



WildWings

Galapagos Seabirds and selected island endemics

Client quote: “It was a tremendous trip, the beauty of many of these places exceeded my expectations. I will never forget the confiding nature shown by the birds and other animals, even more so than Antarctica.” L.F
July 2011

The Galapagos Islands are one of the most incredible places on earth. Starkly beautiful they lie on the Equator some 600 miles west of Ecuador. Having only recently risen from the ocean floor there is evidence of their marine volcanic origin everywhere. The landscape is dominated by large volcanoes, recently collapsed caldera, extensive lava flows, lava tunnels, cinder cones and spatter cones.

It is also the meeting point of ocean currents, so amid this dramatic landscape there is a vast wealth of wildlife, much of it unique and incredibly tame. Indeed the fearlessness of the birds and mammals is one of the most enduring memories of a visit, unchanged since Charles Darwin’s time so many years ago, and superbly illustrated in the recent BBC TV Natural History series.

The Galapagos has one of the highest rates of endemism of any island group anywhere in the world including the endangered Waved Albatross, Galapagos Penguin, Flightless Cormorant, Nazca Booby and two gulls, Lava and the exquisite nocturnal feeding Swallow-tailed Gull, plus of course the famous Darwin’s Galapagos Finches. The Magnificent Frigatebirds that breed on the islands seem likely to be split soon into Galapagos Frigatebird too! Other seabirds include Galapagos Petrel, Galapagos Shearwater, storm-petrels, frigatebirds, other boobies, tropicbirds and noddies. This wonderful voyage should yield all the island’s expected seabirds plus a good selection of the landbird endemics too. (Operated in conjunction with INCA/Inca Floats Inc whose booking conditions will also apply)

In addition to the birds there are unique mammals, reptiles and amphibians: Giant Tortoises, Marine Iguanas, Land Iguanas, Pacific Green Turtles, Lava Lizards, Galapagos Sea Lions and Galapagos Fur Seals. Join us on this relaxed trip and observe them at arms length and photograph them with unbelievable ease. You will also have the opportunity to swim or snorkel with tropical fish and perhaps penguins, turtles, Flightless Cormorants and rays too! Cetaceans to be watched for include Common, Bottlenose and Striped Dolphins and several species of whales including Cuvier’s Beaked, Orca, Sperm, Bryde’s, Shortfin Pilot, and Humpback Whales.

The weather is ideal, it is warm without being too hot, and shorts and t-shirts are the usual clothing. Our ship is extremely comfortable with modern interiors and cabins, plenty of outside space and excellent food.

The islands are quite varied in nature. On some, volcanic peaks tower over 5,000 feet, with lush vegetation on the upper slopes, whilst other lower, flatter areas are still lacking soil on the lava flows which are extensive and beautiful in their starkness. On a typical day we will rise around dawn and have an early morning landing with our guide, preceded (or occasionally followed) by breakfast. On shore we will find ourselves walking through great colonies of seabirds, oblivious to our presence; taking care not to trip over Blue-footed Boobies in the path, avoiding the great fluffy chicks of Waved Albatrosses whilst the adults keep a watchful eye; pausing by bushes where Red-footed Boobies nest at arm’s length, or marvelling at the spectacle of the only day flying

colony of storm-petrels in the world. At times we will have to side step groups of placid Marine Iguanas that gather even in the middle of the path. Each individual can be three foot long or more. Late morning there will often be an opportunity for a short swim or snorkel before we set sail for a new landing in the afternoon. After lunch on board we will typically spend most of the afternoon ashore at a different landing site, before returning to the ship by 6pm in time for a shower and to watch the sunset from the deck or the bar, before dinner at 7pm. Afterwards there is a briefing concerning the following days' activities, and the bar remains open for those who have not retired to their beds. We will move between the islands mostly at night.

We will explore the Galapagos Islands by sailing on the M/Y Reina Silvia, US built, 90' long and one of the more elegant vessels in the region, she offers relaxed comfort aboard. Exceptionally well suited for island cruising she has open deck viewing areas and is equipped with Zodiacs for landing and wildlife viewing in the remotest of areas. She is an upgrade from our previous vessels and is certainly not the 'camping afloat' offered by many operators. She has a crew of seven and an expert Galapagos National Park Guide. The vessel has space for 12 - 16 passengers, berthed in six cabins. Inside, the vessel is smart and comfortable and is fully air conditioned throughout. There is a spacious dining room which combined with the forward saloon also acts as the briefing and daily bird log area. The chef serves three excellent meals a day from a varied international menu. Drinks are served from the bar or out on the large sundeck (under awning). The vessel has a swimming and/or diving platform at the stern and boasts an extended bow pulpit for whale and dolphin watching too. The cabins offer triple, twin or double occupancy and are air-conditioned with private shower, vanity, washbasin and toilet. Two of the four cabins are on higher decks and command a small supplement. Two pangas are used for landings and wildlife cruises.

Photography

Whilst the trip is not designed for the professional photographer, the photo opportunities are often incredible and irresistible. You will use much more memory cards/film than you thought possible. Even compact cameras will be capable of taking many great close-up wildlife shots. Video opportunities are great too. Pack half as many clothes as you are tempted to, but pack twice as many memory cards or film as you think you may need! Note that Galapagos National Park rules forbid the use of flash photography of wildlife, and whilst ashore, we must stay in close proximity to our National Park Guide.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrive Quito, transfer to overnight hotel.

Day 2: WildWings birding excursion to Tandayapa Lodge, where over 20 species of hummingbird can occur at their feeders alone! Or a city tour. Overnight Quito.

