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*the life*

{ESCAPE}

# A World Within Itself

Darwin may have put the Galápagos Islands on the map, but a bucket-list luxury voyage brings the fearless wildlife and drama of the remote islands alive in the modern-day world.

**W**ithin minutes of our Zodiac fastening off the island of Española, one of the oldest in the wildlife-rich Galápagos Islands, what feels like a scene from a Discovery Channel special unfolds in front of our eyes. Yards from the beach, a sea lion has just given birth to a pup in the sand, and the baby is hungrily nursing for the first time. Above, a frigate bird known as the “pirate of the sky” circles, angling to steal its next meal. “There’s always a lot of drama here. It’s like a soap opera,” says our guide, Fernando Sánchez, as the mother sea lion begins barking, and her baby sweetly echoes her distinct call. “If you look around, there are so many stories happening.”

Sánchez’s words ring true as he continues to lead us along a designated trail, where other than the skittish Sally Lightfoot crabs who scurry back and forth along the lava rocks, the animals barely seem to notice us. We’re forced to navigate around clusters of red-and-test marine iguanas — that look nothing like our



South Florida friends — who refuse to move from their spots in the sun. Like the Big 5 in Africa, they’re one of the fascinating must-sees here, as they don’t exist anywhere else in the world; and these particular ones amazingly morph from black to their present Christmas-like colors during mating season. Winding along the trail, we quickly grab our cameras, as another captivating story plays out. Two magnificent waved albatrosses are involved in a comical courtship dance, the birds rapidly clacking their bills like swords, “mooring,” then bobbing and weaving, as they check to see if the other is a worthy mate for life. All of this as a nearby blowhole theatrically shoots saltwater into the air. As we arrive back to our Zodiac an hour or so later, our minds already racing with stories and our fancy cameras full of images, the newborn sea lion is being nudged into the shallows by its mother, taking its first ceremonial dip in the ocean.

Travelers can lay back and take in the inimitable sights on the deck of Ecoventura’s mega-yachts, the Origin and Theory.

## *the life*

### THE LAND BEFORE TIME

That breathtaking drama of the Galápagos Islands, a remote archipelago situated around 600 miles off mainland Ecuador that served as the inspiration for Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, comes to life while sailing aboard Ecoventura's newest mega-yacht, Theory. It's one of two identical luxury yachts in the Galápagos touting the prestigious Relais & Châteaux brand (the other its sister yacht, Origin), offering guests the chance to embark on a 7-night cruise with two different itineraries. During the week, you'll visit around 8-9 islands, each with different personalities, astonishing landscapes that drastically range from idyllic beaches to barren volcanic rock, and mind-blowing animal encounters — all while soaking up the posh amenities and gourmet food that are synonymous with the Relais & Châteaux name.

The crisp navy-and-white yacht boasts ten staterooms with large, comfy beds, rainfall showers and floor-to-ceiling windows that forever connect you with the ocean. A plush communal living room that rivals one of a hotel leads to a bar and dining room, where a seemingly never-ending banquet of snacks and food awaits each day. In between activities, bartenders who've mastered your favored drink greet you with a cold beverage on the sun deck, where a dip in the hot tub is encouraged after long hikes.

One of the biggest advantages: the yacht's two uber-knowledgeable naturalists/guides, who break guests into small groups to explore the islands each day. A staggering 97 percent of the Galápagos is protected by the National Park, which means visitors must be with a registered guide and stay at least six feet away from the animals to minimize the impact on the fragile environment.



Opulence on the high seas on Ecoventura's vessels; a land iguana enjoys a moment of sunbathing; a flock of flamingos graze in the waters of the Galápagos archipelago.



"Otherwise, what we have here will not be around. The animals are still unafraid of people, and we've been able to preserve the unique flora and fauna because of these regulations," says Sánchez, who keeps a strict eye out for excited guests who wander off designated trails or unleash camera flashes. "We're still in a bubble. The islands haven't changed much since Darwin visited."

