



## DESCRIPTIONS OF THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

### SAN CRISTOBAL

San Cristobal Island is the easternmost island in Galapagos and also one of the oldest, reflected by its eroded volcanic peaks in the north, and densely vegetated slopes in the south. It has one of the two airports for travel to and from the mainland. On its southwestern side is the town of **Puerto Baquerizo Moreno**, the capital of the province of Galapagos. Here is an **Interpretation Center** operated by the Galapagos National Park offering exciting insights and valuable education of these fascinating islands. Opened in 1998, the Interpretation Center presents a complete and documented history of the Galapagos, its ecosystems, flora and fauna.

A trail from the interpretation Center takes you to Frigate bird Hill. Here where you can see both the magnificent frigate birds and great frigate birds in the same colony; the perfect place to compare and distinguish them.

In the **highlands of San Cristóbal** (2,300 ft./700 m.), a 45-minute bus ride from Puerto Baquerizo, is **El Junco Lagoon**, one of the few permanent fresh water lakes in the islands. On the way you notice the different vegetation zones. The beautiful panoramic lake is excellent for bird watching. **Isla Lobos** is located north of Chatham and an hour's ride across a small channel. Isla Lobos translates as "Sea-Lion Island", and has a large sea lion colony where they frolic, leap and make a racket. The island is also a nesting place for blue-footed boobies and a good place for snorkeling.

**Leon Dormido (Kicker Rock)** is a vertical tuff cone formation that abruptly juts up 500 feet from the ocean. This giant rock is shaped like a sleeping lion. The rock is split with towering vertical walls on either side, forming a narrow channel through which small vessels can navigate. Watch sea lions, blue-footed boobies, masked boobies and magnificent frigate birds on the cliffs.

## **BARTOLOME (BARTHOLOMEW)**

On Bartolome, it seems like you are walking on the moon. Dry and inhospitable to most plants and animals, this small, young island offers beautiful white sand beaches fringed by luxuriant green mangroves. The eastern end of the island has many volcanic cones and lava tubes. After a dry landing, you climb 30 minutes up a steep slope to the summit of a dormant volcano. Along the way you'll marvel at lava bombs, spatter cones and cinder cones. From the top you have one of the most breathtaking views in the islands, a panorama that includes famous "**Pinnacle Rock**", a tall, leaning spike which is an eroded tuff cone, the most representative landmark of the Galapagos.

Down below, you snorkel in the crystal clear water among schools of tropical fish. Galapagos Penguins, the smallest species of penguin and the only one found north of the Equator, often swim in this area. On the other side of the Island encounter sea turtles and white-tipped reef sharks which patrol close to shore.

## **SANTIAGO (JAMES or SAN SALVADOR)**

On the northwestern side of Santiago Island is **South James Bay (Puerto Egas)**. The landing is on a black sand beach with eroded rock formations in the background. The trail crosses the dry interior to the remains of a salt-mining enterprise from the 1960s. On this trail you can sight land birds such as finches, doves and hawks. Continuing along the rugged shoreline, many tide pools contain a variety of invertebrate organisms such as octopus, starfish and other sea life.

Marine iguanas are scattered around feeding on exposed algae while oyster catchers try capturing Sally Lightfoot crabs. At the end of the trail there is a series of grottoes or sea caves where fur seals and night herons rest on shady ledges. Here in the deep pools of clear water you see (and perhaps swim with) the fur seals, once on the verge of extinction, in one of the only places in Galapagos to see them. You also see the great blue heron, yellow crowned night herons, lava herons, and abundant Darwin's finches.

On the northeast side of the island lies **Sullivan Bay**. Across a narrow channel from Bartolome Island, there is a large lava flow of pahoehoe (ropey) lava dating from an eruption in 1897. A walk over this glazed black rock gives the impression of the still-molten lava, as every ripple, swirl, and bubble in its surface has been preserved. Only the occasional pioneering Mollugo plant gives a clue of the time needed for species to colonize such an expanse. You can imagine how this lava flowed down to the sea, engulfing everything in its way. There is swimming and snorkeling with playful sea lions off two small coralline beaches.

## **FERNANDINA (NARBOROUGH)**

Fernandina, the westernmost island in the Galapagos, is the youngest and most pristine island, usually visited on a longer itinerary. **Punta Espinosa** is a narrow stretch of land where you see some of the most unique Galapagos species: penguins diving off the rocks into the water; Sally Lightfoot crabs dispersing on the lava; herons and sandpipers exploring mangrove roots. Hundreds of marine iguanas, the largest colony in Galapagos, bask in the sun along the rugged shoreline. They are everywhere: swimming near the shore, grazing on exposed seaweed and blocking the way at the landing dock. This is one of the few places where you can watch iguanas feed underwater. There are also sea lion harems with resident bulls carefully guarding their territory.

