

Trip Review



Galapagos Wildlife Odyssey

A JOURNEYS Trip Review

By Joan Weber

Will and I joined twelve clients in June for a Galapagos cruise on the Eric. Will had been to the Galapagos a year earlier and was eager to return. I had never been and I was especially pleased that I could go with Will. I'd traveled a fair amount in Latin America, but I'd never lived on a boat. I was thrilled at the prospect of experiencing what so many had told me was awesome, but I was nervous about seasickness.

Weather doesn't vary much in the Galapagos. It's actually a dry climate, and fairly warm year-round – although June is the beginning of a windy season called La Garua when a cool mist settles over the islands for part of the day. There were definitely periods when we were happy to have fleeces or windbreakers.

We flew from Detroit to Guayaquil, Ecuador via Houston. We were met in Guayaquil and transferred to a very comfortable hotel that presented a fabulous breakfast buffet the next morning – tropical juices and fruits, cheeses, meat, yogurt, and egg dishes to order. Then we transferred to the airport again for our flight out to the Galapagos. We were on a 737 I think, and it was full. The flight was about an hour. I sat next to a small young Indian woman with jet-black hair who was even more excited than I was on touching down. It turns out that she was a student, studying to be a naturalist. The airport was small, and a frenzy of arriving and departing tourists, but our Ecoventura guide,



Orlando, did an excellent job. He rounded up the 14 of us and all our luggage, got us onto an awaiting bus, and took us to the harbor where motorboats took us out to our ship. Ecoventura owns three matching boats that cruise together, but we immediately bonded with the Eric and our crew – Captain Johnny, two naturalists, Hugo the barman-waiter, our two panga boat drivers (Jorge 1 and Jorge 2) and our young, good-looking, ultra enthusiastic and talented chefs. The routine was established easily: evening briefings on the next day's islands with instructions on how to prepare (it was essential to know if it was a wet or dry landing) and whether we needed our wetsuits and snorkel gear. Then, like in a dream, one day folded into the next as we explored the different islands. Some were flat with wide beaches, some were covered with black boulders, some defined by volcanic mountains, and each offered distinct wildlife.

There was a moment on our second island, N. Seymour, when I was overcome with the surrealness of the scene. It was a sandy, windswept island of low brush. We divided into two groups, as we always did, one group with Orlando, the other with jovial Juan Carlos, and one group went left and the other went right to circumnavigate the island. We could actually keep each other in view as we got further apart, as more and more of the sea of brush divided us. I almost stepped on a blue-footed booby and her chick right on the trail, and I noticed how huge the frigate birds were as they landed three feet from me on the scrub. Their cheerful red balloon pouches disappeared when they landed and instead I saw their menacing, hooked beaks. I saw more big brown frigate birds, and then more, and what I had thought was all scrub came alive with movement. The more I looked, the more frigates and boobies I saw – like staring at a night sky eventually reveals more and more stars. I saw booby nests and chicks of all sizes on the ground, and frigate nests and babies at my shoulder level. I said to Will, "I feel like I'm walking in a diorama at a Natural History Museum!"



This happened again on Fernandina Island with the land iguanas and again on Isla Lobos with the sea lions. So many of them, so oblivious to us. But I'd have to say my favorite moment was when I was alone in the underwater silence, floating effortlessly in my wetsuit, allowing the gentle waves to push me a little this way, a little that way. I had my arms out to my sides and my feet spread slightly. Directly underneath me in my shadow, I noticed a turtle almost my size, and she was doing exactly as I was: allowing herself to be rocked by the sea.



I appreciated that the trip allowed for moments of solitude while at the same time offering an easy camaraderie. There were generally two shore landings a day, and one or two opportunities to snorkel either from the panga in deep water or from the beach. There were a few long hikes, but nothing was mandatory; it was possible to stay behind. We could also rise early and watch the moon set and the sun rise, or stay up later and view the stars. Exquisite meals appeared magically three times a day – all we had to do was say, "Gracias!"

In reflecting on the experience and how it met my expectations, I observe with relief that seasickness was not an issue for any of us. Some wore patches or wristbands with pressure point buttons, some took the occasional Dramamine, but everyone agreed when all was said and done that we were just fine.

Personally, I found the trip to be one of the most relaxing and least stressful of all Journeys trips, while at the same time presenting a continuous lineup of storybook experiences. It's humbling to enter an environment where animals rule and humans are irrelevant. My advice to others is, if you're tempted to do this but have some fears, let me hear them. I'm fairly certain I'll be able to reassure you.