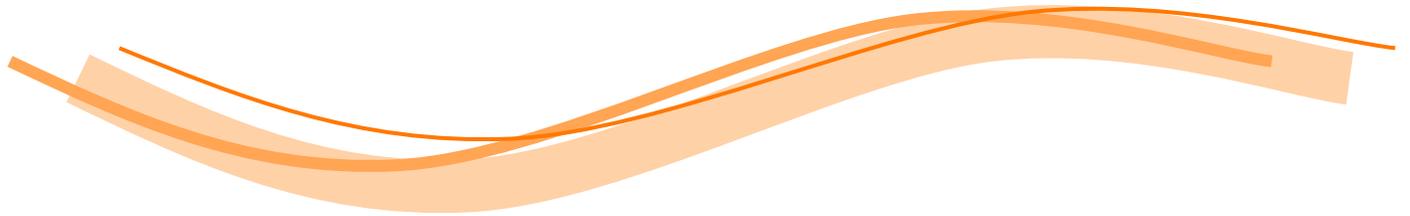




THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS





GALAPAGOS

The Galapagos Islands are a far-flung archipelago, 1000 kilometres off the coast of Ecuador, and they are a “bucket list” destination for many travellers. The islands are famous as the place where Charles Darwin’s ideas of evolution took wing following his visit there aboard the Beagle in 1835. Today’s visitors can follow in his footsteps and still experience the same wildlife encounters that sparked the huge scientific leap forward embodied in his book "The Origin of Species".

The Galapagos Islands are located at the meeting of three ocean currents, which also makes it one of the world’s richest marine ecosystems. These processes, together with the extreme isolation of the islands, led to the development of utterly unique plant and animal life – such as marine iguanas, flightless cormorants, giant tortoises, huge cacti, endemic trees and the many different subspecies of mockingbirds and finches – all of which inspired Charles Darwin and continue to be studied by scientists and admired by visitors today.

There are many unique species within the Galapagos - and the wildlife also varies between the islands. Indeed, it is this notable variation that gave Charles Darwin the first clues that led to his theories of evolution. So, when you choose an itinerary, be sure to understand the islands that you will visit and the animals that you can expect to see.

A minimum 4 night itinerary is suggested to give you time to explore the islands. The distances are significant as the islands of the Galapagos are quite spread out. There are 20 islands and many islets, all with different ecosystems!

As the Galapagos represents such an amazing marine environment it is important to note that the wildlife experience is 50% land and 50% water. Snorkeling is a fantastic way to enter into a fascinating world that includes coral beds, colourful fishes, giant manta rays, sea turtles and white tipped reef sharks. It also gives you an insight into the ways animals pass between land and sea as you experience the grace of penguins and sea lions under water and watch sea birds diving deep under the surface as they hunt for fish.

It is therefore important to choose to travel with a tour company that provides an excellent standard of equipment, tuition and support for both land and water activities. If you do not want to snorkel you may want to ensure that glass bottom boat trips provide you with a window into the undersea wonders. And activities like sea kayaking and coastal exploration by zodiac also allow you to get close as possible to nature

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	<p>above and below the water.</p> <p>I travelled with Metropolitan Touring and whole-heartedly recommend them – you can find details on their tours in a special section at the end of these notes.</p>
Location	<p>The islands are located in the eastern Pacific Ocean, 973 km off the west coast of South America. The closest land mass is that of mainland Ecuador, the country to which they belong.</p> <p>Straddling the equator, islands in the chain are located in both the northern and southern hemispheres, with Volcán Wolf and Volcán Ecuador on Isla Isabela being directly on the equator. Española Island, the southernmost islet of the archipelago, and Darwin Island, the northernmost one, are spread out over a distance of 220 km.</p> <p>The Galápagos Archipelago consists of 7,880 km² of land spread over 45,000 km² of ocean. The largest of the islands, Isabela, measures 5,827 km² and makes up close to three-quarters of the total land area of the Galápagos. Volcán Wolf on Isabela is the highest point, with an elevation of 1,707 m (5,600 ft) above sea level.</p>
Geography	<p>The oldest islands are in the west and the youngest are in the east - ongoing volcanic activity reflects the processes that formed these islands: Fernandina Island experienced an eruption as recently as September 2017. This dynamic landscape means that not only is a visit to the Galapagos an amazing biology lesson – it is also an opportunity to see geology in action with lava fields, volcanic craters, lava tubes, volcanic spires, black lava beaches and more.</p> <p>The group consists of 18 main islands, 3 smaller islands, and 107 rocks and islets. The islands are located at the Galapagos Triple Junction. The archipelago is located on the Nazca Plate (a tectonic plate), which is moving east/southeast, diving under the South American Plate at a rate of about 6.4 cm per year. It is also atop the Galápagos hotspot, a place where the Earth's crust is being melted from below by a mantle plume, creating volcanoes. The first islands formed here at least 8 million years ago.</p> <p>While the older islands have disappeared below the sea as they moved away from the mantle plume, the youngest islands, Isabela and Fernandina, are still being formed.</p>
Name	<p>The islands were named "Insulae de los Galopegos" (Islands of the Tortoises) in the 16th century in reference to the giant tortoises found there and specifically after the saddle shape of some of the giant tortoise species on the islands.</p>
Population	<p>The population is around 30,000, mostly centred in the two towns of Puerto Ayora and Puerto Baquerizo Moreno.</p>
Language	<p>Spanish – but English is widely understood</p>
Currency	<p>The islands are part of Ecuador which has adopted the US Dollar as its</p>

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	national currency. The current (Dec 2017) exchange rate is one Canadian Dollar = 77 cents US.
Tipping	It is normal practice to tip your naturalist guide and the ship's crew on your Galapagos trip – details of recommended amounts are provided by the operator.
Government	The islands are administered by a provincial government, within the state of Ecuador. It was made a province by President Guillermo Rodríguez Lara on 18 February 1973. The province is divided into cantons, each covering certain islands. The capital is Puerto Baquerizo Moreno.
Documentation	A Passport is required for Canadian nationals and a 90-day tourist visa is automatically provided upon arriving in Ecuador. Your passport must still have a minimum 6-months of validity to be allowed into the country. There are two fees payable: \$100 US for the national park entrance and \$20 for the migration control card.
Time zone	The Galapagos are one hour behind EST in Toronto and Montreal and also an hour behind the Ecuador mainland.
Health	There are no significant health risks on the island, but because the archipelago is quite isolated, it is good advice to seek an expedition ship that includes a doctor on board.
Safety tips	This destination is very safe.

