

Tour Report

Ecuador – Galapagos Exclusive with Mark Carwardine
16 – 28 May 2024

Vermillion flycatcher



Marine iguana



Giant tortoise



Lava lizard



Tour Leaders: Chris Breen & Mark Carwardine

Our private 12-night charter of the vessel Beluga saw us travelling the eastern, central and western islands in comfort, with our naturalist guide bringing the remote archipelago's wildlife and geology to life throughout, and with Mark Carwardine and Chris Breen adding photography tips, tricks and workshops, and evening presentations and talks.

We explored the islands on land and sea with highlights including snorkel excursions most days (with penguins, turtles, marine iguanas, sharks, rays, flightless cormorants and an array of colour fish). We walked across lava fields, discovered pristine sea-lion strewn beaches, witnessed waved albatrosses courtship behaviour, bird-rich brackish lagoons, giant tortoises and land iguanas. It was a feast for the senses and there really is nowhere else in the world quite like this. Where else can you view the dance of iconic blue-footed boobies or capture your own reflection when photographing the eye of a swallow-tailed gull?

Expect a busy but hugely rewarding schedule with mind blowing wildlife experiences from the word go when visiting this unique and incredible group of islands.

Day 1:

Thursday 16 May 2024

London Heathrow to Quito

Whilst most of the group had already arrived in Ecuador and were on personalised pre-tour excursions, four of the group flew into Ecuador and arrived into Quito mid-afternoon. They were met at the airport and transferred to the small and personal Casona de la Rhonda hotel.

As a group we all met in the reception at 6.30pm, made our various introductions and then headed the (very) short distance to a very nice Ecuadorian restaurant. The table had been prepared for all 15 of us in a private room. The food was excellent, the company was excellent, and the mood was upbeat and excited in respect of our departure for San Cristobal island in the Galapagos first thing tomorrow morning...

Day 2:

Friday 17 May 2024

Quito to San Cristobal, board Beluga & visit El Junco

Everyone was in the hotel lobby shortly before 5am in order to pick up a packed lunch and board the bus for our departure to the airport. At this time of day (before the rush hour begins) it is a 40-minute journey and we arrived at the airport in good time. Bags unloaded from the bus we went through the bio-security check and then left our bags at the bag drop before heading through security to the air side and boarding the flight.

The journey isn't long – it is 30 minutes or so to Guayaquil and then just under two hours to San Cristobal. As we came into land we could see our boat – M/Y Beluga – in the harbour. We disembarked and immediately felt the warming welcome of the Galapagos air. We paid our entrance fee to the Galapagos National Park and then waited in the arrivals hall for our bags. It is an interesting (if unusual) wait because the bags are taken off the carousel and lined up with everyone watching, and then a sniffer dog patrols the bags to check for drugs and other 'undesirables'. That job out of the way, it was time to gather our gear and head out to the coach – our bags were going off to Beluga separately.

It is a short journey to the harbour (5 minutes or so) and we were greeted at the harbour by some of the Galapagos' most endearing mammals – Galapagos sea lions – which were sleeping just near the harbour wall... lots of them... and of course there were marine iguanas, a lava heron and both magnificent frigatebirds and the occasional brown pelican overhead. It's a great way to start a trip! When the pangas from Beluga arrived at the jetty we put on our lifejackets and jumped aboard – eight people per panga – and sped across to Beluga.

We took our hand baggage to our rooms, our hold bags followed shortly after, and we then sat down for our first on-board meal (pasta and beef with a side salad), after which Juan (our naturalist guide for the trip) gave us a short briefing on what to expect later today.

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At 2.30pm we boarded the pangas and went back to port, jumped on a waiting coach and drove the 30 minutes to El Junco. Our first activity of the trip was to walk up the shallow-side of the caldera to see the freshwater lake that the magnificent frigatebirds use to rinse salty water off their wings. The top of the caldera sits at about 700 metres and needless to say is a little cooler than being at sea level. As we walked up to the top of the caldera we had our first sightings of small ground finch (male and female), smooth-billed ani and Galapagos yellow warbler.

We spent a little time looking down into the caldera and then Juan led a walk around the entire rim - a distance of about 1.5 kilometres. Whimbrel, snowy egret and common gallinule were all seen but the most interesting of all the birds were the half dozen or so magnificent frigatebirds that seemed to be ditching themselves in the water, struggling to take off, and shaking off their feathers (like a dog shakes when it comes out of the water), and then doing it all again. A very curious evolution!



Our walk over, we re-boarded the bus and returned to Puerto Baquerizo Moreno and had an hour to look around this small town, and stop in a local bar for a beer. As the sun was setting we returned to the jetty and to our pangas for the short ride over to Beluga.

Dinner was served at 7pm and was followed by a briefing for tomorrow's activities and a safety briefing from Juan. Mark then gave us an introduction and overview of the islands of the Galapagos. Then it was time for bed!

Day 3:

Saturday 18 May 2024

Gardner Bay & Punta Suarez, Espanola



It was a 'late' morning and we were up for a breakfast of cereals, fresh fruit, ham and eggs at 7am. Then at 8am we were in the pangas heading towards the beach at Gardner Bay. This pristine white sand beach is home to a healthy population of Galapagos sea lions, and they were there to greet us on arrival. It was our first wet landing of the trip, too, but in the warm, and crystal-clear waters it was simple and straightforward despite the slight swell.

Once disembarked we headed up to the top of the beach, left our lifejackets and were free to walk along the extent of the beach looking at the wildlife. The first and most notable of

the birds was Espanola mockingbird which jumped on our bags and fussed around our feet - apparently looking for fresh water. The sea lions on the beach were a constant source of interest, coating their fur in sand as a way of keeping off irritating insects.

