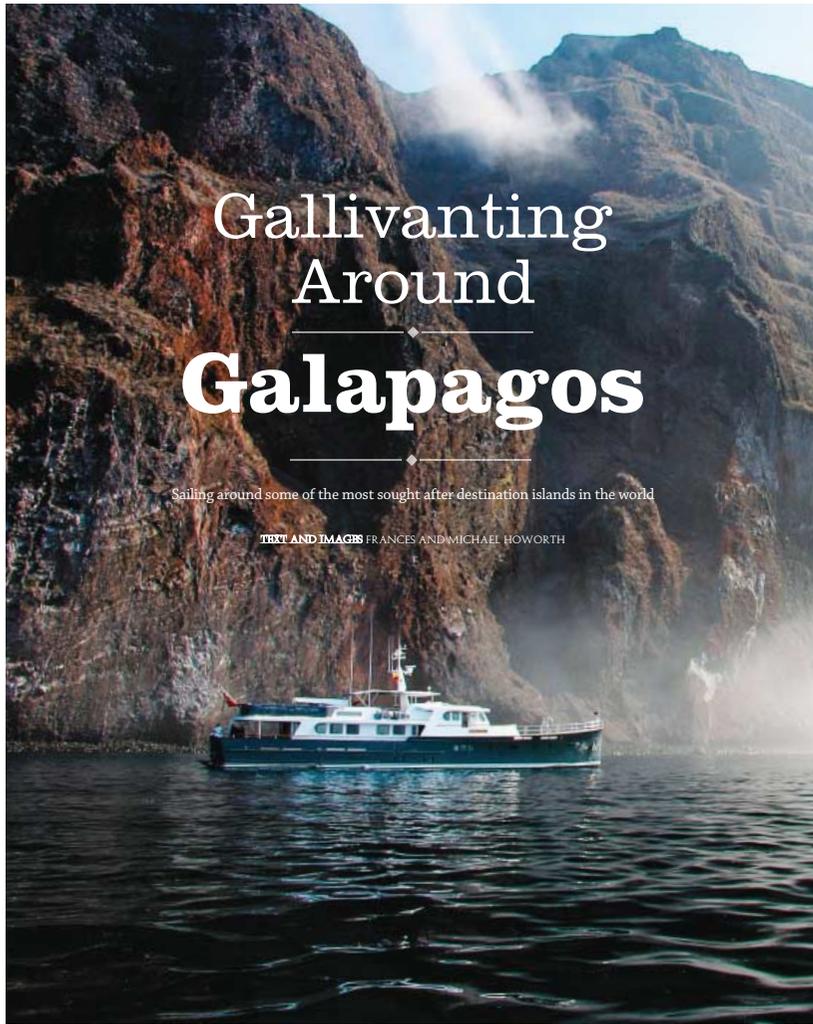


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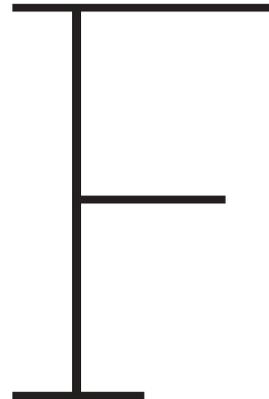
Gallivanting Around Galapagos

