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## Galapagos: All creatures great and small

From huge endemic tortoises to greedy sea lions, wildlife is certainly the star attraction in the Galapagos. But the archipelago's human story makes for a compelling sideshow

By Gavin Haines. Published on 22nd January 2016



Women working on a fish stall. Image: Gavin Haines

Puerto Ayora is the Galapagos they don't show you on television. Nestling on the island of Santa Cruz, this town has a few surprises up its sleeve. "You see that building," says my guide, Klaus, as we drive past a shabby property on the outskirts of town. I nod. "That's a brothel."

Its presence in Galapagos jars somewhat with the archipelago's reputation as a wholesome nature-lover's paradise, but I suppose what happens inside is wildlife, of sorts.

In every conceivable way, it seems, Puerto Ayora services the needs of its 12,000 inhabitants and many more tourists. It's a modern town with modern amenities and the main thoroughfare, Charles Darwin Boulevard, is lined with half-finished hotels, lively bars and open-fronted restaurants, serving up international cuisine and Latino beats. There are also plenty of art galleries, souvenir shops and a jewellers peddling expensive silverware.

But the star attraction is the fish market, where local fishwives slice and dice the day's catch. Few individuals are permitted to cast their lines into the archipelago's protected waters, but those who are send their quarry to this covered market, where rotund women in tight leggings fillet fresh portions of tuna, barracuda and whatever else the sea has yielded.

Sea lions can be seen scrounging for scraps. Some of them have been abandoned by their mothers and survive solely on the fishwives' generosity. "They're like Labradors," says Klaus, as we watch them nuzzle up to the women.

Charles Darwin Boulevard winds down to Puerto Ayora's pretty harbour, where frigate birds plunge into gentle waves to catch unsuspecting fish. Their svelte bodies hit the water like arrows, barely creating a splash as they disappear below the surface. These impressive birds have to compete with a gaggle of pelicans, which crash clumsily into the water, beaks agape, hoping to scoop up a meal. Herons look on with contempt. A thinking man's bird, they refuse to waste energy flapping around in the sea, preferring to bide their time at the water's edge, waiting for fish to swim to them.

And, once again, there are the sea lions, which pirouette through the gentle surf, putting on a show for the mawkish tourists looking on from nearby pontoons. Albeit offering only a glimpse, this spectacle is what Galapagos is all about.

Adrift in the Pacific Ocean, hundreds of miles from mainland South America, Galapagos is one of the most biodiverse locales on Earth. This crucible of life has fascinated naturalists for centuries, and it's this rich history — not least its famous links to Charles Darwin — that gives the islands an extra dimension.

I discuss this with Klaus at Finch Bay, a secluded eco-hotel accessible only by boat. The lodge sits outside Puerto Ayora and overlooks a small, sandy beach surrounded by mangroves, which chirp with the sound of finches and from which the hotel takes its name.

We sit next to the pool and order beers. A font of information, Klaus has spent decades in the field, leading tours in the Amazon, Andes and Galapagos Islands. He hung up his guiding boots a few years back and now creates itineraries for the tour operator, Metropolitan Touring. Occasionally he comes out of guiding retirement; luckily for me, this is one of those occasions.

As the sun falls towards the horizon, Klaus sips his beer and reminds me about Darwin's visit to Galapagos in 1835, during which he famously developed his theory of evolution. But human presence in Galapagos was established long before the British naturalist arrived — Floreana Island even had a post office, by which I mean a rusty oil drum put there by US whalers. As Klaus explains, "Whaling ships would be out here for years, so when they passed Floreana they put their mail into the barrel," says Klaus. "When one of the boats was going back to the US, the crew would empty the barrel and take the mail home. They called it Post Office Bay — you can still post letters there."

As well as picking up the mail, whalers would hunt tortoises on Floreana. Highly valued by sailors, they could live for years in the hold of a ship and provide a continuous supply of fresh meat on lengthy voyages. Sadly, these creatures are now extinct from Floreana. They perished in 1820, when crewmembers of the ill-fated whaling vessel, *The Essex*, started a fire on the island, which burnt out of control.

The pyros got their just deserts however. Soon after, an angry sperm whale sunk their vessel, forcing them to abandon ship. They floated helplessly for months in lifeboats, resorting to cannibalism to survive.

