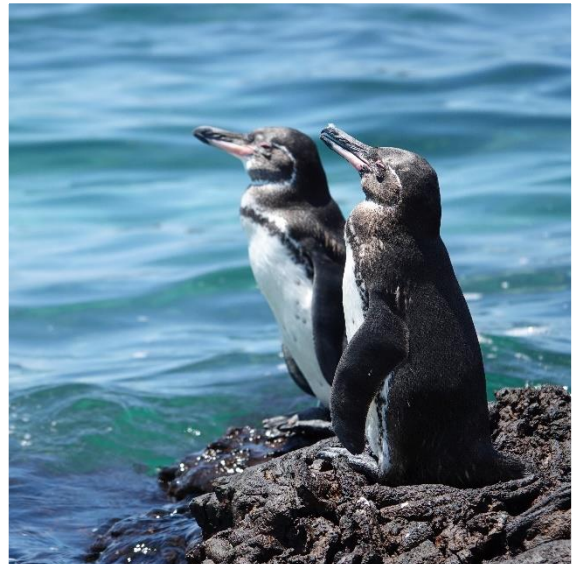


Tour Report Galapagos Wildlife Cruise 18 April – 02 May 2024

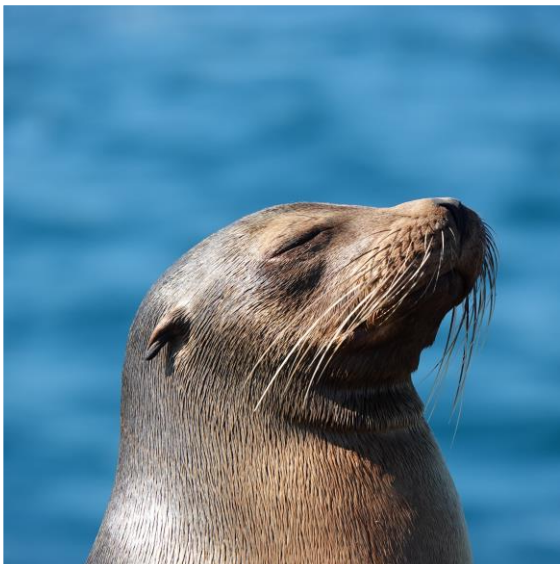
Marine iguana



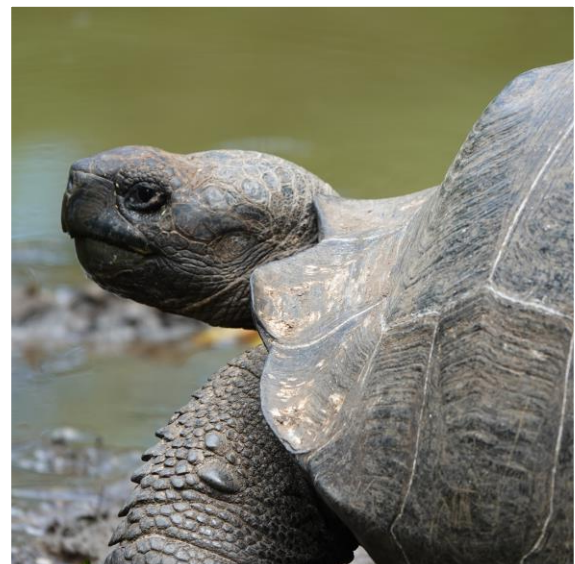
Galapagos penguin



Galapagos sea lion



Galapagos tortoise



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Our inaugural Galapagos Wildlife Cruise was not just a success, it was a sensation! Our private 12 night charter of the vessel Beluga saw us traversing the eastern, central and western islands in comfort, with our naturalist guide bringing the remote archipelago's wildlife and geology to life throughout. An undoubted bucket list destination, we explored the islands on land and sea with highlights including daily snorkels with penguins, turtles, marine iguanas, sharks, rays, tropical fish, flightless cormorants and more. We walked over lava fields, discovered pristine sea-lion strewn beaches, saw cliff nesting waved albatross, bird rich brackish lagoons, giant tortoises and land iguanas too. When crossing the equator we were treated to short-finned pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins, but a completely unexpected highlight was watching a volcanic eruption on the island of Fernandina under the cover of darkness. There 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 that were well and truly put on the map by Darwin.

Day 1:

Thursday 18 April 2024

London Heathrow to Quito

Weather: sunny then overcast, 20 degrees

Whilst many of the group had arrived in Ecuador early in order to enjoy pre-trip extensions (the Andean cloud-forest being especially popular), those leaving the UK had an early start flying via Amsterdam to Quito. Arriving mid-afternoon to a six hour time difference, they were met by local guide Gloria and tour leader Helen, who transferred them to our beautiful boutique heritage hotel in the heart of historic Quito, Casona de la Ronda. After a delicious early dinner in the hotel's charming restaurant, everyone was grateful for an early night.

Day 2:

Friday 19 April 2024

Quito to San Cristobal, board Beluga and visit El Junca

Weather: sunny, 28 degrees

Meeting in the lobby at 04.50am ready for our departure on the hour, the group were remarkably bright eyed and bushy tailed! It was absolutely pouring down as we were driven back to the airport and we dreamt of blue skies ahead. We had our luggage scanned at biosecurity, dropped our bags off and had plenty of time for a coffee before boarding our flight to San Cristobal via Guayaquil. Pushing back on time, our final descent took us directly over distinctive Kicker Rock shortly before landing at 10:40am local time (the Galápagos Islands are one hour behind the mainland).

Walking along the tarmac on arrival, magnificent frigate birds soared overhead and a Western cattle egret flew low over the terminal building ahead. We had arrived! After completing arrival formalities, we met our naturalist guide Juan, and were driven to the port at Puerto Bazquerizo Moreno, just five minutes away. Disembarking to the sight, sound and smell of sea-lions, we delighted in watching them sleeping on

benches, under the jetty, on the beach and some even nursed on a set of steps right in front of us. The wildlife bonanza had commenced!



Once safely onboard our pangas and cruising towards Beluga we took in diving brown pelicans and a white-vented storm-petrel seemingly 'walking' on the water. Within minutes we were onboard, shoes discarded (hoorah for the no shoes policy) and life jackets were handed back as we were shown around our vessel, home for the next 12 nights.

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At 12:05am, we sat down to a delicious fish salad lunch before having some time to unpack, settle in and ready ourselves for our first excursion at 14:30pm. Heading back into town on the pangas, we boarded a bus for the highlands, passing introduced guava, flame, and the very aptly named, red cleaning pipe trees before arriving at our destination, El Junco, twenty minutes later. Our surroundings were lush and lichen covered as we followed a pathway up to the caldera ahead. It took half an hour for us to ascend the 300 or so steps slowly, and we were easily distracted by carpenter bees hovering over purple lily (*Centratherum punctatum*), hawk-moths, hummingbird hawk-moths, a warbler finch and a woodpecker finch before reaching the summit some 700 metres above sea level.

Looking down into the only freshwater lake in the archipelago, we watched a white-tipped pintail close to the reed lined edge as magnificent frigatebirds flew low over the water rinsing sea water from their bellies. Ironically, they are unable to swim so when skimming, they appeared somewhat cumbersome in their struggle to get airborne again. While some clients stayed and took in the view, others circumnavigated the caldera, a walk that took 40 minutes with sightings of smooth-billed ani, grey warbler finch and more dragonflies than you could shake a stick at along the way. The grasses were absolutely alive with movement.