Following the trail inland, you can see two different types of lava flows, “aa” and “pahoehoe” lava. The most active volcano in Galápagos, Fernandina has eruptions every few years, the most recent occurring in 2009! Many fortunate visitors saw the bright red lava flowing down the sides for spectacular photos. It is also one of the most pristine of the islands, with none of man's introduced species to date. The flat lava of **Punta Espinosa** gives a feel for this stark and barren landscape.

At the tip of one of the small peninsulas is the nesting spot for the flightless cormorants, a fascinating bird. They are flightless because they had no predators and it was easier to find food in the ocean than on land. They progressively evolved for swimming rather than for flight. Seeing these fantastic birds with their long, serpent-like necks arched forward, their wet, fur-like plumage and their bright turquoise eyes, is to witness evolution. Also on the point, sea lions sprawl on the beach or play in the tidepools.

## **ISABELA (ALBEMARLE)**

Isabela is the largest island in the archipelago with a total area of 1,771 sq. miles (Santa Cruz, the second largest is 380 sq. miles.) Composed by six shield volcanoes that merged into a single land mass, it also has the highest point in the islands, Wolf Volcano. Isabela looks a bit like a sea horse facing toward the west.

On the way to **Tagus Cove**, you cruise through **Bolivar Channel** where you may see whales and dolphins. Tagus Cove was historically used as an anchoring site for pirates and whalers. The nature trail ascends through typical dry vegetation and offers spectacular views of Darwin Lake, a saltwater crater lake, and the long narrow inlet that appears to connect with it. At the top of the trail you can observe Darwin and Wolf volcanoes, Galapagos penguins, flightless cormorants and pelicans.

Located at the ‘mouth’ of the sea horse’s head, at the northern part of the island, is **Punta Vicente Roca**. Here the remnants of an ancient volcano form two turquoise coves with a bay

that is well protected from the ocean swells. This is a popular spot for taking panga rides along the cliffs or exploring a partially sunken cave at the water's edge. Masked and blue-footed boobies perch along the sheer cliffs, while flightless cormorants inhabit the shoreline.

**Urbina Bay**, on the west coast of Isabela Island at the foot of Alcedo volcano, was uplifted from the sea in 1954. Over three miles of the marine reef at the edge of the shore were uplifted thirteen feet. On the flat walk you can see coral heads and other marine formations left on the surface after the uplift. You will see land iguanas and sometimes, giant tortoises.

At **Elizabeth Bay** many cruises offer a panga ride through the mangroves to see the rays, turtles, sea lions, and Galapagos hawks that circle overhead. A colony of penguins inhabit a rocky islet at the entrance to the bay.

## **NORTH SEYMOUR**

North Seymour is an uplifted (as opposed to volcanic) island and so is generally flat and strewn with boulders. There are good nesting sites here for the largest population of frigate birds found in Galapagos. Blue-footed boobies perform their courtship dance in the more open areas and swallow-tailed gulls perch on the cliff edges. Despite the tremendous surf that can pound the outer shore, sea lions haul out onto the beach alongside marine iguanas. As you stroll along the beach, you can see sea lions body surfing in the northern swells.

## **SANTA CRUZ (INDEFATIGABLE)**

Santa Cruz is the second largest island in the Galapagos and one of the five inhabited islands in Galapagos. The residents are distributed between the cattle-farming communities in the lush highlands and the coastal town of Puerto Ayora. This small town is the economic center of the archipelago, with the largest population of the inhabited islands (approx. 12,000) which is expanding rapidly. Tourism, fishing, boat building and commerce are the major productive activities. Here you can buy souvenirs, mail postcards and absorb local charm in the social heart of the Islands.

The **Charles Darwin Research Station** and the **Galapagos National Park offices** are based here. Scientists from all over the globe work at the station and conduct biological research from anatomy to zoology. They, park rangers and park managers work very hard to preserve and protect the Galapagos Islands. The station is renowned for its tortoise breeding and rearing center, where tortoises of different subspecies are prepared for reintroduction to their natural habitats. Tortoises once flourished in the islands, but their populations were decimated in the early 1800s by the whaling ships that stopped in the islands to fill their holds with fresh meat.

At the Darwin Center you learn about the captive-breeding program, and you can have your picture taken with one of the giant tortoises.