Sailing around some of the most sought after destination islands in the world

TEXT AND IMAGES FRANCES AND MICHAEL HOWORTH

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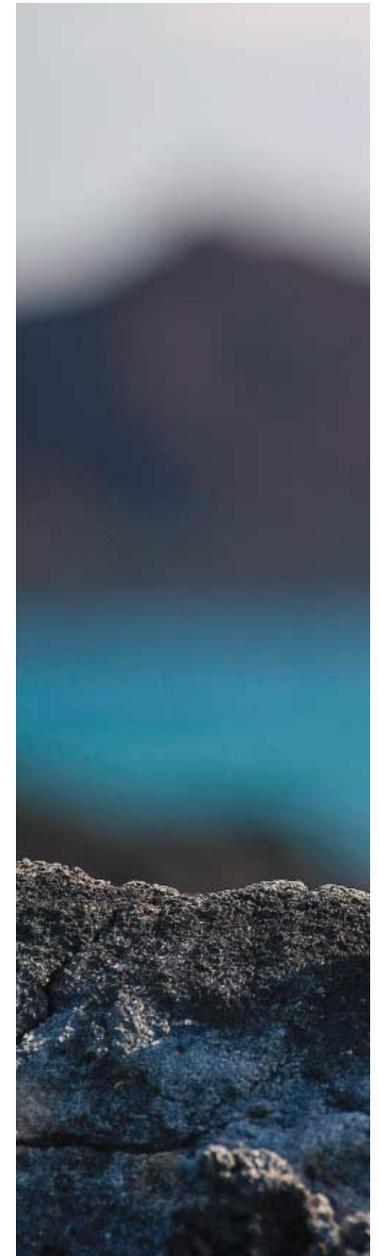
Far from their expected habitat of Antarctica, the equatorial Galapagos Islands are home to the world's smallest breed of penguins.



Flightless cormorants, magnificent Frigatebird and clumsy blue footed boobies are just some of the reasons why you would want to visit a wonderfully isolated group of islands in the Pacific called the Galapagos. Other winged attractions include the waved albatross and, of course, 13 different species of the most famous of bird on the Galapagos, the Darwin finch. When it comes to sea life, there are; sea lions, fur seals, iguanas that swim and, despite being on the equator, a huge colony of penguins. Step ashore and the giant tortoise and endemic land iguana will vie for your attention.

Ever since the English naturalist Charles Darwin made them famous with the publication of his books; *On the Origin of the Species* and *The Voyage of the Beagle*, the Galapagos Islands have been included on most people's must visit places in the world list. Seeing them from the deck of your own yacht must surely be the very best way of exploring these magical islands.

We arrived the day before we joined our yacht, flying into the Galapagos from Guayaquil in Ecuador and landed on the small island of Baltra. A short trip on one of the flotilla of blunt bowed ferryboats across the narrow channel and we were on the much larger, delightfully named Indefatigable Island, also known as Santa Cruz. Just 45-minutes after arriving, the four-door pick-up taxi had dropped us off at our hotel in the town of Puerto Ayaro and we were enjoying a welcome drink on the patio overlooking the sea.





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FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Within moments of settling down we were interrupted by the arrival of a rather large pelican, which ambled over towards us as if in greeting. He posed for photographs, before waddling off on his large webbed feet to where another family were enjoying a drink. There, sleeping like a Labrador dog at her master's feet, lay a seal lion basking in the sun, eyes closed and gently snoring. The camera clicked, and she opened an eye and, we swear we heard her say: "Do you mind? I am sleeping!" The hotel's patio was obviously her chosen place to repose thanks to the shade provided by the veranda. What was amazing however was that she co-existed with man without interaction or fear. She was not begging for food, nor was she being fed, something strictly forbidden in the islands.

A little way outside the town of Puerto Ayora a small pedestrian pathway leads into the National Park and, once clear of the registration hut, runs for nearly two miles through woods to one of the world's most beautiful white sand beaches. Here the Pacific swell heaps up the waves, causing them to curl and crash onto the shore making this a great surfing spot with not a shack in sight! Those who have carried their board on the 40-minute walk from town are rewarded with thrilling sets of glass when the surf is up.

For others, the beach provides an uninhabited and almost deserted walk beside the sea. Marine iguanas move twixt surf and shore, where they pile up into great heaps on top of one another 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; the similarity to miniature whales spouting is remarkable. These are the only sea going lizards in the world and are unique to these islands. If numbers here on this beach at Tortuga Bay are anything to go by, they are certainly not endangered. They were totally content for us to approach incredibly close, making for a moving experience with wild creatures.

Towards the end of the beach a twist of nature has allowed the sea to force its way into the island, forming a beautiful and very peaceful lagoon, complete with sandy beaches, cactus plants and plenty of pelicans. This quiet beach, with its calm waters, is the complete opposite to its near neighbor, without a wave in sight and proves again what a fascinating group of islands the Galapagos are.

