

Tour Report Galapagos Wildlife Cruise 17 April – 1 May 2025

Galapagos sea lion



Giant tortoise



Great frigatebird



Land iguana



Compiled by Helen Bryon

The vast majority of vessels in the magical, wildlife-rich Galápagos archipelago tend to offer cruises to either the eastern or western islands, but why choose between them when you can visit them all aboard the comfort of our annual private charter on Beluga? Following a logistical night in Quito (from where it is possible to extend your stay to include the Amazon, nearby cloud forests or day trips to Otavalo, Cotopaxi and the equator), we commence our voyage in the eastern islands, which arguably offer greater birding opportunities with red-footed boobies and the stunningly gorgeous waved albatross amongst staple species such as great and magnificent frigate birds, blue-footed boobies, brown noddies, swallow-tailed gulls, and a plethora of shore and land birds including Darwin's finches. Moving through the central islands to visit giant tortoises and the Charles Darwin Research Centre on Santa Cruz, we continue to the younger western islands, where volcanoes, calderas and lava fields provide a scenery fix whilst the colder waters here are home to penguins, turtles and if we're lucky, cetaceans. On land, we search for land iguanas, racer snakes and much, much more. With walks, panga rides, snorkelling and sea-kayaking all on the agenda, this really is a superb holiday in a simply sensational destination!



Thursday 17 April 2025

Day 1: London Heathrow to Quito

Weather in Quito: partly cloudy, 23°C

A very early morning was in store for most of us as bag drop opened at Heathrow from 04.30 am. Departing on time two hours later, we arrived in Amsterdam shortly ahead of schedule and power walked to the gate for our connecting flight just over an hour later to Quito. Picking up two more clients who had enjoyed a brief city break here, we again departed on time, landing in Quito 11 hours later to beautiful sunny skies and a warm welcome from our local representative, Gloria.

We were whisked to our overnight accommodation, La Casona de La Ronda, located in a heritage building in the heart of Quito's historic centre, 45 minutes away. With hand-painted individually decorated rooms, plants aplenty and masses of character and charm, we enjoyed a few hours of rest before meeting up with

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the remainder of our group who had visited the Amazon and Quito's key sites prior to our arrival. Following a welcome briefing at 19.00, we made our way to the hotel's lovely restaurant for dinner before our beds beckoned, the long travel day and six-hour time difference well and truly catching up with us.

Friday 18 April 2025

Day 2: Quito to San Cristobal, board Beluga and visit El Junco

Weather: sunny, 28°C

Another early start had us gathering in Reception at 04.50 am, ready for departure at 05.00 am. Grabbing our pre-packed breakfasts, we boarded our private bus transfer back to the airport, swiftly cleared departure formalities and got to know each other as the morning mist dissipated and another beautiful day dawned.

Taking off on time at 08.05 am, our flight to the Galapagos touched down in Guayaquil, where we waited onboard before continuing our journey. Excitement levels were palpable as we flew over a very, very green San Cristobal landing just after 10.30 am local time (the islands are an hour behind the mainland). We were met by our naturalist guide, the irrepressibly chirpy Juan, and our driver David, who drove us the four minutes or so into town by private bus.



Dropping us off on the waterfront, the delights of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno were largely ignored as we immediately gravitated towards a number of Galapagos sea-lions lying, nursing and relaxing on rocks in the sun next to the jetty. Sally lightfoot crabs scuttled around them, and a lone marine iguana introduced us to the natural treasures of this remote and quite wonderful archipelago. The first of many Darwin's finch were seen (small ground), and we boarded two pangas and headed out towards Beluga, moored in the bay.

Our first magnificent frigatebirds soared overhead, and once safely up the gangplank, we discarded our shoes (there is a barefoot policy onboard) and received a warm welcome from Ivan, our bartender. Juan took us through a few basic house rules, and we were shown to our en suite cabins, where we had half an hour to settle in. The lunch bell rang at 12.15 pm and we tucked into spaghetti bolognese, garlic bread and a variety of salads washed down with fresh juice or beer and followed by a fruity sponge pudding.

An hour of downtime followed, after which we watched frigatebirds mobbing blue-footed boobies, diving brown pelicans, brown noddies and delightful white-vented storm-petrels (known as Eliot's here) while donning our life jackets and hiking shoes on the bow, ready for our first excursion to El Junco this afternoon. Disembarking the pangas back on San Cristobal, we came across the distinctive bright yellow plumage of Galapagos warbler and sulphur butterflies before driving for 20 minutes or so, past colourful but introduced lantana, hibiscus, guava and hallucinogenic angel's trumpet flowers.

Reaching the start of our walk to the only freshwater lake in the Galapagos, located within the confines of a sunken crater 700 metres above sea level, we took the 300 or so steps up there very slowly, stopping to admire flora and fauna along the way. Black female carpenter bees were out in force along with their male black and yellow counterparts, attracted to the purple flowers of daisy lily. Dragonflies hovered by miconia trees lining the pathway, their upright lilac flower clusters attracting insects, and we stopped to observe a long-tailed skipper.





Lichen covered the thick, lush vegetation, and a grey warbler finch caught our attention, lightly walking and jumping along the ground right next to the path. A juvenile, it was unconcerned by our presence, and we learnt that this species was the founding member of Darwin's finch family. A black-spotted grasshopper later and we were oohing and aahing over Monarch butterflies and a multitude of spectacular hummingbird hawkmoths. With their hairy bodies and red tones, photographing them proved to be tricky as they simply don't stay still, but we gave it a good try!

Reaching the top of the climb, we looked down into the lake and as we circumnavigated the 300 metre diameter crater, we spotted a common gullinule and a white-cheeked pintail with no less than seven gorgeous wee chicks way down below. After more Monarchs, hawkmoths and a smooth-billed ani, we walked back down towards the bus, passing pipe cleaning trees with their upright raspberry red flowers as we retraced our steps to town. Here we spent a lovely 45 minutes buying postcards, having a cold beer (which was well deserved after the two-kilometre walk), and birding, with a lava heron seen nesting in a tree.

Then, with the sky ablaze with pinky red hues, we were pangad back to Beluga, coming across two sea-lions resting on the platform at our stern, and gathered to meet the crew (Captain Guillermo, chef Ivan, bartender Ivan, panga drivers Pierro and David, and engineers, the two Gilberts).

Dinner followed at 19.00, whereupon we feasted on fish in plantain sauce with potato cakes and salad. Afterwards, Juan briefed us on tomorrow's visit to Espanola, and then took us through a safety drill, before we retired to bed for an early night. After two long travel days, we were finally here!

Saturday 19 April 2025

Day 3: Gardner Bay & Punta Suarez, Espanola

Weather: sunny and overcast, 28°C

Waking to cloudy but clearing skies, we were anchored off the absolutely glorious white sandy beach of Gardner Bay, being gently lapped by turquoise ocean. Dotted with sea-lions, we watched white-vented storm-petrels and had a Nazca booby fly by as we sipped coffee on the bow. After breakfast at 07.00 am, we prepared to leave Beluga at 08.00 am for our first wet landing. The minute we walked up the beach to remove our life jackets, the action started. A female Espanola lava lizard, complete with bright orangey red neck, lay motionless on a bleached-out log, quickly usurped by a pair of Espanola ground finches and then a Galapagos flycatcher. Galapagos doves came next, ducking and diving with surprising speed, before one stopped atop a bush, enabling us to have a good look at its red legs, blue eye ring and gold iridescence on its neck through our binoculars.



We moved along the beach to view an old humpback skeleton and then noticed a juvenile pelican sitting on the sand, a photo opportunity too good to miss. Behind it on some lava stood an adult drying out its wings, conspicuous with its bright white head. Blue-footed boobies dived head first into the ocean as we stopped to lookout over the islets of Gardner Rock, Onslow and Turtle Rock. We began walking along the beach, coming across tendrils of morning glory snaking their way towards the water and drop seed grass beginning to colonise the beach. An old carcass of a sea-lion transpired to be a female due to the smoothness of her skull, and we stepped over what looked like tyre tracks in the sand made by scuttling hermit crabs. The shell of a Nerita snail was seen along with grasshoppers and more lava lizards, then the hole of a ghost crab, and finally the super fresh tracks of nesting green turtles who possibly laid their eggs last night. Half of the group then turned back to enjoy a swim close to some hauled-out sea-lions, the freshness of the water, and a

pelican swim by, an absolute delight.