At 17:15am, we arrived back in town and spent the next hour looking around, grabbing an ice-cream or enjoying a cold beer as the sun descended towards the horizon. We came across our first marine iguanas getting snapped at by sea-lions, a warning that they were too close, whilst Sally Lightfoot crabs scuttled across the rocks. Once back on Beluga, we had time to shower before meeting the crew for a welcome drink, dinner and a safety meeting followed by a summary of what we would be doing tomorrow. As we got into our comfy beds, the engines started and we commenced our 31 mile sail towards the island of Espanola. Let the adventure begin..!

Day 3:

Saturday 20 April 2024

Gardner Bay & Punta Suarez, Espanola
Weather: sunny and overcast, 28 degrees

This morning felt like Christmas! We couldn't wait to get started and at 08:00am sharp, having breakfasted already, we boarded the pangas for a wet landing on the glorious white powder sand beach of Gardner Bay, Espanola. A blue-footed booby flew by, followed by a swallow-tailed gull and then the magic began. Sea-lions were scattered along the shore line, their back flippers being constantly caressed by the gently lapping waves. The water was clear, turquoise and calm and we very much felt like we had landed in paradise.



Further up the beach lay the remains of a humpback whale but we were immediately distracted by Galapagos doves flying and hopping along the rocks with their vivid red legs and light blue eye ring on full show. A hermit crab moved across the sand (we learnt this was responsible for what looked like bike tyre tracks on the beach), and then a series of lava lizards, a few small ground finches and finally Espanola mockingbirds. There was simply so much to see! If you scuffed your feet in the sand, tinges of green gave away the fact that algae is growing underneath the surface and we watched plant succession in action as the rhizomes of drop seed grass

sprouted intermittently and native morning glory spread ever closer to the water's edge. We'd only moved about 30 metres since our arrival but the photographers in the group were already on their knees and stomachs trying to get shots from different angles. It was fabulous!

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A Galapagos hawk flew by as we watched a lava grasshopper and then we continued to walk along the beach, taking our time and enjoying the presence of more sea-lions stretching luxuriously in the heat before reaching a group of rocks with a lone marine iguana on them.

Slowly heading back the way we came, a dark bank of deep grey cloud came over to our right, and our reward for a good old leg stretch was the chance to run into the ocean for the first time. It felt utterly exhilarating and intoxicating. We were grinning like children and needless to say, rather high on life! We spotted a group of three or four young sea-lions swimming just off shore and were entranced when they approached us, having a good look at us and coming ever closer. A blue-footed booby chose a moment very soon afterwards to fly low over the water, missing our heads by what felt like inches! A few ruddy turnstones later and it was time to return to Beluga, but not for long.



We had a snorkelling date set for 10:30am so after getting kitted out with complimentary snorkelling equipment and wetsuits (for those hadn't brought their own), we were once again in the pangas with Nazca boobies making their first appearance en route. Sliding into the water, the underwater world presented itself with colourful fish surrounding us in the clear, cool water. We swam for an hour seeing tropical flounder, leather bass, parrotfish, grunts, yellow-tailed surgeonfish and many, many more. A few lucky clients saw a turtle from their panga while waiting for the rest of the group to finish up.

During lunch, we sailed towards Punta Suarez, the only nesting site in the world for waved albatross. En route we saw our first breaching rays in the open ocean and once at our destination, although unable to land as the site is currently closed to visitors due to bird flu, we sailed towards the cliffs upon which they nest and were absolutely delighted to find 'islands' of albatross sitting together on the open water. Invariably they all faced the same direction and we snapped away, taking them in, getting quite close and being able to enjoy some impressive fly bys too.



Red-billed tropicbirds were also in attendance, as were Galapagos shearwaters and a lone brown noddy. We spent around an hour watching them, with numerous turtles raising their heads intermittently too, before spending the afternoon sailing the 42 miles west towards our next island, Floreana. More jumping rays, a potential whale blow and softening peach tones over the island as we approached at sunset kept the majority of us on deck with eyes peeled for potential sightings.

Dinner was served at 19:00pm, after which Juan talked us through what to expect tomorrow. Floreana is one of the few islands with quite an interesting human history and he dangled a few teasers regarding toothless dentists, serial killers and a baroness to be discussed further when exploring the island. Intriguing..! Afterwards, we went outside to search for sharks that may be attracted by our lights after one couple had had an incredible experience at 04:30am when a comfort break resulted in them noticing tens and tens of Galapagos sharks surrounding Beluga. Watching them stun prey with their tails and then fight over the spoils had whetted our appetite to see if we could witness this phenomenon too. Immediately, three sharks could be seen by torchlight and after watching them for perhaps 15 minutes, we were absolutely ecstatic when a solo hammerhead swam by in addition. Flying fish added to the mix and we went to bed hugely excited at what tomorrow may bring.

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Day 4:**Sunday 21 April 2024**

Punta Cormorant, Devil's Crown & Post Office Bay, Floreana

Weather: sunny, 28 degrees

Waking to a glorious, clear morning, we were aboard our pangas and zooming towards Punta Cormorant (named after a vessel that landed here on a botanical collecting mission many years ago) at 08:00am. We stopped en route to view blue-footed boobies and an up close and personal magnificent frigatebird before landing on a black sand beach, where a brown pelican obligingly perched in a tree above us. Juan pointed out a native plant, the leather leaf, with its broad leaves distinctively reaching straight for the sky (a strategy to cope with heat) whilst Floreana lava lizards scuttled underneath another native plant at its base, a succulent, common carpet leaf. Silver argiope spiders hung suspended in their webs all around us and we were careful not to tread on the beautiful pale pink flowers of the Galapagos passion fruit (non-edible - unless you are a mockingbird or a finch) as we commenced our walk.



Following the edge of a brackish lagoon and passing Palo santo trees (known locally as incense trees) we came across common cactus-finch, Galapagos warbler, Galapagos painted locusts and tens and tens of Monarch butterflies as well as large-tailed skipper. Rounding a point, we saw a group of Galapagos greater flamingoes in the distance and a little later, American whimbrel and black-necked stilt. Ascending to a viewing platform we saw our first medium ground finches after which some of the group returned to our landing beach to relax while the rest of us continued over a ridge to a paradisiacal white beach where turtles, spotted eagle rays and black tip reef sharks could be seen in the azure water. The scene before us really was straight out of a Bounty advert! A lone Great blue heron posed beautifully on an area of exposed rock and we walked ever closer to it, quite blown away by the beauty of our surroundings.

On the way back we stopped to view our first Galapagos fly-catcher and were then whisked back to Beluga for a quick turnaround as our second activity of the morning was a visit to Devil's Crown, a renowned snorkelling site considered one of the best in the archipelago. Once again we couldn't wait to get into the water and it well and truly lived up to its reputation.

Within a few minutes we had experienced a spotted eagle ray gliding below us, sleeping and swimming white tip sharks, a hammerhead swim by (which was truly fabulous), a manta ray (seeing this was the realisation of a life's dream for one client) and finally a Galapagos shark. We were literally buzzing with excitement and were completely and utterly surrounded by fish from Moorish idols to burrito grunt and puffers to parrotfish. Chocolate chip stars, blue star fish and needle fish hugged the rocks below and if we tore ourselves away to look up, sea-lions hauled themselves out and honked on rocks by the water's edge while blue-footed boobies dived around us. It was simply mind blowing and all too soon, we returned to Beluga for lunch and had an hour or two's downtime.