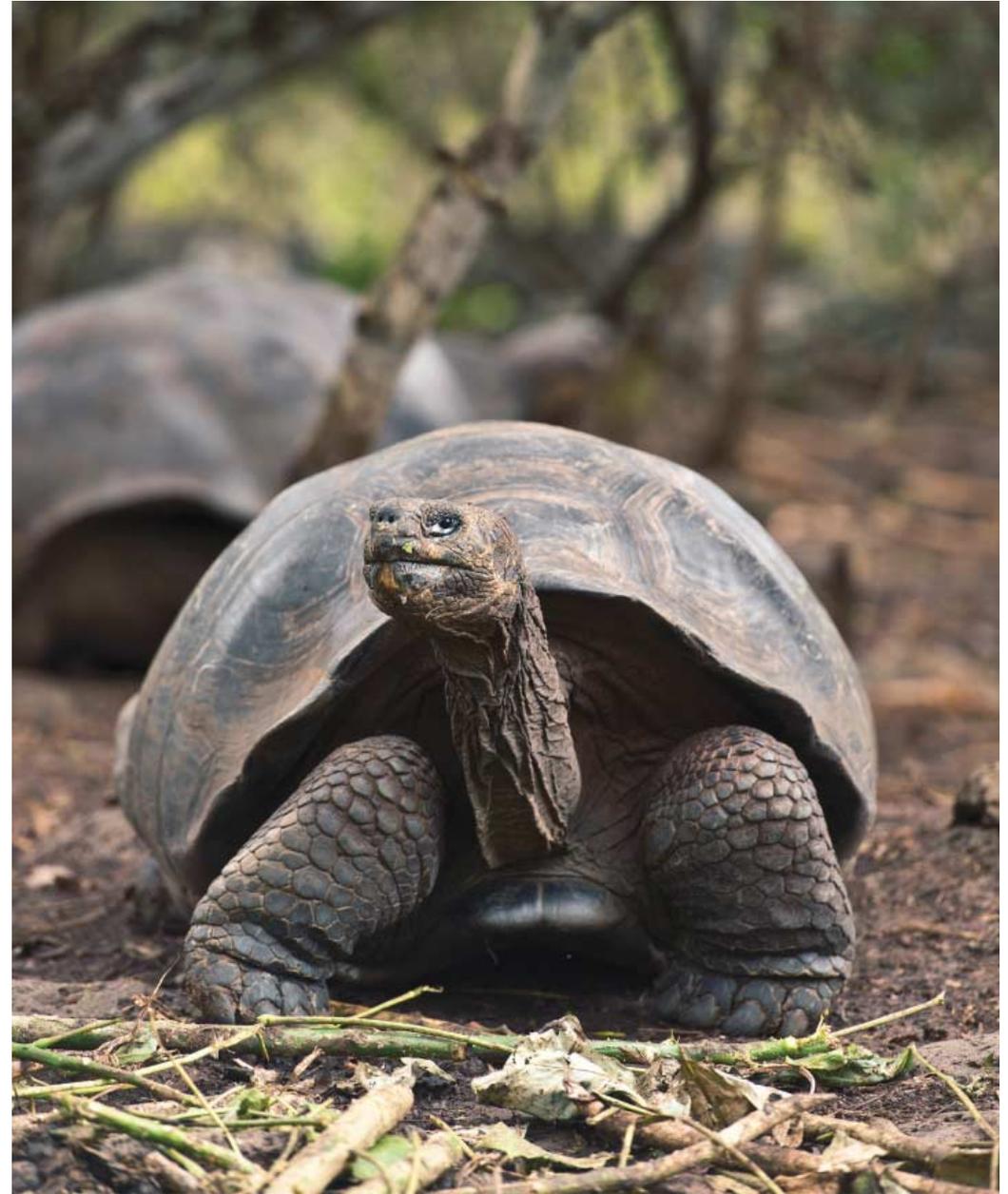
Every yacht must carry an accredited and licensed guide and it pays to take advice and seek