Everyone managed to reach the furthest extent of the beach where the rocks began to dominate, and where there were both sally lightfoot crabs and the first marine iguanas of the trip, some of which were displaying quite a rich pinkish red on their skin which is a legacy from their breeding season a few months ago.

Magnificent frigatebirds, ruddy turnstones and small ground finch were also seen, as were a small number of distant blue-footed boobies.

Some of the group swam from the beach, and then it was time to get into the pangas and head back to Beluga where freshly made juice was waiting for us. We had a break of 30 minutes or so before Juan fitted everyone

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out with a wetsuit, mask, snorkel and fins and we upped anchor and headed the short distance to our first snorkelling site of the trip at nearby Islote Gardener. By now the sun was high in the sky and it was getting warm but before too long we were in the water looking at colourful fish. As we swam closer to the rocks, we could see some sea lions half in the water and half out, and every now and then their inquisitive nature would get the better of them and they would slip off the rocks swim around us. All too soon our hour was up, and it was time to get back into the pangas and back to Beluga for lunch.

After lunch and a break of an hour or two we were back in the pangas and heading over to Punta Suarez – one of the most spectacular landing sites in the Galapagos. The site which has been closed for the best part of a year due to the bird flu outbreak re-opened last week and we were delighted to be amongst the first visitors for an extended period of time.

A Galapagos hawk was sat on the vantage point of the lighthouse looking at the arriving visitors, sea lions were on the beach and marine iguanas were warming themselves on the rocks. As we walked along the path we came across Espanola lava lizards, Galapagos doves and our first nesting waved albatross. This is the only site on the Galapagos that they breed so this is a particularly special landing. As we continued our walk there were Nazca boobies, blue-footed boobies and swallow-tailed gulls all nesting – literally – on the path, so that we had to walk around them to get past.

At the furthest point on our walk we sat on the cliff edge, next to some nesting blue-footed boobies, looking at the sea below us being forced up through a blow hole in the rocks as albatrosses and a Galapagos hawk were cruising past.

Our walk continued and we saw Galapagos shearwater and a handful of red-billed tropicbirds with their bright red bills and resplendent long white tails. Juan, our guide, noticed a pair of waved albatrosses in a courtship ritual so our focus immediately shifted and we sat and watched the albatrosses displaying to each other by extending their necks, bowing to each other and tapping their bills together. It was a truly humbling and wonderful sight.



The light was getting better and better as we were drawing towards the end of the day – golden hour has rarely been so well described – and as we headed back to the jetty we saw American oystercatcher, and had yet more iguanas, this time sat on top of the rocks bathing in the final vestiges of the sun's warmth.

We had to draw ourselves away from this exceptional landing site finally and return to Beluga. After a quick shower we grabbed a drink and sat on the sun deck as the sky was turning orange, and until Juan called us down to the salon where he introduced us to the captain and his crew.

Dinner was followed by a briefing about tomorrow's activities and then it was time to retire for the night. It was the end of our first full day in the Galapagos – and it was a day to remember!

Day 4:

Sunday 19 May 2024

Punta Cormorant & Post Office Bay, Floreana

It was an earlier start this morning with breakfast at 6.15am and a departure for Punta Cormorant at 7.15am. The sky was a bit overcast, but the temperature was (typically!) balmy. As ever we were greeted by a sea lion at our landing (a wet landing) on the beach here is volcanic (rather than oceanic) so the sand was dark.

Shortly after we began our walk there was a female Floreana lava lizard on the path – much smaller than the lava lizards we were seeing yesterday. We looked at Galapagos yellow warblers (of which there seems to be a significant number on Floreana), Galapagos painted locusts, and a number of different spiders that

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had strung their webs from tree to tree.

On the far fringe of the brackish lagoon was a small group of Galapagos (American) flamingos (ten in all – mostly adults, but with a couple of juveniles), and overhead cattle egrets, striated (lava) heron and the occasional magnificent frigatebird.

From the slightly raised vantage point overlooking the lagoon we walked over a small 'isthmus' to the other side of the island and to a completely different beach, this time made from oceanic material. This can be a good beach to see sting rays and Galapagos sharks though today neither were present so instead we photographed yellow warblers and sally lightfoot crabs on the black volcanic rocks.

We headed back to our landing beach where there was a small collection of Galapagos penguins swimming close to the shore, with brown pelicans nearby. We strolled along the beach to look at some blue-footed boobies but found a small (young) green turtle that appeared to be beached, and slightly above the tide line. It seemed to be exhausted but we were (obviously) hopeful that it would get back into the ocean later in the day and swim away. Bill saw a sea lion swimming in the shallows that appeared to have caught something. It was throwing its catch in the air and seemed to be bashing it on the surface of the sea. Closer inspection of some good photographs that were taken during the encounter revealed that it was a medium sized octopus.

Sadly, it was now time to head back to the boat, but our snorkelling programme at Devil's Crown was next, and it didn't disappoint. There was half an hour or so between activities and then we were back in the pangas – wet suits on – heading to the 'upstream' side of Devil's Crown. On instruction from Juan, we jumped into the water and drifted with the current. In addition to a myriad of colourful fish, some people were lucky enough to see an eagle ray, but sadly a hammerhead escaped us all!

Back on board there was time for a shower before lunch and a siesta!

We departed Beluga at 3pm and headed for Baroness Bay - with kayaks in tow and five enthusiastic kayakers. The sun was breaking through the clouds and as we got into the calm and sheltered waters bay, we could see the heads of a number of green turtles. We brought both of the pangas together and Juan told us a (true) story of a toothless dentist and her sexual slaves that lived on the island many years ago.