Day 3: Transfer to airport, fly Quito to Baltra, board vessel and sail. Our previous voyage yielded Blue-footed Boobies, Elliot's Storm-Petrel, Galapagos Shearwater (a recent split from the Audubon's complex), Galapagos Petrel and Red-billed Tropicbird on this short sea crossing. Afternoon landing on South Plaza Island. Home of the endemic Land Iguanas, Galapagos Sea Lions, Lava Heron plus it should produce our first Darwin's Finches, Common Cactus and Small Ground Finches. Swallow-tailed Gull and Red-billed Tropicbirds nests on the cliffs.

Day 4: Overnight we shall sail to Tower (Genovesa) Island with a morning landing at Darwin Bay with a snorkel opportunity and an afternoon landing at Prince Phillip's Steps and a panga ride. The stunningly beautiful Swallow-tailed Gull nests at Darwin's Bay plus Great Frigatebirds and Red-footed Boobies and our best chance of Galapagos Fur Seal. Nazca, Red and Blue-footed Boobies breed at our afternoon landing spot plus a diurnal colony of Wedge-rumped Storm-Petrels, predated by the local dark form of Short-eared Owl. We should also see a number of landbird endemics such as Galapagos Mockingbird, Large Cactus, Sharp-beaked and Large Ground Finches here.

Day 5: Overnight we will sail to Isabela Island and plan to spend the morning at Tagus Cove. A landing plus a snorkel opportunity and panga ride are planned. We could encounter our first Galapagos Penguins and Flightless Cormorants here. In the afternoon we will sail to Fernandina Island and plan to land at the Flightless Cormorant colony. Other birds seen here include Galapagos Hawk and Small Ground Finches plus a few shorebirds. Both Lava Lizards and Marine Iguanas also make their home here. (Note there is currently a volcanic eruption on this island, our plans may have to change!)

Day 6: Our morning landing will be Santiago Island for a beach walk at Puerto Egas, another good site for Galapagos Fur Seals, whilst Galapagos Hawks and more finches should also be seen plus another snorkel opportunity and in the afternoon Bartholome Island, famed for it's geological formations with a walk to the top of the island for the view, more snorkelling and panga rides planned.

Day 7: Our morning landing will be North Seymour with another snorkel opportunity. Both Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds breed here plus Blue-footed Boobies and Lava Gulls. In the afternoon we will at Puerto Ayora, the largest town in the islands. We will visit the Charles Darwin Research Station to see the breeding programme for the Giant Tortoises, a good site for more finches including on occasion Woodpecker Finch, famous for it's use of tools on occasion whilst feeding. There will also be a chance to go up to the El Chato reserve to see Giant Tortoises in the wild and witness the 'frigatebird' drinking pool.

Day 8: Today we will spend around Floreana Island. We will take the pangas to get close to Champion Islet to try and see the endemic Charles Mockingbirds, land at Pta Cormorant and visit the lagoon for American Flamingos and shorebirds. In the afternoon we land at Post Office Bay and go into the highlands for Small and Medium Tree Finches, Small and Medium Ground Finches plus Galapagos Flycatchers.

Day 9: Our final full day and we've saved the very best until last! Hood (Espanola) Island. In the morning we land at Gardner Bay for a beach walk, snorkel and/or panga rides. We expect to encounter the endemic Hood Mockingbirds, Galapagos Dove and a number of finches including Warbler. Pacific Green Turtles and Galapagos Sea Lions can often be encountered in the water here along with a myriad of tropical fish. Marine Iguanas are not in short supply and we should also see the endemic Espanola Lava Lizards too. In the afternoon we land at Punta Suarez, home to more Nazca Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds plus the big star of the show, Waved Albatross which we will enjoy at arm's length as we slowly work our way through the colony. (Note : the albatross's are away from their colonies from January to March!)

Day 10: Disembark vessel, fly Baltra – Quito, transfer to hotel and overnight with dinner. Afternoon at leisure. There are some interesting birds in the city's parks including Black-tailed Trainbearer.

Day 11: After breakfast transfer back to airport.

NB This is a sample itinerary, the exact order of the vessel's visit to the various islands (and the islands themselves) will be determined according to local conditions at the time and is ultimately subject to permissions from the Galapagos National Park authorities.

Voyage Information

Dates: 23rd February – 4th March, 15th – 25th March, 3rd-13th May, 21st June-1st July, 12th-22nd July and 2nd-12th August 2012

Leader: Local bird & Galapagos National Park guides

Cost: Sharing a twin cabin £3415 per person. (Triple £2849 per person)

Deposit: £850

Group size: Maximum number of participants will be 16 plus guides.

Price includes: Air travel Quito to Baltra and return, pre and post voyage accommodation in Quito, twin share with private facilities and breakfast and two dinners, all airport transfers in Quito, all transfers in the Galapagos including luggage, ground transport in the Galapagos where specified, seven night voyage with accommodation on vessel as booked, all cabins with private facilities with full board whilst aboard vessel including soft drinks, tea and coffee; all excursions in the Galapagos; use of snorkelling gear and two-person kayaks on the vessel at locations permitted by the GNP; services of local guide and ship's crew, pre-voyage information pack and bird and wildlife check list.

Price excludes: Air travel to Quito, approx US\$100 transit tax payable in cash locally in Quito, Galapagos National Park entrance fee (currently US\$100 per person which must be paid in cash on arrival at Baltra), travel insurance, first night dinner in Quito, alcoholic drinks, souvenirs, gratuities (suggest US\$15 per day on ship), laundry charges and other items of a personal nature. Single cabins on request. Supplement for deck 2 cabin, £319 per person, sundeck 1 cabin, £439 per person. This vessel is also available to charter, full details on request. Children welcome, contact us for more details.

See our website for previous trip reports.