

Arts & Travel

# Adventure travel in the Galapagos Islands

By **MELODY WREN**  
Special to *The CJN*

The best way to see the breathtaking Galapagos Islands is to travel by ship, and the smaller, the better.

In the highly regulated Galapagos National Park, smaller vessels are given access to more islands. Recently, I travelled through them on the Ecoventura line's 65-foot, 20-passenger motor yacht Eric.

After a short flight from Guayaquil, Ecuador, to San Cristobal Island to join the Eric, our itinerary for the seven-night journey took us first to Genovesa in the north, then east to Fernandina, a relatively young island at half a million years old. We then worked westward through successively older islands back to San Cristobal, crossing the equator four times.

The Galapagos Islands sit right atop the equator: an archipelago of volcanic peaks spread across 130,000 square kilometres from stark Fernandina to relatively fertile Santa Cruz and San Cristobal. They are separated from the mainland of South America by 965 kilometres of very deep water, and lie at the confluence of marine currents from the Antarctic, equatorial Pacific and South American coast.

The hot- and cold-water temperatures give rise to a wild diversity of habitats and creatures adapted to them. This extraordinary ecosystem is home to more than 3,000 varieties of plants and animals, approximately 20 per cent



found nowhere else in the world.

One of the highlights of our trip was that the animals ignore human visitors unless you get too close. Any month is good to visit, but October is particularly special because of all the newborns and hatchlings we saw. We snorkelled with penguins and white-tipped sharks and sea lions, and came face to face with giant tortoises. We stepped into a veritable maternity ward with dozens of sea lions nursing their newborns.

Ambling along the shoreline of Santiago, we came across fur sea lions, a species that was once on the verge of extinction. A glut of marine iguanas lounging lazily in the sun blended into the landscape so well so you had to step carefully to avoid stepping on them or their droppings. Hundreds of dolphins swam alongside our ship one evening, and another day, as we crossed the Bolivar Channel, we spotted seven Bryde's whales just off the bow. We hiked along ancient lava tunnels and felt like explorers going back to the beginning of time.

Every day we travelled to one or two islands by Zodiac, tossed by the high rolling waves, causing us all to screech and our driver, Luis, to giggle like a schoolboy at our reactions.

Each island features different types of birds. We crossed the equator toward Genovesa, a volcanic caldera that is home to many bird species: red-footed boobies with their scarlet webbed feet, Nazca boobies, Galapagos mocking birds with their piercing eyes, four species of Darwin finches, and the elusive short-eared owl as it hunted over an open lava field. On Fernandina, we walked on a coral sand beach where swallow-tailed and lava gulls gather near tide pools. As we entered a forest of cactus and mangroves where great frigate birds were nesting, the males inflated



**Animals in the Galapagos Islands tend to ignore humans — unless you get too close. Pictured, clockwise from top left, a giant land tortoise, the stern gaze of the marine iguana, a nazca boobie and her eggs, and finally, a sea lion relaxes with her cub. [Melody Wren photos]**

their striking red throat pouches to attract females as they flew overhead.

On stark Espanola Island we saw many pairs of blue-footed boobies perform their ritual mating dance, lifting their bright cerulean feet, offering gifts of twigs to each other. Espanola is also the only nesting place of the wave albatross, a gallant bird, majestic in the air but awkward ashore.

Snorkelling was a focal point of the trip — even for the water shy — who soon were enraptured by the colourful inhabitants of the crystal-clear water: angel fish, parrot fish, yellow tailed graits, surgeon fish, sea urchins, white-tipped reef sharks, sting rays and chocolate-chip starfish (yes, that is their name). We had our picture taken with tiny Galapagos penguins as we snorkelled around Tagus Cove, on the western side of Isabela Island. On the cliffs of Isabela we were surprised to see graffiti, some of it dating back to the 1800s.

Once we returned to mainland Ecuador, the noise and bustle seemed to have multiplied in our absence, in jarring contrast to the calm and largely unspoiled beauty of the Islands.

*Wren's trip was sponsored by Ecoventura, a company that has a fleet of three small ships and is Ecuador's first carbon-neutral company. The Eric is one of the first boats in its fleet to have wind turbines, and solar panels. www.ecoventura.com.*



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