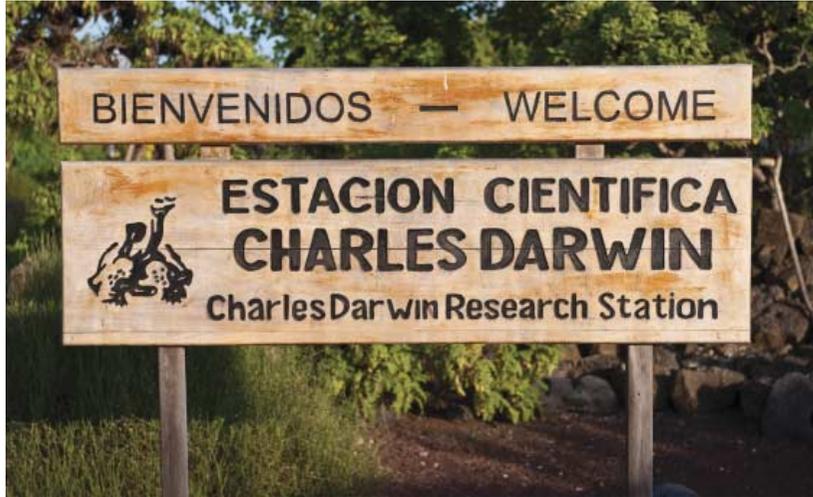


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recommendations before hiring one. Ours was Juan Carlos Sosa, or JC as he prefers to be known. He is one of those wonderful characters with whom it is a delight to converse. Witty, charismatic, multi-lingual and hugely knowledgeable about a wide variety of subjects, he is an award-winning guide with the Galapagos National Park authorities. We were therefore fortunate it was he who led us through our entire adventure in the islands.

EMBARKING ON ADVENTURE

Although we were now aboard our yacht, we were not leaving Santa Cruz and instead we went on an island tour with JC. Our first stop was the Rancho Primica, amidst the wetlands, and home to a wild colony of giant tortoise who love to wallow in the 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 on the island as 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.

Next stop was the Charles Darwin Research Station and the headquarters of the National Parks Service, the controlling body governing the activities inside the National Park. The Research Station is an internationally supported foundation for the furthering of biological studies and is a must see for every visitor. Inaugurated in 1959 with just a splattering of sprawling buildings, today it houses some 200 scientists from all around the world, here to 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 various islands and bring them to the station, rather than leaving them in the wild where birthing and survival is low. Hatching takes place in specially adapted incubators and 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 on their native islands.

It was here at the research station that they tried to find a mate for Lonesome George from the island of Pinta who, before he died in June 2012, was thought to be the very last of his kind.

The Charles Darwin Research Centre runs a breeding program for tortoises, which can live to 150 years of age.

George lived at the station with two lady tortoises' each with similar genes and, although they were not exactly the same species, it was hoped the trio would breed. At well over 95 years of age however, there was perhaps too much responsibility resting on the shoulders of poor old Lonesome George; he died without issue. Giant tortoises can live up to 150 and reach around 350 lbs in weight, though size is not an accurate indicator of age. Another of the programs at the station is the re-homing of unwanted, rescued tortoises' and among these is Popeye, a huge animal whose shell was shot up badly by soldiers in an army base. Fierce and unfriendly at first due to his cruel life, he has recovered his equilibrium and become docile and content.

NEW DAWN, NEW ISLAND

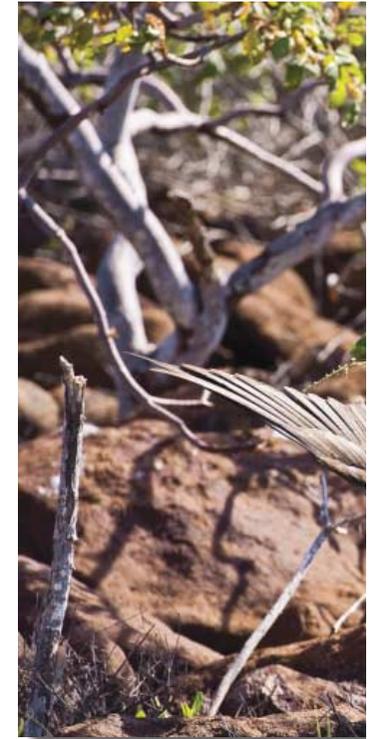
Back aboard our yacht that evening we slipped anchor and sailed through the night to anchor off North Seymour Island, home to a wide variety of wildlife. Once ashore, right beside our landing spot, we watched enchanted as a male and female Swallow-tailed Gull performed a courtship ritual right in front of us, just feet away. Like almost all the birds and mammals we see here in the Galapagos they seem oblivious to their human watchers and, provided you watch and try not to disturb, they carry on as if you were not there. The male invited the female to partake in a meal by regurgitating one that he prepared earlier, feeding her from his beak. Clearly birds are not quite like us! She was not put off though and they huddled together. Things were definitely progressing well for Mr. Gull, so we decided to give them a little privacy and moved off.

