

THE ENCHANTED ISLES OF THE GALAPAGOS

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Without warning, they are suddenly there, so alien and impossible. A school of hammerheads one hundred plus strong, like a wall of writhing barbwire, all angles and points. Beautifully sinister, hypnotic as they bend back and forth riding in on the sea wind, they surely must have come from the beyond. It's as if The Arch, 60 feet (18m) above, is a gateway from another world. Through its wave-blasted doors, all manner of marine wonders stream forth. Rivers of fish-- super-sized jacks and mirror-bright bonito tuna-- coursing through the blue. Dolphins and Silky sharks. Dozens of huge moray eels slithering about the reef. And of course 'Mr. Big' the whale shark, whose shadow eclipses all others, a regular visitor to Darwin Island. It's still early in my weeklong

August live-aboard tour on *Galapagos Sky*, but shocked and awed underwater, I've already promised myself that this won't be my last trip to Las Islas Encantadas, 'The Enchanted Isles' of the Galapagos.

Sure, Charles Darwin created all the early buzz on this incomparable archipelago 620 miles (1000km) west of South America's Ecuador. But it is today's adventurous scuba explorers, those fervently wishing natural selection had favoured them with real gills, who have taken this marine reserve viral in diving circles. Year after year, Galapagos is at the top of the world's best diving destinations lists. For some it's the high-voltage big animals encountered underwater. For others, the topside experience with fearless wildlife and evolutionary oddballs sets this place apart. For me, it's mixing it up with the menagerie of creatures large and small, temperate and tropical,

above and below the waves, all the while surrounded by smoldering volcanoes and surging seas. You just cannot help but feel part of the origin of life.

Centrally located Santa Cruz Island is the hub of tourism in the Galapagos National Park. It is homebase for a large fleet of boats specializing in naturalist trips, which offer hiking excursions throughout the Islands. Of course no expedition to the Galapagos would be complete without giant tortoises. The Galapagos themselves are named for this reptilian heavyweight (*galapago* is Spanish for tortoise) that can weigh some 500 pounds (225kg) and live to 150 years. Though you will see turtles (of the green sea variety) on nearly every dive in the Galapagos, your first meeting with the Islands' most famous animal ambassador will likely be at the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) in Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz.

Dive with Godzilla, in the Galapagos Islands!





CDRS started a captive breeding program in 1960, and with the help of concerted conservation efforts throughout the Islands, the gentle giants are steadily recovering from the brink of extinction. Tour the tortoise pens to view different subspecies hailing from various islands, noting differences in overall body size, carapace shape, and neck length-- a great example of evolution at work. Afterwards, drive up to the misty highlands in the island's interior to photograph wild tortoises lumbering through grassy fields and enjoying mud baths.

Though I'm usually only interested in blowing bubbles underwater, spending time tromping around Galapagos topside really helps make this trip extra unforgettable. At North Seymour Island, I find prehistoric marine iguanas crawling out of the ocean onto the lava rocks to soak

up the sun while land iguanas march across the path to climb trees and feed on the leaves. Proud male frigatebirds nestled in scrub inflate their shockingly red throat pouches trying to impress the ladies. I witness the mating maneuvers and fancy footwork of the blue-footed boobies staggering about as if drunk. The comical courtship antics of this charismatic bird with ridiculously blue feet-- lopsided high-stepping, contortionist yoga-like poses with wings raised sharply and back stiffly arched -- has me burning through digital film. Darwinian weirdness and wonder is all around me.

Spoiled for Choice

More than a dozen dive sites ring Santa Cruz and are visited by day boat dive operators out of Puerto Ayora. North Seymour and Gordon

I was missing the big picture, completely oblivious to the pelagic passersby over my shoulder

Rocks are both favoured for shark encounters with whitetips and hammerheads, and healthy throngs of grunts and goatfish. Mosquera's boulder piles are adorned with bushes of yellow black coral and orbited by schools of blue-striped snapper. On the sandy plain garden eels sway back and forth, and countless sea stars are littered about in artful disarray. Diamond and marble rays glide overtop. Though the land-based diving operations out of Santa Cruz will content some, hardcore members of the scuba tribe should book a multiday live-aboard cruise through

Top left: Black striped salema fish. Above left: A Galapagos Shark can grow up to 10 feet (3m) long. Middle: Scalloped hammerhead

the Islands. Most of these trips originate on San Cristobal Island in the southeast portion of the chain. This is where we board *Galapagos Sky*, our floating home for the week. Straight away we test the waters with a checkout dive at Isla Lobos and are given the perfect introduction to the local life aquatic, courtesy of a boisterous gang of sea lions who immediately take a liking to us.