Story over, the kayakers got into their kayaks, and we all spent time looking at and photographing the increasingly inquisitive turtles – at least one of which had beached itself on the sand possibly to go and lay eggs after dark (even though we are right at the end of the nesting season). After some time, we moved away from the turtles and headed towards the rocks where there were blue-footed boobies and sea lions, a whimbrel and ruddy turnstones and then made our way back to Beluga to drop off the kayaks and made our way to Post Office Bay.

This wonderful bay is home to the very first post office in Ecuador, a place where sailors would leave their letters in a box for them to be collected by other passing sailors and taken to their destination. The tradition continues with a barrel that people leave postcards in that we looked through to see if there were any near where we lived... so that we could take them home and hand deliver them.

From there we walked further inland and (some of us) walked down into a lava tunnel. Then, exhausted after another excellent day, we walked back to the beach, boarded the pangas and returned to Beluga for a shower, a beer in the last light on the sun deck, and dinner.

After dinner Juan gave us a short briefing for tomorrow's activities and Mark showed some wonderful images of the past couple of days and gave some photographic tips.

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Day 5:

Monday 20 May 2024

Dragon Hill, Santa Cruz & Puerto Egas, Santiago

Today got off to a great start with breakfast at 6am and a landing on the north-west side of Santa Cruz (at Dragon Hill) at 7am. A dry (but quite slippery) landing brought us to a small white sand bay – no sea lions amazingly! – but there were a few yellow warblers which kept us on the beach photographing for a while. Through, and past a small ‘woodland’ of cactus and we were onto a long sandy beach with rocky outcrops littered with sally lightfoot crabs and the occasional marine iguana. But it was the back of the beach that was a little more interesting this morning with marine iguanas in low green foliage.

We continued along the trail to a large, brackish lagoon on our left, and another on our right, but it was the Galapagos mockingbird on the path and the white-cheeked pintail that stopped us until we got a glimpse of an infrequently seen dark-billed cuckoo.



Carpenter bees and saffron butterflies adorned the bushes as we continue in our quest to see some land iguanas which are known to live in and around this part of the island. It wasn't long before we found one just off the path. It was a young male – still large – but only showing the dorsal crest on the back of the neck rather than all the way down its back. It is staggering how unconcerned the wildlife of the Galapagos is, and this iguana was no exception simply lying still on the track, no doubt aware of our presence but not moving away. There was another further along the trail shortly before we reached a fairly high point which had magnificent views to the north towards the smaller Guy

Fawkes islands and Santiago.

Before we returned to the pangas (and to Beluga) we stopped at the lagoon again as there was a pair of black-necked stilts with a couple of fluffy chicks, and a couple of marine iguanas in the shallow water.

Once back onboard we immediately set sail for Puerto Egas on Santiago Island four hours away. There was plenty of time for processing images, and writing up notes, and photographing the many magnificent frigatebirds and storm-petrels that that were following along behind Beluga.

Puerto Egas was visited by Charles Darwin in 1835 and he climbed the nearby volcanic cone. In the early 1920s the area was also inhabited, but this time by a group of Ecuadorians that came here to mine salt – until the price of salt plummeted and it was no longer viable.

Another incredible excursion. This time it was what Juan describes as a “very wet landing”, or snorkelling! The water wasn't especially clear and the visibility was poor, but it was shallow and the wildlife was simply spectacular – the first of the major sightings was of six adult white-tipped reef sharks on the bottom (which was only about 1.5 metres down) sleeping under a huge rock. At first all you could see was the tails and some of the dorsal fins, but they appeared to be cross hatched together with the heads deep into the darkness of the rock. However, one of the sharks was lying on the sand, and not under the rock which was what gave them away. What an amazing start to the snorkel excursion! Next up was a huge sting ray and as some of us were looking at that a small Galapagos swam by. To some extent the Galapagos sharks were the ‘animal of the excursion’ as they continually appeared from nowhere.

Of course the sea lions were playing near us, and brown pelicans were perched on a rick that we kept snorkelling around, and showed absolutely no signs of moving (why should they!)... even though we were only a metre or two away from them.

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By 4pm the intensity of the sun was much lower, the light was becoming (even more) beautiful, and we had landed on the beach ready for our walk. It was hard to leave the beach though as there were brown pelicans and blue-footed boobies diving from a great height into the water to catch fish, and sea lions porpoising through the water to catch fish from (presumably) the same shoal. After 15 minutes or so we walked up the rocky steps and along the path in a westerly direction encountering a number of female Santiago lava lizards along the way – resplendent with their orange throats. And then we got to the coast (again!) and as Juan put it, we had an ‘Attenborough moment’ as we

watched 40, 50 or more boobies and pelicans diving for fish, and magnificent frigatebirds wheeling around hoping to steal from the others. It was irresistible, we had to sit and watch.

Show over, we walked down to the rock pools to photograph the crabs and marine iguanas – the rocks were quite slippery so it was a challenge for some (!), and a yellow warbler that appeared on the dark lava rocks as did a semi-palmated plover.

Continuing on we saw a small group of Galapagos fur seals (with a mother nursing a baby), which are superficially similar to Galapagos sea lions though they are shorter and stockier, with much longer whiskers and bigger eyes. As usual our time was up much too quickly, and we just about managed to get back to Beluga at 6pm. After dinner at 7pm Juan gave us a briefing about tomorrow and Mark showed some images from today and gave everyone his six top photographic tips... and then it was time to retire.