“They drew straws to see who would become food for the rest,” says Klaus, grimly. “And then they drew straws to decide who would kill that person.” Of the 20 crewmembers only two survived: the captain, George Pollard, and deckhand, Charles Ramsdell. They were found gnawing their shipmate’s bones by another whaling vessel off the coast of South America. It is their story which inspired Herman Melville’s seminal novel, *Moby-Dick*.

Darkness is beginning to fall. We order more beers and watch a lava heron stalk the night. Endemic to Galapagos, these birds are nocturnal and appear highly intelligent: they’ve been observed using insects as bait to catch fish. “Incredible,” says Klaus, appreciatively.

He smoothly moves the subject from herons back to humans, explaining how Galapagos was annexed by Ecuador in 1832 and turned into a penal colony. “The worst thing that could happen to an Ecuadorian was to come here,” he says. “Now it’s a treat.”



Windy South Plaza. Image: Getty

## Reef encounter

Next morning, I'm stirred by fresh rays pouring through my window, inviting me outside to the beach, which I have all to myself. As I walk along the sandy shore, Galapagos comes to life. Frigate birds glide above me, flashing their scarlet breasts, while mockingbirds sing from the mangroves. Contrary to popular belief, it was the Galapagos mockingbird that most influenced Darwin's theory of evolution, not the finches that unjustly take his name.

Klaus and I take breakfast with the fraudulent and scavenging birds, before hopping aboard a boat bound for Carrion Point. But there's nothing dead about this limpid lagoon. In fact, it teems with life, which we immerse ourselves in on a snorkelling expedition.

Though Galapagos straddles the equator, the cool, Antarctic waters, which are brought here on the Humboldt Current, are too chilly to support coral reefs. But, as Klaus likes to remind me, cool waters are rich waters, which is why marine life is so abundant here.

I fill my lungs with air and dive down to the rocky reef below. Holding my breath, I watch giant parrotfish hovering the seafloor, schools of surgeonfish gliding through the water and myriad other species skulking around the reef.

"Shark," someone shouts, as I surface. The sharks in Galapagos are friendly to humans, Klaus tells me, so I plunge my head back into the water, scan the sea and watch the whitetip reef shark swim towards me.

Though I trust Klaus, I feel uneasy as its menacing form glides beneath me, but in spite of my fear, it's hard not to be awed by the creature's dangerous beauty. It disappears, as quickly as it arrived, and is replaced by a sea lion, which dances around us in what could be a carefully choreographed routine.

Back on the boat we sail out of the lagoon and into choppy seas, where I spot the spray of a distant whale rising from the waves. We drop anchor at South Plaza, a rugged, uninhabited island where the wind hisses through cacti like a child whistling through gap teeth. You have to watch where you walk here: the resident iguanas blend in with the undergrowth and are completely unfazed by humans. You could easily tread on one.

With no predators to speak of, the wildlife in Galapagos has evolved to be fearless, which is why you can get so close to it — close enough to smell the sea lions of South Plaza, whose pungent poo has stained the island white. The marine iguanas seem immune to the acrid odour: crammed onto the whiffy rocks, they sit sunning themselves and spitting saltwater.

I join them, watching Galapagos shearwaters patrol the cliffs and blue-footed boobies diving for fish. "Look, a ray," shouts Klaus, from the cliff edge. I tiptoe through the iguanas and join my excitable guide, who's pointing out to sea. I follow his finger and spot the manta ray, which glides, like a magic carpet, through the waves before sinking into its miraculous, underwater world.



Adriamo Cabrera testing the potency of his moonshine. Image: Gavin Haines

### **Morning moonshine**

You know it's going to be a long day when you're doing shots for breakfast, but that's exactly how the next morning begins. "It's all organic," says Adriamo Cabrera, as he tops up my glass. I smile uneasily; it's 9.30am.

Adriamo is a local farmer whose modest smallholding nestles in the misty highlands of Santa Cruz. It smells of burning wood and sodden earth up here and pitter-patters with the sound of raindrops splashing on banana leaves. We shelter from the downpour in a wooden outbuilding, where Klaus points out a barn owl nesting in the rafters. I look up at the napping owl, still wincing from the last shot. Boozing and birdwatching; now that's a combination I haven't tried before.