Working our way northwest on the chart, we snorkel with Galapagos penguins off Isla Bartolome. Yes, penguins on the equator, thanks to the cold Humboldt current coursing up from the Antarctic. This is the most northerly penguin species in the world and endemic to the archipelago. Don't pity its inability to fly in air, because underwater it is a rocket ship, zipping about with frantic beats of powerful stubby

wings as it skillfully hunts baitfish. Chasing after these feathered diminutive dynamos leaves me completely knackered.

Bartolome also offers us a second way to stretch our legs. A short but steep hike up to the top of a craggy, dormant volcano rewards us with a breathtaking vista of Pinnacle Rock and an otherworldly tableau of lava fields and cinder cones. This is a postcard perfect view for fans of violent vulcanism and testament to the nature of the Islands' birth.

Cousins Rock

Nearby Cousins Rock is a great spot for underwater photographers to break out the macro lens. But be warned... it has big animals too! Cousins looks just like a shark's tooth from the air and is a small islet on the eastern side of Santiago Island. We dive along a terraced

A Galapagos sea lion and a manta ray, better make sure you take a wide angle lens!

ridge extending off the southern tip, beginning in 20 feet (6m) and eventually dropping to more than 100 feet (30m). This is a colourful site, especially on the eastern flank of the spur, with ledges covered in glowing yellow black coral, orange cup corals and sponges. Frogfish, longnose hawkfish, juvenile king angels, bravo clinids, blennies, flatworms, nudibranchs and octopus are just a sampling of the little beasties I spy here. Thankfully, we have the chance to dive Cousins twice, so I put the wide angle lens back on and focus on a school of barracuda, green sea turtles resting among black coral bushes, and the playful sea lions which are often present in the shallows on the western and northern sides of the rock. These aquatic puppy dogs are almost guaranteed to put on a performance. Some are even bold



enough to nibble on your fins. Though the refreshing 64°F (18°C) water at Cousins is undeniably a bit chilly, the marine life more than makes up for it. Punta Vicente Roca, on Isabela Island's northwest point, takes the pain for gain motif a step further. We drop down a wall so colourful it seems at odds with the bracing 59°F (15°C) temperature. In a rock pile at 75 feet (23m), our guide Edwin points out both red and yellow seahorses clinging to seafans. Showing his toughness, he then removes his glove and rests his hand on a rock, which entices goldsnouted red shrimp to scuttle out from the crevices and give him a manicure. A 20 inch (50cm)-long spotted horn shark catches my

Stunned by our good fortune, we respectfully keep our distance to avoid interrupting the cleaning behavior

Top: Everyone's favourite gentle giant. A Galapagos penguin. Above: Darwin's Arch, Darwin Island

eye, and I happily go to work taking photos. Until the mischievous sea lion which has been watching us from above suddenly swoops down into the picture and not ungently grabs the poor thing in its mouth, pulling it away by the tail. I laugh and curse at the same time. A moment later the pinniped prankster releases its chew toy and floats back up to the surface to breathe. Unharmful but no doubt perturbed, the shark settles back down onto the bottom.

I resist the urge to pester it further, and instead descend further with the group. The water is surprisingly clear at 100 feet (30m) deep-- perhaps 65 feet (20m) visibility-- affording a striking view of seafans and gorgonians in fiery hues along a rocky reef plunging even deeper. Hovering above is a huge ocean sunfish, Mola mola, the object of our dive in the ice box. Tilted upward, the six-and-a-half foot (2m) freak of nature is being cleaned by king angelfish and wrasses. Edwin had mentioned that those braving the cold might be lucky enough to encounter this weirdest of fish deep at this spectacular site, but I honestly had not expected to see

one. Stunned by our good fortune, we respectfully keep our distance to avoid interrupting the cleaning behavior. We shiver in amazement and appreciation until our computers tell us to head skyward. **Mobs of Mobula** Cabo Marshall, on the northeastern corner of Isabela Island, is a dive that, on an earlier Galapagos expedition more than ten years ago, taught me the wisdom in looking out into the blue. Mobs of fish swarming overtop the shallow reef had captured my full attention. Suffering from photographer's tunnel vision, my eye was locked onto the camera's viewfinder. But I was missing the big picture, completely