CLIMATE	
General climate	No seasons exist in the Galapagos Islands due to fact that they're along the equator. However, there are two weather patterns that are recognizable every year: The hot season from December to June when humidity is high and average temperatures are 26°-30° C. There may be occasional showers (downpours), but days are generally hot and sunny. From June to November, you can expect cool winds, occasionally bringing with them a light misty-type drizzle called "garúa." Temperatures average 20°-24° C during the day and lower at night. The islands may resemble a subtropical weather pattern.
Today's weather	Puerto Ayora in the Galapagos is 25C and sunny today, 23 December 2017
Best time to visit	The Galapagos is a year-round destination; however, you should consider the best time to visit according to your own specific "wish list". Do you want to coincide with the time that a bird might display its mating plumage? Do you want to go in the dry season where there is less vegetation and the wildlife is easier to see – or in the warmer wet season when the water temperature is higher and diving visibility is higher?

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GETTING AROUND	
Getting There	<p>Tourists mostly arrive in the Galapagos by air. There are no international flights direct to the Galapagos and the islands are reached by a 2 hour flight from Ecuador’s biggest city of Guayaquil on the coast of mainland South America. There are two airports in the Galapagos – on San Cristobal and Baltra Islands.</p> <p>Visitation to the Galapagos National Park is strictly controlled and you can only visit as part of a tour accompanied by an authorized Naturalist Guide. The total number of visitors over an entire year is close to 75,000... and that is less than what a world-class sports stadium holds at just one sold-out event! So not only is it a privilege to be able to visit this special destination – it pays to plan carefully and book well in advance.</p>
Cities	<p>There are no cities in the Galapagos! There are just two small towns and a number of villages.</p>
Distances	<p>Española Island, the southernmost islet of the archipelago, and Darwin Island, the northernmost one, are spread out over a distance of 220 km. The mainland of South America is almost a thousand kilometres distant.</p>
Ships	<p>In other parts of the world, cruise ships can be massive - but in Galapagos, the largest ships hold a maximum of just 100 passengers. Expedition vessels of around 40 passengers still provide good stability; there is wave action as the Galapagos are far out to sea and most itineraries demand many hours of overnight travel, so consider this if you are sensitive to motion sickness. Another point to consider is that the archipelago covers a vast area of 138,000 km² (about half the size of Great Britain) and so larger expedition vessels may be able to reach more islands than a smaller, less powerful boat.</p> <p>Expedition vessels around 40 passengers and above may also allow a little more comfort and better facilities than the very small boats of around 16 passengers. For instance - there may be a doctor on board the larger ships. While you may not be worried about your own health – if one person aboard falls sick and there is no doctor, then the itinerary for the whole group may be affected.</p> <p>Park regulations set a limit of 16 visitors to one Guide – but when there are around 40 passengers there may be at least 3 Naturalist Guides on board, and the ratio of visitors per guide will decrease to 1:13 or less. Larger numbers give the Expedition Leader the option to split up the group according to language, mobility - or special interests such as photography or birdwatching. And as your Naturalist Guide is such a central part of your experience – not just “spotting wildlife” but interpreting natural history and animal behavior – this ratio is an important consideration when choosing your tour.</p>

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Buses	There are local buses on Santa Cruz and San Cristobal Islands.
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ACCOMMODATION TYPES	Accommodation is limited on the islands. Land based hotels are opening on the inhabited islands of San Cristobal, Santa Cruz, Floreana and Isabela. Now, more than half the visitors to Galápagos make their tours using day boats and these small hotels. Restaurants, easy access and economy make this an attractive travel option. The expedition cruise ships are still the best way to see all the complex environment and wildlife of the islands.
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LIFESTYLE GROUPS	
Families	The Galapagos would be a dream vacation for most teenagers. The ability to get so close to the unique wildlife, both on land and in the water would appeal to children of all ages, but the demands of wet landings and hiking probably mean that kids under 12 would be more challenged.
Romance	It's a perfect vacation spot for honeymooners or those seeking a special trip together to remember for a lifetime. The sunsets over the Pacific are often gorgeous and the lack of crowds are another plus.
Zoomers	As long as you are able to board a Zodiac boat and cope with wet landings on beaches (normally no higher than your knees in seawater), you will be fine. For many Zoomers – myself included – this has been a dream trip for many years, so go for it!

UNIQUES	The voyage of the Beagle brought the survey ship HMS Beagle, under captain Robert FitzRoy, to the Galápagos on 15 September 1835 to survey harbours. The captain and others on board, including his companion, the young naturalist Charles Darwin, made observations on the geology and biology on Chatham, Charles, Albemarle and James islands before they left on 20 October to continue on their round-the-world expedition. Primarily a geologist at the time, Darwin was impressed by the quantity of volcanic craters they saw, later referring to the archipelago as "that land of craters." His study of several volcanic formations over the five weeks he stayed in the islands, led to several important geological discoveries. Darwin noticed the mockingbirds differed between islands, though he thought the birds now known as Darwin's finches were unrelated to each other, and did not bother labelling them by island. Nicholas Lawson, acting Governor of Galápagos for the Republic of the Equator, met them on Charles Island, and Lawson told Darwin the tortoises differed from island to island. Towards the end of the voyage, Darwin speculated that the distribution of the mockingbirds and the tortoises might "undermine the stability of Species". When specimens of birds were analysed on his return to England, it was found that many apparently different kinds of birds were
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	species of finches, which were unique to islands. These facts were crucial in Darwin's development of his theory of natural selection explaining evolution, which was presented in <i>The Origin of Species</i> in 1859, 24 years after his visit to the islands.
Surprising	Almost everything about these islands is surprising! From penguins on the Equator to cormorants who can't fly – the wildlife is endlessly fascinating.
History	The first recorded visit to the islands happened by chance in 1535, when Fray Tomás de Berlanga, the Bishop of Panamá, was surprised with this undiscovered land during a voyage to Peru to arbitrate in a dispute between Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagro. De Berlanga eventually returned to the Spanish Empire and described the conditions of the islands and the animals that inhabited them. The group of islands was shown and named in Abraham Ortelius's atlas published in 1570. The first crude map of the islands was made in 1684 by the buccaneer Ambrose Cowley, who named the individual islands after some of his fellow pirates or after British royalty and noblemen. These names were used in the authoritative navigation charts of the islands prepared during the Beagle survey under captain Robert Fitzroy, and in Darwin's popular book <i>The Voyage of the Beagle</i> . The new Republic of Ecuador took the islands from Spanish ownership in 1832, and subsequently gave them official Spanish names. Darwin visited in the Beagle in 1835.
Recommended Reading	Lonely Planet's guide book "Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands" was my guide of choice for the islands. Of course, you should also delve into Charles Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" to read how his ideas came together with his experiences on the islands in 1835.
1000 Places to See Before You Die	Of course, the Galapagos Islands are featured in Patricia Schulz' book and she emphasizes that the wildlife wonders are both above and under the water...which is so very true.
Must Sees: The Big 15	When it comes to wild animal observation, no place on earth compares to the Galapagos. Africa has its "big 5" wildlife encounters – the richness of the Galapagos brings you "The Big 15"! On my trip I was lucky enough to see 12 out of the Big 15, so I need to return to see the albatross, flamingo and Santa Cruz Iguana... Noted below are the wonderful, unique and sometimes bizarre creatures that you should have on your checklist – the "Big 15".
Galapagos Albatross	The Galapagos Albatross, also called the waved albatross, the Galapagos albatross (<i>Phoebastria irrorata</i>) is the largest bird in the Galapagos, with a wingspan of up to 250 centimetres. They breed exclusively on Española Island, except for a handful of albatross on the continental Ecuadorean island of La Plata. Close to 35,000 breeding pairs exist, but they have been considered critically endangered since 2007 due to the vulnerability of having a single main breeding site.