Once back on Beluga at 10.15 am-ish, we tried on wetsuits and were provided with snorkelling equipment to use for the duration. Boarding the pangas once more, we split into two groups, one going directly to circumnavigate a cluster of rocks, and coming across a multitude of fish, including streamer hogfish, king angelfish and yellow-tailed surgeonfish, as well as a fine spotted moray, a green turtle, and a white-tipped reef shark. The others went closer to shore, viewing a marbled ray and another (positively huge!) green turtle.

After a very rewarding morning, we tucked into chicken, pork, potato, corn and a selection of salads, followed by stewed fruit, and then enjoyed a few hours to rest, go through photos, and sit on the top deck to watch frigatebirds at close range as they sat on our lines. We had motored on to Punta Suarez and as we arrived, cloud descended, but not before quite a few of the group saw their first waved albatross flying overhead. By the time 15.30 rolled around, we were aboard the pangas and heading to shore. Espanola mockingbirds, lava lizards and a lone lava heron greeted us, and we soon began to notice the striking red and green colouration of breeding marine iguanas strewn along the shoreline. This is the only island in the archipelago in which they change colour, so it was great to witness first-hand.



Our focus this afternoon was to reach a colony of waved albatross, and with just two hours to play with, we made the executive decision not to stop for creatures we were likely to see elsewhere but to press on and follow the boulder-ridden trail that led to them. Careful foot placement was required to negotiate not only the terrain but the sheer number of lava lizards and marine iguanas soaking up the heat. As we walked through feather fingergrass, mosquitoes were out in force, so we kept moving, and Helen narrowly avoided stepping on an Espanola racer snake that crossed the trail immediately in front of her. Red-billed tropic birds and a number of Galapagos shearwaters were seen by a few of the group, and a hermit crab scuttled across the path.

In just under a kilometre, perched on a cliff edge and framed by the Pacific behind it, we came across our first waved albatross. Surrounded by Nazca booby chicks in various stages of moulting plumage, the size difference was substantial. The albatross were huge, their gorgeous buttermilk crowns and necks resplendent against the stark, clean white feathering of the boobies. With interest, we watched a Galapagos hawk perched in the top of a scrubby bush at our eye level, especially when another flew in to join it a little later, and they began to mate! Mockingbirds looked on, iguanas crawled along the surface, and it was difficult to know where to look. Suffice it to say we were grinning and happy!



After some time to absorb the scene, watch the proliferation of life under our noses, and take an obscene amount of photographs, we descended a small rocky cliff and came across our first swallow-tailed gulls. With their bright red legs and eye rings, they really are quite beautiful. Continuing on, we carefully passed a ring of rocks signifying a marine iguana nest, then a Chinese lantern tree, and then entered what can only really be described as a meadow in which albatrosses were sitting at various intervals all around us. Three sitting in a row proved to be a popular image to try and capture, and as we turned around to head back, two albatross blocked our path,

waddling towards us. We listened to them vocalise, a few clients saw them mate, and we lost our hearts to these wonderful creatures, adoringly ungainly on land, but completely and utterly beautiful when stationary or in flight.

We were pleased to leave the mosquitoes behind us, though, as we headed back to Beluga in time for sunset. It was most definitely time for a beer and/or a caipirinha, so we toasted our great first full day in the islands and indulged in chicken with peppers and a variety of salads and vegetables before heading to bed. We experienced quite a swell during the five-hour crossing to Floreana, dropping anchor in the early hours of the morning.

Sunday 20 April 2025

Day 4: Punta Cormorant, Devil's Crown & Post Office Bay, Floreana

Weather: sunny, 28°C

Breakfast was supplemented by a visit from the Easter bunny as we tucked into bowls of Mini Eggs alongside fresh fruit, cereal and French toast. We were pangad across to our first landing site, a dark obsidian and olivine strewn beach of volcanic, rather than oceanic origin, where a pelican sat high in a tree, blue-footed boobies dive bombed repeatedly for fish, and Sally light-foots hot footed it across the sand. Juan proceeded to take us through a treasure trove of objects left on a tree stump, which included volcano barnacles, a collection of shells, sea urchin spines and a sea-lion skull.

Next, he laid out a tea towel portraying a map of the Galápagos Islands on the sand, and from a drawstring bag, he produced a series of model volcanoes which were placed on the western islands of Isabela and Fernandina, respectively. He asked us to imagine that the islands, sitting on the Nazca tectonic plate, were consistently moving eastwards at the relatively fast rate of two to ten centimetres per year, and as they move, an underground hot spot of molten lava is constantly erupting, creating new islands in the process. Although these islands may take thousands of years to come to fruition, they are evolving, and the landscape is ever changing. Geology lesson over, he proceeded to explain how wildlife arrived in the current islands courtesy of the three main oceanic currents that affect the archipelago, the Panama, Humboldt and Cromwell.

We then proceeded down a path towards a brackish lagoon, passing Floreana lava lizards, Galapagos flycatchers, a small ground finch and a Galapagos warbler en route. We arrived to a number of Galapagos flamingoes, as well as Franklin's gull, American whimbrel, lava heron, cattle egrets and a lone black-necked stilt. Continuing along another trail, Galapagos blue butterflies were out in force, and we passed the blood-red blooms of cow pea, the bright yellow flowers of the muyuyu, and white morning glory, as well as the unusual needle-like spikes of parkinsonia or Jerusalem thorn. Thanks to an eagle-eyed client, we came across Galapagos painted locust for the first time, silver argiope spiders, and watched a male small tree finch with nesting material in his mouth. Upon reaching a glorious white sand beach, we strolled along it, viewing turtles in the water, and a great number of ghost crabs, before heading back the way we came and returning to Beluga in order to prepare for our second outing of the morning, snorkelling at Devil's Crown.



No sooner had we entered the water when a hammerhead was spotted swimming slowly beneath us. Rather obligingly it swam past repeatedly, quite unconcerned by us homo sapiens gawping at it from above! Next a white-tipped reef shark showed itself, as did a hawksbill turtle, and a few greens, whilst we ogled an extraordinary mass of tropical fish species including guinea fowl puffer, Panamic Sergeant Majors, a shoal of long fin halfbeaks, Pacific creole, reef cornet fish, blue chin parrotfish, and the beautiful violet hues with shades of orange of young damsel fish. The ocean floor was dotted with white and pencil sea urchins, as well as aptly named blue sea star, chocolate chip sea star, and Pacific cushion sea star. An hour had gone past

before we knew it, and we reluctantly withdrew from the water and headed for home, where a rather marvellous Mexican feast of tortillas, chicken, black beans, guacamole and salad awaited us.



A welcome few hours of rest ensued, and at 15.00, we were off again on a panga ride, slowly navigating the shoreline to see what we would find. We were towing three kayaks, and a few minutes out from Beluga, we manoeuvred ourselves from one panga into the double kayaks and set off for a paddle. It proved to be a very relaxing and rather lovely afternoon as in addition to a handful of marine iguanas and blue-footed boobies, we watched sea-lions scratch their backs on beaches, rolling to and fro over and over, as cattle egrets flew over green covered volcanic peaks beyond.

Passing the elevated roots of mangroves, we came upon a stretch of beach covered in eight semipalmated plovers whilst a ruddy turnstone and whimbrel looked on from rocks nearby.

We returned to Beluga around 16.30 to drop off one client and pick up another, before continuing to Post Office Bay. During our wet landing, a blacktip shark patrolled the shallows and we slowly made our way up the beach twenty metres or so to reach a post barrel established in the 1700s. Passing sailors would drop off mail in the hope that others following would pick it up if going in the right direction. The tradition lives on and we started by delivering our written and dated postcards, so we can see if, and when, they reach their end



destination. We then sifted through piles left earlier, taking any that we could possibly deliver close to our own homes.



