



# Animal PLANET

For lovers of wildlife and the natural world, there's nowhere on Earth quite like the **Galapagos Islands**. PAUL KAY travels to the remote archipelago for a close encounter with the creatures that gave Darwin his brightest idea



**DAWN OF TIME**  
The combination of stunning landscapes and wildlife make the Galapagos a dream destination for nature photographers

**PREHISTORY PRESERVED**  
Clockwise from top: the varied colours of the islands' rocks and vegetation make for vibrant vistas; blue-footed boobies take flight; a Galapagos green turtle

**U**NIQUE—like unspoiled and breathtaking—is a lamentably overused word in the modern travel writer's lexicon, but if anywhere is deserving of the description (and arguably all three), it's the Galapagos Islands. Almost 1,000 kilometres off the coast of Ecuador, to which they belong, the volcanic isles are the very definition of remote and, thanks to that splendid isolation, have walked a truly singular evolutionary path. The major inspiration for Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, in which the pioneering naturalist lays out his theory of evolution through natural selection, the islands are home to a variety of creatures that can be found nowhere else on Earth. Indeed, about 80 per cent of its land-based mammals, reptiles and birds are endemic, making the Galapagos a must-visit for anyone with even a passing interest in the natural world.

For me, and I suspect for many others, the archipelago has always occupied a near-mythical place in the imagination. A strange land at the edge of the world where curious creatures roam volcanic isles locked in an eternal cycle of formation, a place that could be some fantastical creation from the pages of Jules Verne or Frank Herbert. It's a relief to note, then, as my plane descends to the island of Baltra, that there are no giant prehistoric monsters or man-eating sandworms in evidence.

After arrival at the small airport and short transfers by road and water, I find myself on board *La Pinta*, a 63-metre expedition yacht that is one of the most modern and feted to sail these waters. Refurbished in 2007 and able to accommodate 48 passengers and 31 crew, it's a fine vessel from which to explore the Galapagos,

and boasts a sundeck with Jacuzzi, a library, a lounge bar and a gym among its facilities. But such amenities are merely a backdrop to the Galapagos's natural treasures, and so we waste no time in jumping aboard the pangas (motorised dinghies) and making for North Seymour, a tiny island near the centre of the archipelago.

Disembarking on North Seymour's jagged volcanic rocks, we get an instant introduction to a selection of the animals from the marvellous Galapagos menagerie. The rocks come alive with the scuttle of the wonderfully named Sally Lightfoot crabs, which are an eye-catching mixture of bright red, orange and electric blue, while swallow-tailed gulls land nearby. A family of sea lions loll languidly in our path, enjoying the late-afternoon sunshine, and a flock of the aptly named magnificent frigate birds swoop by just metres away, displaying their two-metre wingspans and scarlet throat sacs, which the males can inflate to the size of a basketball to attract a mate.

It's hard to know where to point the camera as there's so much to see, and by the time we leave the shore to follow the trail inland, our small group has collectively shot enough pictures to fill a mid-sized hard drive. Like the fauna, the landscape is rich and varied; even on this small island, it ranges from black volcanic rock to ochre earth to green scrub.

As the sun sinks to the horizon, readjusting the colour palette of the landscape, we encounter one of the most famous residents of the Galapagos, the blue-footed booby. These medium-sized marine birds are notable not only for their turquoise-blue feet, but also their inquisitive nature and somewhat comical expressions. Like most of the animals we encounter, the booby

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**EXPLODING WITH LIFE**  
From top: Galapagos penguins; steam and magmatic gases billow from the rocky volcanic terrain of the archipelago

that crosses our path seems to be completely unaffected by our presence and looks on in a vaguely quizzical manner as we snap away happily before gracing us with a photogenic display of his outstretched wings.

To maximise time on the islands, the larger distances are covered while you sleep, and so the following morning I awake to a slow-burning sunrise between Fernandina, the most westerly island in the archipelago, and Isabela, the largest. As the day dawns, so does the realisation of just how different the islands are from one another, as both verdant hillsides and rocky cliffs come into view. Located on top of a volcanic hotspot at the juncture of three tectonic plates, the Galapagos are the result of eruptions that have continued for millions of years, the most recent being in April 2009. Due to continental drift, the islands move almost eight centimetres to the east each year. They vary in age from the baby of the bunch, Fernandina, at 700,000 years old to long-in-the-tooth San Cristobal at more than four million years old.

Said to resemble a seahorse in shape, Isabela is perhaps the most varied and dramatic of the Galapagos. Straddling the equator, its 100km-long spine is made up of six volcanoes, five of which are active. Our first port of call is Punta Vicente Roca, a cove in the north dominated by the extinct and semi-submerged Ecuador Volcano. Because of its steep cliffs and wave-lashed rocks, getting ashore is not an option here, so we clamber aboard the pangas to take a closer look.

The rugged beauty of the island is absorbing in its own right—from the remains of lava flows to undulating black and tan layers of tuff—but as ever it's the animals that steal the show. The Galapagos marine iguana is unique in being the only lizard in the world that swims in the ocean, and several dozen of them bask on one rocky outcrop. On the other side of our dinghy, a pair of flightless cormorants, their wings long since rendered useless for flight by evolution in favour of water skills, dive for fish, while a family of penguins (the only other bird to have made this evolutionary leap) look on approvingly from the rocks.