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	<p>Albatross have a spectacular mating dance of circling and audible clacking of beaks. Often considered fully monogamous, long-term behavioural research has proven that individuals do mate with birds with which they don't share a nest.</p> <p>Unlike most other animal species of the Galapagos, the waved albatross has a fairly predictable breeding cycle, and for a very good reason: all couples and hatchlings must leave Española before the winds fade away in mid-January. Being so large and heavy, any albatross staying on after that yearly change in weather patterns literally would be stranded until winds pick up again around April; hence, eggs are laid between April and June and incubated for two months. Albatross feed mainly on small fish, squid, and crustaceans.</p> <p>When seasons switch back to the cooler, but dryer months, the albatross return to Española – most of them having scored many thousands of miles of foraging trips to the coastal oceans of mainland Ecuador and Peru in the process! They, in fact, spend very little time of their long lives atop dry ground. They either fly or sit calmly at sea most of their life. Land is for these big birds only a matter of reproduction. Among the BIG15, Galapagos albatross can only be seen on itineraries that explore Española Island in the southeast of the archipelago.</p>
Blue-Footed Booby	<p>Best known for some of their notably colourful anatomical features, the three species of boobies that nest on the Galapagos belong to the Sulidae family of seabirds. Sometimes looking comical on land, they catch fish with spectacular plunge dives, often chasing fish while underwater. The Galapagos boobies are endemic as sub-species.</p> <p>Visitors love the blue-footed boobies (<i>Sula nebouxii</i>). Their conspicuous, unreal-looking blue feet fascinate visitors, as well as their famous, amusing mating dance, during which the male shows off its feet in up-and-down movements to attract females. The most attractive feet for potential mates are those of a more turquoise blue, rather than the deep blue. The shade of blue is indicative of how good a male is at feeding himself, being linked to the amount of food it consumes. Females are actually slightly larger than males, measuring up to 90 centimetres in length, with a wingspan of up to 1.5 metres. While they also nest in other parts of Latin America between the Pacific Coast of Mexico and Peru, around half of all blue-footed boobies live on the Galapagos.</p> <p>At the same time, while these are generally the most commonly encountered boobies, they happen to be the ones with the smallest population. The most important breeding colonies exist on Española</p>

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	<p>Island and North Seymour. But the dramatic sight of plunge-diving boobies may be witnessed on any given day throughout the archipelago's waters. Reliant on diving into the sea to feed, their nostrils are fused, hence it breathes through the corners of its mouth. Unusually for boobies, they may raise more than one chick at a time, although during times of scarce food competition is harsh and first-hatched chicks may kill their smaller sibling (siblicide). The blue-footed booby is considered non-threatened. All itineraries will have contact with blue-footed boobies, and some explore their nesting colonies.</p>
<p>Nazca Booby</p>	<p>Boobies have similar feeding strategies, but they tend to compete very harshly for nesting areas, particularly the Nazca booby (<i>Sula granti</i>). Some scholars argue they are a subspecies of the masked boobies, although a 2002 study provides genetic evidence that the Nazca booby is indeed a separate species, diverging from the masked booby around 400,000-500,000 years ago. It most obviously looks different from the masked booby by having a shorter, flatter orange rather than yellow beak. This largest booby present on the Galapagos, covered in snow-white plumage and with black feet, is the most violently competitive Darwinist among them all. They are bad neighbours, both to their own species, and to their cousins, the blue-footed boobies.</p> <p>These birds mainly nest along the shoreline, up to 100 metres inland on Genovesa. Hatchlings regularly commit siblicide, mostly by pushing the smaller brother or sister out of the nest, without the parents taking any action. Female Nazca boobies do lay two eggs four to five days apart so that, if the first is broken or eaten, the second may yet produce an offspring. When flying, they can be identified by the black wing and tail feathers. Despite the toughness of its competitive life, it is also listed as non-threatened, with a population estimated at around 30,000, but its global number is estimated to be declining. They can be seen on Genovesa, Española, and Floreana.</p>
<p>Red-Footed Booby</p>	<p>Ironically, the least-seen booby happens to be the most numerous on the archipelago: the red-footed booby (<i>Sula sula</i>). They nest mainly on Genovesa Island, as well as San Cristóbal, but may occasionally be seen elsewhere in the archipelago. For them, to live in the corners of the archipelago makes perfect sense, as these boobies forage on the outskirts of Galapagos waters. They have a particular taste for flying fish, which they catch thanks to their ability to fly at high speeds.</p> <p>Individuals among this smallest Galapagos booby species grow to up to 77 centimetres in length, with a wingspan of up to 145 centimetres. Its beak is light blue, turning to pink around the mouth and above the eyes, and its feet are characteristically red, with white claws.</p>

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	<p>Adults have feathers varying from white to brown tones. At the same time, hatchlings look much like the Nazca boobies, all in white with black beaks. They generally build their simple nests in low-lying branches of trees or bushes, unlike all other booby species. To do this, they have longer toes than other boobies, allowing them to grasp and hold on to twigs and branches. They lay only one egg. If it is lost, females may lay another within 10 to 40 days. Besides the Galapagos, they may also be found in a vast area of the Pacific Ocean, including Midway Island and Easter Island.</p>
<p>Flightless Cormorant</p>	<p>The Galapagos or flightless cormorant (<i>Phalacrocorax harrisi</i>) is the rarest, biggest, and most unique cormorant. Its ancestor arrived in the archipelago around two million years ago, in fact even before Fernandina and Isabela, the islands where they now live, even existed. This bird probably evolved in the centre of the Galapagos before migrating west in tune with a major shift of high marine food productivity upon which it had come to rely.</p> <p>Uniquely among cormorants and, except for penguins, marine birds overall, it lost its ability to fly, eased by the absence of terrestrial predators, but mainly to adapt to its need to grow a larger body to dive. Mostly it dives at depths of around 10-15 metres, but can go as deep as 80 metres if necessary, such as during an El Niño. Adaptations to its feeding habits also include its feathers, which resemble fur and aren't covered in oil, and its solid bones.</p> <p>The most unusual trait of these birds may be their mating system: sex roles are partially reversed in courtship – i.e., females lead and are more active than males in courtship and compete aggressively for access to males. The female normally deserts its mate and offspring to re-mate serially with different males while males raise the young unaided. Due to their restricted range, they can only be encountered on voyages through the Western Islands.</p>
<p>American Flamingo</p>	<p>The flamingos present in the Galapagos belong to the American flamingo (<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>), but are an odd southwest outlier, considering that the remainder of the species breeds along coasts of Colombia and in much of the Caribbean. Despite its wide range, this species is in fact rarely found outside the Caribbean. These birds' emblematic colour is linked to their diet (rich in carotenoids), and secretions from their uropygial gland near the base of the tail also transfer pigments to the plumage coat. Young flamingos lack the pink coat and feed on their parent's "crop milk" secreted by another specialized gland in both male and female parents.</p> <p>Flamingos have the largest and heaviest tongues among birds as the</p>