Juan then proceeded to tell us the checkered history of some of Floreana's infamous inhabitants who arrived from Europe in the early 1900s to live a simple existence free of social restraints. From a serial killer to a Baroness, and toothless, nudist, vegetarian dentists, it was certainly an interesting, if somewhat unexpected story! Returning to Beluga as the sun set gloriously in the west, we

gathered for what was becoming a nightly occurrence, caipirinha happy hour. Dinner consisted of beef with ginger, rice and vegetables, after which we went through the daily species list and plan for tomorrow.

Monday 21 April 2025

Day 5: Dragon Hill, Santa Cruz & Sullivan Bay, Santiago

Weather: sunny and overcast, 28°C

Awakening after a smoother night's sailing, breakfast was half an hour earlier today at 06.30 am. It was a beautiful day, and with no other vessels in sight, we realised that we had Dragon Hill on Santa Cruz to ourselves. What a treat!

We walked off the pangas straight onto a lava shelf and made our way to a white beach littered with small shells and sea urchin pencils. Crunching underfoot, we continued to a patch of prickly pear cactus (there are many varieties of opuntia in the islands) and learnt how they sustain giant tortoise, cactus finch and other creatures. Zig-zag spiders were numerous, and goat's head puncture weed with its pretty yellow flowers and mimosa style leaves lined our route leading to carpets of low succulents growing prolifically behind the beach. The dark bodies of marine iguanas contrasted brilliantly against the vivid emerald green vegetation.

Passing a brackish lagoon, the air was alive with dragonflies, and we spotted numerous black-necked stilts in the water, one complete with a fluffy chick in tow, as two white-cheeked pintails flew in. Traversing a staircase of lava rock steps, we followed a narrow track of aubergine coloured soil through a wall of dense, head height vegetation peppered with the dainty white flowers of heliotrope (known locally as scorpion's tail) in abundance. It was humid but stunningly beautiful as sulphurs flew into the yellow hibiscus-like flowers of Galapagos cotton, leaving one to wonder where the flower ended and the butterfly began.



A new species for us, the Galapagos mockingbird, sang its heart out just above the trail, and we listened enraptured before pressing on as our focus here was to find land iguanas. Once we started, we just couldn't stop! They lay singularly, directly in our path, one after another after another, the males distinguished from darker females by their attractive mustard yellow, orange and red-tinged skin. In various states of moult, we came across more and more as we reached the looped sandy trail that we'd follow around a hillock. Upon reaching the top, we had stunning views out over the ocean, Beluga sitting proud beneath a by now azure blue sky.

It really had been a stunning morning, and when we arrived back on board, we couldn't believe it was only 10.15 am. We caught up with one member of the group who had enjoyed a panga ride along the coast, viewing sea-lions, lava herons and two new species, great blue heron and wandering tattler, and then motored through the sunshine across to Sullivan Bay on neighbouring Santiago Island. Passing flying fish during our journey, we arrived at a different world. Here, a volcanic landscape of cones of deep red and black lava appeared devoid of vegetation, a complete contrast to the lushness we'd just experienced. As we anchored, lunch was served (ceviche with popcorn and plantain chips - yum!), followed by pork, vegetables, rice and potatoes, after which we searched for Galápagos penguins on deck, chewed the cud, and enjoyed the sunshine views.



At 15.00 we departed for the beach and snorkelled from there, following the rocky coastline for an hour. As we entered the water, we dodged concentric pufferfish in the shallows and swam out over pure white sand in great visibility to approach a rock face to our right, covered in pencil and white sea urchins as well as cap orange coral. A white-tipped reef shark swam leisurely about a metre beneath us, affording us fantastic views of its streamlined body and myriads of fish kept us well and truly entertained.

We gazed at blacktip cardinalfish, porcupinefish, guineafowl puffer, spotfin burrfish, hieroglyphic hawkfish, black-striped salema, large-banded blenny, blue and gold snapper, yellowtail damselfish and the striking green mottled colouring of flag cabrilla. At one point, a large school of fish suddenly darted and as we looked up to try and find out why, a hunting sea-lion whizzed past. A little later, frantic shouts from panga driver David alerted us to the fact that there were penguins in the water. Only one client saw them, but he counted three as they flashed by...what a thrill! Hot chocolate and sponge fingers awaited us back on deck, after which we readied ourselves for our final excursion.



A walk along the pehoehoe (rope) lava field lay in store, and we carefully negotiated the tortured twists and turns of the once molten river of lava that extended the island by seven kilometres. Considered fresh at just over 125 years old, despite the seemingly barren environment, there is life here. We learnt that lava lizards sustain racer snakes, which in turn sustain Galapagos hawks. We only saw the former, but we spotted early plant colonisers and discovered that seeds dropped in the urea of finches lodge in crevasses, germinate during the hot, wet season and life begins. It may take thousands of years to establish, but the DNA in that one

seed is all it takes! We stopped to photograph the distinct orange and brown almost crochet-like lava cactus as a great blue heron was spotted on a beach to our left. Occupied nerita shells close to the shore were lodged into the lava and using our imagination, we came up with hobby horses, an eagle and various other shapes amidst the rock formations.

The sun was setting and caipirinha hour was approaching as we returned home, showered and tucked into a delicious fish dinner before our nightly species list update and briefing.

Tuesday 22 April 2025

Day 6: Darwin Bay & Prince Phillip's Steps, Genovesa

Weather: sunny and clear, 28°C

What a day!



The caldera of Genovesa awaited us after a six-hour sail through the night. Following breakfast at 07.00 am, we stepped off the pangas onto a white coral beach adorned with snoozing sea-lions and came face to face with a red-footed booby. Sitting at eye level on a branch, as we moved around slightly to ensure that everyone had a good view of it, we became aware of a downy snow white chick nestled in, and partially hidden by vegetation just beneath it. Completely nonplussed by our presence, we set about photographing our willing subjects despite not knowing quite where to look, as there were literally birds everywhere. Great frigatebirds, Galapagos doves, Nazca boobies, Galapagos mockingbirds and swallow-tailed gulls

distracted us as we walked past the white flowers of shore petunias on the beach and lava morning glory tumbling over a prickly pear cactus on the cliff in front of us.

The sky above was clearing to a beautiful powder blue, and we slowly followed a beach trail, not wanting to miss a thing. More and more red-footed boobies sat in vegetation at eye level whilst Nazca boobies lay with their chicks on the ground. Male great frigatebirds, red throat pouches enlarged, and the green iridescence of their feathers clear to see, sat atop the vegetation, hollering loudly and stretching their wings out to attract the attention of passing females while juveniles occupied any remaining space, eyes closed and sleeping.



In a sheltered tidal lagoon to our right, we noticed a handful of marine iguanas adorning rocks and another new species for us, the lava gull. We got a closer look at them as we walked gently through the cool, shallow water, watching a sea lion nursing in the shallows. From around the corner came a yellow-crowned night heron that ended up posing beautifully, holding its wings aloft as a red-billed tropic bird landed behind it. As we re-traced our steps, a swallow-tailed gull manoeuvred its egg more firmly into position beneath it, Nazca booby chicks gular flapped in an effort to cool down, and during the course of the morning, we took

in no less than three of Darwin's finches, Genovesa ground-finch (sharp billed), Genovesa cactus finch (large) and large ground finch. Genovesa, you beauty!

We headed back to Beluga, quickly changed into our snorkelling gear and then set off to our chosen snorkelling site, where we very much hoped to come across hammerheads. We were successful, with two large specimens being seen almost immediately and quite a few more during our wonderful hour in the water. Galapagos shark and white-tipped reef shark were also present along with two unidentified rays, Galapagos seabream, moorish idol, Cortez rainbow wrasse, sunset wrasse, and giant damselfish with their gorgeous young differentiated by their peacock blue iridescent spots.

After a fantastic morning we enjoyed lunch and a few hours of R&R before setting off again at 15.00 with four of the group embarking on a panga ride, birding and coming across Galapagos fur-seals, whilst the rest of us walked up the 60 or so Prince Phillip's Steps for a birding assault to the senses. Utterly mesmerised by the number of birds and species we were fortunate enough to be witnessing, we saw, smelt and heard more red-footed boobies, Nazca boobies, and great frigatebirds than you could shake a stick at. Nazca boobies waddled endearingly ahead of us in the path, past absolute fluffers of chicks and a scene stealer was a male and female great frigatebird pair side by side literally on the edge of the path, where the male sat with his head plumage raised and a wing draped over the female.