At 14:45pm we headed out once more for a panga ride following the shoreline hoping to see Galápagos penguins. Although they remained elusive (for now) we cruised past islands dotted with prickly-pear cactus and beaches being exposed as the tide receded. Turtles were out in force, as were spotted-eagle rays and sea-lions, Western cattle egrets, red-billed tropicbirds and blue-footed boobies busied themselves around us. Six clients experienced their first sea-kayak and by all accounts, loved it!

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90 minutes later we arrived at Post Office Bay. Before we hit the water for a swim from the beach, we were encouraged to 'post' stamp-less postcards that we'd previously written into a barrel established by one James Colnett in 1793. We dated them and deposited them in the hope that future travellers to Floreana will collect them and post them on or even hand deliver them to our recipients. We all took a number of previously left postcards to send once we got home and we later found out that one made it to the UK before we did)! What a charming idea!



Returning home to Beluga, we toasted another wonderful day before dinner and a briefing on tomorrow's schedule from 19:00pm. We then commenced our journey of 47 miles to Santa Cruz.

Day 5:

Monday 22 April 2024

Dragon Hill, Santa Cruz & Puerto Egas, Santiago

Weather: sunny and overcast, 28 degrees

A somewhat cloudier morning awaited us as we woke up on our fourth island, Santa Cruz, at a landing site known as Dragon Hill. Named after a hillock that from certain angles and with a little imagination resembles a dragon. Our dry landing involved walking off the panga and over lava to get to a beach where we gathered and arranged cameras etc. At our approach, a sea-lion came to check us out, rolling onto its back and blowing bubbles at us as we disembarked. Once on the white sand beach, we looked through the detritus of shells, crab legs, keyhole limpets, pieces of coral and sea urchin spines (known as pencils) that over time will be eroded down to a fine powder through exposure to the elements. As we walked inland, we passed Galapagos lava lizards and learnt how iguanas and tortoises eat the fallen oval pads of prickly-pears, thus dispersing seeds as they go. Then, as the path opened up onto a longer, wider stretch of beach, we enjoyed a little rock pooling. In the first one Juan pointed out juvenile King angel fish, Galapagos black-tailed mullet, oceanic skater and excitedly, Galapagos four-eyed blenny. Behaving more like amphibians than fish, they have the ability to see above and below the water, which helps them secure their insect prey.

Continuing on and briefly viewing another of the four species of mockingbird found in the islands, the Galapagos mockingbird, we passed an area completely and utterly covered in vibrant green carpet weed, its delicate small pale pink flowers occasionally visible. It was verdant, lush, and slap bang in the middle of it we noticed two marine iguanas. The contrast in colours was wonderful as they are usually so well camouflaged against black lava rock. Passing them we reached a brackish lagoon where a black-necked stilt carefully and deliberately walked passed us, oblivious as it searched for prey. White-cheeked pintails swam behind it and tiny Galapagos fiddler crabs hugged the shore line, scattering as two lava gulls flew low over the water.



As we continued along the 2 kilometre intermittently rocky and sandy trail, we were easily distracted by Galapagos cotton (large yellow flowers that are part of the hibiscus family), hairy morning glory, Galapagos morning glory (larger white flowers), goat's head (also known as puncture weed), flycatchers, medium ground finches and cactus finches. We were here primarily though to search for land iguanas, and once we had seen our first, they just kept on coming! We had them on the paths, in their burrows, eating, and at one stage, a male and a female rested together in the shade next to the trail.

Realising that time was running away with us, we upped our pace a little and made our way back to our landing site stopping to watch mimosa leaves curl up at our touch and also coming across two lava herons casting their beady eyes over the rock pools we'd passed earlier.

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As we boarded the pangas a young black tip shark appeared close to the beach and once back on board, those that wished to had the chance to jump into the ocean for a cooling swim. Much hilarity ensued as a few of us clambered repeatedly on to the flat platform (with style and aplomb obviously!) at Beluga's stern, bombing, cartwheeling and diving into the Pacific. Lunch was served shortly afterwards during which we set sail for our next stop and island, Puerto Egas on Santiago.

We were distracted during our afternoon wet landing onto the deep black lava sand beach at 15:45pm by the incredible anticlines and synclines in the cliff face and the 'fresh' 7 kilometre lava flow from an eruption in 1898. Ascending some natural sandstone strata steps up to a cliff top path, we looked back over a small brick red island upwelling (a kipuka), had to step over Galapagos lava lizards doing press ups and a pair of mating locusts. Tequilia or grey mat plants lined the trail alongside white Galapagos lantana (native) and the beautiful inflorescence of finger grass. One bush was absolutely alive with Queen butterflies, a perfectly circular grass finch nest was found in a salt bush and just beyond the long drooping leaves of Galapagos crotons we tried to photograph a tiny Galapagos blue butterfly that simply wouldn't sit still.

Dropping down onto a beach we came across least and western sandpiper, Galapagos oystercatcher and wandering tatter. Santiago marine iguanas were on the beach (one burying itself which was new behaviour to our naturalist) and we walked over solidified lava to view a lone Galapagos fur sea-lion. Smaller, hairier and with longer whiskers and a shorter snout than Galapagos sea-lions, it moved into a rock pool, still resting before becoming more active after dark.

We moved on slightly to visit 'Darwin's loo', a hole in the lava where the water flushes outwards as the tide ebbs. A yellow-crowned night heron loitered on the edge of it and we finished our 2 kilometre walk twenty minutes later back on the beach we'd started on. The moon had risen during our return and magnificent frigatebirds caught the last of the peach coloured sunset before we returned to Beluga for dinner and tomorrow's briefing, during which we started sailing the 32 miles to Sullivan Bay on Santiago Island.



Day 6:

Sullivan Bay, Santiago & North Seymour

Weather: sunny and clear, 28 degrees

Tuesday 23 April 2024

It was a beautiful day when we awoke to the startling volcanic structure that is Pinnacle Rock on neighbouring Bartolome. Imagine the top of the Empire State Building tilted at a 35 degree angle and silhouetted against the colours of the sunrise and you'll get picture. One of the most photographed geological formations in the islands, we are due to return here later in the itinerary but our focus this morning was to explore Sullivan Bay on nearby Santiago Island. As usual, we boarded the pangas at 08:00am for the short ride to a pure white Robinson Crusoe sandy beach where after a successful wet landing, we donned our shoes and discussed tracks made by a female Pacific green turtle lumbering up the beach to lay her eggs.

We then set off for our first lava walk, following the solidified remnants of rivers of fire that flowed down to the ocean after an eruption in 1897. Walking over the pahoehoe lava (the Hawaiian term for rope), we followed the twists and turns of the flow, marvelling at the formations under our feet. The black surface was broken up by lichen, obsidian and other minerals, as well as by ochre areas where iron has oxidised coming into contact with the elements. Lava carpet weed grew in small tufts between crevasses, its tiny flowers pollinated by finches and others. Further on another pioneer plant, lava cactus defied the odds surviving in such barren and harsh conditions.

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As we reached the point at which we would turn around and retrace our steps back to the beach, it was suggested that we lie down as a group to feel the effect of the sun warmed lava under our backs. It was wonderful, a little like a hot stone massage without the massage part! Returning to the beach, we were delighted to see our first Galápagos penguins of the trip, a group of three standing and lying down on the water's edge. We had taken two hours to walk around 400 metres or so but it had been an informative and enjoyable morning.



Returning to Beluga, we changed into our swimwear and wetsuits ready to experience Sullivan Bay beneath the waves too. Some of the group were dropped off on the beach we'd landed on earlier to snorkel from there while others swam from the pangas, being dropped off further up the bay. Sharing the three to four metre-deep water with white-tip reef sharks and swimming Galápagos penguins were absolute highlights, whilst brain coral was prevalent and the fish life was sublime.



