Cristobal to the tiny island of Genovesa. Although I've always loved the ocean, I'm rapidly realizing that I'm not much of a seaman. It's best out on the sundeck, where lounge chairs afford exceptional views of the sun setting on Kicker Rock, and a refreshing wind turns to a brisk chill as the evening sky provides the most brilliant star show I can imagine.

TAKING ATOLL

From top: The Flamingo I, one of four eco-friendly yachts in ecotourism operator Ecoventura's impressive fleet; Galapagos land iguana; Santiago Island provided amazing snorkeling with sea turtles and sea lions.

Discovery Channel

For all the tranquil serenity of its natural beauty, this archipelago of islands, located 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, has a rough-and-tumble history. Mankind has been trying to tame it for centuries.

The crew that first discovered it ended up on the verge of death from lack of water. During the 1600s and 1700s the Galapagos was a favorite spot among pirates—who would hide there after attacking Spanish galleons, pillaging the local tortoise population for meat. Since all efforts to colonize the area ended in death and despair, by the late 1800s the islands were considered cursed.

Even now, most of the islands remain uninhabited, and laws put in place to protect the remarkable biodiversity of its ecosystems are designed to keep it that way. More than 97 percent of the Galapagos archipelago is one big national park. You couldn't move there if you wanted to.

From the moment we set foot on Genovesa, I understood why the Galapagos National Park works so hard to preserve the region's delicate ecological balance: It was like nothing I'd seen on my previous adventures abroad. We walked perhaps 100 yards in a span of three hours, never deviating from a narrow, clearly marked path, and yet we were met by an Eden-like abundance of wildlife.

The beautiful beach was lined with adorable sea lions sunning themselves, seemingly oblivious to our presence. Tiger herons, Nazca boobys and red-footed boobys were literally everywhere, the babies eagerly squawking for their next meal from nests near or even on the ground. Because they have no natural predators and have not yet learned to fear humans, most of them were close enough that we could have easily touched them... though no one dared, for fear of the wrath of our passionate naturalist guides, Ceci Guerrero and Yvonne Mortola.

Though we loved Genovesa for its picturesque scenery and remarkable breadth of wildlife, every island we sailed to offered distinct pleasures. We spent an amazing morning off the coast of Fernandina, the youngest island in the archipelago, spotting Bryde's whales cresting and spouting. We then went ashore to find hundreds of marine iguanas cluttered en masse like kittens... albeit hissing, spitting kittens who look like mini-Godzillas. The bizarre volcanic rock formations of Santiago Island were home to thousands of colorful Sally Lightfoot crabs, which darted and dashed amongst the rocks along the shore as more young sea lions frolicked playfully in the surf.

The massive eroded tuff cone of Pinnacle Rock made Bartolome Island a perfect spot for catching a sunset, and hiking up the otherworldly landscape to the volcano's summit offered an excellent workout the next morning, providing spectacular views that



stretched on for miles. Note: All the trails are well-marked and you have to stay with your guide the entire time. North Seymour Island featured the dazzling colors of blue-footed boobys, brilliant yellows and oranges of land iguanas and vivid red inflated pouches of magnificent frigate birds hoping to impress potential mates.

On the island of Santa Cruz, we explored the Charles Darwin Research Station, the heart of Galapagos conservation efforts, where we learned about prehistoric-looking Galapagos tortoises and how selective breeding brought them back from the brink of extinction. We learned how invasive species and over-hunting nearly wiped them out before the Galapagos was declared a national park in 1959.

PARTY ANIMALS

From top: Hundreds of marine iguanas lay en masse on the shores of Fernandina Island; snoozing sea lions catching some rays in Gardner Bay, on Espanola Island



Under the Sea

If there was one surprise about our Galapagos adventure, it was how undersold the islands' underwater attractions are. I've snorkeled all over the world and never seen the sheer diversity of species we met every single time we entered Galapagos' waters.

Few words can express how weird and wonderful it is to see a bird (the flightless cormorant) swimming on the bottom of the ocean beneath you, or to watch a marine iguana feeding on algae 20 feet beneath the surface, or to accidentally follow a trio of Galapagos sea turtles into a school of medusa jellyfish that look like something straight out of *Finding Nemo*. This is the only place in the world where you can find yourself swimming with penguins, marveling at their rocket-like speed as they zip through the waves. White-tipped reef shark spottings are frequent, though they were the one Galapagos species that seemed to avoid humans like the plague (perhaps due to the increasing frequency of illegal shark-finning in the area).

My favorite memory was swimming with Galapagos sea lions, which seemed ambivalent on land but in the water proved eminently curious and eager to engage. Our most memorable encounter came off the island of Santiago, where I swam alongside a young sea lion with my video camera as he floated lazily. As I twisted and turned to get the best shot of him, he began swimming faster and faster, coming closer with each subsequent pass. The more I contorted my body to keep him in frame, the more playful he got, zooming beneath me like a torpedo, blowing bubbles and flipping out of the water. I dove down and tried to mimic him, only to realize he was mimicking me. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life.

Fantastic Voyage

The truth is, everything in the Galapagos seems so spectacular that you can be in the middle of a once-in-a-lifetime experience and not even realize it. Snorkeling on our first day off the coast of Playa Ochoa, I filmed a



small, iridescent blue fish that glowed like neon in the waters 75 yards from shore. I thought nothing of it until the end of our journey, when our group was watching my video clips on the Eric's flat-screen TV. Neither of our guides had ever seen anything like the fish, nor had the ship's captain. When we were at the Charles Darwin Research Station, Guerrero took me behind the scenes to speak to the scientists there.

To make a long story short, nobody could identify our mystery fish... not even Dr. Jack Grove, author of *The Fishes of the Galapagos Islands*. After watching our video, Grove, one of the world's foremost experts on Galapagos wildlife, admitted that he did not know what the fish was, but "it is not a typical species known to the Galapagos." As of our press deadline, it remains entirely possible that we have the only documented evidence of what may prove to be a new fish species.

The Galapagos Islands may not be for those looking for lazy days. There are plenty of physical challenges, such as hikes and snorkeling, just as the waves of lengthy inter-island passages require a strong stomach. But you know what they say about heaven: Sometimes you have to go through hell to get there. For those addicted to the thrill of adventure, this wildlife-rich wonderland is nothing short of paradise. ■

COASTING ALONG

Clockwise from top: The Sally Lightfoot crabs are a constant, colorful presence on the rocky shoreline; close up of a magnificent frigate bird; pelicans eagerly await a taste of the fishermen's catch of the day on Santa Cruz Island.