We walked past Galapagos sedge, yellow ground mallow, scorpion weed and a pair of small painted locusts, following a rocky path crossing deep crevasses teeming with lava lizards and even a stalking yellow-crowned night heron. Chicks were hidden or partially covered by vegetation everywhere, and eventually the track opened up onto an elevated plateau looking straight out over the deep blue Pacific Ocean. Here, Nazca boobies continued to line our path as frigatebirds and red-billed tropic birds soared over us, which we desperately tried to capture on camera.

White-banded storm-petrels whizzed here and there, preyed on by a short-eared owl. We scanned through our binoculars in the hope of seeing one, and Juan set off to check a gully with a client, but we were unsuccessful. Although seeing one was on our wish list, we were being well and truly blown away by what this magnificent sunken crater had to offer, so all was good.



After the most incredible day, our panga ride back to Beluga was disrupted by sightings of two Galapagos fur-seals resting at the base of a cliff so we, of course, went in for a closer look. The wildlife gods continued to be good to us as, on the way home afterwards, we came across a pair of mating green turtles. Once home, we toasted our good fortune at being here with drinks on the top deck and then tucked into a delicious chicken dinner after which we quickly went through our species list and briefing for tomorrow before retiring for another early night and a long sail back to the central islands.

Wednesday 23 April 2025

Day 7: Black Turtle Cove, the highlands and Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz

Weather: sunny and hot, 29°C

An early start saw us gathering on the bow deck watching an abundance of brown noddies ahead, as we readied ourselves for our 06.00 am panga ride through Black Turtle Cove. Little did we know that a sublime 'zen Zodiac' experience lay in store as we drifted through the mangroves, cutting our engine and listening to the song of medium ground finches. Paddling serenely alongside turtles, jumping fish and a nursery of blacktip sharks, the absolute scene stealers were squadrons of golden rays, their wing tips just visible above the water line as they glided in formation, first next to us, and then later, directly underneath us. Their caramel colouring and effortless movement through the water was mesmerising, and we returned to Beluga for breakfast, feeling fabulous.



A quick turnaround later and we were heading for shore, where a bus waited with Tyrone at the helm, ready to take us into the highlands. Passing the pale branches of palo santo (incense) trees, and bright tropical blooms including hibiscus and flat-fruited senna, our first stop was a somewhat dubious small electrical building that Juan and Tyrone took off down a path to peer into. Giving us a thumbs-up, we took it in turns to peek inside, and came face to face with a Galapagos barn owl. After viewing the dozing creature, we continued on our way, passing fields of cows complete with cattle egrets in attendance, as well as chickens, horses, goats and dogs, before spying our first giant tortoises next to the road.



Arriving at El Chato Ranch just outside Santa Rosa mid-morning, we exchanged our footwear for Wellington boots and set off into the lush surroundings for some up close and personal encounters with these mammoth reptiles. Two males lay side by side in a pond, so submerged that their faces were completely caked in mud. Barely moving, we left them to it, our attention drawn by others on the move. We walked through grass meadows flanked by Spanish cedar trees, stopping to talk about behaviour and breeding habits. Some nibbled on grass, others plodded along trails, and we drank our fill of these fabulous creatures before driving on to a lava tunnel not far away. Descending 60 steps into a vast, dark and dripping world, we

marvelled at the immense forces that would have propelled molten lava through channels like this.

Shortly before noon, we reached Enchanted Lodge, where we would be stopping for lunch. Due to a power cut, this was slightly delayed, so we hit the hammocks and poolside chairs, while others sat in the dining room, chatting, relaxing, and watching leaf-toed geckos on the ceiling. A delicious fish and coconut quinoa later, and we had half an hour in which to relax further before being driven the 15 minutes or so south into Puerto Ayora.

Here, we visited the Charles Darwin Research Centre, learning about the various projects they are involved in, and viewing baby and juvenile pens housing future generations of Santa Cruz, Floreana, Espanola tortoises and more. It was hot, so the walk into town afterwards past marine iguanas and Sally light-foots had to be rewarded with a drink before we drove 45 minutes north to board our pangas back to Beluga. It had been a long and rewarding day, but it was good to be home! We'd arrived to a change in our Captain and to one engineer, so introductions were made to Jose and Lennis, respectively.



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Thursday 24 April 2025

Day 8: Sombrero Chino (Chinese Hat) and Rabida

Weather: cloudy and wet, 27°C

Overcast, threatening skies made for an atmospheric breakfast as banks of grey cloud sat low over the dark, bare lava of Santiago Island. Branches of candelabra cactus and kipukas (small volcanic cones) pushed through the murky atmosphere whilst blue-footed boobies dive bombed into the ocean and magnificent frigatebirds sat atop our rigging and those of the two vessels next to us. Our wet landing onto Sombrero Chino, or Chinese Hat Island, so called due to its distinctive cone shape, was very much enhanced by, for most of us, our first sighting of the Galapagos penguin! A lone individual could be seen face down in the water, searching for food. Eliciting huge grins, we also noticed concentric pufferfish swimming around our ankles as we moved up the white sand beach to the less eroded coral further up.



Stalking down a path in the saltbush (a member of the hibiscus family), came a young lava heron, who proceeded to walk directly over one client's sandal. Next, a vivid green grasshopper blended in perfectly with its surroundings, but we were able to capture images of it and its long proboscis when it rested on a branch. Pelicans perched on rocks, marine iguanas dotted the coastline and Sally lightfoots, as always, crawled and jumped along every surface. Juan introduced us to Galapagos spurge, also known as bonsai, growing next to carpetweed and purslane succulents. Light rain began to fall, increasing in intensity, so we curtailed our walk, called in the pangas

and prepared for an extended snorkel instead.

This turned out to be a great move! No sooner had we descended into the turquoise ocean than a large white-tipped reef shark swam leisurely past. It would prove to be the first of many with adults, juveniles, pairs and youngsters swimming through a wall of black-striped salema. One rested on the white sand seafloor as we lay suspended on the surface, watching it for what seemed like an age. Completely unperturbed by us, we only tore our gaze away as a Galapagos sea-lion twisted and turned through the water with grace and agility, following and hunting shoals of schooling fish.

All shapes, colours and sizes were represented as we swam alongside spinster wrasse, Amarillo snapper, bicour parrotfish, blue chin parrotfish, yellow-tailed goatfish, barberfish, Panamic Sergeant Major, Calico lizardfish, yellow-tailed damselfish (with their bright yellow 'pucker up lips'), sea cucumbers and more. Juan found a Galapagos lobster, its bright blue eyes rivalling Sinatra himself, and a massive marbled ray lay suspended on the sea bed, partially covered by an overhang. Juvenile blacktip sharks joined the hunt for fish and to finish, the birthday girl within our midst enjoyed a penguin fly by, ahem, swim by. We all agreed that we'd had a magnificent morning viewing the underwater treasures of this remarkable archipelago, even Juan couldn't get over the variety and amount that we'd seen.

After our beef lunch, we watched photos and videos that had been taken during our snorkel, all of which elicited oohs and aahs as there was some simply brilliant footage. A little downtime followed, during which we travelled to the red island of Rabida, and at 15.00, we were back in our wetsuits more than ready for our second snorkel of the day!

As we rounded the headland and made a beeline for the beach that we'd snorkel from, marine iguanas hugged the red rock cliff just above the water line, and mockingbirds landed on vegetation above them. Oystercatchers greeted us on the deep red sand beach, and as we began to swim, the visibility was better than expected. As always, we were astounded by the myriad of species before us. A sea-lion shot past and bright peacock blue spots appeared intermittently, the size of sequins, which were later identified as a form of plankton. When not looking up to view marine iguanas on the cliff at close range, we'd return our attention to what lay beneath, captivated by more flag cabrillas, beautifully nondescript large-banded blenny, another marbled ray and a zebra moray eel. Although the latter wasn't seen by everyone, it was captured beautifully on film by Juan for us all to view later. During the panga ride home, we went through

frenzies of yellow-tailed mullet on the ocean surface, then enjoyed hot chocolate on the bow, and had another quick turnaround before the last activity of the day, a beach walk. It's all go, you know!

