

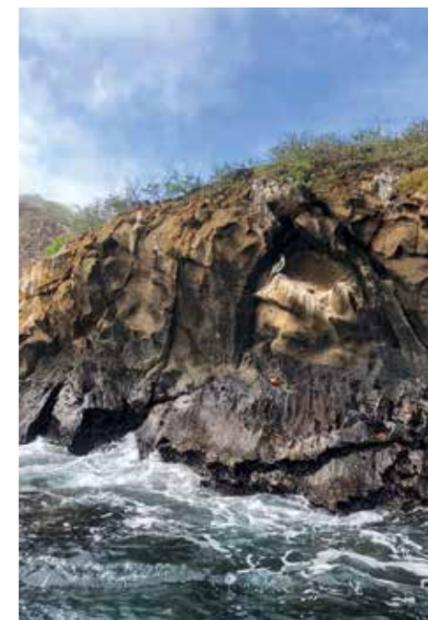
Nature at its absolute best



Sun-soaked and salty-skinned, we slip into the ultra-clear swells for our first snorkel of the expedition. Within seconds, I'm diving down to swim with a green turtle the size of an emperor bed. Minutes later, a curious sea lion bullets past us, playfully rolling and twisting through the current, calling us out for a race. I rise to the surface again and note the lone rocky outcrops in front of me. Their molten basalt ledges are camouflaged by a tangle of jet-black marine iguanas who are busy sunning themselves in the scorching midday blaze. The Galapagos Islands have been famed for their bounty of unique and diverse wildlife since Darwin's discoveries in 1835, but I never expected such a warm welcome from the locals on day one.

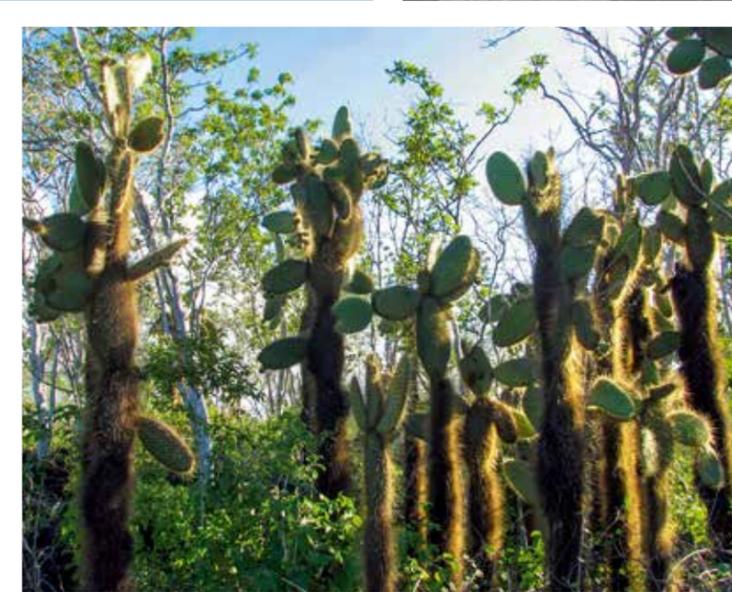
Here to experience the volcanic archipelago's Northern Islands itinerary, I'm staying aboard the luxuriously appointed La Pinta yacht for the next four nights. And it's already abundantly clear to see why this remarkable little pocket of the Pacific, which squats some 563 miles off the coast of mainland Ecuador, is firm bucket-list territory for so many.

Only here can you watch magnificent frigate birds soar overhead, their signature crimson-coloured pouches punctuating the cobalt-blue skyline, or casually



ISLAND HOPPING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF DARWIN

Dancing in the shadows with sharks and hiking the ropey lava flows of Ecuador's wild archipelago, Nicola Moyne discovers a world within itself in the Galapagos



PHOTOGRAPHY: UNSPLASH AND NICOLA MOYNE



HOW TO GET THERE

Rainbow Tours (www.rainbowtours.co.uk) offer an 11-night Ecuador & Galapagos itinerary incorporating stays at Casa Gangotena, Mashpi Lodge, Finch Bay and a four-night cruise aboard the yacht La Pinta from Dhs33,500 per person.

The price is based on two sharing, including accommodation with breakfast at Casa Gangotena and on full-board basis in all other locations, return international flights, all domestic flights, transfers and Galapagos National Park entry fees.

breaststroke beside the only penguins thriving north of the equator. And the fact that these islands' rich tapestry of endemic species have no fear of humans makes the experience of meeting them all the more magical.

Back aboard the stylish La Pinta, which features floor-to-ceiling windows in the bar, contemporary Scandi-style interiors, Le Cordon Bleu-standard cuisine and a top-deck hot tub, the group can't quite believe their luck. "I have never seen a turtle that big; did you see the two sea lions dancing? What about the white-tipped reef sharks – I can't believe how close we were," we chortle excitedly before getting ready for the afternoon hike. It's an orchestra of joy that continues for the entirety of the tour.

Setting sail from Santa Cruz, we stop to see the blue-footed boobies on Eden Islet dip and dive for their lunch, before hopping over to the whitewashed sands of Chinese Hat bay to count the saffron-stained Sally Lightfoot crabs expertly skimming the scorched, volcanic tuffs. We hike to the top of Bartolome Island to drink in 360-degree views from its long-deserted lighthouse, and marvel at the moonscape-like lava flows while snorkelling off Santiago Island.

As we sail to towards the sunken caldera of Genovesa for our final night, we spot a flock of pink flamingoes gracefully balanced in the shallow bays beyond, and drink sundowners while a pod of dolphins bow-ride with us in the surf below. Magical doesn't even begin to cover it.

Back on land, we check into Finch Bay Galapagos, the only design-led, beachfront hotel on Santa Cruz for two nights of some much-needed R'n'R. Our five days of coastal exploration have taken their toll and I literally sink into the massage bed as my muscles are kneaded into submission with a perfume of lavender oils.

Here, plush daybeds, boutique beach house interiors and hurricane-lamp lighting come as standard. I barely need mention the enormous marine iguana bathing himself by the pool.