



Treasured ISLANDS

A charter voyage to one of the most sought-after destinations on the blue planet. Welcome to the evolution
Frances & Michael Howorth





Should we have needed any reminder of why we had chosen to cruise the Galapagos Islands it came a little while after we had arrived on the small island of Baltra, just off the north coast of Santa Cruz. We were enjoying a welcome drink on the patio overlooking the sea when we were interrupted by the arrival of a pelican who ambled over towards us as if in greeting. He posed for a photograph and then waddled off to where an American family were having a drink. There, sleeping like a labrador at his master's feet, lay a sealion basking in the sun, eyes closed and gently snoring.

The animal magic of the place completely wins you over. Later, a little way outside the town of Puerto Ayora, we were on a small pedestrian pathway leading into the National Park and running for 3km through woods towards some beautiful white sand beaches, where the Pacific swell curls and crashes onto the almost deserted shore. Marine iguanas move twixt surf and shore where they pile up in great heaps to bask in the sunshine. Asleep they appear lifeless, save for the occasional snort as they clear the excess salt from their bodies in a spray of brine, like miniature whales spouting. Towards the end of the beach a twist of nature has allowed the sea to force its way into the island, forming a beautiful, peaceful lagoon with sandy beaches, cactus plants and more pelicans. This quiet beach with its calm waters is the complete opposite to its near neighbour, with not a wave in sight. We've only just arrived yet here were the constant surprises of nature that have been charming visitors since Darwin's day.

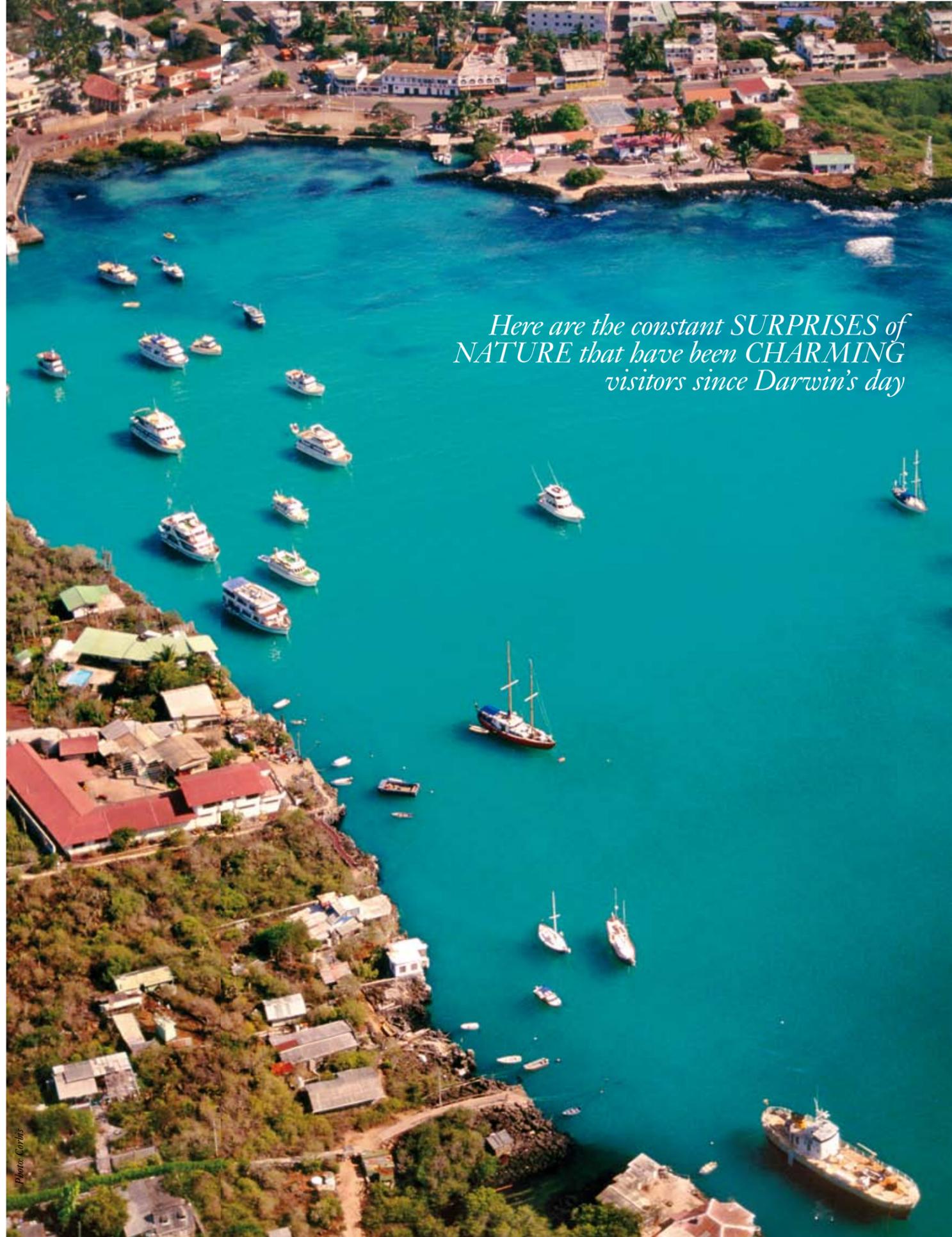
The islands have long been on the list of must-visit places in the world, and seeing them from the deck of a yacht is surely the very best way to experience them. It is not, however, an easy destination for yachts to reach given their isolation off the coast of Ecuador and the