Returning to the same beach we'd snorkelled from, we slowly walked along it to a towering cliff, passing a trio of Galapagos oystercatchers, nesting and diving pelicans, and heaps of lava lizards. A sea-lion snoozed, and as we turned to retrace our steps and move slightly inland to a brackish lagoon, two Galapagos flamingoes flew directly past generating grins! Amongst the shore petunias, we watched pink-spotted hawkmoths seek nectar with their ridiculously long proboscis and then came the turn of more flamingoes.



Standing on one leg, then two, preening, sleeping, stretching out their necks and wings and vocalising, they moved like graceful ballerinas as we lapped them up, trying to capture their beauty on camera. Impossibly salmony orangey pink, they were utterly absorbing, and contrasted fabulously with the green algae in the lagoon behind them. Juvenile yellow-crowned night herons were spotted in the distance by an eagle-eyed client, and as we waited for the pangas, we watched a pale young ghost crab, complete with stunning carapace markings, burying itself in the beach, and a marine iguana posing next to a Sally light-foot.

With the dining room decorated with balloons, our chicken dinner was followed by birthday cake, after which Juan played the guitar and led Captain Jose and engineer Lennis in a few hearty renditions of traditional (and lovely) Ecuadorean song.

Friday 25 April 2025

Day 9: Sierra Negra and Puerto Villamil, Isabela

Weather: sunny on the coast, then overcast, 27°C

Waking up just off the southern shore of Isabela, our eighth island, we breakfasted early at 06.30 am as we had a morning hike planned up Sierra Negra, with the aim of viewing the ten-kilometre-wide caldera at the top. At 07.15 am sharp, we were en route to Puerto Villamil jetty, where a colourful, open vehicle was waiting to take us to the highlands. We left the morning sunshine behind as we ascended into the mist, where a thick blanket of moonflower covered absolutely everything in sight. Passing small homesteads, horses and dogs, the hibiscus-lined road gave way to introduced hydrangeas, and we reached a car park, signalling the start of our walk. We took advantage of a quick loo break as an American great egret and a vermilion flycatcher (one of our target species) showed themselves in the murk.

We set off at 08.40 am, taking the anticipated two hours to cover almost three and a half kilometres and a change in altitude of 120 metres. Initially, we passed through an area dominated by guava trees (another introduced species) and the tiny, purple flowers of vervain (verbena) amongst native bracken fern, listening to, and searching for the variety of finches found in this moist environment. Scanning trees covered in moss

and lichen, all dripping into the muddy terrain underfoot, a small tree finch was spotted first, followed by a green warbler finch. As we left the main track and commenced our climb up to the crater, Juan excitedly pointed out a woodpecker finch slap, bang in the middle of the path. Its elongated beak differentiated it from other finches seen so far, as well as the fact that it is known to use tools to extract insects and grubs from beneath bark....clever little fella! A small ground finch joined it, and we were fortunate to come across a number of further vermilion flycatchers and strangely enough, a small herd of cows.

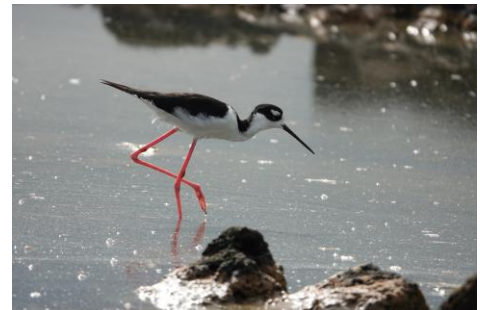


We stopped to view the large hairy, barbed leaves and pink flowers of naranjillo, which was quite timely as we'd enjoyed the juice of its fruit for breakfast. We also noticed the square leaves of a ground dweller, Blechnum, lining the final ascent to the crater viewpoint. Unfortunately, but rather expectedly, we found ourselves in the cloud, so contented ourselves watching long-tailed skipper butterflies. We all agreed it had been a lovely walk, and despite the cloud cover, we'd had nothing to lose in case it had lifted.



Slow and steady won the race as we carefully made our way back down to the bus, arriving back at the jetty to bright, hot sunshine. We'd passed Galapagos passion flowers and carpets of pinky purple beach morning glory along the way, and were now faced with negotiating marine iguanas lining the pavement, one even snoozed on the zebra crossing! Galapagos sea-lions lay next to sunbathers on the beach, snorkelers followed a turtle, and as we boarded the pangas, a penguin was fishing within metres of us. The wildlife just doesn't stop!

Lunch was spaghetti bolognese after which everyone enjoyed a well deserved rest and at 15.00, under humid grey skies, we made our way back to town, stopping at a white and button mangrove lined lagoon where black-necked stilt, flamingoes, Galapagos warbler, and a lava gull fly by were well and truly trumped first of all by a common gullinule with five little ones, and then by white-cheeked pintail with six! They followed Mum around, looking like they had the zoomies, and completely stole our hearts! A close-up photo of a green-eyed horsefly had us all a flutter, and as we walked over to the beach, we had two hours to do as we wished.



Most of us set off on a beach walk, doing a Little Rock pooling as we went, and strolling along the white sand, watching ghost crabs, brown pelicans, grey plover, a ruddy turnstone, and a rocky promontory alive with marine iguanas. Meeting up after the first hour, we hit a bar called El Faro (the lighthouse) and, on Juan's recommendation, sampled a local 'endemic drink' as he put it, Coco Loco. It transpired to be rum in a fresh coconut, which, although fine, was a slight anticlimax, and not a patch on Ivan's caipirinhas!

As the sun set, we returned to Beluga, where snacks, hot chocolate and drinks were served before dinner. It had been a long day, and with our bellies full of fish, vegetables, rice and salad, we indulged in an early night as we moved around the south-western tip of Isabela to wake up in stunning Punta Moreno.

Saturday 26 April 2025

Day 10: Punta Moreno & Elizabeth Bay

Weather: sunny, 27°C



More turtles than you could shake a stick at popped their heads up as we sipped our coffee in bright, glorious sunshine on the bow deck this morning. The almost 1,700 metre Sierra Azul volcano dominated our view to the right, while straight ahead lay Sierra Negra, its mammoth crater almost devoid of cloud cover today (of course)! Setting off for a panga ride at 08.00 am, our quest was to find flightless cormorants, but first, we went into a series of red mangrove lagoons to once again turn off our engines and drift silently, seeing what we could see. Almost immediately, we were spoilt. Three penguins, a shoal of yellow-tailed mullet, golden rays, spotted eagle rays, blacktip sharks, green turtles and one hawksbill

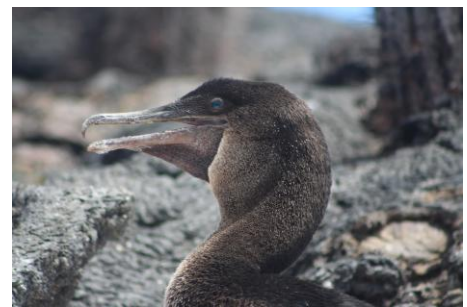
turtle later, found us motoring further down the coastline watching a magnificent frigate bird try to steal an octopus out of a flightless cormorant's bill. The cheek of it!



Reaching the entrance point to a lagoon, a pelican stood tall, gular flapping to cool down, and next to it was one of the largest marine iguanas we'd yet seen. He wasn't alone. As we rounded the shoreline, a 'mess' of iguanas (their collective noun) was framed on a large slab of lava beneath the blue, blue sky, giving us photo opportunities aplenty. Amongst them were five Galápagos penguins, standing tall, and a lone ruddy turnstone. The swell was substantial, with turquoise tumbling waves lifting us up repeatedly, but our panga drivers, David and Pierro, did a great job in keeping us as stabilised as possible so we could capture the scene on our cameras and mobiles. Another penguin stood alone, and we passed two

swimming iguanas to get to it. Sea lions came next, both with their heads down fishing. One must have been so absorbed in what it was doing that it almost ran into us before lithely turning and moving away just before the point of impact!