Around us, so close we could touch them (but we never did), were sea lions of every size. Mothers with pups at their breast, other pups on their own squeaking loudly in the hope that mother won't be gone long before bringing home a fish supper. Apparently it might be a long wait, up to four days, before she returns with food. We also know a mother's job is never done, so it is common for feeding to continue well into adulthood.

Elsewhere on the beach are marine iguanas by the score. They climb from the sea, their strong legs scooting them across terra firma. In the ocean it is the powerful tail that they use to get to the underwater rocks, often spending up to an hour below the surface before coming up for air. Evolution has favored them with a blunt snout, all the better to harvest algae and sea grass. Scuttling across the rocks, brightly colored Sally Lightfoot crabs liven up the otherwise drab black colors. These red crabs know few predators when they are large, so therefore can afford such flamboyant displays. When young and small however they are prey to birds, so the juveniles are black and can hardly be seen walking across the lava shoreline.

Your correspondent scribes careful notes, while wife Frances records the trip and unquitos wildlife through the lens.

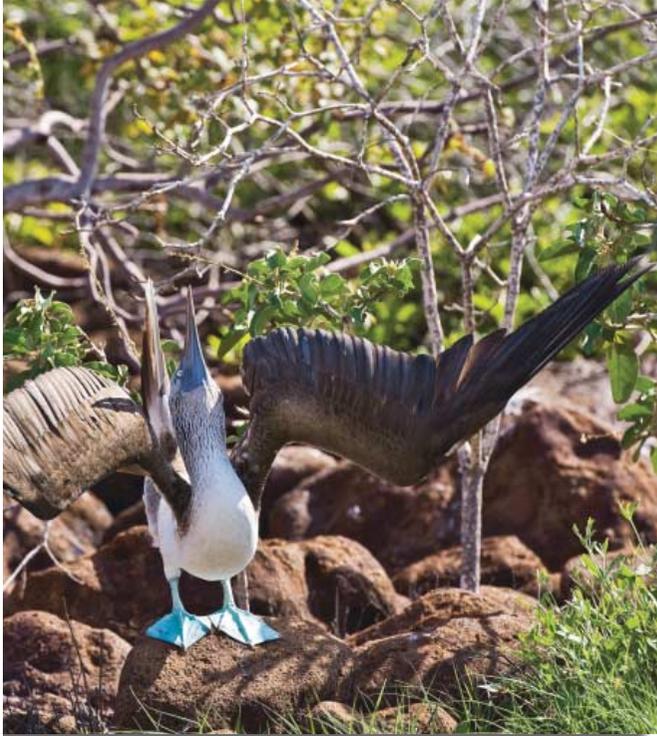




Inland are the frigatebirds. There are two species here in the Galapagos: the Great Frigatebird (or *Fregata minor*) whose origin was Asia, plus the Magnificent Frigatebird, which hailed originally from the Caribbean Islands. While there are differences that are easy to spot when pointed out to us, they are very similar. It was late in the breeding season and only a few male frigates were sitting on a potential nest, puffing up their gular sacks in the hope that the female would notice their bright red throats. The females fly in to inspect the nesting spot and if the nest has, what the female considers, good potential, she will stay. As always with a home, it is location, location, location that wins the day. As we watched there were many young frigates, awaiting their parents return with food. Lightweight and aerodynamically shaped, the adult birds can have wingspans of over eight feet. They are so agile in the air with magnificent scissor shaped tails, but they are absolutely hopeless when on the ground. Landings can make for very amusing watching.