After an animated lunch we set sail for North Seymour 18 miles or two hours away arriving shortly before 15:00pm. On the hour we set off in two pangas; one going ashore and one circumnavigating the island. The reason for the split was partly due to the description of this afternoon's landing as 'acrobatic' (!) and the fact that the trail was very rocky. The water was choppy and we had quite a step up from the front of the panga on to the lava cliff, by-passing a nesting swallow-tailed gull and her gorgeous wee chick peeking out from underneath a crevasse as we landed.

Immediately, we had magnificent and great frigatebirds flying low over our heads and we learnt how to tell the difference between them. While male magnificent frigatebirds have purple iridescence on their mantle, greats have green, and female magnificents have a blue eye ring whereas greats have red. In terms of vocalisation, magnificent frigatebirds can be likened to frogs, whereas greats make a woo-woo-woo sound reminiscent of the sound made when you were young playing Cowboys and Indians and being the latter. We watched the males inflate their red neck pouches, clap their bills, open their wings wide and start to call. It was brilliant!

Nazca boobies and lava gulls also flew along the cliffs and land iguanas began to appear almost everywhere, striding out into the open, dry landscape like prehistoric dinosaurs. One perched on his back feet leaning against a rock while grasshoppers and painted locusts buzzed around us.



We slowly followed the path eventually coming across blue-footed boobies too. They weren't all out courting but a few couples were definitely practicing their moves, lifting one blue foot and then the other, dancing, while rubbing bills every now and then. The sun was moving closer to the horizon and the light just got better and better as we watched one particular pair, suddenly noticing a land iguana photobombing the shot with a lava lizard and frigatebirds in the background. There was absolutely no mistaking where we were!

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The trail evened out on to a beach from where we watched sea-lions surf the waves before slowly making our way back towards the panga landing point so we could return to Beluga.

We had a meeting to go through our species checklist so far at 18:30pm, then enjoyed local red snapper and set sail for the north shore of Santa Cruz Island during our briefing about tomorrow.

Day 7:

Wednesday 24 April 2024

Black Turtle Cove, the highlands and Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz

Weather: sunny, 27 degrees

It was a sublime start to the morning with a mangrove cruise through Black Turtle Cove from 06:00am. As we entered the cove, diving pelicans fished for their breakfast and brown noddies landed on their heads afterwards (literally!) trying to steal their catch. Golden rays were our first sea creatures of the day, gliding serenely through the still water, swiftly followed by spotted eagle rays and juvenile white and black tip sharks. We turned the panga engines off and paddled silently past the barnacle clad encroaching finger roots, the one metre tidal differentiation clear to see. A lone turtle emerged from the tangle of vegetation and all too soon it was time to head back to Beluga.

After breakfast we prepared for a day onshore, exploring the island of Santa Cruz. Leaving at 08:00am, the panga ride to port took half an hour after which we boarded a bus with our driver Tyrone, who would take us to the highlands via two sinkholes, Los Gemelos, twenty minutes away. Approaching the first 70 metre deep sinkhole via a narrow pathway lined with waist high ferns, quinine (*Cinchona pubescens*), cat's claw and giant daisy trees (*Scalesia pedunculata*) were pointed out whilst Galápagos doves and small ground finches busied themselves on the ground at a viewing point. We added two new species to our list, green warbler finch and small tree finch, before following a trail into a cool, dappled green wonderland intermixed with the delicate, soft lavender flowers of the cow pea. A woodpecker finch flitted above us and elephant grass grew bushy and tall, never quite reaching the mossy lichen (very similar to Spanish moss) clinging to branches above our heads.

Continuing on, we drove for a further twenty minutes to Manzanillo, a ranch from where we would search for giant tortoise, of which we viewed our first one in the middle of the road. Upon arrival we donned wellington boots for the possibly muddy walk, and set off into a grassy meadow filled with the domed carapaces of these prehistoric creatures complete with Western cattle egrets in close attendance.

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 gallinule 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! We continued on to Enchanted Lodge for a swordfish lunch and a refreshing dip in the pool afterwards.

At 14:00pm we set off for Puerto Ayora twenty minutes away.



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The largest town in the islands, we headed straight for the Charles Darwin Research Centre which was established in 1959. We walked the Tortoise Trail passing breeding project pens of Floreana and Santa Cruz tortoise hatchlings that will be monitored for the first stage of their lives before being released. 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 current conservation projects detailed on bill boards and include minimising ship collisions with turtles, the removal of alien invasives, monitoring sharks and re-wilding areas. Ninety minutes later we were dropped in town to enjoy more shopping or the simple enjoyment of a cold beer on a hot and humid day!

At 18:00pm we gathered at the dock, and whilst donning life jackets to return to Beluga, were distracted by squadrons of rays and juvenile black tip sharks swimming beneath us. Fresh from our showers a little later, we gathered for dinner from 19:00pm after which Juan not only took us through tomorrow's agenda but he also dimmed the lights and told us some of the promised human stories from Floreana, also known as the mystery island, due to several disappearances and murders there. We ended on a high as he got his guitar out and we had a good old sing song. It was an unexpected and rather wonderful evening!

Day 8:

Sombrero Chino (Chinese Hat) and Rabida

Weather: sunny, 29 degrees

Thursday 25 April 2024

Today was going to be a hot one! Waking up to a glorious day we were moored right next to the distinctive shape of Sombrero Chino Island (or Chinese Hat) and at 08:00am we were on shore after an easy wet landing. The white sand felt wonderful between our toes and a lone young sea-lion kept us company as we slipped on our walking sandals or shoes, as we were going to be walking over coral and ai ai lava (Hawaiian for pain) which can be jagged and loose.



We followed the shore, stopping regularly to photograph Sally lightfoots, lava lizards and marine iguanas... one even swam languorously by. The coastline was beautiful and the impossibly blue sea crashed into the black lava rocks ahead of our more sheltered position. Only 700,000 years old, the island is considered quite young and colonists such as Galapagos bonsai trees, Galapagos tomato plants and common carpet weed are beginning to bring life to the otherwise barren lava. A Galapagos hawk flew low over neighbouring Santiago Island with its candelabra cacti standing tall. The walk was relatively short

(less than a kilometre) but the terrain was rocky and we slowly made our way back to the beach, the pangas and Beluga with time to spare before our snorkelling trip at 10:30am.

Whilst we donned our wetsuits on the bow (they are left there to dry after each water session), a group of sea-lions porpoised some way off in the distance. We thought they were dolphins initially but the lack of dorsal fins made us change our minds. Great numbers of pelicans lined the shore as one panga dropped off two clients to snorkel with Helen from the beach we'd disembarked on earlier, and after a swim by a young black tip reef shark, we enjoyed no less than five more reef shark encounters during our time in the water. It was magic!



The rest of the group swam along the opposite side of the channel and they experienced an absolute plethora of tropical fish as well as penguins, panamic horse conch and a few sharks too. They all agreed it was one of the richest snorkels to date despite a fairly swift current towards the end.

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Lunch was served at 12:00pm as usual after which we were able to rest whilst we re-positioned to the beautiful island of Rabida, around an hour away. Characterised by its brick red soil, our second snorkelling excursion was scheduled for 15:00pm and again, some clients swam with Helen off the beach whilst others swam from the pangas. The undulating sea floor gave way to submerged red lava cliffs with marine iguanas



clinging to the rock above the water line and plenty of colourful fish species below. A sea-lion rushed past, sleek and speedy before returning a while later to glide on its back looking up at us on the surface. As we prepared to go ashore, a marine iguana elegantly swept into the water and we swam with it until it clambered out a little further up and proceeded to eat algae from the lava. We watched enthralled, as did a lava heron that tolerated our close proximity.

