



TRAVEL SPECIAL

# Galapagos Islands Pelagic partytime!

SCUBA Editor **Simon Rogerson** reports from the Galapagos Islands – can this legendary big fish destination live up to its reputation?

You know those documentaries where the crew has a week to film some rare beast, and they keep you waiting right until the last few minutes? Well, this is not one of those stories, because on our first dive of our first day at Wolf Island, the water was alive with scalloped hammerhead sharks.

The current came in unpredictable gusts that threatened to blow us off the sloping reef, and the sharks kept a wary distance from the melee. But even in the milky blue haze of the thermocline I could make out their ghostly shapes receding into the void.

Gradually, the other divers began to surface in buddy pairs as their gas ran low, leaving me with my buddy Sophie Rennie and our guide, Max. Just as I thought the action was over, Max pointed below us, to where a dense group of sharks was approaching.

I was in prime position just as the sharks drifted past, some trying to slow down as a squadron of barberfish billowed out to offer their cleaning services.

For a few unknowable moments I was in the middle of a hammerhead school, barely able to decide which way to point my camera as the sharks converged on me. It had been a decade since my last visit, and already Galapagos had delivered a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

## A tale of two weeks

The photos on these pages were taken on two back-to-back weeks on the Galapagos Sky liveaboard, which took place in February this year. I wanted to go for two weeks partly because it's such a long way to go for just six days of diving, but also because no two trips are ever the same in Galapagos, where ever-changing currents dictate the action. The 'Sky' is a beautifully appointed liveaboard in the classic style – lots of gently creaking teak, a cushion-strewn saloon and an expansive sundeck where you can lie back on hammocks and watch frigate birds swooping overhead. »

Below: A marine iguana feeding on algae at Cabo Douglas

Inset: Marine Iguanas at Santa Cruz



This is a story of two weeks in which the sites revealed their different aspects as the currents shifted from south to north. For the first week I was joined by my friend Sophie, a National Instructor, while for the second I buddied up with various members of Kingston and Elbridge BSAC, who were on a grand tour of central America. They were superb company and greatly enhanced my enjoyment of the trip.

After an uneventful buoyancy check dive at *Los Lobos*, we sailed to *Isla Pinzon*, which offers a great introduction to the type of diving you do in the southern islands of Galapagos. Although the water was cool (about 23°C) and relatively dark, there was plenty to see, including a vast school of striped salemas and the endemic yellowtail surgeonfish. The

reef itself was dominated by forests of black coral and draped with various sponges, home to smaller fish such as triplefin blennies and longnose hawkfish.

As we neared the corner of the reef, the current took hold and swept us over the top with unexpected violence. Holding my camera out of harm's way, I clung to the rock, but it was so strong it effectively pinned us into one place, all the while surrounded by a swirling school of salemas. On the second week I braced myself for more of the same, but the dive concluded with a sedate drift.

Later, we visited Cousin Rock, where you can see anything from schooling barracuda to seahorses. On the first week I set up my camera to shoot the resident white-tip reef sharks, but I was swimming past all sorts

- Below: Bartolome Island
- Right: Giant tortoise, Santa Cruz island



of interesting smaller animals, including the intensely colourful Galapagos barnacle blenny.

That's the slight downside of the Galapagos having such attention-grabbing megafauna – you tend to ignore all the beautiful life on the reef. So for the second week's visit to Cousin Rock, I went in with a macro lens to capture the pretty blennies and the endemic hawkfish, finding one nestled against a cushion star.

Picked up by the ever vigilant Zodiac driver, Willie, we were taken back to the Sky, where the crew were as usual on hand to welcome us with warm towels, hot drinks and freshly baked pastries. The level of pampering on Galapagos Sky verges on the ridiculous,

but I didn't hear anyone complaining. Treats consumed, we secured our kit for the 100-mile journey to the northern islands.

**Wolf and Darwin – the end of the map**

We enjoyed the best hammerhead action at Wolf, the first of the two remote northern islands on the Sky's itinerary. Beyond Wolf, there is the northernmost of the archipelago, Darwin Island. Both are characterised by steep cliffs and absolutely nowhere to land a vessel. They are primordial, untouched places; unpopulated and unspoiled both above and below the water.