Perhaps our favorite bird in the Galapagos is the Blue-footed Boobie because they seem so comical. We were entranced as we watched one male put on a wonderful courtship display. He is clearly proud of his huge, brightly blue colored webbed feet and appeared oblivious to the

The Frigate Bird (top left) and Blue Footed Boobie (above) have mating rituals as different as they are dramatic. The red crab can happily display its presence due to the lack of natural predators.



fact they are not unique; the female was wearing similar colored footwear. The male uses his feet to attract her attention, raising first one then the other high into the air, before occasionally spreading his wings and throwing back his head to emit a shrill whistle. We can understand exactly why this strange looking bird got his name.

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Sailing on to Bartolomé Island we pass between the islands of Daphne Minor and Daphne Major, the second of which has been made famous by the publication of Beak of the Finch by Jonathan Weiner. This book tells the fascinating story of how and why an English couple, Peter and Rosemary Grant, have been regularly returning for 25 years to this tiny island. They have been researching the many different species of the famous darwin's finches to be found here. Bartolomé is possibly the most photographed landscape in the whole of the Galapagos and it is easy to see why. It rises starkly from the ocean, a barren volcanic mass thrusting up onto which very little in the way of vegetation has settled. The island maybe barren, but the waters around it are teeming with sea life and we were quickly rewarded with our first Galapagos Pen-



Useful Information

The islands are not an easy destination for most yachts to reach given their isolation off the coast of Ecuador and the stiff regulations visiting boats, crew and guests must comply with both before and after they arrive.

Using Local Boats

For most people, it makes more sense to consider chartering a yacht already based in the islands. For many years the tourist trade has marketed voyages around the various islands in the Galapagos Archipelago in sub standard head boats which while yacht shaped fell very far short of the luxury standards demanded by today's luxury seeking sailors. Cabins were sold on a by bed basis and guests aboard had little in the way of input when it came to choosing the itinerary or the onboard menu. Indeed little has changed over the years, but it is fair to say that now boat owners are beginning to become a little more safety conscious and cognizant of the desires of the travelling public, to this end some of the yachts have begun to spruce themselves up a little when it comes to the amenities that they offer.

The owners of one yacht are however trying to change that and have employed charter brokers Edmiston to act as the yachts Central Agent for charter. Working from that firm's New York office, Robert Sheppard heads up a division within the company that markets discovery yacht charters and it is he who handles Queen of Galapagos.



"We awoke at anchor off Santa Cruz, alone and with no other yacht in sight. The expanse of white sand beach can only be reached by boat..."

guin: the smallest penguin 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, a top of which is a small lighthouse. JC, still fastidiously dressed in freshly pressed shorts, neatly trimmed beard, gold rimmed aviator sunglasses and his ubiquitous Panama hat, was in his element. What he does not know about volcanic eruptions and the complex landscape it creates is simply not worth knowing. Reaching the top, the view was stunning, far below us, our yacht lay quietly at anchor in the bay as the sunsets behind her. We all scampered down the mountainside at the mention of cool beers back on board and so spent an evening at another memorable anchorage.

SECLUSION AND PROFUSION

The yacht moved again overnight and we awoke at anchor off the northern end of the island of Santa Cruz. We are alone, no other yacht could be seen anywhere and we had a special expedition ashore planned. 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 to lay her eggs at night and, as soon as we reached the shore, we saw evidence that last night was just one such evening. Large tracks, as if made by a 4x4 off-roader led from the water to a mound of sand. Here, one large female had clearly laid and buried some of her clutch of what could be up to 200 eggs. Galapagos is the only place in the world where this particular species of turtle lays her eggs, though the seagoing reptiles can be found all over the Pacific Ocean. Each turtle returns to the same beach, on which she herself emerged from inside a leather-like shell no bigger than a ping-pong ball, to perpetuate the species. The eggs incubate in the sand under the hot equatorial sun, females will be born if the ambient temperature stays around 87/80 Fahrenheit. Make it nearer 90.60 and chances are all the babies will be boys. A little further along the beach we saw the Lava Gull, with his distinctive black hood and grey ash colored body. He is just one of 400 of these birds thought to exist in the world and all of them here in the Galapagos. Beside him the Wandering Tattler, with his distinctive yellow legs, chasing the same food in the seawater pool.