Day 6:

Tuesday 21 May 2024

Darwin Bay & Prince Phillip’s Steps, Genovesa

We woke up in Darwin Bay and at 5.45am everyone was up (though not necessarily bright-eyed!) and ready to jump in the pangas and head over to the beach for the beginning of one of the very best of all on the trip. The distance we cover and the area we visit is minimal, but it is arguably one of the finest landings in the whole archipelago.

Sea lions on the beach (of course), and lots of swallow-tailed gulls, red-footed boobies, some Nazca boobies and lots of Galapagos doves. It is impossible to accurately describe the scene, but the volume of wildlife, and the proximity of wildlife is simply exceptional. There were red-footed boobies standing in the middle of the path as we walked around the short loop, as well as nesting at low level in the red mangroves. Some of the many red-footed boobies are actually a white-morph, but with the distinctive red feet and their beautiful powder blue bills.



Then we walked round a little further to where the male great frigatebirds were displaying and puffing out their huge red pouches and extending their wings to attract the females. It really is quite extraordinary being at eye-level with such large birds that don’t have any fear or concern about us being present. Further on there was a female yellow-crowned night heron with two nearby juveniles, and yet more red-footed boobies nesting in the red-mangroves.

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Then, as ever, our two hours were up far quicker than we had imagined, and it was time to head back to the beach and back to Beluga. As we arrived on the beach there was a very young sea lion that was walking out of the water and up to the rocks. It stopped, rolled about in the sand and completely covered in sand, then wriggled under another rock. It seemed to be having a lovely time scratching and rolling, sitting up to see what was happening nearby, and lying down closing its eyes. It couldn't settle... and was a joy to watch.

Back on board we had a quick turnaround before heading out to our snorkelling site. Although we managed to see a few parrotfish and angel fish, the visibility was poor for the snorkelling, so we climbed into the panga to snorkel on the other side of the bay. Visibility was poor here too so we headed back to Beluga for lunch.

There was plenty of time for writing notes, reviewing images, enjoying the sundeck or even having a siesta as the next excursion didn't depart until 3pm – this time to El Barranco (Prince Phillip's Steps). One of the great highlights of any trip to the Galapagos, this visitor site has been closed for the past year due to the bird flu epidemic but reopened only last week, and we were so pleased that it did.

The panga took us across the bay from Beluga, and as we approached the landing site, we drove close to the cliff face and saw Galapagos fur seals sleeping in the crevices of the rocks with nesting Galapagos shearwaters flying around above. Once at the top of the steps, Juan gave us quick briefing and we made our way along the trail. This is an exceptional site, a feast for the senses from the moment you get to the top of the steps. There are scores of nesting great frigatebirds and males inflating their pouches trying to attract over-flying females sit on the low bushes lining the pathway. The Nazca boobies are either sitting on eggs, feeding their fluffy white chicks, gently bringing their partners gifts of sticks and small stones or flying low overhead. And the air is full of the sound of birds – Galapagos mockingbirds, boobies, swallow-tailed gulls and red-billed tropicbirds.

We walked as far along the trail as we could, past the bushes and out onto an open, rocky area where the air was alive with wedge-rumped (or Galapagos) storm-petrels. We had hoped to see short-eared owls hunting them too, but they proved elusive.

As the sky was turning orange we returned to the landing site, boarded the pangas and returned to Beluga for a shower, and a pre-dinner drink. After dinner Mark showed a few of his images from today and then gave us an introduction to Charles Darwin. It was the end of another fabulous day.



Day 7:

Wednesday 22 May 2024

Black Turtle Cove, the Highlands & Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz

It was a great start to the day with a panga ride into Black Turtle Cove at 6am. As we entered the cove there were blue-footed boobies on the rocks and diving pelicans fishing for their breakfast, whilst the brown noddies stood guard on the rocks.

As we went deeper into the mangroves we found cow-nosed golden rays gliding through the still, glassy water, as well as a couple of spotted eagle rays and a white-tipped reef shark. We turned the panga engines off, everyone went quiet and we paddled silently past the mangrove roots, the one metre tidal differentiation clear to see. A few turtles were in evidence and all too quickly we had to head back to Beluga.

After breakfast we prepared for a day exploring the island of Santa Cruz. Leaving at 8am on the pangas it was a short crossing to port where we boarded a bus that took us to the highlands via two sinkholes, Los Gemelos, twenty minutes away. We approached the first 70 metre deep sinkhole via a narrow pathway and Juan pointed out waist high ferns, quinine bushes, and giant daisy trees whilst Galápagos doves and small

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ground finches busied themselves on the ground at a viewing point.

We also added green warbler finch and small tree finch to our bird list before following a trail into a cool, shaded section of woodland on the other side of the road to see the other of the two sinkholes.

Continuing on, we drove to Rancho Manzanillo to see giant tortoises in the wild. Photographing them and enjoying their proximity, we learnt about their life cycles and passed a pond where a few were partially submerged as a common gullinule walked past. Walking for over an hour, we came across more and more before arriving back at the reception area where some of the group indulged in a little retail therapy whilst others tried the local lemongrass and/or sugarcane rum! A short distance up the road from the ranch we stopped at a lava tunnel which is a known site for Galapagos barn owl, and sure it enough there it was for all to see. What a treat that was.



We continued on to Enchanted Lodge for a delicious lunch and at 2pm we were off again, this time to Puerto Ayora. We headed straight for the Charles Darwin Research Centre which was established in 1959. Some of the group visited 'Lonesome George', the last La Pinta giant tortoise who died in 2012 and who is now preserved at the centre. We also visited the Information Centre where many of the conservation projects currently being worked on are detailed on billboards and include minimising ship collisions with turtles, the removal of alien invasives, monitoring sharks and re-wilding areas.