Our liveaboard reached Wolf early in the morning, slowing to a reverential chug as we emerged from

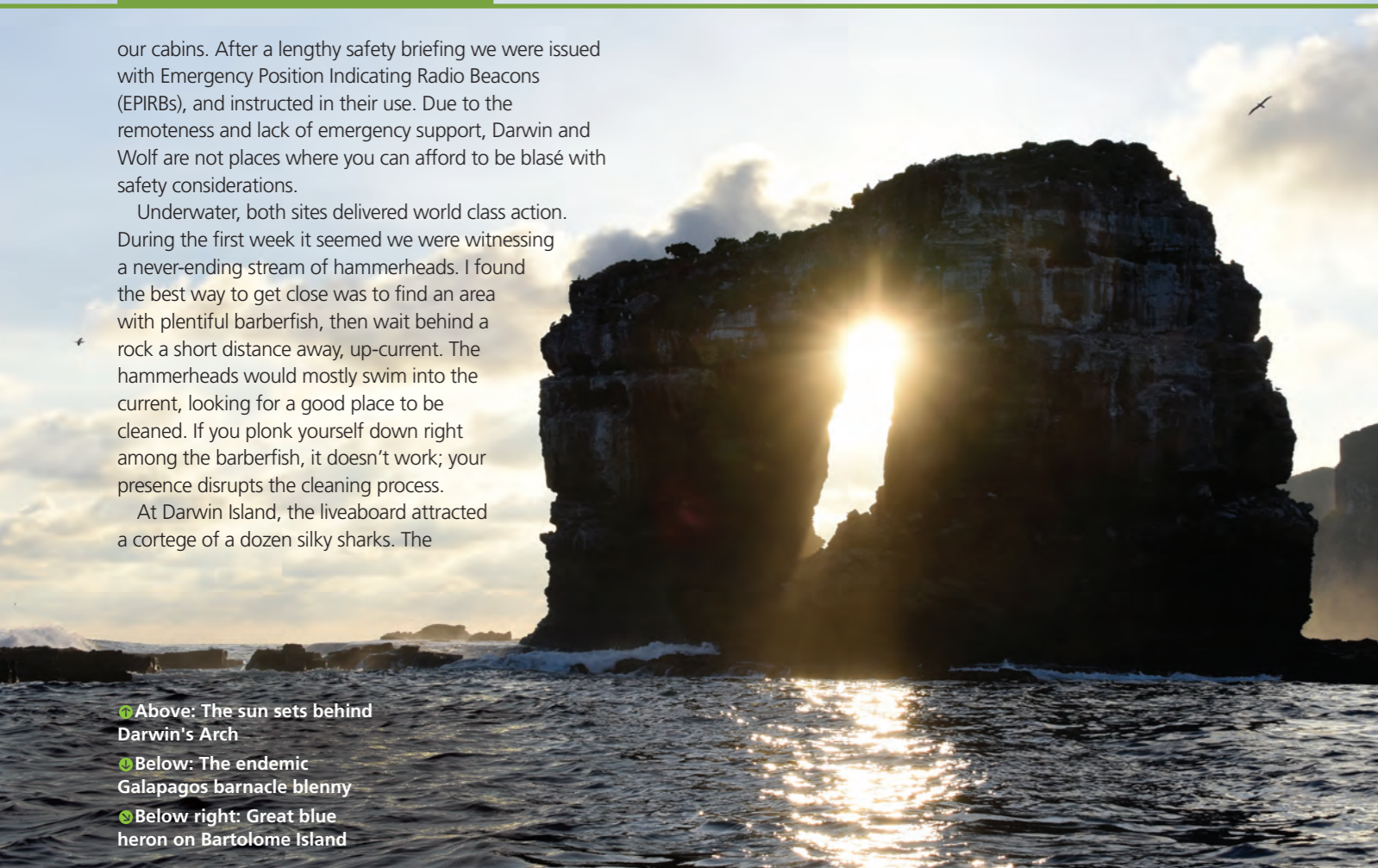
- Above: Striped salemas school at Cabo Douglas
- Below left: *Tubastrea* sun corals are common in the southern Galapagos
- Below right: Yawning scorpionfish



our cabins. After a lengthy safety briefing we were issued with Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs), and instructed in their use. Due to the remoteness and lack of emergency support, Darwin and Wolf are not places where you can afford to be blasé with safety considerations.