After a day's hiking, the promise of cold beer back aboard the yacht encouraged a sunset scramble.





Queen of Galapagos is a purpose built 98 foot catamaran yacht designed for these waters; she carries all the necessary equipment and tenders that go with a discovery yacht so as to make exploration of the islands easy. While not laid out or decorated to established mega yacht standards she has cabins for up to 16 guests and a naturalist guide. Itineraries have to be agreed with National Park authorities before the yacht begins her voyage, to ensure that no island has too many visitors at any one time, therefore it is important that potential charterers liaise with the yacht's operators beforehand to ensure expectations expectations, of what islands and wild life they want to see, are met.

Cruising

The use of a ships agent is strongly advised. Take care to use one who is used to handling private yachts and carefully check references with yachts that have recently used their services.

Fees

Cruising the area is not cheap. A licensed and accredited guide must be used for shore side excursion and the list of potentially payable fees seems endless. Sorting out what fees have to be paid is perhaps the single most important reason to use a reliable ships agent. Fees will include:

- Cruising permits per person on board including crew
- National Park admission fees
- Guide Fee
- Fumigation
- Municipal Fees at each island anchorage

Local Restrictions

Only waste suitable for recycling can be left behind on the islands and must be taken to the recycling centers and disposal fees paid.

Lifejackets must be worn by everyone when using a yachts tender
Animals must be confined on board yachts and not landed ashore.



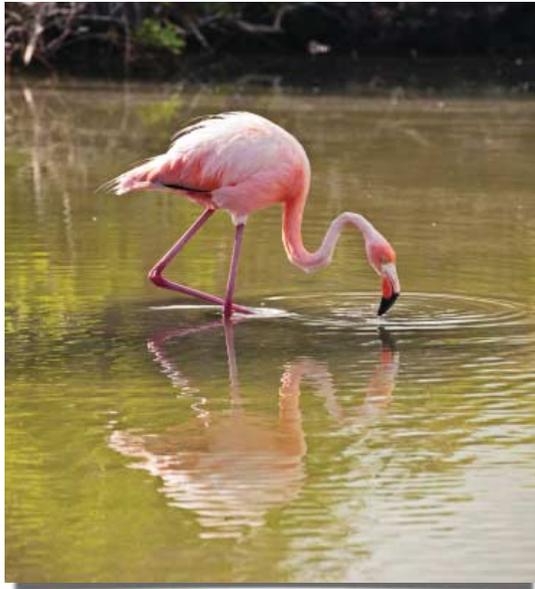
Around 500 registered guides can lead 16-strong parties per day, that's 8,000 a day or nearly 3-million a year. Preserving the Galapagos environment is therefore crucial for its inhabitants' future.

Behind the beach are lagoons filled with brackish water and it is here that the Greater Flamingos feed in small groups. They seek a shrimp like krill that develops well 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 recognize instantly, but these are pinker than their cousins. The total number of birds in this sub species is thought to number just 500. Since each year the hen bird will lay one egg and there are few predators, this number is showing signs of remaining steady. Nearby feeding in the same waters there are Black Necked and Common Stilt Herons.

Our final port of call was Baquerizo Moreno, the capital of the Galapagos but not the largest town. It is prettier and less hectic than the larger Puerto Ayudo on Santa Cruz, where we spent our first night. It was time to leave our comfortable home and become landlubbers again. Having completed our trip there was little doubt in our minds as to the magnificence of the destination, it truly is spectacular. The question is, for how long can these amazing little islands stand the onslaught of the tourist or indeed the islanders themselves?

Around 500 Guides can each lead 16 tourists per day around these marvels of nature, where animals allow themselves to be seen at very close quarters. Add to that the independent yachtsmen, plus those permitted to visit selected islands inside the park without a guide, and the number of visitors could reach 8,000+ a day. Nearly 3-million a year.

Commercialism is creeping in quickly; attractions such as the habitat of the giant tortoise



Customs and Immigration

An immigration fee per person entering the Galapagos has to be paid, there are no costs for clearing out. This is a separate immigration fee per yacht for clearance in and out, which also has to be paid plus light and port dues based on tonnage. Additional fees include payments for the use of a jetty, VHF, and various other charges. Anchorage fees based on gross tonnage are charged locally with Port Captains requiring a further fee for a Zarpe (outbound clearance document) when you leave.