Everyone was free to wander through the centre and enjoy it at their own pace, and afterwards many 'ended up' in the handmade chocolate shop and bought some delicious treats.

At 6pm we gathered at the dock and whilst we were waiting for the pangas to collect us we gathered around a sleeping sea lion for our group photo (!).

Back on board, we enjoyed a delicious dinner and then retired for an early night after an excellent day.

Day 8:
Sombrero Chino & Rabida

Thursday 23 May 2024

How is it that every day is both so different, and so amazing?

We began with breakfast at 7am and then landed on Sombrero Chino (or Chinese Hat) – named due to the shape of the island) for a couple of hours at 8am. Although there isn't a huge amount of wildlife to see here, there is plenty to enjoy and photograph. There seem to be a notably large number of lava lizards here and the path is narrow so in order not to disturb any nesting holes it is important to keep to it.

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We spent time photographing a fishing (or perhaps foraging) lava heron, and a particularly photogenic lava lizard that was producing a large amount of foam. Was the foam an indication that it was washing the algae from its exoskeleton, or was it beginning to moult? We weren't sure... but regardless it was fascinating to watch!



The end of the path opens out to a huge flat area of rock and, in the middle distance, crashing waves – on the rocks were marine iguanas, more crabs and another lava lizard.

Sombrero Chino lies very close to the north side of Santiago – and the warmish sea is a spectacular colour of turquoise. And our next activity? Snorkelling. We were back onboard for about 30 minutes – just enough time to get prepared for the snorkelling activity and then we were off. The crystal-clear water in this part of the archipelago is home to a myriad of fish and snorkelling here is really like snorkelling in a gigantic tropical fish tank. The waters are relatively shallow with a sandy floor.

There were a number of white-tipped reef sharks, a Galapagos shark and right at the end of our snorkel a few of the group had a sighting of a collection of seven sting rays that seemed to be sheltering in a small cave. A magical moment that will never be forgotten.

Back onboard, lunch was ready and then, whilst some were enjoying the sunny upper deck and others were having a siesta we motored over to Rabida for our second snorkel of the day. Rusty-red coloured rock wall and a dark sandy sea floor is how this snorkelling site appears. A Galapagos shark, some white-tipped reef sharks and a couple of super-fast sea lions entertained us in the water whilst on the rock wall we were looking at young marine iguanas soaking up the warmth of the sun and a couple of brown noddies on a ledge.

Back on-board Cesar had prepared hot chocolate and biscuits for us for warmth and nourishment.

Our last excursion today was to the dark red sandy beach on Rabida and the brackish lagoon that sits just behind the beach. As we boarded the pangas we could see a large flock of brown noddies and Galapagos shearwaters diving to catch fish in a choppy area of ocean nearby. As we passed a promontory and turned in towards the beach there was a blue-footed booby on a ledge at around eye-level and some young marine iguanas on the rocks basking in the sun just below the level of the cacti. We took a slow panga ride along the low cliff photographing the wildlife as the light was so beautiful.

The wet landing on the beach was as straight forward as ever and it was immediately obvious that with the wonderful light we were going to be able to get some fabulous photos of the American flamingos on the lagoon – which was where we spent most of the landing. There were also a few white-cheeked pintails on the lagoon as well.



Back down on the beach there was a male sea lion posing in the last beams of sunlight and three wandering tattlers foraging near the cliffs. Then it was time to return to Beluga after yet another incredible day.

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Day 9:**Friday 24 May 2024**

Sierra Negra & Puerto Villamil, Isabela

Today was all about vermillion flycatchers – one of the most endangered bird species in the Galapagos. And whilst it occurs on a number of the islands, it is rarely seen. However, it is surely one of the most beautiful with a fabulous bright red coat and a black ‘bandits’ mask it is very distinctive, and if it is in the area, very easy to identify.

We landed shortly after 7am and boarded a locally chartered bus to drive from the port to the start of the trekking point to the Sierra Negra caldera. It was about a 40-minute journey and as we ascended the clouds descended so that by the time we arrived we were in a fairly thick ‘fog’ and it was quite chilly. From here we walked to the lip of the caldera just over a kilometre away. We had been walking for about 15 minutes when Jane called out that she had seen a vermillion flycatcher so with great excitement we all gathered round and began to photograph it. As with most of the Galapagos wildlife it was unconcerned by our presence and jumped closer to us to investigate! (In fact what it was really doing was taking advantage of us disturbing the ground and putting up insects for it to eat.

After 15 or 20 minutes we continued our walk but shortly saw another flycatcher, and another, and another. In fact this rare flycatcher was proving to be anything but on this short stretch of walk. Over the course of the next hour or so we had a number of them and took many, many photographs so that there would have been very few of the group that had anything other than excellent shots of it!



We also saw small ground finch and small tree finch, as well as woodpecker finch.

Unfortunately the weather was ‘closed in’ at the top of the crater so the views were of cloud rather than crater but we waited for 20-minutes to see if it might clear (which it didn’t!) before heading back down to where our bus was waiting for us.

We headed to the port and back to Beluga for lunch and a siesta and then at 3pm returned to the port for a chilled out afternoon visit, a swim (for most of the group) and a relaxing drink in a local bar as the sun was setting.

We were back onboard Beluga at about 6.30pm and a delicious dinner was served at 7pm. Everyone was exhausted and it was early to bed!

Day 10:**Saturday 25 May 2024**

Punta Moreno & Elizabeth Bay, Isabela

Today we didn’t go ashore – there are no landing sites – it was pangas, snorkelling, more pangas and (for some) kayaking.



