

# Galapagos Islands: A Nature Adventure

Flying 972 km from Guayaquil on Ecuador's mainland coast to Santa Cruz Island in the Galapagos Islands, our group of 20 guests boarded the M/Y Eric, one of three motor yachts operated by Ecuadorian cruise operator, Ecoventura (Ecoventura.com). Here was our island-hopping home for the next seven days on a grand ocean adventure of 785 km with 89 hours of sailing time (mainly at night) and four equator crossings.



## At the Mercy of Weather & Waves

Rules are strict about where, when and how many people go ashore and there are plenty of small islands from which tourists are banned altogether. On our first shore excursion, we anchored in the volcanic caldera of Genovesa Island where only small vessels like the Eric are permitted to take guests ashore. Within this widespread archipelago, there are islands that host a species of rare bird, reptile or marine mammal found nowhere else in the world, so if you hope to see it, inquire in advance if your cruise has a permit to go there.

Over breakfast each day, our two wildlife guides described our morning and afternoon excursions – always subject to weather and waves, of course, with a backup Plan B so as not to disappoint. Excursions were identified as wet or dry landings, meaning that you could expect to get your feet wet or not as you clambered in and out of the Zodiac inflatables.



## **Wildlife Rules the Archipelago**

It is virtually impossible to avoid the color-camouflaged wildlife, whether picking your way around lolling sea lions draped across a gangway or carefully treading a designated trail strewn with dozens of Galapagos Marine Iguanas. While walking, keep your eyes not far ahead of your toes to ensure you don't trip over a sleeping sea lion pup or a clutch of sun-warming iguanas or a ground-nesting Blue-footed booby bird with wings spread to shade a new generation. They all share nature's extraordinary living room here with no fuss or fear.

We were treated to close observations of manta rays and sea turtles floating near shore in passionate embrace, to vigorously courting sea lions, and to one female sea lion babysitting ten pups sprinkled across a beach while their mothers feed at sea. Among the marine iguana males, we witnessed wonderful color changes from characteristic black to vivid turquoise and red as mating began. The endemic Galapagos Hawk practices cooperative polyandry with four males mating with a single female, then teaming up to defend the territory and look after the young. Could such rare behavior explain why this sole original island predator has survived for 300,000 years?

## **The Giant Tortoises**

Following five days of exploring remote islands uninhabited by humans, we spent a day on Santa Cruz, the second largest island, Santa Cruz, home of the Charles Darwin Research Station, most of the Islands' human population, and those famous giant tortoises. After days of black volcanic

landscapes with only scrub for vegetation, here we encountered a lush tropical environment. Traveling to a private farm in the highlands, we donned gumboots to follow muddy trails through cloud forests and fields dotted with ponds. None of us was prepared for our first glimpse of Galapagos Giant Tortoises, ever-so-slowly progressing across thick grassy fields at the pace of, well, a tortoise, pausing to cool off in a pond en route between the highlands and the lowlands. The height of an average person's hip and built like a Sherman tank, they are the world's largest tortoises, salvaged from extinction despite the best efforts of man to wipe them out in centuries past. With determined captive breeding at the Darwin Station, they are now making a successful comeback in the wild on four islands.



Most nature travelers place Ecuador's Galapagos Islands near the top of their vacation life list, an iconic destination rightfully designated as one of the earliest UNESCO natural world heritage sites. While they will always be among the most fragile ecosystems in the world, the good news is that UNESCO's heritage watchdog committee agreed in August 2010 to remove the Galapagos Islands from a three-year placement on the committee's "sites in danger" list. Ecoventura's President, Santiago Dunn, mirrors the relief of many who value the islands and their wild inhabitants, "We all must renew our commitment to maintaining sustainable tourism operations, keeping the Galapagos the pristine destination it was in 1978 when it was first declared a World Heritage Site."

## Ecoventura

is a family-owned company based in Guayaquil, Ecuador, with offices in Quito and Miami. In operation since 1990, this Galapagos Islands nature cruise company hosts 4,000+ passengers annually aboard a fleet of three expedition vessels that are identical, first-class 20-passenger motor yachts with 10 double cabins. All vessels have been retrofitted to meet or exceed the highest world environmental standards. For example, in 2008 the M/Y Eric became the first hybrid-energy vessel in the Galapagos. On this "green" vessel, forty solar panels and two wind turbines now provide enough power to replace 18% of the energy previously produced by two diesel generators. For current Ecoventura rates, schedules and itineraries, visit [Ecoventura.com](http://Ecoventura.com). There are also designated family departures with discounts for children age 7 to 17 years.

**By Alison Gardner**

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