Do's and Don'ts

- Wear tough walking shoes ashore, the volcanic rock cuts into the soles of shoes
- Be prepared for wet landings ashore from boats. Many landing spots do not have jetties.
- Wear sun hats and lightweight clothing during the day. Shorts and T-shirts are acceptable wear but take long trousers and sweater for the evenings, which can seem chilly.
- Consider a hiking stick and a daypack. A dry bag to take your camera ashore is also a good idea.
- Read a good guidebook or watch some of the TV documentaries before you go. They will give you an idea of what to expect and will undoubtedly fuel the excitement levels.
- Read, or take with you, Galapagos Wildlife by David Horwell and Pete Oxford, a well-written book published by Bradt.
- Take a swimsuit and mask, snorkel and fins. The wildlife below the surface is just as exciting as that above.

Fuelling

Locals buy fuel at prices subsidized by the Government of Ecuador. Foreign flagged yachts pay roughly twice the price paid by locals. It is illegal for foreigners to buy fuel at subsidized prices. Quantities of fuel exceeding 400 gallons must be preordered through and approved of by the Navy

Provisioning

Unless grown locally, fresh produce is expensive and frequently difficult to come by. Fresh fish is plentiful and inexpensive. Buy from markets or shops and recommended sources only.



have entrance fees, plus the omnipresent gift shop and café. In town, bars and restaurants jostle for business, each offering bargain prices and happy hours that seem to stretch through the afternoon. With dread one thinks it can only be a matter of time before the Golden Arches are seen downtown. Even the iconic Charles Darwin Research Station and National Park attractions come complete with gift shops and snack bars. While it is possible to see some of the achievements these organizations have made over years, most of what they do is hidden from the visitor.

Plastic bottles float where sea lions play, island homes have no mains sewerage and some ignorant yacht operators still pump chemically treated effluent directly into the sea. Townships are sprawling, teenage pregnancy is apparently rampant and the local population is expanding at an alarming rate, yet there are few good schools or places of higher education. Compared to mainland Ecuador though the standard of living here is high, making the islands a desirable place to live.

Despite our worries, the destination remains one of the modern wonders of the world and undoubtedly the best way to see it from the deck of a superyacht. Trying to do it on down-market tourist boats is like joining the lines in Disneyland during the summer holidays. Endeavoring to visit islands by small local boats and using land-based hostels is a pastime only for the young and those prepared to carry the world inside a rucksack. But visit the Galapagos as soon as you can, because despite the best efforts of the authorities, we fear it may not remain a wonderful, unique, pristine, environment forever. Go now, before it is too late. ■

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is available through Edmiston Yachts and charters year round for \$70,000 per week
Contact: Robert Shepherd
E Mail: rs@edmistoncompany.com
www.edmistonyachts.com
www.queenofgalapagosyacht.com

VIA NATURA

Contact: Esteban Velasquez.
E Mail: evelasquez@vianatura.com
www.vianatura.com

Ships Agents

NAUGALA

Galapagos Marine Company
Tel: 593-5-2520958, Fax: 593-5-2520846 E
E Mail: naugala@hotmail.com
Contact: Bolivar Pesantes Palma.
www.naugala.com

NAUGALA

Galapagos Marine Company US Office
Tel: +1 954 638 7757
E Mail: lisa@naugala.com
Contact: Lisa Greenberg Falconi
www.naugala.com

ROSITAS SERVICES

Tel: 593-5-520526
VHF Channel 62
E Mail: Ghernandez27@latinmail.com
Contact: Gustavo Hernandez.

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Tel: +593-5-2526186
VHF Channel 09
E Mail: info@arenas.bz
Contact: Ricardo Arenas.

YACHTGALA YACHT SERVICES

Tel: +593-5-2527403,
Fax: + 593-5-2527403,
Contact: Johnny Romero
E Mail: nautigal@interactive.net.ec

GALAYACHTS

Tel: +593-5-2527515
E Mail: antonio@galayachts.com
Contact: Antonio Moreano
www.galayacht.com