Our first excursion was around Punta Moreno which is the central south-western coast of Isabela. It is a fairly desolate landscape of pristine brackish lagoons which are a magnet for wildlife. Although the sky was a little overcast, we could still just about make out Sierra Negra in the distance which we had walked on yesterday. As we cruised around the lagoons keeping our voices as low as possible in order not to disturb any wildlife we had fabulous sightings of spotted eagle rays and golden cow-nosed rays. And then, when after we had worked the area as much as possible and motored

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to a slightly different location we saw Galapagos penguin and flightless cormorants (the only flightless cormorant in the world). One of the pangas witnessed the most beautiful encounter with a pair of cormorants too – one was on a nest and the other approached from nearby. First it nudged the cormorant on the nest and they looked at each other, pointed their beaks towards the sky, and then crossed their beaks a couple of times and slowly the bird on the nest stood up and stretched, making way for the other cormorant to settle down and incubate the eggs that had recently been laid. It was a very small and simple piece of observation that felt like a particularly intimate insight in to the private life of this pair of cormorants.

Panga ride over, we got ready for our first snorkel on this western side of the archipelago. It was still overcast and not especially warm and, being on the western side the Cromwell Current brings cooler water, so our snorkelling excursion wasn't a warm one either – but it didn't matter. Almost as soon as we got in the water we were seeing incredibly inquisitive flightless cormorants that were swimming around, foraging for food and occasionally pecking at our GoPro cameras to see if they were edible. And then there were the turtles – green turtles of course – that we were swimming with for the first time. In fact, it was sometimes difficult to avoid bumping into them as (like the other wildlife) they seemed quite unconcerned by our presence and carried on swimming and feeding as if we weren't there.

Lunch on Beluga followed and then we motored the short distance to Elizabeth Bay where we once again boarded the pangas and headed off into the mangroves. This is another tremendous excursion with an opportunity to see and photograph Galapagos penguins, yellow warblers, lava herons, Galapagos mockingbirds and turtles. And for the kayakers there was the opportunity to see all of these and get some exercise into the bargain!

We were back on board Beluga by around 5.30pm and were able to enjoy a couple of drinks before dinner. After dinner, and after Juan had briefed us on tomorrow's activities Mark showed some images of the past couple of days. Then it was finally time for bed after another wildlife-packed day.

Day 11:

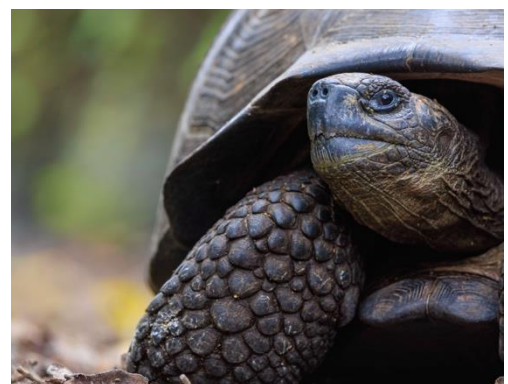
Sunday 26 May 2024

Urbina Bay & Targus Cove, Isabela

You've heard it before, but every day on this trip is different to every other, and today (yet again) proved the point. We had a leisurely start to the day with breakfast at 7am and a wet landing on the beach at 8am. The beach is steep and there were plenty of signs of turtles making their way up the beach to nest.

We walked along to the far righthand end of the beach and while some of the group were photographing hermits crabs others were looking at Galapagos martins flying overhead and Juan was telling everyone about the tectonic event that took place overnight in 1956 that raised the beach up by a staggering five metres.

We walked to the opposite end of the beach, past the skull of a short-finned pilot whale and down the back of the beach where we saw the first of our giant tortoises. The tortoises here are the Alcedo volcano giant tortoises and are endemic to this part of Isabela Island. Walking on we came across the first of the land iguanas – larger than those we saw at Dragon Hill and possibly more colourful, but judgement was reserved on that! As we continued our walk, we had a further three land iguanas and two more giant tortoises before we got back to the beach. Our return to the beach was a signal for some to swim in the cooling water, and for other to photograph the sally lightfoot crabs that were crawling all over the dark volcanic rocks.



Back on board there was little time before we upped anchor, and the captain was heading north through the Bolivar Channel to Targus Cove. Due to the upwelling currents this is an excellent place to see cetaceans so

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some of the group were out on deck spotting. It wasn't long before the captain slowed the boat as both he and John had seen a whale break the surface. As we gathered on deck (mostly without cameras at this stage!) we saw a circle of bubbles breaking the surface 50 metres or so from the bow, and then the head of the whale surfaced within the ring of bubbles. It then approached our boat and turned onto its left side, arched its back and swam in a semi-circle past the bow – it was clearly checking us out. And, it was clearly a Bryde's whale.

It swam away from the boat, close the surface and we could see its fluke prints as it swam, but it dived and shortly afterwards another ring of bubbles appeared and the whale came up through the bubbles a second time. Later Mark explained that whilst Bryde's whales are known to use the bubble-netting technique, it is only something that has been recorded a handful of times and it isn't something he's seen before.



Shortly after the excitement of the whale there was a pod of 15 to 20 bottle-nose dolphins that appeared and were bow-riding for 10 minutes or so – what an amazing pre-lunch sequence of events.

