

Saturday 18 January 2020

The Daily Telegraph

# Cruise



A really wild show

*Cruise around the Galápagos Islands to see the natural world from a different perspective*



**ROOM FOR ONE MORE**  
Teresa has some downtime with a relaxed sea lion

never seen a bull come in," said one of the spotters on deck. "That's a pretty good start."  
Soon we were sliding into one of the ship's inflatable ribs and bound for North Seymour Island. Almost all our landings would be "wet" - which means nosing up to a beach in the inflatable and sliding your legs out over the edge. Within minutes of paddling ashore we encountered an enormous colony of mating frigate birds - their yellow (throat sacs) inflated a shameless love-heart red in an attempt to lure a mate. Frigates are such wonderful creatures that the two species use superlatives in their names to distinguish them. The "great" is overshadowed by the "magnificent". There was no doubting the magnificence of these *Fregata magnificens* but the stakes are high in the mating-season "chest off". After a couple of days rejected birds are forced to join another colony. Further along the walking trail the avian equivalent of *Love Island* was being played out by a pair of blue-footed boobies. This male, too, was desperate to impress. A flip-flap of plumage, shimmy to the left; shimmy to the right.

**ESSENTIALS**

An eight-night trip to Ecuador including two nights in Quito and six nights on board Santa Cruz II costs from £6,799pp. Includes international and domestic flights, transfers and Galapagos Park fees (020 7286 4646; theulimatravel.com.uk).

Seabirds filled the air. Nazca boobies, eyes masked as if ready for carnival, more petrels, shearwaters, waved albatrosses and several showers of dive-bombing boobies with powder-blue feet. Pacific-green sea turtles swam close to the water's surface. On rocky outcrops Sally Lightfoot crabs ran livid-orange rings around snoozing fur seals and streaked the ashen foreshore like splattered chicken korma. It was a neck-swivelling show requiring more than one pair of eyes. Still to come that morning was the first of two deep-water snorkels. Under the water I found a magical world of pirouetting penguins, inquisitive sea lions and slow-mo green turtles. Ordinarily you're lucky to catch a glimpse of a turtle's feet as it vanishes; here I could be blown on their noses. A chocolate-chip sea star, Pacific boxfish, blue-striped snapper and a guinea-fowl puffer barely got a look in as doe-eyed seal pups ducked and dived, their whiskers millimetres from my cheeks.



**A wildlife paradise... and so much more**

Nothing prepared Teresa Machan for the rugged, enchanting archipelago that is the Galapagos Islands, an entire ecosystem filled with fearless and fascinating creatures

**W**hen you grow up with a parent who is a teacher it is assumed you will breeze through their specialist subject with ease. My dad taught biology, and things started well. In my formative vocabulary butterflies weren't butterflies, they were *Lepidoptera*s and house flies were *Cyclorhaphans*. At school it was a different story. I cared more for poetry than photosynthesis and my GCSE biology result was shocking. Which is how it came to pass some two-and-a-half decades later, in the Galapagos Islands that dad was drawing bird beaks on a paper napkin over breakfast on board our expedition ship, Santa Cruz II. It was Darwin's theory for dummies in the world's best classroom. We were a couple of days into our cruise, but before flying to



A dragon-fruit dessert, above; the jumping Sally Lightfoot crab, below

the Galapagos we had spent a couple of days in the cloud forest half-way down the Andes. There, guided by rangers at Mashpi Lodge, we identified scores of brilliantly coloured tanagers, the birds that Darwin called finches, during his time in the Galapagos. Finches were the clincher for Darwin's study of adaptive radiation. Located 600 miles away, astride the equator, the Galapagos were far enough from mainland Ecuador to

discourage casual "visitors". But over their lifetime some species did make the journey. An iguana full of eggs may have stepped on a raft of leaves and watched in horror as the shore receded only to find itself, weeks later, washed up on an island shore. A rare storm may have blown an ancient ancestor of the Mashpi tanagers in the wrong direction. Landing in virgin territory, with no competitors, the island archipelago allowed each bird to exploit as many vacant habitats as possible. Variants evolved and by the time the Beagle arrived in 1835 with illustrators to sketch them, common ancestry was written all over the birds' beaks. After our brief stay in Quito, dad and I had followed the same route as Darwin's ancestral birds, flying 600 miles southwest of the