#### BUCKET-LIST EXPERIENCES

When Darwin visited the Galápagos Islands for two months in 1835, he fondly wrote, "The archipelago is a little world within itself," and this cruise plunges you into that dynamic world. Days are jam-packed with three-to-five activities, with the chance to zoom off on Zodiacs to hike and explore the island of the day, or shimmy into a wetsuit for snorkeling.

During our first full day on San Cristóbal, we found ourselves dipping in the cerulean blue waters and basking in the sun with the ever-present sea lions, who sit in yoga-like poses along the shore. Even if you're not a birder, the seabirds of the Galápagos will amaze and capture your heart. Hiking around Punta Pitt, we're met with weeks-old blue-footed boobies — adorably enveloped in fluffy feathers and whose feet haven't yet burst from white to bright blue — who wobble and fall as they awkwardly test out their wings. This is the only place to see all three of the iconic species, including the red-footed booby and Nazca booby, and as we continue along the rugged trails, we spy all



Red-footed boobies may feed at sea, but they can often be seen perching on coastal trees; the native Galápagos tortoise is the largest living species of its kind; witness lava flows and unique wildlife (like brightly colored Sally Lightfoot crabs) on Fernandina Island.

three perched in trees and on rocks nestled close to the walkway. They inquisitively stare back at us, allowing us to photograph their brilliantly colored beaks and feet that I've only seen in books. Things become somber, though, when our guide reminds us that sworn enemies like the thieving frigates often sleep in the same trees. "While it can be heaven for us, these desolate islands can be hell for some species. It's a constant fight for food, partners, or a nest," says Sofia Darquea. "You're always sleeping with the enemy."

Our hope is later renewed on the small island of Floreana, where we stalk (from afar) bright pink Galápagos flamingos wading in a brackish lake, and then giddily watch as the flock pierces the sky in a pink explosion. And, one of the most incredible spectacles happens on North Seymour Island, where male frigates grandly inflate red pouches on their chests (that look like they could burst at any moment) in an effort to look more attractive to female mates.

The strangest feeling came on day five, when after visiting mostly uninhabited islands, we were abruptly launched back into civilization on the bustling island of Santa Cruz, which is



*the life*



dotted with hotels, shops and restaurants. That overwhelming feeling quickly fades when we ascend into the highlands to see the world-famous giant tortoises with their dome-shaped shells and long necks roaming free at El Chato Tortoise Reserve. Even after snapping tons of photos, none truly captured their massive size. Later in the day, during a visit to the Charles Darwin Research Station, we meet a super-hero of sorts, Super Diego; the tortoise was brought in from the San Diego Zoo to help bring back his subspecies after goats and rats threatened to wipe them out. "He's the father of 800 babies," Sánchez informs us, as we look at the 100-year-old-plus tortoise who barely moves and is in "retirement" after a job well done.

**BELOW THE SURFACE**

If you travel between June and November, the Humboldt Current brings cold, nutrient-rich waters to the Galápagos, which means an extraordinary abundance of marine life. "Shark!" yells someone in our group, as everyone scrambles off the side of the Zodiac into the water, eagerly paddling to the area off Bartolomé

Island where the shark was spotted. The shark is quickly forgotten, as tiny Galápagos penguins dive from rocks and dart through the water, while playful sea lions eagerly lead our group through their playground of underwater caves. As I float in the shallows, leisurely following a group of brightly colored fish, what looks like a rock on the ocean floor catches my attention. A pair of eyes suddenly flip open and stare back at me — forcing me to blink to see if I was imagining things — until a smartly camouflaged octopus reveals its hiding place in the sand.

All of those once-in-a-lifetime moments, and those brilliantly adaptive and unique animals, are why the park and guides work so hard to keep this natural jewel unchanged. As Darwin wrote, "The love for all living creatures is the most noble attribute of man," and a trip to the Galápagos will leave you completely in awe of nature's glory, and hopefully with a stronger drive to protect our planet.

**WORDS BY ANGELA CARAWAY-GARLTON**

*Find more information at [ecoventura.com](http://ecoventura.com). Cruises are priced at \$8,050 per person.*

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