The first post-lunch activity (other than a siesta for some!) was snorkelling along one of the cliff walls of the cove. The visibility was poor, but it was good enough to see plenty of feeding green turtles, and a group of three sea lions that were playing around some of the snorkellers blowing bubbles underwater and showing off. We also had a flightless cormorant that swam 25 metres or so with a large piece of seaweed in its mouth through our snorkelling group to a shallow piece of rock wall which it climbed. It then walked about 20 metres or so back in the other direction to its mate which was sitting on a nest. They did some bill-clapping, and then the seaweed was gifted. A wonderful piece of behaviour to witness.

The second afternoon activity was split into two – whilst most of the group walked up past Darwin's Lake to the viewpoint, a few of the group did a panga ride to photograph storm-petrels. Both excursions were a great success.

After dinner Mark spoke a little about the Bryde's whale sighting, and then chatted about the state of world conservation – a tough but enlightening subject. Then it was time for bed... tomorrow will be a busy day!

Day 12:

Monday 27 May 2024

Punta Espinoza, Fernandina & Punta Vincente Roca, Isabela

Even though all of the visitor sites on our trip are amazing, Punta Espinoza on Fernandina is somehow even more incredible than all of the others. This is where the BBC filmed the racer snakes attacking young marine iguanas – perhaps the most amazing piece of wildlife film ever made – and landing here feels as if you are landing on a film set. We arrived at our landing site just after 7am and it was high tide so we walked through



a short stretch of mangroves before arriving onto the sand-covered rocks. There was a smell of dead animals and it was clear to see why – there were plenty of dead, and desiccated marine iguanas. However there were many more alive (!) – hundreds in the immediate area, and all facing the same direction, worshipping the sun to heat up their (naturally) cold bodies. They are the most fascinating animals huddling together and climbing over one another – there is no concept of 'personal space'.

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There was a Galapagos hawk in a tree behind the rocks and then a call from Juan that there was a pair of racer snakes under a nearby bush – western racer snakes. In this small area, close to our landing point we stayed for about an hour watching, observing and photographing, before moving further along the trail to another huge ‘raft’ of iguanas – this time some of them had lava lizards sitting on their heads. Another call of snakes and we had sight of another three.



We moved on again to another gigantic pile of marine iguanas, and then on again to a sea lion that was posing beautifully on the water’s edge. More marine iguanas, sally lightfoot crabs and even another pair of western racer snakes appeared before it was time (after our 3-hour landing) to return to Beluga.

We had about 30 minutes before we were off again for what was the very best snorkelling trip so far. Although the water was a little colder than we had experienced previously, this was easy to overcome with a most extraordinary array of marine animals. There were green turtles in both colour morphs – the more normal ‘dark’ morph, and the less common ‘yellow’ morph – flightless cormorants, and the absolute stars of the show, marine iguanas. They were the stars of the show because we were watching them feeding underwater. They occur nowhere else on earth and to see them feeding on algae underwater as if it were on land is a most extraordinary (and utterly wonderful) experience.

Our snorkel trip came to an end too soon and we were back aboard Beluga for lunch, and almost immediately headed further north to Punta Vicente Roca where we anchored down, got ready for our second snorkelling trip of the day and piled into the pangas. The water was colder (still) than earlier, and not very clear but as ever we had friendly sea lions, plenty of turtles, a couple of penguins and even a yellow-crowned night heron devouring a baby marine iguana whole.

Time for another change of clothing and another excursion – this time a panga ride along the cliff wall that we had just snorkelled in order to photograph brown noddies, boobies, sea lions and other wonders.

We were back onboard Beluga by 5.30pm and within half an hour or so we were on the bridge with Juan and the captain who was slowing Beluga down as we were about to cross the equator heading north. As we hit 0.00.00 we had a cocktail to celebrate and Juan immediately burst into song and played the guitar – this is one of the moments that we will all remember!

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Dinner was followed by Mark and Chris showing a selection of photographs from the past couple of days – and then it was time for bed after our penultimate (very) full day.

Day 13:

Tuesday 27 May 2024

Buccaneer Cove, Santiago & Bartolome

Today was our final full day and we were determined to make it a good one! It began with a panga ride (for most) and a kayak (for some) around Buccaneer Cove, and as we got underway there was obviously some disturbance on the water 75 metres or so away which turned out to be a large squadron of mobula rays. We tried to get a little closer to them in the pangas which proved to be difficult, but by staying quiet and still in the pangas we were able to watch them circling and occasionally they swam close to, and sometimes under, our pangas.

The five kayakers disembarked the pangas and Juan 'set them free' to kayak around the bay whilst both pangas were approaching the rocks in order to photograph Nazca boobies, swallow-tailed gulls and brown noddies. Whilst the photographers were hard at work some of the kayakers paddled offshore a little further and found a bottle-nosed dolphin playing nearby. A little later the pangas and the kayaks drove across the bay and past a rocky outcrop where there were a couple of land iguanas, then as ever it was time to return to Beluga to don our snorkelling gear and get back into the water.

The water was cold and clear, and we snorkelled along the cliff edge where there was a magnificent array of colourful fish and the occasional ray below us, and then we rounded the corner into the sunlight and it was as if someone had opened the curtains – it was a beautiful way to end this morning's snorkelling excursion.

Over lunch the captain moved the ship and anchored off Bartolome Island. The sun was shining brightly in the sky and the air was warm. Snorkelling gear on we took to the water for our final snorkel, swimming with the island on our right-hand side and snorkelling towards the iconic Pinnacle Rock. The conditions here



were very different from this morning's snorkel – the sea was still beautifully clear, but it was relatively shallow, and the sea floor was sandy. The first 'big' sighting was of a sting ray half buried in the sand, and then a pair of penguins that became five when we looked closer. At first, they were sat on a rock but they took to the water and we were able to follow them, watching them feed and 'flying' underwater.