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	<p>feeding techniques of baleen whales (rorquals) and flamingos are very similar: both are able to filter large amounts of very small food in very large quantities with the help of specialized filters, the baleen plates in the case of rorquals, and, in the case of flamingos, the lamellae, small plates in their mandibles.</p> <p>Courtship rituals among flamingos form one of nature's most impressive shows. Adult males and females aggregate in close groups and start an intricate dance with necks cocked up while flashing their primaries (the long flying feathers at the wing tips). These are exceptionally pink and black as they are less exposed to abrasion, wear and tear and other factors that may weaken the colour intensity.</p> <p>Among the largest birds in the archipelago, American flamingos can stand up to 145 centimetres tall. The most recent bird-count registered 314 individuals of this species in the archipelago. Visitors can see American flamingos on all itineraries with few exceptions related to vessels exploring the Eastern Islands of the Galapagos.</p>
<p>Frigate Birds</p>	<p>Unusually, two different species of frigatebird coexist practically side by side on the Galapagos: the great (<i>Fregata minor</i>) and the magnificent (<i>Fregata magnificens</i>), the largest species of frigatebird. While they have a wide distribution through tropical oceans, there is nowhere one can approach them more closely than on the Galapagos. The magnificent is more pelagic, foraging for fish out at sea for long periods of time, while the great is more coastal. They catch most of their food on the wing, sometimes robbing other seabirds.</p> <p>In their larger colonies, both species nest near each other. Males' impressive red gullar sacks – which inflate to bright red heart-shaped balloons – are among the most eye-catching feature of Galapagos breeding colonies. It takes around a half hour for the sacks to inflate.</p> <p>While guides will help you pick out which is which, great frigate males inflate a slightly shorter gullar sack, but of a warmer red colour. Additionally, male great frigates have a green sheen on their shoulder plumage, while magnificent males have a purple sheen. The easiest to tell apart are juveniles and females: Magnificent frigate females have a black triangle of feathers running down from the base of the chin to the centre of their white chests.</p> <p>As a result, a white "M" is visible from below. Great frigate females have white all the way up their chins. Juvenile magnificent frigates have a white head, while great frigate juveniles have a rusty tone. All Galapagos locations will have frigatebirds flying around, and top places</p>

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	<p>to see their nesting colonies include San Cristóbal, Española, and Genovesa Islands.</p>
<p>Galapagos Hawk</p>	<p>Outside the Galapagos, the animal on top of the food chain is a large carnivore like the jaguar in South America or the polar bear in the Arctic. In the archipelago, this distinction belongs to the Galapagos hawk (<i>Buteo galapagoensis</i>), a large endemic bird of prey. As the apex predator, it has no natural enemies, but is classified as vulnerable by the IUCN. Genetic investigation indicates that it is among the most recent native arrivals to the islands, having reached them around 300,000 years ago, compared with the famous finches, who arrived two to three million years ago.</p> <p>They are present on most islands, but uncommon, with perhaps 150 breeding pairs. While they are unafraid of humans, people caused their extinction on Santa Cruz, Floreana, Southern Isabela, and San Cristóbal by introducing rival predators and through outright hunting. They are also absent on Genovesa. This natural exclusion seems to be linked to the fact that Genovesa has no lava lizards, the key food species of Galapagos hawks. They also prey on young land and marine iguanas, hatchlings of tortoises and sea turtles, as well as insects like locusts and centipedes. They may hunt in groups of up to three hawks and sometimes feed on carrion.</p> <p>Of course, given the nature of diversity on the Galapagos Islands, the hawks show a significant variety of sizes, with wingspans ranging from 116cm on Marchena to the largest, with 140cm, on Española.</p>
<p>Land Iguana</p>	<p>On the Galapagos, land iguanas play an important role as endemic resident herbivores. Their largely vegetarian feeding habits are responsible for the dispersal of several succulent plants. The Galapagos land iguana (<i>Conolophus subcristatus</i>) lives on several islands, making it the most widely distributed land iguana of the three species of the Galapagos. The biggest adults can weigh 13 kilogrammes.</p> <p>Nesting periods vary from island to islands, and females bury two to 20 eggs in burrows. Rare hybrids of land and marine are known to exist on little South Plaza Island, and both species can be seen there side by side. Land iguanas feed mainly on plants (mostly cacti and other succulent plants, so they can survive long periods of time without the need to drink water), but may also feed on anything else available, even carrion.</p> <p>To remove the small and annoying spines of cactus fruit, land iguanas are known to roll them repeatedly over sand and stones before eating</p>

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	<p>them. These reptiles have a life expectancy of about 50 to 60 years. Invasive mammals have taken a strong toll on these iguanas, with rats attacking eggs, feral cats eating the young, and feral dogs the adults. Feral donkeys and goats compete with them for food.</p> <p>The national park's programmes to eradicate introduced species have helped the iguanas recover, allowing Galapagos land iguanas to be reintroduced on islands like Baltra where they had become extinct. Their current population is estimated between 5,000 and 10,000 animals. During the hot season (December-May) their courtship behaviour is quite amazing to observe with aggressive chasing, territorial displays, and the development of bright brown and yellow coloration in their skin.</p>
<p>Marine Iguana</p>	<p>The marine iguana (<i>Amblyrhynchus cristatus</i>) is one of the most amazing Galapagos species. Few species show such astonishing adaptations and evolutionary changes as these lizards, called "imps of darkness" by Charles Darwin. They arrived as terrestrial iguanas, and then evolved into their marine status and then spread throughout the archipelago. Their marine adaptations are a unique showcase of evolutionary biology. They are found on all Galapagos Islands – but nowhere else.</p> <p>Their critical adaptations to a marine habitat include a reduced heartbeat and constriction of blood vessels near its skin to avoid temperature and oxygen loss. A shortened snout with small tricuspid teeth allow them to graze on the narrow algae they forage at low tide either submersed, especially in the case of larger iguanas, or those exposed by low tide favoured by smaller iguanas.</p> <p>Marine iguanas also have a supersized supraorbital gland (marine birds also have this gland well developed) as a means of extracting excess salt from their blood flow, like kidneys, and sneeze it out several times in a day.</p> <p>Their life span is shorter than land iguanas, believed to be around 40 years. All visitors see marine iguanas as they inhabit all islands, but they vary significantly from island to island. Guests who visit Genovesa island (all three vessels) will see the smallest and blackest marine iguanas (<i>A. cristatus nanus</i>), guests visiting Fernandina and Northern Isabela, will see the largest marine iguanas (<i>A. cristatus cristatus</i>), and those visitors seeing Floreana and Española will see the most colourful subspecies (<i>A. cristatus venutissimus</i>).</p>
<p>Santa Fe Land Iguana</p>	<p>The Santa Fe land iguana (<i>Conolophus pallidus</i>), with smaller dorsal spines and a more brownish colour and tapered snout, lives only on little</p>