Moving into the cove, we enjoyed our first close-up views of flightless cormorants. While some stood uncooperatively with their backs towards us, others fought, squabbling loudly, in the water. One stood with wings held aloft, two stood side on and we could finally see their stunning turquoise blue jewel-like eyes. Framed behind them were the green fertile slopes of the volcanoes and quite simply, it was beyond beautiful. It was a good day to be alive, and little did we know that the morning was only just getting going. We had more to come, and it was only going to get better!



Our usual 30-minute turnaround had us back in the pangas, readying ourselves for the cooler, nutrient-rich waters of the west. As we slid into the aqueous world, one client came face to face with a white-tipped reef shark, after which all attention was focused on turtles. One after another, after another, they popped up, drifting silently and serenely beneath us, until we were completely surrounded. We lost count of how many we saw, but at one point, we had eight individuals ahead of us, moving with the strong ebb and flow of the tide. As they nibbled on algae on the rocks, they were being thrown around a little in the current until we were distracted by playful sea lions who wanted to play. Of course, we were only too willing to oblige!

Tropical fish were also out in force, and we clocked up a few new species, including Galapagos ringtail damselfish, Harlequin wrasse, Pacific beak fish, the uniformly grey, but very pleasing, dusky chub, and despite seeing them before, mention must be made of an absolute bruiser of a Mexican streamer hogfish. The final highlight was a penguin that came out of nowhere. We shot after it, but it didn't loiter. It didn't

matter. We'd had a fabulous morning, we were high on life and a celebratory beer at lunchtime was a must!

We sailed north during our downtime, arriving into the stunning Elizabeth Bay around 13.00. The ocean was a ridiculous blue, the breeze was brisk, and a pelican landed on the bow, posing beautifully for photographs. The sky was endless, and at 15.00 we were out on the waves, towing sea kayaks, and heading for the mangroves sheltering the lava flow shoreline. Passing a rock filled with sea-lions, blue-footed boobies, Sally lightfoot crabs, a flightless cormorant and a penguin, there was simply no doubt as to where in the world we were!

Three of us moved from the pangas into the kayaks and set off ahead to explore. Turtles came first, followed by a sea lion making a beeline directly for us at speed, only swerving away at the last minute. We approached a small lava peninsula complete with three blue-footed boobies, a pelican and two flightless cormorants, while just around the corner, a great blue heron stalked. Walls of lava could be seen with tiny red mangrove seedlings finding their feet (we couldn't help but cheer them on) and as we entered the mangroves themselves, a lava heron perched obligingly on a semi-circular branch just above the water line.

Moving further in, what happened next was simply extraordinary. We needed eyes in the backs of our heads as penguins fished all around us, blacktip sharks swam leisurely beneath us, pelicans and blue-footed boobies dived repeatedly for fish, and turtles lifted their heads clear of the water to breathe. For nigh on half an hour, we watched the plethora of life going on around us, grins wide, gasps of astonishment audible and eyes wide with wonder. Today just kept on getting better and better!

Making our way back to Beluga, the pangas dropped clients off first and then were due to come back and get the kayakers, but with home in sight, we dug deep, despite the strong headwind and current, and were determined to get back unaided. We succeeded and were mightily pleased to do so! Snacks were served with a celebratory drink and then we reconvened on the stern deck to watch the sunset and toast a great day. A fabulous chicken and pineapple dinner later, followed by filled crepes with chocolate sauce, and we hit the sack knowing we would be sailing north for two hours from 05.00 am. Until then, it was time to sleep!



Sunday 27 April 2025

Day 11: Urbina Bay & Tagus Cove, Isabela

Weather: sunny, 28°C

Large oceanic swells enforced a change of plan this morning, but it all turned out rather brilliantly in the end. We had been planning to land at Urbina Bay, an area in which we would follow a looped trail searching for land iguanas and giant tortoises. After breakfast, however, while we were watching white-vented storm petrels dancing on the water, we were warned that the landing may be a little 'tricky'. With the captain joining us on the pangas to assist if necessary, we approached the beach and although two pangas had made the landing, quite a few were hanging back assessing the situation.

The beach is steep at the best of times due to a volcanic uplift in 1954, and with large waves crashing onto it, it did not look inviting. If we did land, we also had to consider what conditions would be like in two hours for pick up, so erring on the side of caution and minimising risk, we made the decision to return to Beluga and push on up the coast for a further two hours, to our afternoon destination, Tagus Cove. It was another beautifully sunny day, albeit with a brisk breeze, and we hoped we might find some sea life along the way.

Utilising all of Beluga's outside space, we relaxed on her bow and stern decks, enjoying the simple fact of being on the ocean and having a little time to enjoy it. A sea lion was spotted lying on its back, flippers and tail up in the air, most likely thermo-regulating, and shearwaters were out in force. We'd just commented that we hadn't seen any rays jumping yet when, almost on cue, a manta leapt clear of the water. It was the

first of many, but you had to have eyes in the back of your head to try and see them! One lucky client saw us pass a hammerhead clearly swimming just below the surface and flying fish were skimming over the water to our starboard side.



Suddenly, there was a shout asking, "What's that?" Helen grabbed her binoculars and yelled back, "Dolphins!" Two dorsal fins were followed quickly by two more, so running down to alert the Captain, Beluga was turned to follow them. Sure enough, perhaps eight or nine bottlenose dolphins were ahead of us and they came to ride our bow. Fantastic. What a high! They disappeared, so we turned in slow circles once more until we had them again. We stayed with them for perhaps twenty minutes or so and were all beaming by the end of it. It had been brief but magical.

We pulled into Tagus Cove and were welcomed by another leaping manta just off the bow. As we anchored, we noticed a number of penguins close by, resting in a circle on the surface, some preening and some with faces lowered, possibly looking for prey. We had permission from the captain to jump into the ocean and cool down a little if we wished, so four of us took up the offer. A panga was lowered and as we slid into the water, the penguins moved directly beneath and away. When we surfaced, we were face to face with two pelicans who didn't seem to mind our proximity, so we enjoyed close-up views of them and then the penguins were spotted again, this time off the bow. We swam towards them and they completely ignored us, their proximity ridiculous! It was utterly magical. We circumnavigated Beluga, climbed back on board and enjoyed chicken or beef lasagne for lunch with salad and veggies.



At 14.30, we were back in the water, snorkelling as per our original schedule. The water was deep and we followed a cliff face searching for all manner of life. We trod water and watched a flightless cormorant preen right in our midst, enjoyed a penguin swimming towards us, who then hopped up on to the cliff where we followed its progress, a turtle, sea stars galore and plenty of orange lichen that were later identified as yellow-tailed damselfish eggs. A bright yellow juvenile guineafowl pufferfish was followed by a porcupinefish, and new species included red sand sea star, colonial barnacles, super streamlined Spanish mackerel and Pacific creolefish with their red tails and fins. We were welcomed back with hot chocolate and cookies again (yes!), and 25 minutes later we're back in the pangas, steaming towards 170 steps and an almost three-kilometre round trip walk that would take us up to a viewpoint overlooking the northern part of Isabela.



It was a hot afternoon as we commenced the climb past Darwin's Lake, and it was wonderful to hear a chorus of bird song and see Galapagos mockingbird, small and medium ground finch and Galapagos flycatcher at close quarters. They flew onto the trail as lava lizards whizzed here and there, and forty minutes later, we were looking out over a panorama of volcanic peaks that, from right to left were Darwin, Wolf and Ecuador, respectively. Under the canopy of palo santo trees, we meandered back, passing ant-lion holes in the sand, long-tailed skippers, painted locusts and noticing the drag lines of land iguana tails.

Once home, we caught up with three members of the group who had opted for a panga ride over the walk, and who had thoroughly enjoyed coming across seabirds, penguins and one swimming marine iguana. We pulled our anchor and headed towards Fernandina, just across the water and forty-five minutes away. Passing porpoising sea-lions and splashing tuna, we sailed directly into the sunset and as the sky deepened

to deep, burnt orange, we stood on the bow deck luxuriating in our surroundings. Dinner was pepper steak, chips, pasta and vegetables, and then, as usual, we went through our species list and the plan for tomorrow before gathering on the top deck for a spot of stargazing.