Santa Cruz is the only island that has seven different vegetation zones: coastal, arid, transition, scalesia, miconia and pampa zones. Most cruise itineraries include an excursion by bus through the lush greenery and refreshingly cool temperature of the **Santa Cruz Highlands**. Watch the terrain change as you wind your way through all the seven vegetation zones. From June to January you can find giant tortoises at the **Tortoise Reserve** in their natural habitat. The rest of the year, you visit **Los Gemelos** “The Twins”, a pair of large pit craters in the Scalesia forest where you find the bright red male vermilion flycatcher and other interesting bird life. You can also visit the famed giant lava tunnels and trek through them, which is not only fun, but also geologically interesting.

At **Black Turtle Cove**, accessible only by sea, you ride a panga into an extensive mangrove lagoon to see three kinds of mangrove plants: red, white and black. Here in the peacefulness of the mangroves, turtles break the surface of the still waters, while fish, white-tipped sharks, and spotted rays and mustard rays cruise below.

**Las Bachas** is a white sand beach that is a major egg-laying site for sea turtles. Las Bachas refers to the indentations left in the sand by laying turtles or departing hatchlings. Marine iguanas dot the shore and flamingos fish for krill in the lagoon.

At **Cerro Dragon (Dragon Hill)** there’s a brackish lagoon where you see flamingoes, common stilts, pintail ducks and other species of birds. A short walk up the hill offers a great view and a nesting site for iguanas.

## **BALTRA**

Just a short hop from Santa Cruz, Baltra has one of the two airports in the Islands where most flights arrive from the Ecuadorian mainland. The U.S. military originally constructed this airport during World War II, and during this period most of the indigenous fauna of the island was exterminated. Land iguanas have been only recently re-introduced successfully, and can be seen near the airport. Baltra is currently an Ecuadorian naval base and is not within the boundaries of Galapagos National Park. The airport is just a short bus ride from the harbor where most of the cruises begin.

## **ESPAÑOLA (HOOD)**

Española is one of the oldest of the islands. It is small and flat, with no visible volcanic crater or vent. As the southernmost island of the archipelago and therefore quite isolated, Española has a high proportion of endemic fauna. **Gardner Bay**, on the eastern shore, is a most magnificent beach. On the seemingly endless stretches of sandy beach you’ll find colonies of sea lions. It is

also a major nesting site for marine turtles. Around the small islets nearby, swim and snorkel with sea lions and sea turtles, as well as a variety of beautifully colored fish, and enjoy the colorful diversity of sea life.

The trail leads from here to Punta Suarez, on the western tip of the island. Along the way you'll pass the nesting site of almost all the world's Waved Albatross, huge birds with a 6-foot wing span. **Punta Suarez** is one of the most outstanding wildlife areas of the archipelago containing the highest rate of "endemicism" in the archipelago, with a long list of species along its cliffs and sand or pebble beaches. In addition to five species of nesting seabirds, Galápagos doves and sometimes Galápagos hawks can be seen. Several types of reptiles, including the brilliantly colored marine iguana and the oversized lava lizard, are unique to this island. The quantity and variety of wildlife here is remarkable.

When landing, young sea lions surf the breaking waves, while a few steps inland groups of the Española iguanas bask in the sun. Further inland, masked and blue-footed boobies nest almost right on the trail. Galapagos doves peck around unaware of visitors and finches go about their business in the bushes. The trail continues toward the cliffs and a spectacular blowhole, where when there are heavy swells, a thundering spray shoots up through a fissure 30 yards into the air. The cracks in the rock are home to the attractive swallow-tailed gulls and red-billed tropicbirds.

Further up the cliff, in an area of low-lying trees, is the only place where the waved albatross nests, and in fact, the 12,000 pairs of albatross on Española are the only individuals of this species that exist on the planet! From April to November they perform their wild mating rituals, one of the most spectacular rituals of the animal world. Watching these huge birds (up to 3.3 feet high) with a 6-foot wing span take off is another unforgettable moment. The albatrosses clumsily wobble to the edge of the cliff and launch themselves against the wind to be transformed into gracious flying creatures.

In addition, extroverted mockingbirds sit on top of visitors' hats, peck at their feet and investigate their belongings. Other species endemic to Española include Darwin's finches, Galapagos doves and Galapagos hawks. Colorful Sally Lightfoot crabs crawl along the shoreline near the blowhole.

## **GENOVESA (TOWER)**

Tower Island, one of the most spectacular Islands in Galapagos, is the tip of a submerged shield volcano that rises 250 feet above the sea. Ships sail directly into its large breached caldera to anchor at the foot of the steep crater walls. Known as "bird island," it certainly honors its name.