stiff regulations visiting boats, crew and guests must comply with. So it makes sense to consider chartering a yacht already based in the islands through a company that understands the requirements of the discerning visitor.

Queen of Galapagos, offered through Edmiston, is one of the few yachts that fits this profile. Working from Edmiston's New York office, Robert Sheppard heads up a division within the company that markets discovery yacht charters. We would be lying if we described this 30-metre yacht as the last word in luxury superyachts, but her owners have taken advice from Edmiston, who act as her central agents, and are pushing through a series of upgrades that will see this yacht emerge from a refit way beyond the standard found elsewhere in the island chain. Stephanie Saman, the charter co-ordinator who manages the yacht on behalf of the owners, has visited top charter yacht shows around the world and fully understands the needs of the luxury yacht traveller. She is ensuring the crew go through an intensive training programme so that the levels of service are the highest, while chefs from top hotels have been brought in.

Queen of Galapagos is a purpose-built catamaran designed for these waters; she carries all the necessary equipment and tenders to make exploring the islands easy. She has cabins for up to 16 guests and a naturalist guide supplied by the National Park, who must accompany guests ashore at all times. Itineraries have to be agreed with National Park authorities before the yacht begins her voyage, so no island has too many visitors at any one time. This may seem to be Draconian, but the benefits of managing the situation can be seen in the recent news that Unesco has taken the Galapagos off Unesco's World Heritage under-threat list.

Our next stop was the Rancho Primica, amidst the island's wetlands and home to a wild colony of giant tortoises who love to wallow in the



Here are the constant SURPRISES of NATURE that have been CHARMING visitors since Darwin's day

Previous page: Pinnacle Rock and Bahia Sullivan on Bartolomé.
Facing page, top: Do not disturb the sealion. A first sight of the locals in the bar on Baltra.
Facing page, below: *Queen of the Galapagos* offers luxury charters.
Left: The harbour at Puerto Ayora.
Below, from the top: Swallow-tail gulls; sally lightfoot crabs; the blue-footed boobie; marine iguana.



All photos: Frances Heworth (unless otherwise stated)



Above, from the top: The Galapagos penguin; feeding time for an iguana; the greater flamingo; Lonesome George.

