



## Cruising in Paradise: An Eco-Friendly Galápagos Adventure

By Lavanya Sunkara

**T**he name Galápagos conjures images of exotic wildlife, breathtaking volcanic vistas, and 100-year-old giant tortoises. Located 600 miles west of mainland Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean, the islands have lured many explorers, including Charles Darwin, who developed his Theory of Evolution during his visit. Darwin may have roughed it on the H.M.S Beagle, but Ecoventura's luxury yachts make it easy to see the archipelago in all its glory. With comfortable, ocean-facing cabins, gourmet meals, a fully stocked bar, multiple decks for sunbathing and stargazing, a friendly crew, naturalist guides, and exciting daily excursions, you are bound to have an unforgettable vacation on the enchanted isles.

Ecoventura has been leading expedition cruises in the Galápagos since 1990. The first-class fleet includes three motor-yachts – named M/Y Eric, Flamingo I, and Letty – each serving 20 guests. The seven-day cruise on Flamingo I, upon which I embarked, whisked me to San Cristóbal, Santa Cruz, Española, Isabela, and Floreana. The islands, created five-million years ago by undersea volcanic eruptions, are now protected as a national park; each provide abundant opportunities for visitors to come face-to-face with unique wildlife that wander freely and fearlessly. Every island is drastically different in its flora and fauna, including colorful iguanas, penguins, sally light-foot crabs, blue-footed booby birds, albatrosses, and tortoises. The best way to experience the natural beauty of the Galápagos is aboard small

vessels, such as those offered by Ecoventura, which can visit sites that cannot accommodate larger boats.

Every day, I awoke to magical new landscapes, untouched by civilization or barely populated. After a delectable hot breakfast, we ventured out in groups of 10 in panga – inflatable zodiac boats – for land and sea activities accompanied by our two enthusiastic, sibling naturalist guides, Ivan and Karina Lopez.

"Hello Paraders, welcome to another beautiful day in paradise," Ivan said, as we boarded the panga. One morning, we strolled along a picture perfect white sand beach along turquoise blue water in Cerro Brujo, on San Cristóbal Island – where sunbathing sea lions greeted us audibly – and Kicker Rock, a vertical tuff cone formation that juts up 500 feet out of the ocean, stood tall in the distance.

An afternoon adventure in Playa Ochoa took us snorkeling with sea lions that danced around us like ballerinas while playfully blowing bubbles. Our guides, always attentive and supportive, paid extra attention to novice snorkelers like myself, so I could enjoy the marine life. After gaining more experience, I was ready to go deep-water snorkeling at Devil's Crown, a collapsed, sunken volcanic cone that attracts divers from around the



world. I had a spectacular opportunity to join an underwater kaleidoscope of colorful fish, sea turtles, eagle rays, and shy reef sharks.

Leaving the undersea world behind, we cruised to Punta Pitt, another vertical tuff rock formation in San Cristóbal where nazca, blue-footed and red-footed boobies nested. With no predators, the birds of the Galápagos were unfazed by our presence, allowing us to get close to admire their beauty. Frigatebirds, known for their bright-red necks puffed in a dazzling display during courtship, can be spotted hovering above areas where blue-footed boobies fish, trying to steal their catches and following cruise boats to catch free rides. Near the shore, the world's smallest penguins are seen perched on rocks, foraging for food in the water. On every island – from San Cristóbal to Santa Cruz – we met different species of Darwin's finches; their little bodies camouflaged to their surroundings, reminding us how remarkable nature truly is.

There is no shortage of wildlife on terra firma. Gentle hikes on the islands brought us up close to amazing animals. The land iguana can be seen feeding on leaves under prickly pear cacti on South Plaza, a small geological uplift with tall cliffs offering otherworldly views. On Santa Cruz, the scenery gradually transformed as we drove up through all seven vegetation zones to reach the tortoise reserve at "Las Primicias," one of the private farms in the highlands where we met graceful tortoises in their natural habitat. Encountering a giant tortoise is like traveling back to a time when nature was completely untouched and giants roamed the earth. There is no Lonesome George anymore, but The Centro de Crianza Fausto Ilerena (formerly the Charles Darwin Research Station) is breeding tortoises for their conservation.

From the exotic wildlife and the secluded beaches to the stunning marine life, the outings were unforgettable, but on the onboard experience was icing on the cake. Chilly snorkeling trips were instantly forgotten the sec-

ond I stepped onboard and was handed hot chocolate and offered hors d'oeuvre. Fresh juice and fruit followed hikes. Ecuadorian and international gourmet cuisine, from cheese-stuffed yucca dumplings and chicken cordon bleu to pistachio-encrusted mahi-mahi, satiated our appetites. Our guide, Ivan, belted out a few tunes with his talented bandmates/fellow crewmembers on the top deck as we sipped Chilean wine and snapped photos with new friends.

The trip was all the more fulfilling knowing that I was onboard an eco-friendly ship; Ecoventura received Rainforest Alliance's Smart Voyager certification for its environmental stewardship. They are committed to protecting the vulnerable ecosystems of the islands, ensuring that guests enjoy the comforts of home, while keeping the environment free from pollutants through the use of biodegradable products. Ecoventura's M/Y Eric yacht is equipped with solar panels and wind generators. In 2006, the company became the first operation in the Galapagos to completely offset carbon emissions and aims to make its ships the greenest in the islands. I cannot wait to return to paradise on their fanciest ship yet, MV Origin, debuting in early 2016.

As the sun set below the horizon and night fell over the Pacific, we slumbered contently to the slight hum of the engine and the splashing of waves. Darwin may have slept on a hammock, but we were blissful to have walked in his footsteps in grandeur.

Galápagos is a year-round destination. December through May is warmer and the winds are calmer for cruising.

Visit [www.Ecoventura.com](http://www.Ecoventura.com) or call 800-633-7972 for more information.  
Price: \$4,100 to \$4,900 per passenger.

Where to Stay in Ecuador: Hotel Oro Verde in Guayaquil.  
Airline to Galápagos: AeroGal from Guayaquil to San Cristóbal Island.