Tower attracts vast numbers of pelagic seabirds who come here to nest. **Darwin Bay's** coral beach is filled with frigate birds and their bustling activity. Colonies of great frigate birds nest here; the males are famous for inflating their red-throated pouches to attract females that fly overhead. Also, red-footed boobies, swallow-tailed gulls and storm petrels breed here by the thousands. A trail leads from a coral beach past tidal pools where lava gulls and pairs of swallow-tailed gulls, the only nocturnal gulls in the world, can be seen. Along the low shrubs are populations of frigates and boobies, and at the cliff edge many seabirds soar.

At Prince Philip's Steps are more frigates. masked boobies on the ground and red-footed boobies, with their contrasting red feet and blue bills, nesting in Palo Santo trees. Thousands of band-rumped storm petrels flutter like swarms of locusts at the cliff's edge, where they nest in crevices. Short-eared owls can sometimes be seen here, hunting the storm petrels during daylight hours. There is excellent snorkeling at the beach or alongside the cliffs.

Near the shores of a tidal lagoon you see pintail ducks, yellow crowned and lava herons, and other birds feeding. A panga ride along the jagged shoreline reveals the variety of animals that find shelter in the ledges and crevices of the lava. Above, the elegant red-billed tropicbirds fly in and out of their nests.

## **SOUTH PLAZA**

South Plaza, one of the smallest islands visited, is only 426 feet wide and just over ½ mile long. Its tall cliffs offer spectacular views. Trails lead through a small cactus forest of "prickly pear cactus" or opuntia and sesuvium. Here, you find Galapagos land iguanas feeding on the cactus pods and sunning themselves, comically, one on top of another.

Generally between the months of January to June, (the hot and "rainy" season – occasional downpours alternating with deep clear blue skies) the dormant ground cover undergoes a drastic change: the red sesuvium turns bright green and the leafless evening-blooming portulaca bursts into large yellow flowers relished by the iguanas.

Toward the end of the cliff, you see swallow tailed gulls, shearwaters and red-billed tropicbirds who build their nests along the cliffs. Here there is also a large colony of bachelor sea lions, numbering about 1,000 bulls occupying the smooth rocks. The dominant bulls are in various stages of recovery from battles lost over prime beach territory.

## **SANTA FE (BARRINGTON)**

Santa Fe, one of the most picturesque anchorages, has one of the most beautiful coves of all the visitor sites in the Galapagos. It is a turquoise lagoon protected by a peninsula that extends from the shore by a row of rocks and a small island aligned with it. Santa Fe was not formed by a volcanic eruption but by tectonic activity that created uplift.

Its beauty is best appreciated from the trail which climbs the fault cliff overlooking the southern half of the bay. This plateau is also the best place to find the large land iguanas that are endemic to this island. Santa Fe's species of land iguana are a brighter yellow and have uncommonly large spikes on their spine. Often they can be seen beneath the imposing Opuntia cacti. In the opposite direction runs a trail alongside the coast and crosses through a picturesque forest of prickly cactus. These Opuntia trees are the largest of their type in the islands, and are endemic to Santa Fe. After a long hike, there is nothing better than a swim in the calm waters of the bay or snorkeling in the company of sea lions at the base of the rocks.

### **FLOREANA (SANTA MARIA, CHARLES)**

Besides Santa Cruz and San Cristobal, Floreana, (population: about 30) is the only other inhabited island visited in the Galapagos. It's best known for its colorful history of buccaneers, pirates, whalers, convicts, and colonists. In 1793 British whalers set up the Post Office barrel to send letters to and from England. This tradition has continued and visitors can still drop off letters, without stamps, to be picked up by others and hand-carried to remote destinations.

**Punta Cormorant** has two highly contrasting beaches: one is volcanic, composed of olivine crystals, giving it a greenish tinge. The other is a carbonate beach of very fine powdery white sand, formed by the erosion of coral skeletons; it is a nesting site for green sea turtles. Between these beaches is a salt lagoon frequented by flamingoes, pintails, stilts, and other wading birds.

An old eroded volcanic cone called **Devil's Crown** is a popular roosting site for seabirds such as boobies, pelicans, and frigates and it is not uncommon to see red-billed tropicbirds in rocky crevices. The center of Devil's Crown is an outstanding snorkeling spot full of sea lions and colorful fish. The exterior is considered to be one of the prime areas for scuba diving, especially when the current is strong.

### **RABIDA (JERVIS)**

Rabida has a different look with its reddish beach, cliffs, and steep slopes of volcanic cinders. A noisy colony of sea lions lives on the beach and a short trail inland is a good place to observe land birds such as finches, doves, yellow warblers and mockingbirds. Hidden behind a narrow strip of green saltbush is a briny lagoon where flamingoes may be found, sometimes even nesting. There is great snorkeling along the rocks at the east end of the beach to see many of the reef fish common to these waters, and the ever-present sea lions.