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	<p>Santa Fe, an island of 24 square kilometres, off the eastern coast of Santa Cruz Island, unlike its more widely distributed cousin, the Galapagos land iguana. Perfectly adapted by its colour to blend in with its surroundings, it is somewhat more difficult to observe than the other land iguana. It weighs up to 11 kilogrammes. Beyond their plant diet, which consists overwhelmingly of the island's prickly-pear cactus, some individuals have been discovered to eat insects and carrion. In season, it loves the yellow flowers of the genus <i>Portulaca</i>.</p> <p>Darwin's finches sometimes feed off the bothersome parasites that can affect these reptiles. The Santa Fe land iguana is categorized as vulnerable given its tiny geographical distribution. The eradication of feral goats in 1971 has helped the species to survive, along with the endemic Santa Fe rat (<i>Oryzomis bauri</i>), one of very few native land mammals (all of them rodents) in the islands. The 3-11 eggs females lay take about 50 days to hatch in their burrows. This island-endemic reptile can only be seen on Santa Fe Island. If you have that herpetology bug, make sure this island is part of your voyage.</p>
<p>Galapagos Penguin</p>	<p>Galapagos penguins (<i>Spheniscus mendiculus</i>) are the only penguins that live on the equator, the only penguins that moult twice a year, and, of the 18 species of penguins, they are the rarest. The Galapagos penguin is the second-smallest penguin and weighs about two kilogrammes. Males, generally larger and heavier than females, have thicker bills. The Galapagos penguin is the only species of penguin that has no set breeding season, can lay eggs up to three times in a year, and, when food is abundant, can raise two chicks in about three months.</p> <p>These penguins can survive on the equator because their breeding biology is adapted to the unpredictable upwelling of productive, nutrient-rich water in the Galapagos archipelago. During breeding, they shed their feathers around their eyes and bill so they can lose heat, and they stand with their feet in the shade to avoid the hot black lava.</p> <p>Penguins have no sweat glands, so when they get hot, they pant to keep cool or jump into the water. They seek shade to lay their eggs and raise their chicks. Lava tubes and crevices just above the highest tides make good nest sites.</p> <p>The current population is less than half of what it was in the early 1970s, with somewhere between 1,500 and 4,700 individuals. The population of Galapagos penguins has not recovered because of several severe El Niños in the 1980s and 1990s and the introduction by whalers of predators like rats and cats to the islands.</p>

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Galapagos Sea Lion	<p>The Galapagos sea lion (<i>Zalophus wollebaeckii</i>) is a particularly interesting seal species since it lives right on the equator, exposed to greater heat and potentially less food than colder-climate species. The productivity of the Galapagos, as well as the sea lion's adaptations, allow it to thrive nonetheless. This is the smallest species of sea lion, with females weighing around 75 kilogrammes and males up to about 200 kilogrammes. Its ancestor apparently reached the archipelago around 1.2 million years ago, and the species currently numbers around 20,000 individuals. El Niño events also impact their population by reducing food supply.</p> <p>They live throughout the Galapagos, but most densely in the central islands. Nonetheless, given that they are an endemic species in a small area, they are listed as endangered. Excellent divers, they can descend up to 580 metres, although they mostly look for food in the top 100 metres below the waterline, day or night. Visitors may see sea lion pups during most of the year. Most births are October and November, but on South Plaza, breeding season extends from July through April. During this time, dominant males defend their territories – and harems – along the shore, living off their fat reserves, while smaller males may try to sneak in and find a mate. After giving birth, mothers stay with their pups for five to seven day, later alternating between one to four days of hunting in the ocean and one day of suckling ashore. The length of time pups stay with their mother varies considerably: On Fernandina, they become independent after just a year, while this takes two to three years in the central islands. They are seen on all itineraries.</p>
Galapagos Fur Seal	<p>The Galapagos fur seal (<i>Arctocephalus galapagoensis</i>) is the smallest of all seals, with females weighing just around 30 kilogrammes and males around 80. It appears to have arrived in the archipelago relatively recently and is more similar to its mainland relative than the Galapagos sea lion. It currently numbers around 15,000 individuals but can be highly susceptible to El Niño events, during which many young risk starving.</p> <p>They live mostly on Fernandina and the western side of Isabela, but can often be seen in other parts of the Galapagos, notably Puerto Egas, North Seymour, and Genovesa. Solitary males can occasionally be found all over the archipelago. During breeding season, between September and December, males however defend their territories for two weeks to a month at a time, living off their fat reserves.</p> <p>After giving birth on land, mothers stay with their young for five to seven days straight. Pups stay with their mothers for two to three years; should another youngster be born during that time, both compete sharply for</p>

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	<p>food, and the younger one generally starves.</p> <p>Galapagos fur seals tend to hunt well offshore at depths between 60 and 100 metres, seeking fish and squid that at night tend to rise to these depths from further down. The bright light of the moon can keep this ascent from happening, so that most fur seals tend to spend nights close to full moon on land.</p>
<p>Galapagos Giant Tortoise</p>	<p>The Galapagos giant tortoise (<i>Chelonoidis nigra</i>) is the largest living tortoise species. Weighing up to 250kg and numbering perhaps 200,000 before humans discovered the islands, their huge size led 16th-century Spanish explorers to apply their Spanish name to the whole archipelago. The islands' dominant plant eater, they play an important role as their habitats' top grazer. In the wild, these gentle giants slowly barrel their way through the plant cover. The shape of their shells varies from island to island and, on Isabela, from volcano to volcano. Islands with humid climate have larger tortoises with domed shells and shorter necks; dry climates lead to somewhat smaller tortoises with "saddleback" shells and long necks. Growing slowly, they often live to become well over 100 years.</p> <p>Hunting by whalers and others took a steep toll on the giant tortoises and their numbers plunged, with five of fifteen subspecies becoming eradicated. Breeding programmes have however led to a recovery, and Galapagos giant tortoises now number close to 20,000. Rats and feral cats and dogs still pose a threat to nests, attacking eggs and freshly hatched tortoises. Young tortoises are therefore kept until they have grown large enough to be safely released into the wild. Inside the Galapagos National Park, visitors can see them at Urbina Bay on the Western Islands itineraries; they can also be seen in their natural habitat in the highlands of Santa Cruz and also at breeding centres in Puerto Ayora and at Cerro Colorado on San Cristóbal.</p>