Our final sighting was of a white-tipped reef shark sleeping on the sandy sea floor, nestled between some rocks. We must have inadvertently disturbed it as it noticed us and then moved off. It wasn't moving too quickly, and we were able to follow it for a bit before Juan called everyone back in – it was time to get

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changed for our final excursion.

Our last visit of the day was a dry landing on Bartolome itself and a walk up the 360 steps to the top of the island to see the most famous view of the Galapagos and Pinnacle Rock below. The sun was beginning to go down and it was incredible to see many of the islands that we had been travelling around.

Back on-board Beluga we had sundowners on the upper deck and toasted our incredible trip, and before dinner the captain and crew said the farewell and we toasted them too.

Day 14:

Wednesday 28 May 2024

North Seymour, Baltra & on to Guayaquil

Although it was our last day and the landing was only going to be a short one, everyone wanted to be up in time to spend 45 minutes on North Seymour departing at 6am. It was a swirling mass of both great and magnificent frigatebirds, nesting swallow-tailed gulls, lava gulls, and blue-footed boobies (some of which were doing their fabulous courtship dance. Although it was an early start, at the beginning of a very long day, everyone agreed that it was a fabulous excursion to end on.

We were back on Beluga for breakfast at 7am and then after gathering our belongings we said our final goodbyes to the captain and crew and departed on the pangas shortly after 8am. On arrival at the jetty on Baltra there was a bus waiting for us and we transferred the short distance to the airport. We dropped our bags off, said goodbye to Juan and browsed the shops before walking out to the first of today's aircraft.

We took off for Guayaquil and watched the Galapagos melt into the background as we gained height and headed to mainland Ecuador for our homeward flights.

It had been a truly exceptional trip.

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Checklist for Galapagos Exclusive with Mark Carwardine



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13
	BIRDS													
1	Galápagos penguin	<i>Spheniscus mendiculus</i>			✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Waved albatross	<i>Phoebastria exulans</i>		✓										
3	Galápagos petrel	<i>Pterodroma phaeopygia</i>		✓										
4	Galápagos shearwater	<i>Puffinus subalaris</i>			✓		✓							
5	Eliot's storm petrel (white-vented)	<i>Oceanites gracilis (galapagoensis)</i>			✓	✓		✓						✓
6	Wedged-rumped storm petrel	<i>Hydrobates tethys</i>			✓	✓	✓							
7	Band-rumped storm petrel	<i>Hydrobates castro</i>			✓					✓	✓	✓		
8	Red-billed tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>							✓					✓
9	Flightless cormorant	<i>Nannopterum harrisi</i>									✓	✓		
10	Brown pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Magnificent frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Great frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>					✓							
13	Red-footed booby	<i>Sula sula</i>					✓							
14	Nazca booby	<i>Sula granti</i>		✓			✓		✓					✓
15	Blue-footed booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓				✓	✓

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16	White-cheeked pintail	<i>Anas bahamensis</i>				✓			✓					
17	American (Galapagos) flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber (glyphorynchus)</i>			✓				✓	✓				
18	Great blue heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>				✓		✓				✓		
19	Cattle egret	<i>Bulbulcus ibis</i>			✓	✓				✓				
20	Snowy egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	✓											
21	Lava heron	<i>Butorides sundevalli</i>				✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
22	Yellow-crowned night heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>				✓	✓							
23	Galápagos hawk	<i>Buteo galapagoensis</i>		✓		✓			✓				✓	
24	Common gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>	✓											
25	Hudsonian whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>				✓	✓						✓	
26	Wandering tattler	<i>Heteroscelus incanum</i>							✓					
27	Black-necked stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>				✓		✓						
28	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓									✓	
29	Semi-palmated plover	<i>Chadrius semipalmatus</i>					✓							
30	Galapagos (American) oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus (palliatu)s galapagoensis</i>		✓										
31	Lava gull	<i>Larus fuliginosus</i>						✓						✓
32	Swallow-tailed gull	<i>Larus furcatus</i>		✓	✓		✓							✓
33	Brown noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>				✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
34	Galápagos dove	<i>Zenaida galapagoensis</i>		✓				✓	✓			✓		
35	Dark-billed cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus melacoryphus</i>					✓			✓	✓			
36	Smooth-billed ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>				✓	✓					✓		
37	Galápagos barn owl	<i>Tyto alba punctatissima</i>							✓					

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38	Vermillion flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus nanus</i>								✓				
39	Galápagos flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus magnirostris</i>				✓								
40	Galápagos mockingbird	<i>Mimus (parvulus) parvulus</i>				✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	
41	Espanola mockingbird	<i>Mimus macdonaldi</i>		✓										
42	Galápagos martin	<i>Progne modesta</i>										✓		
43	Yellow warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓			
44	Medium ground finch	<i>Geospiza fortis</i>						✓				✓		
45	Small ground finch	<i>Geospiza fuliginosa</i>		✓	✓	✓							✓	✓
46	Genovesa ground finch	<i>Geospiza acetirostris</i>							✓					
47	Small tree finch	<i>Camarhynchus parvulus</i>									✓			
48	Woodpecker finch	<i>Camarhynchus pallidus</i>						✓						
49	Grey warbler finch	<i>Certhidia fuscus</i>		✓										
50	Green warbler finch	<i>Certhidia olivacea</i>						✓		✓				
	MAMMALS													
1	Galápagos sea lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Galápagos fur seal	<i>Arctocephalus galapagoensis</i>				✓	✓							
3	Bryde's whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>										✓		
4	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>										✓	✓	

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