oblivious to the pelagic passersby over my shoulder. My wife had to practically slap me upside the head to get me turn around. Mobulas, mini manta rays 4 feet (1.2m) across, filled the water column, darkening the sea. I was so transfixed by the immensity of the school that I froze, then frantically fumbled my camera, almost missing the shot completely. It was one of those moments immediately seared into one's memory which remains crystal clear years later. Back on board, after calming down enough to speak coherently, we voted and the average estimate was three to four hundred mobulas. I've seen smaller schools here since that epic day, plus groups

Smoothtail mobula rays. Left: Marine iguana feeding on algae. Right: Mola mola hovering above a cleaning station waiting for a tidy up! of fifty hammerheads, schools of tuna, swirling tornadoes of salemo baitfish, and even a blue marlin! Cabo Marshall is also one of the best places in the Galapagos to see giant manta rays. On my last trip here, which was in April during the warmer 'manta season', I counted at least six different individuals on one dive. **Wolf and Darwin** As amazing as all of the action in the central islands may be, two rocks far to the north are all it takes to lure many seasoned divers back to the Galapagos over and over again. Wolf and Darwin Islands are the exclusive domain of live-aboards and considered advanced sites for



those who've logged enough time diving challenging conditions. Neatly summed up, these are two of the premier spots on Earth for divers seeking adrenaline overload in the midst of marine megafauna.

A long overnight steam has brought us more than 100 miles (160km) to the Landslide along Wolf's southern coast. The sea is a bit warmer (about 71°F/22°C) and bluer (visibility 50 feet/15m) than we've averaged in the central islands. There is a healthy current as expected, so we waste no time in dive-bombing down to the reef, where we promptly grab on to barnacle covered rocks. Yes, gloves are a diver's best friend in the Galapagos. The moray eels, on the other hand, not necessarily so. The reef is filthy with them, and I have to search for a handhold not already claimed by the overgrown, snaggletooth serpents.

Our eagle-eyed guide's rattle snaps me to attention, and I squint

into the still-dim early morning water. Spotted eagle rays, a squadron of eight, swoop in close and glide gracefully past. Before they're even out of range I hear squeaking, and of course, more rattling. Bottlenose dolphins zigzag towards us, showing off. The next 30 minutes pass all too quickly, with repeated eagle ray flybys, twenty hammers, wahoo, bigeye jacks and more.

Frenzied Drift

The peak for me, however, comes on the fourth dive of the day in late afternoon's gloaming hour, with light levels low and vis declining. The current has picked up, so we speedily drift over the shallow boulder field, enveloped in a frenetic mass of thousands upon thousands of plankton-picking red creolefish. Dozens of green jacks are dining, punching through the creolefish crowds. Marauders with a taste for fish flesh, they wreak havoc, tearing through the densely

Above: California sea lion. Top middle: The Galapagos Sky liveaboard. Right: Whitetip reef sharks resting in a cave

packed biomass. Upping the action another notch, Galapagos sharks join the fray. Serious sharks built for business, they are seven to ten feet (2-3m) long and girthy. They carve through the chaos, hidden from my view one second by the piscine blizzard, then appearing suddenly within arm's length when the scaled curtain parts. How many sharks are here? Five? Ten? More? Not knowing adds to the suspense, quickens the pulse. I love dives like this.

But I also like the Anchorage, where during a night dive on a sandy slope in 92 feet (28m) I photographed Wolf's most garish celebrity, the rosy-lipped batfish, a twisted misfit with a red-rimmed piehole. Exciting and rewarding, in a very different way.

Anything Goes

And then, of course, there is Darwin Island. 25 miles (40km) farther north, its position at the top of the Galapagos chain is well-

earned. There's really only one dive site, Darwin's Arch, but it's a keeper. Pretty much any pelagic can show up here. Be ready.

We are. Fully briefed, amped up, we take leave of the Galapagos Sky mothership and pile into the zodiacs. It's bumpy, blustery and whitecapping; wind and current fight each other as we near the drop zone. We're keen to escape the slop, so countdown and backroll into the briny depths. Before I'm clear of the bubbles, I can sense that the show has already begun.