<p>SPORTS ACTIVITIES</p>	
<p>Surfing</p>	<p>The Galapagos provides some good waves and many locals make it a daily activity. Boards can be rented by the day or month at port towns. In general sites are marked with a place to rest surf boards as to not damage the land. The following are beaches that allow surfing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Punta Carola San Cristobal La Loberia San Cristobal Tongo Reef San Cristobal Tortuga Bay Santa Cruz Playa Ratonera Santa Cruz <p>Isabela has a more continuous sandy shoreline that provides open surfing</p>

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	The Galapagos surf co. www.Surfgalapagos.com is the only surf travel company in the Galapagos.
Fishing	You can fish in the Marine Reserve for marlin, tuna, wahoo and many other species but only if you are using an operator and boat that have the requisite "Artisanal Vivencial Fishing" licenses issued by the Galapagos National Park. Sport Fishing, as such, is prohibited. The Galapagos National Park publishes a list of Vivencial Fishing license-holders and their boats. When Vivencial Fishing, you can keep a limited quantity of fish for personal consumption but all marlin must be released unharmed.
Horse riding	Horseback riding can be organized to allow you to see the highlands at greater depths. Tours are roughly \$50 US. Additional tours may be found through inquiring with taxis or local tour agencies.
Hiking	Hiking is often included as part of organized cruises or tours of the highlands. Although you will often see fewer animals during these tours, you will usually gain a greater understanding of the difference in terrain and vegetation as well as the formation of the islands. Hiking is restricted in all National Park land, however several sights, like the Wall of Tears on Isabela and Cerro Tijeras on San Cristobal can be hiked independently.
Cycling	Biking provides quicker access to far sites from the ports. Bike rentals are available on Isabela, San Cristobal and Santa Cruz for around \$15/day.
Diving	Diving in the Galapagos is incredible. Darwin and Wolf Islands have been ranked as the best dive destination in the world for several years in the categories of healthiest marine environment, best big animal dive, and best advanced diving. Still, the Galapagos is not necessarily the right place for beginners or novices. Currents, surge, cold water, and sometimes poor visibility and depths make it a challenge for novices. Certification courses are available in both Santa Cruz and San Cristobal for those looking to learn, and there are several dive sites that are relatively beginner-friendly. Two of the world's premier diving destinations, Darwin Island and Wolf Island, are accessible only via live-aboard boats. These islands present challenging currents and are not suitable for beginners, but offer amazing opportunities to see huge schools of hammerhead sharks, Galapagos sharks, Silky sharks and whale sharks in season (July-Nov), in addition to other pelagic life like giant mantas, eagle rays, sting rays, huge schools of jack and tuna, sea turtles, sea lions and more.
Snorkeling	I have never found better snorkeling experiences anywhere on the planet than these islands. On my trip I played with Galapagos Seal pups; I flew underwater with perhaps a hundred spotted rays; I swam with Galapagos Penguins; watched from underwater as boobies plummeted from above to catch fish; drifted by grazing marine iguanas

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	<p>inches from my face; floated immobile as six white tipped sharks swam right by me; got flipped in the face (gently!) by a massive sea turtle intent on grazing; and...most memorably of all...danced with a 20 foot wingspan giant manta ray as it rotated 360 degrees with me in a feeding loop that had me totally mesmerized.</p>
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CULTURE	
Film	Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World. This was the first film to ever be shot, at least in part, in the Galapagos.
Museums	The Charles Darwin Research Station is on Santa Cruz Island, just outside the main town of Puerto Ayora. Here more than two hundred scientists and volunteers work on conservation projects, especially supporting the giant tortoise breeding program. You can view a baby tortoise house, a small enclosure for land iguanas and stroll several trails through the arid scenery.
Monuments	Darwin is one of my historical heroes, so I was pleased to find a fine bust of the great man right on the seafront at Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal Island. Appropriately a large Galapagos Sea Lion lumbered by as I took my photo of Darwin, on its way to join the many other on the beach a few feet from the monument!

ATTRACTIONS	
Beaches	Visitors do not generally come to the Galapagos for the beaches and yet there are some glorious beaches scattered around the islands. Some are black lava beaches, others are brilliant white and silky smooth; and the beach on Rabida Island is a startlingly bright red colour that has to be seen to be believed!
Nature	<p>The Galapagos Islands are a bird watcher's paradise. Not only are the birds abundant, like almost all the animals on the Galapagos, they are also without fear of man. It is possible to come within a few feet of hawks, owls and an array of seabirds – all of them carrying out the business of courting, mating, building their nests and feeding their chicks right in front of you.</p> <p>There is a special excitement in seeing as many of Darwin's finches as possible. These remarkable birds are about the size of a sparrow and are distributed on all the islands. Although they belong to the finch family, they make a subfamily called Geospiznae, which is found only in the Galapagos. Thirteen species are endemic to the archipelago; all originated from an original species, Melanospiza richardsonii, found on St Lucia Island in the Caribbean. All the finches initially look strikingly alike, and it takes the trained eye of a specialist to distinguish them perfectly. But as you look closer you see that their beaks are remarkably well adapted to fit different niches – from "vampire finches" that use their sharp beaks to draw and drink blood from the Blue Footed Boobies to</p>

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	“cactus finches” that feed on cactus flowers in a way that is reminiscent of humming birds.
Parks	The government of Ecuador has designated 97% of the land area of the Galápagos Islands as the country's first national park. The remaining 3% is distributed between the inhabited areas of Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, Baltra, Floreana and Isabela. The Galapagos are also one of the original UNESCO World Heritage Sites.
Islands	<p>The principal Islands of the Galapagos are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> San Cristobal (airport) Genovesa Santiago Fernandina Isabela - the largest island Rabida Santa Cruz (the main island and population centre) Baltra (airport) Bartolome Espanola Marchena North Seymour Pinta Pinzon Santa Fe Floreana South Plaza Darwin & Wolf <p>I visited the first eight of the islands on the list; each one has a different character, landscape and wildlife.</p>

FOR MORE INFO	<p>Website: https://ecuador.travel/ Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/EcuadorTravel?_rdr=p Twitter: https://twitter.com/EcuadorTravel YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/EcuadorTravel Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/ecuadortravel/</p>
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CHRIS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES	<p>I travelled in the Galapagos for six days in November 2017 aboard the Yacht Isabela II, a 20-cabin vessel operated by Metropolitan Touring. I visited eight islands, saw twelve out of the 'Big 15' wildlife and had a wonderful experience from start to finish.</p> <p><i>“Greater men than I have spoken of the wonders of these islands. And how can it not be? Julian Huxley observed that it was on the Galapagos that Darwin took the first step out of the fairyland of Creationism and into the coherent and comprehensible world of modern biology. The</i></p>
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Galápagos Islands are the most famous wildlife-watching destination in the world.