Though Adriamo cultivates bananas, nuts and coffee, his top crop is sugar cane, which he turns into molasses and a potent moonshine that fuels many of Puerto Ayora's parties. Travellers venturing to Adriamo's farm can also enjoy a taste of local life and a tour of his distillery.

"This extracts juice from the sugar cane," explains Klaus, translating Adriamo's words for me. "It's powered by his donkey." Pulling a giant lever, the mule walks endless laps of the archaic contraption, while Adriamo feeds sticks of sugar cane into the machine.

"And this controls the donkey," jokes Klaus, as Adriamo picks up a TV remote. We all fall about laughing. The booze has definitely kicked in.

The highlands of Santa Cruz are also a sanctuary for the Galapagos tortoise. This giant reptile has become the poster child for these islands, thanks largely to the Charles Darwin Foundation, which has adopted it as its emblem. Scattered through the undergrowth like giant boulders (and moving about as quickly), their hulking size and glacial pace make them the easiest creatures to observe here. Rarely have I photographed such docile subjects. And rarely has my imagination been so fired up by an animal.

The tortoises are capable of living up to 170 years. As I look at them, I wonder what the world was like when they were born. Had the American Civil War ended? Had automobiles been invented? Was Queen Victoria on the throne? It boggles my mind. But then lots of things boggle my mind about the Galapagos. It's a land of many miracles: approximately 80% of its birds and 97% of its mammals and reptiles are endemic species.

Their descendants drifted here on flotsam, were blown here by trade winds, and have evolved to cope with the challenging conditions of this remote outpost.

They continue to face challenges. Humans have brought exotic species such as goats, rats and insects, which have distorted the fragile ecosystem of the islands. And although 97% of the archipelago is off-limits to development, tourism is fuelling a human population boom that some fear is unsustainable.

Nevertheless, UNESCO took Galapagos off its list of endangered sites in 2007 and many guides believe the archipelago is in rude health. "I started guiding in 1992 and the park is in a much better state now," says Klaus.

There are also signs that humans can be part of the solution, as I find out at the Charles Darwin Foundation in Puerto Ayora. Part funded by tourism, its scientists have pioneered a successful breeding programme for the critically endangered mangrove finch, which is being decimated by non-native parasitic flies. In charge of the breeding project is Francesca Cunninghame, whom I meet at the research station. Righting the wrongs of the past will be challenging, she says, but such successes offer hope.

Comprising 7,700sq km of protected ocean, Galapagos National Park is one of the largest marine reserves in the world. Few seas are so full of life. Whether you're beneath the waves, in the sky or on dry land, and whichever angle you view the islands from, it brings into sharp focus the marvels of the natural world — and your place within it. Striking a balance between conserving these precious islands and meeting the demands of a human population will always be a challenge here. It's the world in microcosm.

### Getting there

There are no direct flights to Ecuador from London, but KLM, Air France and Avianca fly there with just one stop. Flights to Galapagos depart daily from Quito and Guayaquil with Tame, LAN and Avianca.

Average flight time: 15h + 2h

### Getting around

Travel is heavily controlled in Galapagos. Only four of the 13 major islands are inhabited (Santa Cruz, San Cristobal, Isabela and Floreana) and you can travel between them using local ferries. There are around 160 approved visitor sites, which can be explored on registered vessels.

### When to go

Peak season is between June and December, which is when marine life is most abundant. Prices are higher during this time. Visit between January and May to see birds engage in mating rituals.

### Need to know

Visa: UK citizens don't require visas to enter Ecuador, but everyone must purchase a permit to visit Galapagos National Park, which costs \$100 (£66).

Currency: US dollar (\$). £1 = \$1.52.

International dial code: +00 593.

Time: GMT -7.

### More info

[ecuador.travel](http://ecuador.travel)

[darwinfoundation.org](http://darwinfoundation.org)

*Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands*, Lonely Planet guide, RRP: £11.85.

### How to do it

**Audley Travel** offer eight-day trips to Ecuador including flights, taxes, transfers, breakfasts, two nights in Quito and five nights at Finch Bay, from £3,785 per person (based on two sharing). Alternatively, Audley can substitute Finch Bay with a five-night luxury cruise around Galapagos, from £6,635 (full board, based on two sharing).