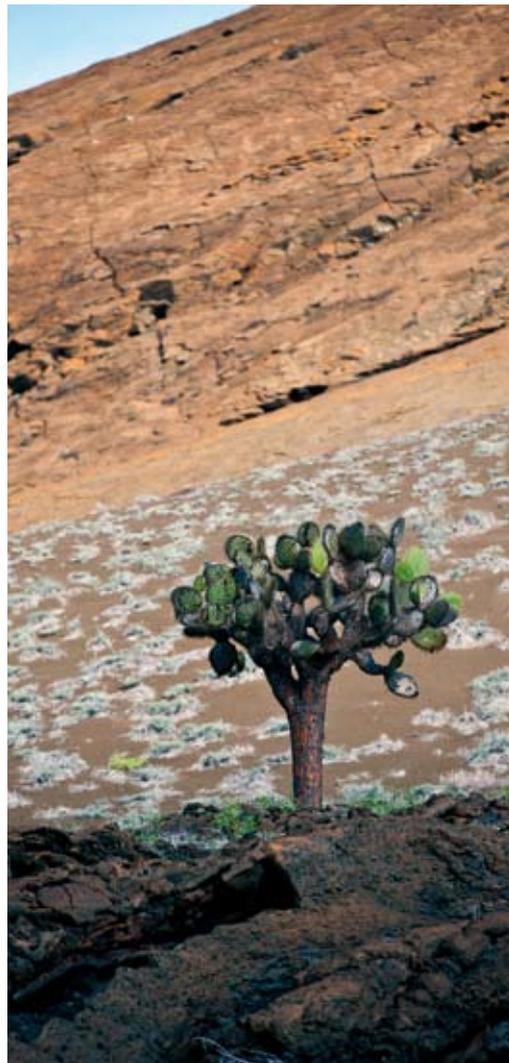
Above right: Every beach has its friendly locals.

Right: The barren landscape on Bartolomé.



Photo: Michael DeFreitas South America / Alamy

Around us are SEALIONS of every size and marine IGUANA by the score



abundant muddy water, hoping to rid themselves of troublesome parasites. These particular tortoises are unique to Santa Cruz and they grow to a large size because they have no predators. We moved on to explore deep inside a lava tube, a huge subterranean tunnel left behind when molten lava flowed underground from a crater, and then headed towards the Charles Darwin Research Station, where 200 or so scientists from all around the world study the unique environment.

Perhaps the most famous activity of the station is the breeding of tortoises. National Park Rangers gather up freshly laid eggs from surrounding islands and bring them to the station, rather than leaving them in the wild where survival rates are pitifully low. Hatching takes place in specially adapted incubators and the controlled temperatures ensure a higher number of females are born. Pampered for five years, the babies grow rapidly and securely before being returned to live in the wild.

One programme is devoted to the most famous tortoise of all. Lonesome George is thought to be the very last of his kind from the island of Pinta. Now he lives with two lady tortoises in the hope that they will breed to preserve something of the Pinta line. At 90-some years of age, a lot of future history is resting on the shoulders of poor old Lonesome George.

The next day we are anchored off North Seymour Island, home to a stunning variety of wildlife. Once ashore, right beside our landing spot, we watch enchanted as a male and female swallow-tail gull perform a courtship ritual. Like almost all the birds and mammals in the Galapagos, they seem oblivious to their human watchers. Around us are sealions of every size. And there are marine iguana by the score; climbing from the sea, their strong legs propel them across terra firma. In the ocean it is the powerful tail that they use to get to the underwater rocks, where they often spend up to an hour below the surface before coming up for air. Evolution has favoured a blunt





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snout – all the better to harvest algae and sea grass. Scuttling across the rocks, brightly coloured sally lightfoot crabs live up the otherwise drab dark colours.

Inland are the frigate birds. It is late in the breeding season and only a few male frigates are sitting on a potential nest, puffing up their gular sacks in the hope that the female will notice their bright red throats. The females fly in to inspect the nesting spot the male has chosen. If she considers the location good she will stay. Lightweight and aerodynamically shaped, the adult birds are so agile in the air with their magnificent scissor-shaped tail but they are hopeless on the ground and landing can make a very amusing spectacle. Perhaps our favourite bird in the Galapagos is the blue-footed boobie because they seem even more comical. We are entranced as we watch one male put on a wonderful display as he attempts to attract a watching female.

