

Sea lion pups on the island of Espanola  
await their mother's return from the sea.



Galapagos Tortoise



Sally Lightfoot Crab



Land Iguana



Astronaut Buzz Aldrin once described Bartolome Island's barren landscape as more like the moon than any place on Earth.

In the Galapagos, outdoor  
and wildlife enthusiasts  
find natural treasures.

# Island Paradise



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEBBRA DUNNING BROUILLETTE

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**Bright blue webbed feet** were lifted high, one foot, then another, as the male booby bird strutted his stuff, part of an elaborate mating dance. The bluer the feet, the likelier a booby will be considered a catch in the seabird world. Just yards away, a blue-footed booby mom stood up to adjust the egg underneath her while her assumed mate sat motionless on a rock near the nest. We walked within a few feet of him, stopping to take photos and marveling at his apparent fearlessness of humans.

Nearby, a pair of waved albatrosses performed their own courtship ritual, bending, nodding, then clacking their bills together like fencers in a love match. Our naturalist guides told us Espanola, the oldest of the Galapagos Islands and southernmost among this archipelago's 19 islands, is the only place in the world where waved albatrosses breed. Just as astonishing is the fact that the highest number of endemic species is found here, meaning their habitat is restricted to Espanola.

Located approximately 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands, protected as a national park since 1959, are home to nearly 2,000 unique animal and plant species. The islands were made famous by Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which outlined his theory of evolution. One of the best ways to experience the Galapagos is aboard a small expedition yacht. I took the *Flamingo I*, a 20-passenger, 83 foot yacht, operated—along with its identical twins *Eric* and *Letty*—by tour company Ecoventura.

Punta Pitt, a volcanic rock formation that serves as a nesting site for many sea birds, is visited aboard motorized Zodiacs.



## Wondrous Wildlife

Upon our landing at Punta Suarez on Espanola's western coastline, brightly colored Sally Lightfoot crabs scrambled across black rocks as our group disembarked from two inflatable Zodiacs that had transported us the short distance from the anchored *Flamingo I*. Our first encounter was with a sea lion mother nuzzling her newborn pup, its placenta still visible beside them.

Marine iguanas, sometimes called Christmas iguanas because of their unique red-and-green markings, congregated in piles as we made our way down the path. The only sea-going lizards in the world, marine iguanas live on land and enter the water to feed on seaweed and algae. As we stopped to observe masked Nazca booby birds nesting a bit closer to the coastline, past their blue-footed cousins, Galapagos lava lizards sunned themselves on the rocks.

Back on the yacht, we gathered for lunch, shared photos and marveled at all we'd seen before retreating to our cabins for a short siesta. But the day's adventures weren't over. A couple of hours later, we arrived at Gardner Bay, a lengthy strand of fine, white sand that is home to a large colony of sea lions. While we tried to keep a distance of a few feet, it was, at times,



Waved albatrosses breed only on Espanola Island.



Ecoventura's three yachts, each with a capacity of 20 passengers, depart weekly from San Cristobal.



practically impossible to do. Like the birds at Punta Suarez, the sea lions seemed oblivious to the human visitors walking among them.

On Bartolome Island, after a Stair-master-like climb up 360 wooden steps to the summit of a once-active volcano, we were rewarded with a view of the island's barren landscape, once described by astronaut Buzz Aldrin as more like the moon than any place on Earth. The panorama is punctuated by an eroded tuff cone formation called Pinnacle Rock, the site of our afternoon snorkeling excursion.

By the time we returned to San Cristobal Island for our flight back to Guayaquil, Ecuador, we had snorkeled numerous times, trekked through the highlands to encounter giant Galapagos tortoises in their natural habitat, and spotted Galapagos penguins, flamingos, frigate birds and many others found only on these remote islands.

### Floating Hotels

Ecoventura's three yachts depart weekly from San Cristobal, offering two seven-night itineraries, which cruise through either northern or southern portions of the Galapagos. Each visits 12 sites on six islands. Because of their small size and maximum 20-passenger capacity, Ecoventura yachts are allowed to visit certain sites larger vessels are not. Comfortable cabins, surprisingly good meals, a congenial crew and knowledgeable naturalist guides—one for every 10 passengers—combine to create an unforgettable week.

### Planning Your Trip

To learn more, call (800) 633-7972 or visit [www.ecoventura.com](http://www.ecoventura.com). For trip-planning assistance, contact a local AAA Travel agent or visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

H&A

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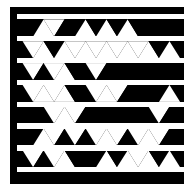


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