Monday 28 April 2025

Day 12: Punta Espinoza, Fernandina & Punta Vicente Roca, Isabela

Weather: sunny, 27°C

A slightly earlier start saw us beat the crowds this morning. Huge shoals of Pacific creolefish, distinct with their three silver spots on their backs, surrounded Beluga, attracted by algae on our keel. Breakfast was at 06.45 am, and by 07.30 am, we set off punctually for the only landing site on Fernandina, Punta Espinoza. The tide was too low to access the regular steps up to the beach, so we walked directly off the pangas onto lava and carefully made our way over the sometimes slippery rocks. Galapagos hermit crabs busied themselves in tidal pools, and our cautious efforts over the wet rocks were well and truly rewarded as marine iguanas were everywhere. Covering every surface, some were alone, some lay over others, and others still had lava lizards perched atop their heads! A young sea-lion vocalised under a tree before moving into the shallows where others were rolling and necking as a young male noisily tried to herd two females. Galapagos hawks watched from on high as we followed the line of the beach, having to concentrate hard to avoid stepping on iguana tails, and passing cowry shells, sea-lion scapulas and other bones strewn across the sand.

Flightless cormorants dotted a small island just offshore, pelicans preened, and approaching a small cove, huge numbers of Sally light-foots littered the shore. Sea lions in the water bellowed and then three approached a hawksbill turtle, checking it out. Moving on, they rolled onto shore, turning over and over, seemingly luxuriating in the lapping water. Marine iguanas crossed the shallows, a lava heron patiently waited for prey, and it was all flanked by 'La Cumbre' (which translates as the summit) of Fernandina volcano behind. We didn't quite know where to look, there was so much going on!



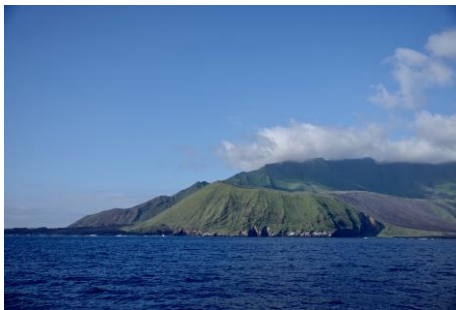
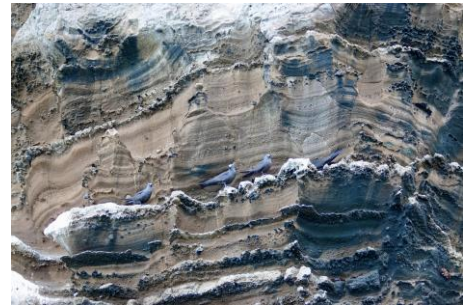
A lava lizard jumped over a Sally light-foot, something Juan hadn't seen before, and got hugely excited about! Carefully negotiating a sandy area full of marine iguana nests, some of the group started climbing up the lava, as we were told this was a good area for racer snakes (it was on Fernandina that the BBC filmed their famous natural history scene). Others chose to hug the base of the lava, and it was here that one client looked down and in a somewhat surprised manner, exclaimed, "Snakes!" Two heads could be seen poking out of a small hole and one decided to exit right in front of us, smoothly winding up the rock heading straight for another client. He calmly videoed the whole thing, and it slid down into a crevasse millimetres

from his right foot. Wow! The second seemed more hesitant, sticking its snout out of the hole by a few centimetres and then retreating once more. Western Galapagos racer snake, also known as the Fernandina racer snake. Tick!

Thrilled to bits with our morning so far, we had a quick turnaround onboard and then set off to try and snorkel with marine iguanas. As we entered the water, it proved to be turtle o'clock! They were everywhere. We were in shallow water, and it was sometimes uncertain whether there would be enough space for us to glide over them, but we just about made it, and it was fantastic! Visibility was brilliant, and during the course of our hour in the water, we came across more fish species in one spot than we'd experienced so far. Galapagos grunt became our latest new species, and Juan delightedly pointed out the gorgeous swirls of moorish idol, a species we'd seen on Genovesa that he wasn't expecting to see here. A handful of clients feasted their eyes on marine iguanas feeding on algae underwater, and we all saw them swim across in front

of us. Mini Godzillas? Another big tick!

Tuna, vegetarian ceviche and pork were on the menu for lunch, during which we navigated further north to dramatic Punta Vicente Roca back off the Isabela coast. Upon reaching the site where the Ecuador volcano blew its top and half of the crater disappeared, we marvelled at the incredible geology. At 14.30, we set off in the pangas seeing the results of molten lava being forced through crevasses resulting in lava dykes, and learning about the huge uplift that caused the seafloor to rise up, the sedimentary layers now being perfect nesting sites for Nazca and blue-footed boobies as well as brown noddies. The swell was still strong as we rounded a headland to view marine iguanas clinging to the sheer cliff face before returning to a rocky beach covered in flightless cormorants. Turtles swam past and on one small island, framed by the azure sky and puffy cumulus cloud, stood a magnificent lone penguin, resplendent in the sunlight.



There were dive boats, snorkel boats and panga riders, all of which combined with large waves, cemented our decision not to snorkel there, but to carry on and head towards the equator. Quite a few of us gathered on the various decks, committing the incredible volcanic landscape to memory before gathering on the bridge to count down the coordinates to 00.00.00.00. Juan, with his guitar, sang 'Happy Equator' to us and then he and the captain serenaded us with "What shall we do with the drunken sailor"? Encouraging us to join in, we were then treated to more music while we drank pina colodas and sailed into the northern hemisphere.

A number of us remained on deck for the next two hours, keeping a watchful eye out for cetaceans. Although unsuccessful, the sun was shining, the scenery was superb and we enjoyed flybys from red-billed tropicbird, Galapagos petrels and shearwaters aplenty before the sun set first below a cloud, peeking out again to sink below the horizon for a second time a little later on.

Tuesday 29 April 2025

Day 13: Buccaneer Pirate Cove, Santiago & Bartolome Island

Weather: sunny, 27°C

What a morning! Back in the central islands and anchored off the north-west coast of Santiago, we woke to clear skies, calm seas and the stunning red rock cliffs of Buccaneer Bay. Prickly pear cactus stood tall, defying gravity, and as we donned our wetsuits ready for our 08.00 am snorkel, common dolphins were spotted going from left to right off our bow. Today was going to be a good day!

The water was beautiful. Clear, still and positively brimming with tropical fish. Juan pointed out volcano barnacles, aptly named due to their conical shape, and a blacktip shark coasted by, changing direction to swim beneath us. As our recognition of more common species grew, we were pleased to also welcome some new ones into the fold, giant damselfish, bump head damselfish, yellow-tailed sea bass and vibrant yellow pyramid starfish specifically.

The undisputed highlight of the morning, though, perhaps of the entire underwater experience all trip, was an enormous manta ray that effortlessly drifted by not more than a metre or two beneath us. Coming from behind us, it gently, then almost imperceptibly moved its huge wings, yet we kicked hard to keep up with it. There was a surge of emotion, and we could hear each other's whoops of joy, awe and incredulity.



underwater. What a stroke of phenomenal luck. The encounter was nothing short of majestic, and we completely and utterly loved it. Juan estimated it to be around four metres wide and we were simply in awe.

On an absolute wildlife high, we returned to Beluga, quickly changed, and as soon as we departed on our panga ride around the coves, yellow-tailed surgeonfish were out en masse right on the ocean surface. Feeding on plankton, we drifted amongst them, taking photos while the three of us who had chosen to sea-kayak got going. It was truly a beautiful morning with the colours around us popping. Vivid green vegetation, azure sky, deep blue turtle filled ocean and iron red cliffs filled with swallow-tailed gulls, fishing pelicans and blue-footed boobies. With sightings of land iguanas and Galapagos oyster catchers too, what was not to love?!

By 11.00 am, we were on the move again, steaming across the north coast of Santiago, passing miles and miles and miles of lava flows towards our penultimate landing site, Pinnacle Rock. Sitting on the bow, scanning the ocean for birds and marine life, we allowed our minds to wander and got lost in our thoughts before gathering for lunch, which was chicken or beef today.