But we're only seeing half the story, so we don wetsuits and snorkels to explore the world below the waves. Punta Vicente Roca is one of the best spots for snorkelling in the Galapagos, due to the large variety of marine life that congregates there, and I soon find

PHOTOGRAPHY: JORGE VINUEZA (OPENING SPREAD, TURTLE PENGUINS)

## FANTASY ISLANDS

A trip to the Galapagos is a once-in-a-lifetime experience so make sure it is planned to perfection

### Cruise Control

The choice of tour operator is of particular importance in the Galapagos. This trip was arranged through London-based Jacada Travel, which specialises in African and South American luxury travel, and its local partner, Metropolitan Touring, which operates La Pinta. The yacht offers three tours—of three, four and seven nights—each taking in a different sector of the archipelago. The seven-night Western Galapagos Islands itinerary (as described in this feature) takes in the islands of North Seymour, Fernandina, Isabela, Floreana, Santa Cruz, Rabida and San Cristobal. Hardcore naturalists can combine the tours for an itinerary of up to 15 days. [jacadatravel.com](http://jacadatravel.com)

### Land Ahoy!

While a cruise is almost certainly the best way to see the Galapagos, it is not the only option. There are a number of small hotels on Santa Cruz, the archipelago's commercial centre, including the Finch Bay Hotel, a modern, well-appointed bolthole reachable only by boat. From these you can arrange day trips, diving lessons and more, returning to terra firma each night. The Galapagos Safari Camp provides an alternative for those who want to see another side of the islands and aren't keen to spend so much time on a boat. Set amid the lush greenery of the Santa Cruz highlands, this small eco-resort features nine large luxury tents, an infinity pool with sea views, a central lodge with a roaring log fire, and great food. [finchbayhotel.com](http://finchbayhotel.com) [galapagossafaricamp.com](http://galapagossafaricamp.com)

### ELEGANT

**EXPLORATION** One of the best ways to see the Galapagos is by yacht, and La Pinta offers customised tours

### Rules of Engagement

As you might expect, conservation is top of the agenda in the Galapagos, and there are various regulations designed to minimise the impact of tourism. Visitor numbers are limited, and groups visiting individual islands must be no larger than 16. Touching or feeding the animals is prohibited. Visitors must also stick to the marked trails and be accompanied by a registered naturalist guide on all island excursions.

### Capital Ideas

Most visitors pass through Ecuador's capital, Quito, on the way to and from the islands, and it's worth factoring in a couple of days to explore this fascinating and beautiful city. The Old Town is a Unesco World Heritage site replete with elaborate churches and picture-postcard squares, all watched over by the Virgin of Quito, a 46-metre statue perched on El Panecillo hill. Flanked by towering volcanoes, Quito itself sits at a lofty 2,800 metres, making it the second-highest capital in the world. Stay at Casa Gangotena, a gorgeously restored historic mansion on the corner of pretty San Francisco Square. [casagangotena.com](http://casagangotena.com)





*After encountering such an array of amazing animals at close range, it's easy to become blasé. But the Galapagos Islands' ability to surprise should not be underestimated*

myself in the midst of a mesmerising sub-aquatic ballet. Sea lions and penguins dive and glide past chasing schools of fish, while sea turtles propel themselves through the water just a few feet below. There are cameos, too, from an octopus, changing colours with surprising speed as it hides between some rocks, and a spotted eagle ray that swims past with effortless grace.

The remainder of the voyage follows a similar routine as we explore the islands to the west and centre of the archipelago over the next few days, punctuated by talks from La Pinta's erudite trio of naturalist guides and opportunities to leap into the ocean from atop the boat. On Fernandina, we see hundreds of black marine iguanas forming a living carpet on the rocks, and Galapagos hawks hovering so still on thermal currents it looks as if they might be frozen in the sky. On Santa Cruz, we meet the island's giant tortoises, which can weigh up to 300kg and live to 150 years old; elsewhere we see land iguanas, pelicans, flamingos and a host of smaller birds that are unique to the Galapagos. The wildlife sightings continue even when we're back on La Pinta, as we spot humpback whales, sharks and a pod of some 20 dolphins from the comfort of the sun deck.

After days of encountering such an array of amazing animals at close range, it's easy to become blasé. But the Galapagos Islands' ability to surprise should not be underestimated, as I discover when I arrive at Santa Fe for the final excursion of the trip. Sea lions are everywhere as we disembark from the pangas, variously napping, playing in the surf or

waddling awkwardly on the rocks. It's a great opportunity to see the animals up close, but one that is eclipsed an hour or so later when we're snorkelling on the other side of the island.

Having previously only glimpsed sea lions in the water, and from a distance, I suddenly find myself surrounded by them. As I swim close to the rocks, more than a dozen, including a 100kg-plus bull, come up to check me out, and before long they're including me in their games, biting playfully on my flippers and playing an aquatic version of chicken in which they take turns to torpedo directly at my mask before swerving at the last second. It's an exhilarating experience to be so close to these wild but playful creatures, and it's with great reluctance that I finally climb aboard the panga and leave the sea lions and their neighbours to this strange haven at the edge of the world. 🐾



**DIVINE DIVERSITY**  
Clockwise from top left: A Galapagos land iguana; millions of years of volcanic activity have blessed the island with an abundance of dramatic cliffs; sea lions bask on the unspoiled shores