Underwater, both sites delivered world class action. During the first week it seemed we were witnessing a never-ending stream of hammerheads. I found the best way to get close was to find an area with plentiful barberfish, then wait behind a rock a short distance away, up-current. The hammerheads would mostly swim into the current, looking for a good place to be cleaned. If you plonk yourself down right among the barberfish, it doesn't work; your presence disrupts the cleaning process.

At Darwin Island, the liveboard attracted a cortege of a dozen silky sharks. The



📍 Above: The sun sets behind Darwin's Arch

📍 Below: The endemic Galapagos barnacle blenny

📍 Below right: Great blue heron on Bartolome Island



immediate proposal was to try and dive with them, but we were anchored in a three-knot current. Instead, we went to Darwin's Arch, an iconic feature situated atop an outlying pinnacle.

Careful dive planning is essential here, as the site has a treacherous shallow area with swirling eddies and crashing waves. Sticking to the brief, we carried out several successful dives and enjoyed encounters with more hammerheads, schools of tuna and jackfish, some big green turtles, bottlenose dolphins and untold thousands of creole fish. The sheer density of life here is almost beyond compare.

📍 Above: Fan corals at Cousins's Rock

📍 Left: Galapagos penguins resting

📍 Below: Bannerfish cleaning a hammerhead at Wolf Island





On the second week the current had shifted to the north. The action seemed to have cooled down at Darwin, so we tried a dive under the boat with the silky sharks. Some determined souls clung gamely to the line, but with my big camera I was helpless in the face of the current. I abandoned the dive almost immediately and surfaced to the grinning Zodiac driver, who had clearly seen it all before.

### Holy mola!

After a second stint at Wolf, we headed south on another overnight cruise, making anchor at Cabo Douglas on the western side of Fernandina Island. It was a much anticipated stop, as the boat is licensed

to carry out a morning dive with the marine iguanas. This is a big deal – I had visited Galapagos on two previous occasions and diving with the iguanas was never permitted.

Each morning, the iguanas take a few hours to warm up, then head into the water, where they graze on bright green algae. You have to allow them a bit of space, as they only have a short window in which to feed before their blood temperature falls and they have to leave the water and resume basking.

The dive takes place in the swelly shallows, where the iguanas cling on while munching determinedly at the algae. The viz is fairly awful... but it's an opportunity to witness the behaviour of one of the planet's most intriguing animals, a jungle iguana which has somehow adapted to life on a remote volcanic island.

The other highlight of the southern islands was Punta Vincente Roca on Isabela, where the reef provides a cast of critters attracted by the cooler currents. The stage was set for a particularly big beast, the Mola mola or oceanic sunfish, which visits to be cleaned by hogfish.

The water was the coldest of the trip at about 19°C; as I peered below I couldn't really imagine a sunfish appearing amid this chilly gloom. But after a while Max pointed down excitedly, and I could make out the shadowy outline of something very big indeed.

Max motioned us to descend, and I did my best to be stealthy. However the darkness and depth had got to me; I fluffed my buoyancy and ended up practically on top of one of the Mola (there were two!); so close that it gave me a dirty look and swam off, followed by its partner.

I half expected a lynching on the Zodiac by the time I surfaced. As it happened, there had been some other drama on the dive and my errors had gone largely unnoticed.

I made my apologies anyway, and resolved to keep my wits about me on the second dive.

Sure enough, we came across another in the process of being cleaned, and this time I remembered to keep calm. We edged ever closer, watching the great fish adopt a vertical position as hogfish worked across its flanks, hoovering up the parasites. It wasn't the biggest sunfish in the world (about 2.5m in diameter), but it was undeniably impressive, holding its position in the current with barely perceptible movements of its fins.

The Mola provided a fitting climax to my Galapagos adventure. The following day would bring a hike up the hill at Bartolome Island, followed by a dive with stingrays, mating pufferfish and more white-tip reef sharks. But Punta Vicente Roca provided one of those unique experiences that put Galapagos in a league of its own.