At 14.30 we set off for our last snorkel. Helen had asked the wildlife gods for playful sea lions and Galápagos penguins, and they well and truly delivered! No sooner had we entered the water than a sea-lion whizzed past us, only to return time and time again, staring up at us with huge eyes, and mirroring the movements of anyone who danced with it. A zebra moray eel came next, moving slowly along the seabed between rocks. By the time we'd shouted for everyone to come and have a look, it had disappeared into a hole in the lava, but most of the group set eyes on it.

We stuck to the lava flows initially as hordes of tropical fish meandered in and around the submerged rocks, where brain and cap orange coral provided shelter. Many of the usual species were seen along with great sightings of barberfish, blacktip sharks and various pufferfish, including a fabulous porcupine one. As we crossed an underwater beach, enjoying the scalloped sand ridges beneath us, a penguin swam by, beautifully aerodynamic and clear in the pristine water. Next came a huge sand dollar, probably the size of a dinner plate, nestled into the sandy ocean floor, floral design face up for us to enjoy. As we approached the base of Pinnacle Rock itself, marbled ray, another playful sea-lion and a new species, diamond sting ray, were seen. As we neared the conclusion of the snorkel, we swam through a huge shoal of pelican barracuda, and over a layer of submerged rock brimming with blennies (fins outstretched, as they guarded and protected their territory), marbled goby and orangeside (or yellow-bellied) triggerfish. More blacktip sharks saw us off, and we returned to Beluga for our penultimate activity.

Filling up our water bottles, we readied ourselves for the 365 steps that lay ahead of us as we walked up to one of the most famous viewpoints in the archipelago. Juan welcomed us “to the moon” as we stood amongst shore petunias and spurge, before following a boardwalk over predominantly bare lava, dotted with grey matplant and intermittent tomato plants. Lava lizards rested on the wooden handrails and on rocks, darting away at our approach, and at the very top, we came across a Galapagos spotless ladybug. The views were spectacular over crescent-shaped beaches, lava fields and islands such as Daphne Major and Chinese Hat.



For those after a more leisurely afternoon, a fruitful panga ride was arranged, where wandering tattler, golden rays, penguins and lava herons galore were seen.

We’d all worked up a thirst and arrived back on board to cocktails and cold beers that we’d ordered when calling for the pangas. We relaxed and chatted, then shortly before dinner, the crew gathered in their whites and finery and thanked us for travelling with them to the Galapagos. The pleasure had been all ours, and we, in turn, thanked them all for looking after us so well. They really had gone above and beyond.

After dinner of chicken or whole grouper with vegetables and salad, we chatted further, partook in last-minute packing and enjoyed an early night ahead of an early start (we were determined to pack in as much as possible!) and a long travel day tomorrow.

Wednesday 30 April 2025

Day 14: North Seymour, Baltra to Quayaquil, and on to Amsterdam

Weather: sunny, 29°C



If North Seymour had a giant tortoise, it would be a mini Galapagos on one island, a fitting final farewell to this magical group of islands. As we approached the landing site at 06.00 am, we dodged Sally light-foots underfoot whilst blue-footed boobies, giant and magnificent frigatebirds, brown noddies and swallow-tailed gulls filled the air. On the boulder-filled trail, we dodged lava lizards, land iguanas and spider webs as we took our last photographs. Following the beach, marine iguanas languished over lava rocks as usual, and a Galapagos sea-lion nursed her pup. When another youngster approached, she noisily discouraged it and it heeded her warning.

We stood quietly, captivated by the dance of two blue-footed boobies and committed the sights and sounds of the morning to memory.

It was with mixed emotions that we returned to Beluga at 07.00 am for breakfast and a quick shower as Captain Jose motored on towards Baltra. Shortly after 08.00 am, we said our goodbyes to the fabulous crew,

and we and our luggage were pangad to the airport jetty. From there, we boarded a bus to the terminal, scouting successfully for numerous land iguanas en route. A little souvenir and gift shopping, and a small ground finch inside the building later, and our two-hour flight to Guayaquil departed on time.

Here, we said goodbye to four of our party who were travelling back to Quito and on to the USA, while the rest of us collected our luggage and headed upstairs to International Departures to drop bags off for our overnight KLM flight back to Amsterdam and connections to UK airports.

Thursday 1 May 2025

Day 15: Arrive UK



Image Credits:

Vermilion flycatcher by C Spielman.

Western Galapagos racer snake by C Bennett.

All others by the author.

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Checklist for Galapagos Wildlife Cruise



	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	Day 14
	MAMMALS														
1	Galapagos sea-lion	<i>Zalophus wollebaeki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Galapagos fur seal	<i>Arctocephalus galapagoensis</i>					✓						✓		
3	Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>										✓			
4	Common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>												✓	
	BIRDS														
1	Western cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓		✓			✓		✓					
2	Smooth-billed ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
3	Magnificent frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnifica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	White-vented storm-petrel	<i>Oceanites gracilis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Brown pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Blue-footed booby	<i>Sula nebouxii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
7	Brown noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Galapagos warbler	<i>Setophaga aureola</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
9	Grey warbler-finch	<i>Certhidea fusca</i>	✓												
10	White-cheeked pintail	<i>Anas bahamamensis</i>	✓			✓				✓					
11	Common gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>	✓							✓					
12	Lava heron	<i>Butorides sundevalli</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Nazca booby	<i>Sula granti</i>		✓			✓						✓	✓	
14	Galapagos dove	<i>Zenaida galapagoensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
15	Small ground finch	<i>Geospiza fuliginosa</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Espanola ground finch	<i>Geospiza conirostris</i>		✓											
17	Galapagos flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus magnirostris</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓				✓			
18	Galapagos hawk	<i>Buteo galapagensis</i>		✓								✓		✓	
19	Espanola mockingbird	<i>Mimus macdonaldi</i>		✓											
20	Galapagos oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus galapagensis</i>		✓					✓					✓	

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21	Waved albatross	<i>Phoebastria irrorata</i>		✓											
22	Swallow-tailed gull	<i>Creagrus furcatus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓					✓	✓
23	Red-billed tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>		✓			✓						✓		
24	Galapagos shearwater	<i>Puffinus subalaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
25	Galapagos greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus rubet-rubet</i>			✓				✓	✓					
26	American whimbrel	<i>Numenius hudsonicus</i>			✓			✓							
27	Black-necked stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>			✓	✓				✓					
28	Franklin's gull	<i>Larus pipixcan</i>			✓					✓					
29	Small tree-finch	<i>Geospiza parvula</i>			✓										
30	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interprets</i>			✓	✓					✓	✓			
31	Semipalmated plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>			✓										
32	Dark-billed cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus melacoryphus</i>			✓										
33	Galapagos mockingbird	<i>Mimus parvulus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
34	Common cactus-finch	<i>Geospiza scandens</i>				✓									
35	Great blue heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
36	Medium ground-finch	<i>Geospiza fortis</i>			✓		✓		✓		✓				
37	Great frigatebird	<i>Fregata minor</i>					✓								✓
38	Red-footed booby	<i>Sula sula</i>					✓								
39	Lava gull	<i>Larus fuliginosus</i>					✓	✓		✓					
40	Large ground finch	<i>Geospiza magnirostris</i>					✓								
41	Genovesa cactus-finch	<i>Geospiza propinqua</i>					✓								
42	Genovesa ground-finch	<i>Geospiza ground-finch</i>					✓								
43	Yellow-crowned night heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>					✓		✓			✓			
44	Wandering tattler	<i>Tringa incana</i>					✓						✓	✓	
45	Galapagos barn-owl	<i>Tyto punctatissima</i>						✓							
46	Galápagos penguin	<i>Spheniscus mendiculus</i>							✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	American great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>							✓						
48	Little vermilion flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus nanus</i>							✓						
49	Green warbler finch	<i>Certhidea olivacea</i>							✓						
50	Woodpecker finch	<i>Geospiza pallida</i>							✓						
51	Laughing gull	<i>Larus atricilla</i>							✓						
52	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>							✓						
53	Flightless cormorant	<i>Nannopterum harrisi</i>								✓	✓	✓			
54	Galapagos petrel	<i>Pterodroma phaeopygia</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓		