It's almost impossible to exaggerate the sheer spectacle of this place that provided inspiration for Darwin's ground-breaking theory of natural selection.

Just the stunning geology alone makes these islands amazing; the mix of volcanoes, stark lava formations, cactus forests, lush green highlands, turquoise bays and idyllic tropical beaches.

But ultimately, it is Nature's evolutionary kaleidoscope here in the Galapagos that will stay with me forever. Each landing on each island has been a powerful and heartwarming interaction with strange, fearless and wonderful creatures.

Sir Richard Attenborough recently reflected: "It is usually a mistake to go back, but I have now returned three times to the Galápagos Islands and each time the excitement has been undiminished."

As I took my leave of the Galapagos, I could only hope that I would return to these islands of dreams..."

You can share my travel on Pinterest and on my Travel Blog here:
www.pinterest.ca/TravelShow
www.chrisrobinsontravelshow.ca/Blog.aspx

See the section below for how to travel to the Galapagos with Metropolitan Touring.

METROPOLITAN TOURING

The Galapagos are for many a life changing, "once in a lifetime" opportunity. It is therefore very important to plan the time of year that you visit, choose the right itinerary to ensure you see exactly what you hope for, and travel with the right tour company who can make your dreams come true.

Metropolitan Touring are the leading tour operator in Ecuador with 60 years of experience and are highly respected for their knowledge, world class infrastructure and proven high levels of customer satisfaction. They have been experts in travel to the Galapagos since the 1960's. Metropolitan Touring feature numerous options designed to make your stay in the Galapagos exactly what you want.

Within the Galapagos, Metropolitan Touring own and operate 3 vessels: the brand-new **Santa Cruz II**, offering contemporary style and flexible travel arrangements for 90 guests, including solo travellers; the **Yacht Isabela II**, the perfect, intimate space for 40 guests to explore the islands in relaxed comfort (this was the one that I enjoyed); and **Yacht La Pinta**, a sophisticated, upscale travel experience for 48 guests. All expeditions offer carefully designed itineraries to help you see the most

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	of the “Big 15” wildlife.
Yacht Isabela II	<p>Yacht Isabela II offers the perfect, intimate space for exploring Darwin’s islands in comfort. Traditionalists will enjoy feeling at home with a crew that has remained almost unchanged for years, leading to seamless attention to detail that will make your stay extra special.</p> <p>With just 20 guest cabins, the yacht’s convivial atmosphere leads to a close-up experience of this unique world. On board, guests find delicious cuisine, faultless service and excellent facilities, including a Hot Tub, fitness room, bar and outside deck for al fresco meals, drinks, and sunbathing.</p> <p>As on all Metropolitan Touring vessels, guests can expect top facilities and equipment, delicious meals, and safe and stimulating expert-planned expeditions on the islands. Scout the island sites for Big 15 wildlife in groups that average no more than 11-14 guests per naturalist guide which surpass the National Park standard, which permits up to 16 guests per guide. Explore the coast with your guides on pangas, glass-bottom boat or kayaks, or get wet and snorkel.</p>
Santa Cruz II	<p>Conceived for operations in remote areas, this state-of-the-art expedition vessel affords the perfect infrastructure for Galapagos exploration. At just over 70 metres long, the generous, 5-deck craft holds 50 cabins for 90 guests and features ample, luxury-sized social areas indoors and out. This infrastructure and the crew’s heritage of decades of experience working in the islands allow guests to make the most of their Galapagos cruise experience.</p>
La Pinta	<p>A sophisticated, upscale travel experience for 48 guests in 24 cabins that combines modern design, spacious rooms, and gourmet cuisine with top adventure. The ship offers a wide variety of aquatic activities including snorkeling, kayaking and a glass-bottom boat. She’s a distillation of the wish lists generated by captains, expedition leaders, hotel managers, and guests over many years.</p> <p>Yacht La Pinta has ample cabins, some of the largest cabins of any Galapagos expedition vessel and features floor-to-ceiling oversized panoramic windows in all cabins for the best views of the islands. Stylish bathrooms with top-notch amenities in all cabins. She is considered an ideal yacht for families travelling together, with eight connecting cabins available.</p> <p>Join guides in the lounge for nightly briefings about the next day’s activities. On the following day, visit the National Park on carefully planned excursions. In between outings, it will feel as if your connection with the islands never ends, as panoramic windows in numerous social areas offer almost permanent visual contact with the island landscapes while you are inside the ship. Or step outside with your camera and make the most of the numerous outdoor social areas, including an</p>

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	<p>outdoor terrace for dining when weather permits and an observation deck that is perfect for equatorial stargazing. Relax in the hot tub, work out in the cardio-gym, or lounge on the sun deck</p>
<p>Tips for Planning Your Galapagos Trip</p>	<p>Francisco Dousdebés, Galapagos Product Manager for Metropolitan Touring, was my travelling companion, friend and mentor on my Galapagos trip. I asked him for some tips about booking the best trip for each individual who wanted to travel there. Here is our conversation:</p> <p>First of all, many people think that there are massive cruise ships exploring the Galapagos...</p> <p>Reality: In other parts of the world, cruise ships can, indeed, be massive. But in Galapagos, the largest ships hold a maximum of 100 passengers and are perfect for exploring the islands. The options range from single-guided boats, with approximately 6-10 cabins, to two different types of multi-guided ships: Expedition yachts (approximately 16-24 cabins) and expedition vessels (over 24 cabins).</p> <p>TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask about your ship's capacity.</p> <p>Another myth is that mass tourism is damaging Galapagos, is this true?</p> <p>Reality: The Galapagos National Park strictly controls the number of visitors allowed to visit the area each year, making the archipelago one of the most highly protected and monitored destinations in the world. As a result, the total number of people staying on live-aboard ships over an entire year is close to 75,000... and that is less than what a world-class sports stadium holds at just one sold-out event!</p> <p>TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask about how tourism helps the Galapagos National Park.</p> <p>Let's talk about some more of the misconceptions that people have about trips to these islands. For instance, should I be concerned about navigating in Galapagos tropical waters?</p> <p>Perception: I've done a great deal of sailing in calm harbours, so I guess in the tropical waters of Galapagos my boat won't move enough to cause me any discomfort?</p> <p>Reality: Stability can make all of the difference and it is a strong feature of an expedition vessel. Contrary to common assumption, tropical waters are not always calm and an expedition vessel, by its very nature, reduces movement at sea. Single-guided boats often face interesting</p>

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challenges when sailing between islands.

TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask what kind of ship will be the most comfortable for you.

Will I get to see all the archipelago on any ship in the Galapagos?

Perception: I can go on any ship. After all, they all cover the whole archipelago.

Reality: Not all ships reach all of the islands you might want to visit, such as Genovesa, Fernandina, Española and North Seymour. The archipelago covers a vast area of 138,000 km² (about half the size of Great Britain) and the ship and the itinerary that you choose will determine how you access the unique wildlife.

TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask which itinerary or programme will give you the best island and wildlife coverage.

Can I only select full-week trips on single-guided boats?

Perception: Only single-guided boats let you select full-week trips.

Reality: Expedition vessels, yachts, and land-based options offer a wide variety of choices for voyage length. You choose what's best for you with itineraries that range from 5 to 15 days. You can even combine two shorter itineraries to make sure you get the island coverage you want.

TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask about the best trip date and length for you.

Francisco – let's talk some more about the right way to plan a trip to the Galapagos: If I choose a single-guided boat, will I get exclusive access in the Galapagos National Park?

Perception: Single-guided boats get exclusive access to secluded National Park locations and do not share the islands with other visitors.

Reality: At each visitor site, you will generally find more than 4 single-guided boats per visitor site or only 1 expedition vessel. Why? Because according to Galapagos National Park (GNP) rules, each visitor site has its own maximum number of guests permitted at any given time. Careful itinerary design, not ship size, is what ensures exclusivity and top wildlife viewing opportunities on island visits.

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TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask about your ship's Galapagos Exclusivity Rate.

A small ship equals a small group, right?

Perception: If I want to go ashore in a small group, I must go on a small ship.

Reality: The Galapagos National Park official regulation authorizes 16 or fewer guests per guide. On expedition vessels, the number of guests per guide comes down to an average of just 12.

TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask about the Guide/Guest Ratio on your ship.

Should I be thinking about who will be sharing the trip with me?

Perception: If I travel on a cosy single-guided boat, all my travel mates will be congenial and we will get along just fine.

Reality: Not necessarily, unless you have chartered the entire single-guided boat. Expedition vessels and yachts give you the freedom to find your own space when you want it or to seek out different guests for company while dining or when you want a friendly conversation.

TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask about any special interests you may have. Ask if your ship has both an expedition leader and a hotel manager to ensure that everyone in your party is comfortable and their specific needs are well attended.

Francisco – let's have some last advice on putting together the perfect, bucket-list trip to the Galapagos... What about languages: will everyone on my single-guided boat be speaking in my language?

Perception: All guests on single-guided boats speak my language and so language issues will not affect my experience.

Reality: Not everyone on a single-guided boat will necessarily speak your language. Naturalist Guides are generally multilingual and on single-guided boats, they often must repeat information in two or more languages each time they go ashore. Expedition vessels and yachts, with multiple Naturalist Guides, are better able to handle varied language requirements. This means that each group can receive more in-depth, outstanding natural history interpretation in various languages.

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	<p>TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask how many guides are on your ship.</p> <p>Will I have access to first aid on board?</p> <p>Perception: I'm in great shape. Basic first aid on board is enough for me.</p> <p>Reality: Lucky for you if you enjoy constant good health, but having an MD Officer (Doctor) on your vessel can make all the difference, considering that you're travelling in a remote region. All operators watch out for the safety and security of their guests, and the National Park authority has its own facilities and emergency medical transport available. But some operators take guest safety to another level by investing in a permanent medical presence on board.</p> <p>TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask if there is a Medical Officer on board.</p> <p>Do all ships have plenty of space on public areas?</p> <p>Perception: With so few guests on board a single-guided boat, I'll never feel cramped.</p> <p>Reality: If it's space and freedom you want, take a look at the Guest Space Ratio (GSR), a cruising industry benchmark designed to show how much room each guest has on any given ship and provide a common number that can be compared from ship to ship. Divide the ship's gross tonnage by the total guest capacity. Anything above a GSR of 20 is considered comfortable.</p> <p>TRAVEL EXPERT TIP: Ask about the Guest-Space Ratio! Ask for detailed information about your ship's facilities and where you can go, besides your cabin, when you want some extra space.</p>
Deals	<p>Although Galapagos tours generally sell out well in advance of departure, Metropolitan Touring occasionally has some special deals for specific departures which whet list on their website here: https://www.metropolitan-touring.com/galapagos/special-deals</p>
Responsible Travel	<p>Anyone visiting the Galapagos should be mindful of the environmental credentials of the company that they travel with to this highly sensitive ecosystem. An Ecuadorian company, Metropolitan Touring were the pioneers of travel in the Galapagos Islands and their philosophy is to allow respectful contact with the natural world while caring for destinations, their resources and their communities.</p>

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Finch Bay Hotel	<p>For those who prefer a hotel stay in the Galapagos, Metropolitan Touring offer the newly renovated Finch Bay Eco Hotel, designated one of the “Unique Lodges of the World” by National Geographic (the only one in the Galapagos). Centrally located on Santa Cruz Island, the hotel offers guests the freedom to come and go as they please: before, in the middle, or after cruising around the islands or as a home base for land and marine exploration.</p>
Quito	<p>If you want to explore mainland Ecuador as part of your Galapagos adventure, Metropolitan Touring can help you there as well. In Quito they offer the Casa Gangotena, right on historic Plaza San Francisco in the heart of Quito’s old town. A lovingly remodeled oasis of genteel living, it is in Trip Advisor’s list of the “25 Best Hotels in the World”.</p>
Mashpi Lodge	<p>In the cloud forest near Quito, Metropolitan Touring have another member of National Geographic’s “Unique Lodges of the World”. Mashpi Lodge is a contemporary lodge set in a world biodiversity hotspot. Enjoy panoramic rainforest views and an extraordinary wealth of plant and animal species in this bird watching heaven!</p>
Canadian Tour Operator Partners	<p>Metropolitan Touring cruises, tours and hotel stays are available through specialist travel companies in Canada such as GoWay, Gateways International, Kensington Tours, Truffle Pig, Inti Travel and Tours and Magic Tours. Here is the contact information for these companies:</p> <p>www.goway.com 1-888-329-1544</p> <p>www.gateways-international.com 1-800-268-0900</p> <p>www.kensingtontours.com 1-888-903-2001</p> <p>www.trufflepig.com 416-628-1272</p> <p>www.intitravel.ca 1-403-760-3565</p> <p>www.magictours.ca 403-237-7691</p>
Contact Information for Metropolitan Touring	<p>Telephone: 1-888-572-0166</p> <p>Websites: https://www.metropolitan-touring.com/ www.yachtisabela.com</p> <p>Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/MetropolitanTouring/</p> <p>Pinterest: https://www.pinterest.ca/metrotouring/</p>

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