On the panga ride home Helen spotted a Galapagos hawk clumsily land and try to get its footing on a small tree on the cliff. We pulled in beside it and it flew away, low over the water showing us its impressive wing span as it went. A pair of yellow-crowned night herons came next, along with some brown noddies and finally the stunning white and brown plumage of a Nazca booby.

Another quick turnaround on Beluga meant we were back at the same beach half an hour later ready to do a short 900 metre or so walk over the headland searching for snakes, lizards and flamingoes. Although lizards were the only one of the three to present themselves (albeit repeatedly!), we were thrilled to come across a Galapagos hawk (quite possible the same one we'd seen earlier) at very close quarters as it was repeatedly squawked at by a Galapagos mockingbird protecting its nest. Sitting in the fork of a low tree on the beach, we were flabbergasted at how close we were able to get to this beautiful raptor.



Eventually tearing ourselves away, during our walk through prickly pears, palo santo trees, pale green grabowskia and scorpion weed, we marvelled at the luxurious vegetation against the red rock and came across cactus finch and a Galapagos dove sitting in its nest. Returning to Beluga at 18:00pm, we showered and gathered for dinner at you guessed it, 19:00pm, before setting off for Isabela. This seahorse shaped island is the largest in the archipelago at 120 kilometres north to south, and it was waiting for us!

Day 9:

Friday 26 April 2024

Sierra Negra and Puerto Villamil, Isabela

Weather: sunny then overcast, 29 degrees

We'd sailed 45 miles overnight to wake up at the southern end of Isabela where concentric puffer fish, a penguin, pelicans, black tip sharks and a fishing sea-lion swam around and underneath us generating smiles and a wildlife fix before breakfast. The huge caldera of Sierra Negra (Black Mountain) was our target this morning, accessed by either an eight to nine kilometre two and half hour round trip on foot or a three kilometre steep one and a half hour round trip. Eight of us had opted for the latter, with four staying aboard and four more going into town to explore Puerto Villamil. By 08:00am we were zooming towards the dock from where we walked past noticeably larger marine iguanas and a sea-lion asleep on a bench en route to boarding our 'bus' to town and beyond. With no doors or windows, it was more like a glorified colourful mega tuk tuk and we enjoyed the two minute ride to town before continuing for another forty minutes or so on to the highlands. Passing introduced species such as impatiens, hibiscus and hydrangeas, we also noticed a native creeper that appeared to be covering almost every thing in sight. We learnt that the few huge buttressed trunks at one point were silky cotton trees and that they'd arrived here as seed pods in pillows that were discarded and later germinated.

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Once we reached the start of our walk at 09:15am, we were all eyes and ears for vermilion flycatchers. Within 15 minutes we had a male sitting in the open, at the front of a tree happily posing for photos as we slowly approached ever closer. Just a few minutes later and we had another male perching on a dappled grey branch even more beautifully framed by hanging lichen in the cloud ridden atmosphere. A little further on still and Juan spotted a female and juvenile begging to be fed.

We discussed various plants as we climbed; naranjilla with its huge thorned fig like leaves and its kiwi looking fruit, verbena with its tiny delicate mauve flowers, and blechum, a ground loving plant with leaves that stand up in a square like formation akin to the top of New York's Chrysler Building. A tiny dove egg lay in the path, it's shell pierced by a predator, and we stepped over ground beetles while viewing numerous finches.

By 10:15am we were at our destination and the vast almost 10 kilometre wide collapsed crated stretched ahead of us complete with smaller parasitic cones dotted in the distance. It was hugely impressive and we committed the scene to memory before commencing our descent. Once back at the bus, we made our way back to town, collected the others who had had a fabulous morning soaking up the relaxed ambience, photographing shore birds and lava gulls, and even rescuing an octopus washed up on shore by relocating it to a rock pool. With around nine thousand inhabitants, the town has a gorgeous beach, a handful of shops and plenty of restaurants and bars. We were all back on Beluga by 12:00pm to catch up with the others and to enjoy a spot of lunch.

Our afternoon excursion from 15:00pm was back into town to visit a brackish lagoon frequented by flamingoes, followed by some beach time. With the few present flamingoes were pintails and common gallinules as well as a young black-necked stilt. Walking to the beach afterwards, we watched marine iguanas along the shore, tried to photograph a not very cooperative giant egret who just kept flying just out of reach and then visited a beach bar for Happy Hour and the most interesting beer we'd ever seen (a bottle served upside down in a gin glass full of passion fruit juice). When heading back to the dock for the panga ride to Beluga, we came across some of our crew who had been playing football (they were victorious!) and we had a quick impromptu kick-about on the pontoon...as you do!



Meeting for sundowners on the upper stern deck at 17:45pm, we toasted our slightly more relaxing day and after dinner, readied ourselves for a busy day exploring the south western coast of Isabela tomorrow, 54 miles away.

Day 10:

Punta Moreno & Elizabeth Bay

Weather: sunny, 29 degrees

Saturday 27 April 2024

When pulling back the curtains over their porthole this morning, more than a few clients saw our target species for the day, flightless cormorants bobbing on the ocean. Tick! After breakfast, we set off on our first excursion, a panga ride through the mangroves initially and then along the shore to see what we could find. Once again we cut the engines and glided silently through the peaceful mangroves straining our eyes after being told that seahorses can be seen in the area. Although unsuccessful in our search, we caught a brief glimpse of a shark and some golden rays. Moving along the coast, the latter part of our ride proved to be a little more fruitful. Multiple turtles surfaced and as we approached a series of pahoehoe lava flows that disappeared beneath the water, we came across a couple of sleeping pelicans before our attention was drawn to a promontory literally crawling with marine iguanas.

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There were some absolute beasts amongst them and whilst some snoozed, other jumped over crevasses with remarkable agility and others climbed over others in their quest for a sunny spot. A ruddy turnstone walked between them and some even allowed themselves to be hosts for young Sally lightfoot crabs!

We snapped away with glee at our first large gathering of these prehistoric looking creatures (the collective noun for them being an orgy apparently) and then continued further into the cove getting up close and personal with flightless cormorants. One lay on its guano

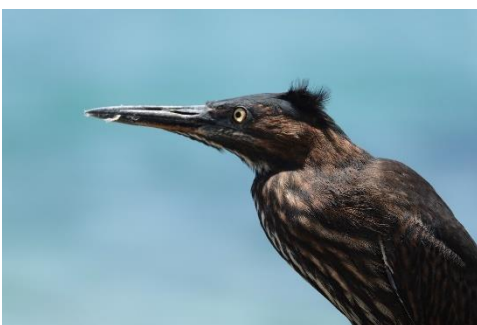
covered nest whilst two others preened with purpose, occasionally looking up to show us their gorgeous bright blue eyes. Like jewels pressed into the sides of their heads, they just don't look real.

Heading back to Beluga shortly before 10:00am, we readied ourselves for a snorkel half an hour later. Upon entering the water, a lithe sea-lion passed quickly beneath us and just a minute or two later Helen yelled out "Turtle!" to anyone within ear shot. Swimming just a few metres below us, it began to rise, surfacing literally right in front of us. We continued to follow the line of the cove and an hour later re-convened on the pangas to discuss the new species of fish that we'd seen in these slightly colder waters (the western side of Isabela is affected more by the influence of the colder Humboldt current and the deep upwellings of the Cromwell current).