To be able to visit the Galapagos and dive the fabled northern islands was an incredible privilege; to be able to do so in such comfort made it even more special. Diving these waters would have been a completely different proposition without the crew of Galapagos Sky, who work incredibly hard to make the guests' life as easy as possible. Their efforts ensured that we experienced an inspirational place in safety and comfort. •

• Below left: Kingston and Embridge BSAC depart for their shakedown dive

• Below: A Mola mola being cleaned by hogfish

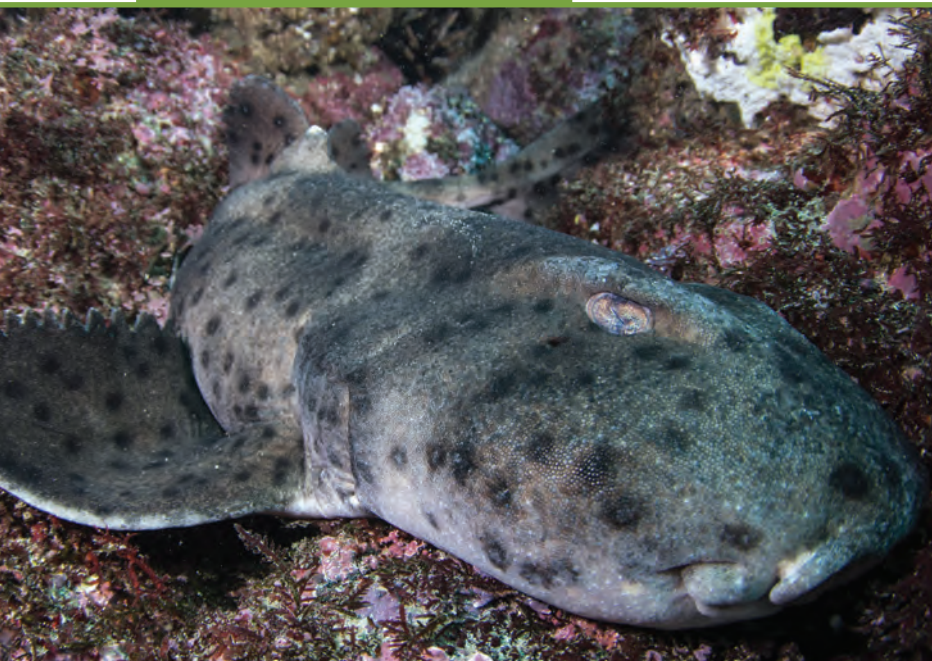
• Bottom: A large Galapagos shark at Wolf Island



• Above: Eye to eye with a green turtle

• Below: A coral hawkfish rests against a sea star





📍 Above: Galapagos bullhead shark at Punta Vicente Roca

📍 Above right: BSAC's Sophie Rennie meets a Galapagos sealion

📍 Below: Scalloped hammerhead portrait, Wolf Island



## Essentials

**GETTING THERE:** The initial dilemma is whether to overnight at the Ecuadorian capital, Quito or the coastal city of Guayaquil. There's more to see around Quito, but flights can be delayed due to fog. I flew to Guayaquil via Madrid on Iberia and its partner airline Latam. You overnight on the Ecuadorian mainland, then there's a short flight to Galapagos the following morning. Budget around £1,000 for the flights.

**WHEN TO GO:** The best time to go is August to November, when there are whale sharks in the north (I went in February). There are two seasons: the wet season from January through June, and the dry season from July through December, but the diving is excellent year-round.

**WETSUITS:** Water temperatures fluctuate by site. During the wet season you can expect 20-27°C, while during the dry season it's more like 19-23°C. The sites in the south are the coldest, while Darwin and Wolf are a few degrees warmer. A 7mm with hood and gloves is ideal for most. Gloves are essential, as you will often be gripping jagged volcanic rock.

**LIVEABOARD:** M/V Galapagos Sky info@galapagosky.com (305) 262-3483. Deluxe cabins are \$5,895 per person. Master cabins are \$6,095 per person.

**TOUR OPERATOR:** Dive Worldwide offers a week on Galapagos Sky from £6,395 per person, including seven nights in a deluxe cabin. Price includes all flights from the UK, transfers and Guayaquil accommodation. Web: diveworldwide.com Tel: 01962 302087.

**HOTELS IN ECUADOR:** I recommend the Holiday Inn at Guayaquil Airport for arrival. It's so close you can wheel your luggage there. For variety on the way back, try the Unipark Hotel, www.uniparkhotel.com located across a square from Guayaquil's cathedral.