We sail on to Bartolomé, possibly the most photographed landscape in the whole of the Galapagos. It rises starkly from the ocean, a barren volcanic upthrusting onto which very little in the way of vegetation has settled. The island may be barren but the waters around it are teeming with sea life and we are quickly rewarded when

we spotted our first Galapagos penguin, the smallest in the world. It seems bizarre that here on the Equator is a species of the flightless bird synonymous with the Antarctic and cold weather. We land on the rocks and begin our trek up to the island's peak, atop which is a small lighthouse. Far below, *Queen of Galapagos* lies quietly at anchor in the bay as the sun sets behind her.

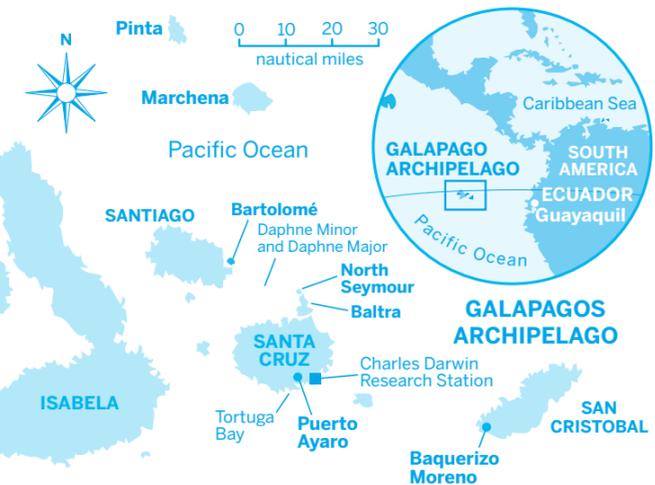
The yacht moves again overnight and we awake at anchor off Santa Cruz, where we are alone. The white sand expanse of beach here cannot be reached by road or footpath – the only way in or out is by boat. The isolation makes this the perfect spot for the Pacific green turtle and when we reach the beach the large tracks that greet us – as if an off-roader has just been through – lead the way from the water to a mound in the sand. A little further along the beach we see the lava gull with his distinctive black hood and grey ash-coloured body. He is just one of 400 of these birds thought to exist, all of them here in the Galapagos. Behind the beach are lagoons filled with brackish water and it is here that the greater flamingos feed in groups. They are seeking a shrimp-like krill that lives in this type of water. It takes them around 12 hours each day to get enough to eat. The pretty flamingo is an endemic sub-species of the bird most people recognise instantly but these are pinker than their cousins. There are just 500 of them.

Our final port-of-call is Baquerizo Moreno, the capital of the Galapagos. It is prettier and less hectic than the larger Puerto Ayazo on Santa Cruz, where we spent our first night. It is time to leave our comfortable home and become landlubbers again. Having completed our trip there is little doubt in our minds as to the magnificence of the destination because it is truly spectacular. The question is, for how long can these amazing little islands stand the onslaught of tourists or indeed the islanders themselves? Commercialism is creeping in quickly and there are some unsettling signs – plastic bottles float where sealions play, while island homes have no mains sewerage and some irresponsible yacht operators pump their chemically treated effluent directly into the sea. But strides have been made and compared to mainland Ecuador the standard of living is high.

Despite our worries, the destination is one of the modern wonders of the world and undoubtedly the way to see it is from the deck of a luxury yacht. The key thing is to see it in all its natural glory while it remains a wonderful, unique showcase for planet earth. **SYW**

Above left: Blue-footed boobies feeding...
Above: ... And a slightly less elegant entry into the water off Bartolomé.

Left: Splendid isolation off Bartolomé.
Below, from the top: Frigate bird; sealions hardly bat an eyelid at visitors; unique reptiles inhabit the islands; frigate bird chicks.



Charter facts
 Length 27.4m (90ft)
 Beam 8.5m (28ft)
 Speed 9 knots
 Guests 16
 Crew 10 (plus guide)
 Charter rates \$70,000pw
 Contact Edmiston.
 www.edmiston yachts.com