Shortly before lunch at 12:00pm we lifted anchor to head north to our next stop at Elizabeth Bay two hours away. We passed a long line of white water sticking out like a sore thumb in the ocean and assumed there must be a shallow reef there, but upon closer inspection with our binoculars, and noting a steady influx of birds from the right, we concluded that it must be a giant bait ball.

A mangrove panga ride with five of the group kayaking was on the agenda and we set off at 15:00pm into a high tide and a somewhat choppy sea. Cruising the lava edged coastline, frigatebirds soared above us and as we entered a sheltered mangrove, we came across a penguin and then another. We stopped to photograph a beautiful lava heron sitting in a red mangrove just above the water line and then we moved further along the coast to a larger sheltered area. A sea-lion shot past and then those who had chosen to kayak, boarded from the pangas and got underway. The rest of the group cruised ahead, eventually cutting their engines to paddle silently with us.



We came across a small group of three penguins ashore up a narrow creek, one of them lying on its nest. Backing out silently, turtles moved slowly and surreptitiously around and underneath us until the silence was broken by repeated splashing. Suddenly we had penguins fishing all around us with their sardine prey leaping out of the water like flying fish as herons and pelicans arrived to settle on nearby branches, waiting to swoop down opportunistically and grab a share of the action (although it can be the other way around as penguins 'steal' fish caught in a pelican's mouth while they filter water out).

More than once, dive bombing pelicans came perilously (wonderfully!) close to the pangas as they hit the water, lifting their long necks high and inflating their gullets to swallow their prey whole once settled on the water. One narrowly missed a turtle who swam on apparently none the wiser while we just couldn't get enough of the squawking penguins who continued to dart to and fro like bullets underwater. This was wildlife overload!

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A tree-lion (ahem, sea-lion!) then took centre stage as it slept on a horizontal branch above the water line, presumably having made itself comfy during the highest point of the tide. Our kayakers had to repeatedly rest their paddles above the water not wishing to unsettle turtles that were passing close enough to touch (we obviously didn't). Before we knew it, it was 16:45pm and we were all being recalled to the pangas so that we could commence our journey back to Beluga. With a strong breeze and rising swell this proved to be a longer trip than anticipated but once again, our very able crew did their best to keep us as dry as possible. Once home, we gathered for drinks before dinner and tomorrow's briefing. We'd had, quite simply, an absolute corker of a day. Repeatedly we asked ourselves, "How do we top that..?".

But it wasn't over yet! As we relaxed in the lounge, Juan came in and said he had a surprise for us as our captain, Jose, had agreed to change our course and head towards Fernandina Island where a volcano was in the process of erupting (as it had been eight weeks ago when it reached the UK news). Earlier this morning we'd seen steam clouds rising from sea level and knew that lava had been spewing out into the ocean so this was an incredible opportunity to try and see molten red lava by night. Our journey would take around three hours and we all unanimously leapt at the chance of a wake up call at approximately 23:00pm to try and see this with our own eyes. We were ridiculously excited and it was a hard decision whether to stay awake or go to bed and then get up again. Between the group, we settled on both.

At 22:30pm, the knock came and we sprang out of bed and joined those who had waited up on the upper and lower bow decks. First views were breathtaking, incredible and awesome in equal measure as only a few hundred metres away, billowing clouds of steam crept stealthily into the night sky as a line of red lava dripped into the ocean below. I'm not sure there are enough superlatives to capture what was right in front of us. I have to confess that there were some softly uttered expletives as we slowly absorbed the scene before falling into an enraptured silence. A few of us uttered how surprised we were at the lack of smell as we were expecting sulphur, but no, nothing. The lava must have been coming from fissures along the island's shoreline as there were no molten rivers from above, although two spewing specks in the distance indicated more activity further up the volcano slopes. Rather, it was a quiet, attention demanding and utterly captivating advance. Nature's power was being unleashed albeit in a softly, softly manner before us and we were absolutely loving it.

Eventually, Beluga's engines started and we backed away from the scene under the light of the Southern Cross. We had been enormously lucky to be in the right place at the right time (thank you Jose) and we were hugely grateful, appreciative and privileged to have witnessed something that many people can only dream about. It was very hard to switch off and head to bed but we managed it.



What an unbelievable day!

Day 11:

Urbina Bay & Tagus Cove, Isabela

Weather: sunny, 29 degrees

Sunday 28 April 2024

Whilst gathering on the bow this morning to don our life jackets and grab our shoes for a walk, fish began leaping out of the water ahead of us and we watched as a bait ball gathered in size, scales glinting in the sun as they leapt out of the water to escape whichever predator was busy rounding them up below. The water rippled and shimmied with their movement, the scene akin to an oceanic Mexican wave. We chattered animatedly about our adventures last night and shortly after 08:00am, approached our wet landing on the steep black sand beach at Urbina Bay. The result of a five metre land uplift after a volcanic explosion in 1963, the area was riddled with fresh turtle tracks (this being a nesting site for green turtles) and we set off for a brief spot of beach-combing searching successfully for 'leaping' Sally lightfoot crabs moving from rock to rock. A lone lava heron loitered above the rock pools leading to one client describing it as "patience personified" while blue footed boobies and pelicans fished in the azure ocean beyond.

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Afterwards, we headed inland past the skeletal remains of a beaked whale and a large crayfish, coming across the domed carapaces of two giant tortoise resting in the shade of a low manzanillo (poison apple) whilst small and medium ground finches fluttered around on the trail. We added dark-billed cuckoo to our species list and as it was hot, we were grateful for the vegetation that shaded us too as we explored during the next 90 minutes. Land iguanas were on our minds and we came across quite a few individuals, the largest we'd seen so far, progressively coming out into the open more and more until the last one almost blocked the path. Our reward at the end, for those that wanted to cool down, was a swim in the cooling ocean. Two clients had brought their snorkels and were lucky enough to see two rays.



Once back on Beluga an hour later, a number of white-vented storm-petrels 'danced' on the water next to the boat, their toe tapping attracting not only us but their krill prey too. We upped the anchor and sailed slightly further north to Tagus Cove, magnificent frigatebirds following our progress and occasionally landing on our ropes as we went.

After lunch, we had a few hours to rest and by 14:30pm, we were back in the water for a snorkel in the cooler, deeper, nutrient rich water. As we wrestled with our wetsuits on the bow (perhaps all of chef Luis's wonderful meals were beginning to have an effect!), two penguins swam by and when we were ready to enter the water at our snorkelling site, a sea-lion awaited, swimming beneath us once we were submerged. Following the sheer cliff walls to our right, we swam past yellow-tailed damsel fish nests, red sun stars, at least nine wonderful turtles, cormorants in the water and a bullet like penguin!

Returning to Beluga for a quick change, we soon re-boarded the pangas and whilst half of the group searched the cliffs for wildlife, the others were dropped off at a landing point in order to commence a walk up past the salt water Darwin's Lake to a viewpoint overlooking the northern part of Isabela and three volcanoes; Ecuador, Wolf (admittedly it was in cloud) and Darwin. Plenty of wildlife kept us occupied en route with a sloughing land iguana, a lava lizard catching a locust and a plethora of cactus finches along the way. Galapagos lantana, scorpion weed with its tiny white flowers and palo santo trees dominated the landscape and on the way back down, we came across another dark-billed cuckoo. Approximately 170 steps later and we were zooming back to Beluga for drinks, dinner and tomorrow's briefing.