Frigate birds in full-on, red-throated mating mode, above Ecuadorian mainland to a tiny airport on Baltra for a transfer to our expedition ship, Santa Cruz II. Passengers are on board Santa Cruz II for one reason only: to explore the Galapagos. No amount of bingeing on *Planet Earth II* can prepare you for this archipelago. The Galapagos is as barren and inhospitable as it is enchanting. The daily schedule revolves around coastal excursions on inflatable ribs, or pangas. There is a no-key policy for cabin doors, desalination and water processing takes place on board, and paper is kept to a minimum. The WiFi worked and the food was healthy and varied. It was just time for a ship orientation and a briefing from expedition leader Mac before lunch. There would be no easing into our "new normal". Halfway through lunch word came that a whale had been sighted. Its flip-flopping tail indicated a male. "We've

In the cosy and informal Beagle dining room we helped ourselves to green plantain stuffed with shrimp, beef broth served with yucca, corn and lime and salmon cooked in a wine and caper sauce and served with crispy plantain. We sat with Claudia, a banker from Hamburg, who was on a sabbatical. Claudia had spent the previous week cruising islands in the east. "In two weeks you'll rarely see the same thing twice." The 50-cabin ship carries 90 guests; our group of 62 included an interesting mix of age groups and nationalities. A local student group had been invited on board by the ship's owner Metropolitan Touring to see for themselves why the world's travellers visit the Galapagos. As part of the island's sustainable tourism endeavours all guides are local. By giving them an understanding of the islands' complex ecosystems the hope is they will take an active role in its future.

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**GALAPAGOS**

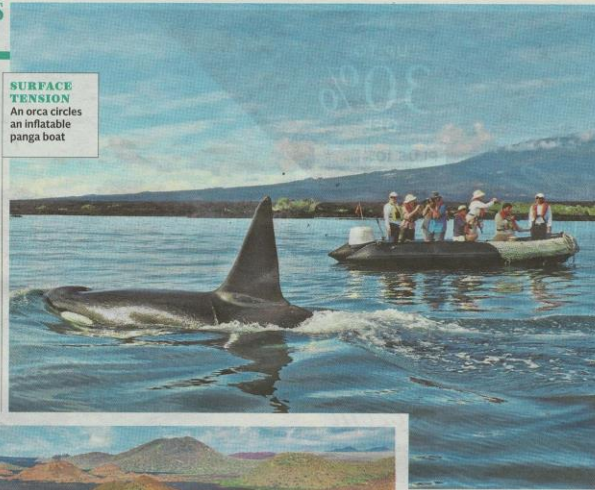
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Next morning I drew the curtains to find huge birds launching themselves, kamikaze style, into the water. Seconds later, as a black panga was winched past my window to the sea I attempted (briefly) to classify it. It was a side effect of being in the Galapagos - compulsive identification. My brain was struggling to catch-up. I felt like Edmund, crashing through the wardrobe into Narnia. We had anchored off Vicente Roca on Isabela where diverse bombing petrels would herald a spectacular day for wildlife. We boarded the pangas at 8am and had barely begun skirting Isabella's volcanic walls when a cry of "mola, mola!" about-turned us in the direction of a giant ocean sunfish. Then, remarkably, three orca came to play - one of them arcing mere feet from a panga.

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Wildlife isn't the only USP. The Galapagos is formed, and continues to be formed by volcanic activity. Repeatedly going by explosions the terrain presents itself in tubes, twists, cones and billowy plateaus of pillow lava. We found a wonderful

**SURFACE TENSION**  
An orca circles an inflatable panga boat



visiting these communities and using the restaurants, buses and bikes you are also supporting conservation," said Mac. "It means local communities don't have to hunt illegally for shark and turtle meat."