We are directly overtop a school of steel pompano, flashing like jewelry polished bright. A wall of bonito tuna is below and just outside, with a few silky sharks patrolling the perimeter. Powering sideways across the current, we plummet like boobies after baitfish to reach the Theatre, a platform in 60 feet (18m) at the edge of the wall, which provides a panoramic view of the blue. Our shelf is currently occupied by two sea turtles being cleaned by a crew of barberfish, a dour-faced lunger of a scorpionfish and plenty of testy moray eels wandering about seemingly homeless. Lovely. Curious hogfish sidle in close, hoping my deathgrip on the reef dislodges a barnacle or two. A few Galapagos sharks watch my back from the reefslope. I'm in the thick of it.

A wall of bonito tuna is below and just outside, with a few silky sharks patrolling the perimeter

A Fitting Finale

The much anticipated rattling of our divemaster's annoying shaker is like the dropping of the flag for a Nitrox-fueled race. I launch into the blue, sidelong into the current, kicking for all I'm worth in hopes of riding, even if only for a second, the bow wave of the spotted submarine now materializing at the edge of visibility. The titan turns towards us. Time stops. I'm perhaps only five feet (1.5m) away, dwarfed by its presence. Making eye contact with a whale shark is an unexplainable thing, an out of body experience. What is it thinking? Why does a 43 foot (13m)-long fish have such a peculiarly small eye? Is it friendly?

Then reality rushes back into my brain. The current sweeps me along its flank, and the monolithic tail fin propels it beyond my ability. It disappears as quickly as it came.

Huffing and puffing, we make our way back to the rocks. I hunker down, daring to hope that I have chosen agreeable eels as reef roommates, and stare out into the blue of imagination. We wait. We wait for the next act to unfold. For something to come into being, to evolve. This is, after all, Darwin's laboratory, a cauldron of creation. There's no telling what magic will be served up next. []

GALAPAGOS TRAVEL INFORMATION

SEASONS: Galapagos is a superb year round destination. Conditions vary widely depending on location and season. January to May is the warm season with air temps 75 to 86°F (24-30°C), afternoon rain showers but also lots of sun. Seas are generally calm, vis 40 to 100 feet (12-30m), and water temps average 64 to 79°F (18-26°C). Some refer to this as the 'manta season', as divers see more mantas and other ray species at many sites. Hammerheads are common too, though sometimes a bit deeper. June to December is the cooler 'garua' season, drier but at the same time often overcast and misty, with air temps 64 to 75°F (18-24°C). Seas are rougher, water temps cooler (59° to 75°F/15-24C) and vis lower (16 to 65 feet/5-20m), but plankton means lots of big animals, including hammerheads, and a very high chance of whale sharks at Darwin.

CONDITIONS AND SKILL LEVEL: Diving is intermediate to advanced, due to cool water (even though you're on the equator), colder thermoclines, sometimes challenging visibility, and strong currents

and surge. This is not a beginner's dive trip! Dive within your limits. Pay close attention to dive site briefings and safety protocols before splashing, and follow your guides while submerged.

GEAR: Depending on the season, 5mm to 7mm full wet suits recommended, plus bring a hooded vest just in case. And gloves! Grabbing onto rocks to deal with current and surge is proper protocol here. Surface signaling devices are a must. SMBs on reels and Nautilus Lifeline radios are great ideas.

GETTING AROUND: With 125 craggy volcanic islands and islets, there's lots of territory to explore. Extended live-aboard expeditions are the optimal way to dive Galapagos, and the only way to get to Wolf and Darwin. Land-based diving ops are headquartered in Puerto Ayora.

TRAVEL REMINDERS: Canadian citizens need a passport, but no visa. There's a \$100 US cash-only National Park entry

fee, and a \$25-40 US departure tax leaving Ecuador. Fly from North America to Ecuador (either Quito or Guayaquil), then out to the Galapagos Islands to board your boat. Check with your boat for details. Pack lightly to avoid excess baggage charges.

ELECTRICITY: Same voltage, same plug as Canada/USA

CURRENCY: US dollar!

RECOMMENDED LIVE-ABOARD OPERATORS: www.galapagosky.com Galapagos Sky is a luxury live-aboard yacht with extensive experience cruising the Galapagos archipelago. www.aggressor.com Galapagos Aggressor III is a 100 foot (30m)-long luxury yacht with Master and Deluxe Staterooms available. Galapagos has been an Aggressor destination since 1993.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: www.ecuador.travel