Day 12:

Monday 29 April 2024

Punta Espinoza, Fernandina & Punta Vicente Roca, Isabela

Weather: foggy to start, then sunny and clear, 28 degrees

Wow. Just wow. How do you begin to write up the day we've just had? This morning we motored a whole 30 minutes to reach Punta Espinoza, the only landing site on the island of Fernandina. We woke to thick, thick fog, indicative of the change in the seasons as we go from the hot and wet months of December to April to the cooler, drier months for the rest of the year. We had just reached our dry landing point shortly after 08:00am when Juan pulled the two pangas together and read an account written by the captain of a vessel that witnessed a volcanic eruption here in 1825. It is remarkable that almost two hundred years later it is still going.

Once on shore, volcanoes were forgotten and marine iguanas took centre stage. Careful to follow the path and not disturb their nesting sites, we were falling over them from the word go. They were prolific; on the pathways, on the beach, on the pahoehoe lava and under the low canopy of trees, their heads shaded from the increasing heat while their tails were fully exposed. Stopping to photograph a large group of them, we noticed three flightless cormorants hopping around on an outcrop just beyond. They appeared to be courting with two males showing interest in a female. Some very definitive squabbling was taking place, rushing at each other to move the other off. Indeed there was neck biting and all sorts when a fourth arrived to join in for good measure!

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We had literally just decided to walk slightly further on when the cry came for "Snake!". We were very much hoping to see racer snakes here as it was on this island that the famous BBC and David Attenborough scene was shot. It came from behind and moved between numerous pairs of legs before briefly following a crack in the lava and slithering away into some vegetation. Juan identified it as a Fernandina racer and we were thrilled!



Walking past the odd sea-lion, we came across another racer snake, smaller this time, as well as a minke whale skeleton. One promontory was literally littered with marine iguanas, and we watched as Sally lightfoots crawled over them and lava lizards scuttled away from the slow and deliberate footsteps of a hunting giant blue heron walking amongst them.



The adjacent cove was teeming with turtles, rock pools were beautifully reflective and we stopped regularly to photograph marine iguanas taking to the water. Looking down into a gap in the lava, we came across a most unusual mollusc, a Galapagos chiton. It was 10:00am before we knew it and time to return to Beluga for a very special snorkel.

Watching marine iguanas feed under water was our aim but no one had told the turtles that. Turtle after turtle after turtle appeared directly in front of us and despite a hefty swell, we moved with the waves hovering above them, silently watching them feed on submerged rocks covered in algae. We stopped counting when we reached double figures and then swam on to search for the iguanas. Although there were many swimming between us on the surface, our captain Jose found one below and we floated there, watching it for as long as we were able. For an animal that appears so clumsy and cumbersome on land, they are remarkably agile and dexterous beneath the waves.

Still more turtles arrived and then, as we approached the end of our snorkel, two sea-lions came to play. Swirling around and around us in the water, we tried to mirror their movements, shrieking with delight as they kept coming closer. The endorphin rush was infectious and when we finally tore ourselves away and headed for home in the pangas, our chatter was excitable and our laughter plentiful! Fernandina you beauty!

After lunch, a brief rest, and about two hours cruising, we were once again in the pangas at 14:30pm traversing the super impressive cliffs of Punta Vicente Roca back on the island of Isabela...and so the geology lesson began. The 170-80 metre towering cliffs feature raised sedimentary layers, rock bombs and many, many volcanic dykes, seams in the rock that lava has forced its way into. Navigating the shore we looked up to see nesting brown noddies, grooming blue footed boobies and sleeping pelicans, flattening themselves onto shelves and rocks jutting out into the ocean. Marine iguanas seemingly defied gravity, climbing higher and higher, their dark colouring contrasting against the compacted sandstone layers. Looking down, turtles drifted past, a sea-lion lazed on its side, flipper raised to thermo-regulate and others porpoised through the water, some might say with glee. Shore petunias were colonising the otherwise bare rock, the green foliage and white flowers proving that nature will always find a way. We entered a cave searching for hoary bats, instead coming across algae in a variety of shades of yellow, purple and pink would you believe? There was even a rock that looked uncannily like a sea-lion resting close to the ceiling!

Half of the group opted to join a snorkel along the lava cliffs afterwards, the sunlight barely penetrating the deep, deep water. One client saw sharks upon entry into the water and once again, we had a super 'friendly' sea-lion who swam with us, its eyes looking almost like fish eye lenses under the water. Diving cormorants were a highlight, folding back their wings after entering the water and diving with ferocious speed into the depths. As we continued, visibility worsened so after 45 minutes we called it quits and returned to Beluga to get ready for our Equator Party scheduled for 17:30pm.

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Juan got out his guitar, margaritas were poured and we joined Captain Jose on the bridge and counted down the co-ordinates a little like New Year's Eve as we crossed from the southern to the northern hemisphere. There were cheers when we reached 00'000.000 latitude but it was a little crowded and not all of the group were able to capture a photograph of the moment due to strong currents. As such, we went around again, singing 'Happy Equator Day to you' to the tune of Happy Birthday! Spirits were high and the sun was beginning to set to our west, the sky growing ever more orange.



Our sister ship, Cachalote, had stopped up ahead and we were advised that this particular area is renowned for cetaceans so we ran to get our cameras just in case there was something to see. Sure enough, we were absolutely thrilled and delighted at the sight of dark dorsal fins and relatively small tail flukes ahead. Running out on to the bow we were told they were pilot whales! We watched them pass Beluga, rising, falling and fluking into the sunset colours that were now pink and purple. Could today get any better?

Once they were out of sight we gathered for a group photo on the bow and a few of us decided to stay outside until dark 'just in case'. That proved to be a good move as Helen spotted what she thought were dolphins between us and the Isabela coastline. Checking they weren't porpoising sea-lions through the binoculars - they weren't - we all gathered outside once again and watched them as they spread out, passing our port and starboard sides to eventually ride our bow. They were identified as bottlenose and we just lapped up their presence. Eventually as darkness encroached, they continued their journey as did we.

Dinner was once again, highly animated, and afterwards Juan took us through tomorrow's schedule which was a return to the central island of Santiago followed by iconic Bartholome. We'd had another cracker on a day!

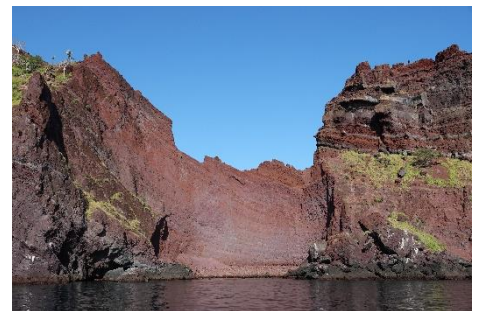
Day 13:

Buccaneer Bay, Santiago & Bartolome

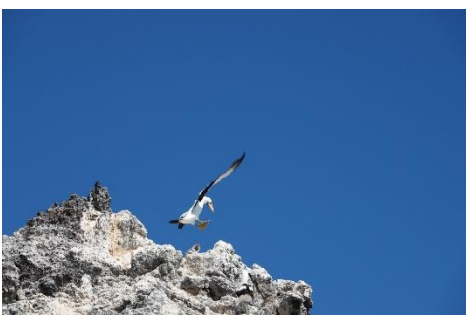
Weather: sunny, 29 degrees

Tuesday 30 April 2024

It was yet another beautiful morning as we woke up surrounded by the dramatic red cliffs of Buccaneer Bay. Frequented by pirates in the 1700 and 1800s, hence the name, this was the last stop in the islands for Darwin back in 1835. The ocean was calm, the sun was shining and our first activity was a 90 minute panga ride from 08:00am. We took to the clear water and circumnavigated some nearby islets, spending time with nesting Nazca boobies framed against a cerulean sky whilst a Galapagos hawk sat conspicuously nearby and a western cattle egret flittered around on the peak.