Pinacón Rock on island Santa Cruz, above; a Darwin's finch, right - the subject of many evolutionary studies

example of this on Fernandina, where our pangas nudged up at a small beach. An alpha male, honking like a donkey, reminded us this was seal territory. Wading inland through a mangrove swamp we arrived at the edge of a lava field which unfurled in sinewy rivers of pahoehoe (tropy lava). There was nothing for it but to jump across like an eight-year-old. "Ah, buenos días!" said Mac, as we approached a well-camouflaged pile of basking marine iguanas. Wearing their reptilian skin like chain mail, with a mohican of spines from nape to tail, it's not hard to see why Darwin called them "imps of darkness". With no natural predators to worry about the life of a marine iguana is... unharmed. Some foraging at low tide, a spot of sunbathing to warm up, a group hug - three, four, five in a pile - is about the sum of it. Then they simply lay there sneezing salt from their noses.



The lounge area in the five-deck expedition ship Santa Cruz II

**I found a magical world of pirouetting penguins and slow-mo green turtles**

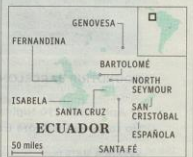
Fernandina would prove memorable too, for our only sighting of a Galapagos hawk. There are thought to be around 150 breeding pairs. Following a coastal path lined with Jerusalem thorn and prickly pear trees, we rounded a corner and there it was, perched on a branch and silhouetted against an apricot sunset. We returned to Santa Cruz II as high as kites. Evenings on board usually included a short pre-dinner talk or docu-film in the bar and a briefing for the next day. On our third evening Mac prepared us for some reverse culture shock on the island of Santa Cruz, the main tourist hub. "We're going to see people, cars and things like that," he said. In the past, itineraries focused almost entirely on the UNESCO-protected marine park. But five of the islands are inhabited and the Galapagos Parks Service has made good its promise to ensure the wider community benefits from tourism. Every cruise ship in the Galapagos must call at an inhabited island at least once a week. "By

Santa Cruz is the only island in the Galapagos where visitors can experience the higher elevations of the archipelago. Most of us opted for a bike ride - a gentle uphill cycle past sugar-cane fields to a small coffee plantation in the Highlands. Just as we'd had no soft landing on the first day, nature would continue to over indulge on our last. During the short panga ride to the first of three sites at Floreana we watched sea lions lolling down to the beach, marvelled at yet another balletic penguin and waded ashore through a school of barely-there stingrays whose wings merged perfectly into their sandy-bottom habitat. Our snorkelling site that afternoon, Champion Islet, is regarded as one of the best in the archipelago. That said diving and snorkelling in the Galapagos is not for the inexperienced. Currents can be strong and the water temperature in the cooler season hovers around 18C. Here, we used the current to our advantage, drifting back to waiting boats along the strapping wall of a volcanic cone with blue-chin parrotfish, white-tailed damselfish and surgefinch being charpered by king angelfish. That evening I felt relieved I wasn't doing a back-to-back cruise. I'd had several "I can die happy" moments underwater, and Dad was still talking about

A sun-basking Galapagos land iguana, right

**PLANNING YOUR CRUISE**

While it is possible to stay on one of the archipelago's inhabited islands (Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, or Isabela) and make day trips by boat, your wildlife viewing will be limited. Cruising makes light work of the 53,000 sq km park, but deciding where to go can still be a challenge. Most visitors can expect to see the prehistoric giant tortoise which could fill a Flat 600. Galapagos sea lions, boobies, bottlenose dolphins and marine iguanas. Other species are island specific. The waved albatross (also known as the Galapagos albatross) is found only on Española. The island-endemic Santa Fe land iguana occurs only on Santa Fe. Some species have limited distribution, including the red-footed booby (Genovesa, San Cristóbal and parts of North Seymour). The flightless cormorant is found only on Fernandina and the west coast of Isabela. Galapagos penguins can be seen on Isabela, Bartolomé and Fernandina. Be wary of packing in too much. Some itineraries cover two or three island groups in seven or eight days but may not give you the best experience. Others group the 13 main islands into geographical, bite-size itineraries (central, eastern, northern and western) of five or six nights, which can be taken back to back. For tips on planning, entry fees and park rules visit Galapagos.org.



the flirting boobies and majestic frigate birds. Overwhelmed by what I'd seen I simply wanted to savour it all. On the plane home there was one more "Galapagos moment" to come. Not long after take-off I dropped off and woke up in an animated film on the big screen TV. My brain defaulted to classification mode - of *Angry Birds*.