Crossing to the next bay, one client perfectly captured his reflection in the eye of the swallow-tailed gull that he was photographing. Where else in the world can you do that?



The nocturnal squid hunters were seen to have a distinctive red-eye ring that matches their bright red legs and feet.

Brown noddies rested on ledges in the cliffs as blue-footed boobies preened above them, shaded from the already hot sun. A little imagination was required next as we were shown rock formations resembling a bishop's hat, an elephant and a cartoon whale.

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Returning to Beluga we readied ourselves for a refreshing snorkel at the base of the cliffs, an area that Juan had advised is usually productive in terms of rays and sharks. He wasn't wrong! Upon hitting the cool, clear water we were faced with hordes of colourful fish and then a large tailless stingray, slowly gliding along the ocean floor below. We swam over large submerged lava boulders covered in white urchins, and between two lay a stationary marbled ray. Next came a white-tip reef shark but it was a huge shoal of yellow-tailed surgeonfish that stole the show, swimming right on the water surface so visibility was as good above as below the surface.

As soon as we were back on Beluga, we pulled up the anchor and during lunch, motored towards our afternoon stop at Bartolome. With no rest for the wicked (!) we were back in the water at 14.30pm swimming alongside and underneath the famous Pinnacle Rock. In addition to penguins and a myriad of fish species once again, we swam over Galapagos sand dollars, sea cucumbers, starfish, sea stars (including a panamic cushion star) and a tiger snake eel too! It was with mixed emotions that we lay our wetsuits and snorkelling equipment out on the bow deck ready to be cleaned by the crew and dried in the engine room overnight ready to be packed away tomorrow.

Our final afternoon activity was a walk up to a viewpoint around 360 steps away to take in one of the most photographed views in the Galapagos. Setting off at 16:30pm the late afternoon light was perfect and for those that wanted a more sedentary excursion, a panga ride had been arranged complete with shore birds, more penguins and a munching sea-lion.



Everyone was back onboard shortly after 18:00pm and an hour later we collated in the lounge to offer our thanks to the crew who had looked after us so well, and then it was time for a farewell dinner. Afterwards, Juan played a slideshow of the wildlife and vegetation that we'd experienced and offered to copy it onto SD cards for those that would like it. We then retired to pack and ready ourselves for departure tomorrow.

Day 14:

Wednesday 01 May 2024

North Seymour, Baltra to Quayaquil

Weather: sunny, 29 degrees

Four of us enjoyed an early start, watching the sun rise over the bow and setting off for another visit to North Seymour island at 06:00am. Once again 'Bird Island' delivered with male great and magnificent frigatebirds showing off their impressive inflated pouches and vocalising to attract females.

We came across another tiny swallow-tailed gull chick being carefully watched over by its attentive parents, whilst a little further along the trail, a blue-footed booby danced for his mate. Two stunning lava gulls saw us off and we were in a reflective mood as we committed the beauty of our surroundings bathed in morning light to memory.

We were back on Beluga for breakfast at 07:00am after which Helen read through a summary of our trip highlights. Of course this took a little longer than planned due to all that we had experienced and we were all a little emotional when we said our final goodbyes to the captain and crew at 08:00am. We set off in the pangas for one last time heading for the island of Baltra, where a bus transferred us the last ten minutes to the airport. We dropped our bags off, hugged Juan fiercely (he had been marvellous) and browsed the many shops airside before walking out to our aircraft, passing two land iguanas (of course!) en route.

We took off for Guayaquil slap bang on time and then 16 became 14 as two of our party continued on to the Amazon. For the rest of us, we checked in for our KLM flights home via Amsterdam as our amazing adventure drew to a close. We had been lucky indeed.

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Day 15:
Arrive in UK

Thursday 02 May 2024

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Checklist for Galapagos Wildlife Cruise



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13
	MAMMALS														
1	Galapagos sea lion	<i>Zalophus wollebaeki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Galapagos fur sea lion	<i>Arctocephalus galapagoensis</i>				✓									
3	Short-finned pilot whale												✓		
4	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>											✓		
	BIRDS														
1	Magnificent frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnifica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Western cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓		✓			✓						✓	
3	White-vented storm-petrel	<i>Oceanites gracilis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Galapagos warbler	<i>Setophaga aureola</i>	✓		✓			✓		✓		✓			
5	Grey warbler-finch	<i>Certhidea fusca</i>	✓	✓											
6	Small ground finch	<i>Geospiza fuliginosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
7	Woodpecker finch	<i>Geospiza pallida</i>	✓					✓							
8	White-cheeked pintail	<i>Anas bahamensis</i>	✓			✓				✓					
9	Smooth-billed ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>	✓			✓		✓		✓					
10	Brown pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Blue-footed booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Swallow-tail gull	<i>Creagrus furcatus</i>		✓	✓		✓						✓	✓	✓
13	Galapagos dove	<i>Zenaida galapagoensis</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓				✓		

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14	Espanola mockingbird	<i>Mimus macdonaldi</i>		✓											
15	Galapagos hawk	<i>Buteo galapagensis</i>		✓				✓			✓	✓	✓		
16	Nazca booby	<i>Sula granti</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓		
17	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓		✓				✓	✓				
18	Waved albatross	<i>Phoebastria irrorata</i>		✓											
19	Galapagos shearwater	<i>Puffinus subalaris</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
20	Red-billed tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>		✓	✓		✓								
21	Brown noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
22	Common cactus-finch	<i>Geospiza scandens</i>			✓				✓						
23	Galapagos greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus rubet-rubet</i>			✓					✓					
24	American whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>			✓	✓	✓				✓			✓	
25	Black-necked stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>			✓	✓				✓					
26	Medium ground-finch	<i>Geospiza fortis</i>			✓			✓				✓			
27	Great blue heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>			✓	✓			✓	✓			✓		
28	Galapagos flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus magnirostris</i>			✓	✓		✓		✓			✓		
29	Galapagos mockingbird	<i>Mimus parvulus</i>				✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
30	Lava gull	<i>Larus fuliginosus</i>				✓	✓			✓			✓		✓
31	Lava heron	<i>Butorides sundevalli</i>				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Galapagos oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus galapagensis</i>				✓								✓	
33	Least sandpiper	<i>Calidris minutilla</i>				✓									
34	Western sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>				✓									
35	Wandering tattler	<i>Tringa incana</i>				✓							✓		
36	Yellow-crowned night heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>				✓			✓				✓	✓	
37	Galápagos penguin	<i>Spheniscus mendiculus</i>					✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
38	Great frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>					✓								✓
39	Semipalmated plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>					✓								
40	Green warbler finch	<i>Certhidea olivacea</i>						✓							

41	Small tree-finch	<i>Geospiza parvula</i>						✓							
42	Common gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>						✓		✓					
43	Purple gallinule	<i>Porphyrio martinicus</i>						✓							
44	Little vermilion flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus nanus</i>								✓					
45	American great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>								✓					
46	Flightless cormorant	<i>Nannopterum harrisi</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	Dark-billed cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus melacoryphus</i>										✓			