



NOTES FROM THE BOAT

A letter from Craig Nattress, B&R Trip Researcher

Imagine an enormous underwater conveyor belt. Admittedly, this is an obscure reference, but it seems oddly appropriate when considering the origins of the fabled Galapagos Islands. Known as the *Encantadas* (or Enchanted Isles) by 16thC pirates and sailors, the islands had a reputation for mysteriously moving. While this was largely a case (or two) of exaggeration, the Galapagos do have a long history of being shifty. The islands are situated at the confluence of three tectonic plates whose movements cause the archipelago to slide southeast about three inches a year. The islands have evolved over a period of at least a few million years, as lava spewed from a weak spot in the earth's crust under the sea, eventually forming volcanic islands. As the plates move, so do the islands—and one by one, new ones appear. Granted it's a slow process, but it explains why some islands are 5 million years old, while others are a mere 700,000 years old.

Now, turn your mind to another truly remarkable subject—wildlife on the islands. If the Galapagos Islands came from the sea, and were never connected to the mainland, then where did all the animals come from? They came by the wind. They came by current. They came by chance. The flora and fauna that call the Galapagos home are the result of thousands of years of incredible and mysterious circumstance. Although he only spent five weeks on the island, it was Charles Darwin who really put his finger on the importance of this diverse collection of life. Whether or not you care to wrap your mind around the theory of evolution, the Galapagos Islands cannot help but captivate you. Believe me, sitting face-to-face with a sea lion or swimming with penguins is a thoroughly awesome experience. Finding yourself in the Andean highlands, discussing spirits with a village *shaman*, is equally inspiring. In Ecuador (and the Galapagos) it's easy to sample life's natural and cultural treats—all just a few days apart.

Craig Nattress is B&R's Regional Director for Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador. When not out guiding a trip, Craig can be found exploring South America... from Easter Island to the wilds of the Patagonian Steppe.

THE TRIP

11 days / 11 nights

START / FINISH

Quito, Ecuador

LEVEL OF ACTIVITY

Walking 1A Easygoing
Very manageable coastal walks on the Galapagos; hiking in the Andes, with more strenuous options on 2 days; swimming and snorkelling

2002 PRICES

Twin stateroom

us\$8,800

(\$6,250 single supplement)

Double stateroom

us\$9,300

(\$6,690 single supplement)

DAYS ONE & TWO**Rendezvous in Quito and Onward to Galapagos**

Rendezvous in Quito; transfer to airport for flight to Baltra Island; board the Isabela II; guided walk around North Seymour Island.

Odd though it sounds, we meet in Quito on the second day of the trip. Because most international flights arrive very late in the day, we have included the first night's accommodation in Quito, though we will not actually rendezvous until the following morning. Of course, those who arrive a day before the trip (or happen to fly in that afternoon) are invited to join us for dinner at one of our favourite local restaurants. Either way, it will be a low-key night, since our flight to Galapagos leaves bright and early the next day. A member of *The Leading Hotels of the World*, the **Swissotel Quito** is the springboard for our adventure. If the incredible views of the city and surrounding mountains don't pull you from your bed, the yummy breakfast will.

After a brief wing to Baltra Island, we have a short land transfer to the yacht **Isabela II**—our home on the water for the next seven nights. We may be 1000 km off the coast of Ecuador, but we haven't left a single luxury behind. The *Isabela II* is the queen of these waters, and her friendly service and casual comfort assure a pleasant stay. While we settle in and enjoy lunch, the ship will lift anchor and sail to our first destination, North Seymour Island. Here we will disembark and walk along the coastline for our introduction to the dramatic volcanic landscape of the Galapagos Islands. The bird breeding colonies may well hold your imagination captive, but this is just the tip of the wildlife iceberg. Besides, you'll be glad you returned to the ship in time for the spectacular sunset.

DAYS THREE, FOUR, & FIVE**Southward Bound**

Espanola, San Cristobal, Santa Cruz, & Santa Fe Islands; beach walks; walking over lava and rock formations; gentle hike from freshwater lake to south shore beach; visit Charles Darwin Station; hike in the highlands; lots of great snorkelling and boat rides

Our swing through the archipelago begins with the oldest islands in the Galapagos collection—at least 3 to 5 million years young, to be vaguely precise. Our first stop is

Stepping over
snoozing sea
lions on the
rough path up to
dancing blue-
footed boobies is
an experience to
cherish.
—John Downing

WHAT'S INCLUDED

All accommodations, including first night's hotel in Quito; seven nights aboard *Isabela II*; two nights at *La Mirage*; and final night in Quito.

All meals and snacks, both on the ship and off

All alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, including selected lunch and dinner wines and spirits and cocktails

Services of B&R guides, supplemented by local guides and vehicle support

All entrance, events, activities, and port fees (including entry to Galapagos Park)

All transfers and vehicle support

All gratuities for ship's crew

Return flight to and from Galapagos Islands

Espanola Island, which is so old and eroded there no longer remains any evidence at all of a volcanic cone. But beauty knows no age, and when our *pangas* (small boats) land on the beach at Gardner Bay it's entirely possible you will experience love at first sight. We'll stretch our legs with a mellow walk along the flawless white sand and keep our eyes peeled for green turtles and pelicans. Later, we'll turn our focus to the spectacular turquoise sea for some shallow water snorkelling off the islet of Tortuga. Here you will realize that there is (at least) as much to see under the surface as there is above. If you're looking for the best of both worlds, you can head out on a casual glass-bottom boat excursion. Our final stop on Espanola will be Punta Suarez—reputed to be one of the richest locations for wildlife in the Galapagos. As we step ashore, we are greeted by sea lions, marine iguanas, lava lizards, masked and blue-footed boobies, and the awesome waved albatross. Walking across the bizarre lava landscape you may have to step over and around some of the local residents.

Fresh water has always been a precious commodity on these rocky islands. Only one island is blessed with a life-giving rain-filled lake: San Cristobal Island, our next stop. We'll spend the day here making our way on foot from the El Junco Lake across the island. Our walk ends at El Chino beach on the south shore, and from here we'll return to the boat and cap the day with a brilliant sunset cruise around Kicker Rock, an awesome chunk of rock that juts dramatically out of the sea. The following day will find us at the bull's eye of the archipelago, at the islands of Santa Cruz and Santa Fe. In the bustling little town of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz, we'll broaden our knowledge at the Charles Darwin Research Station. Here we learn about the effects that humans have had on the islands, both negative and positive, from the depletion of the tortoise population by whalers in the 19th century to the more recent conservation efforts made by local and international communities. But it won't be all "tell"; there's some "show" too. You'll have the opportunity to visit some giant tortoises and marvel at their Jurassic otherworldliness. Later that day, we'll sail the short distance to the seldom-visited island of Santa Fe. Those who choose to walk for the afternoon will enjoy the company of a colony of land iguanas, a fascinating creature that's found nowhere else in the Galapagos. Of course, it may be hard to say no to the outstanding snorkelling off the coast. The choice is yours.

DAYS SIX & SEVEN**Westward Ho!**

Isabela & Fernandina Islands; visits to Sierra Negra volcano and Puerto Villamil; easy walk through mangroves and lava formations

We cruise westward through the night to the relatively new island of Isabela. A mere 800,000 years old, the landscape of this island is markedly different from our earlier ports of call. Perhaps the most dazzling geographic feature is the Sierra Negra volcano, whose crater is the second largest in the world (after Ngorongoro in Africa). After a stroll around the remote settlement of Puerto Villamil and a visit to a tortoise-breeding centre, we'll transfer to the summit of the volcano for a walk along the rim of the crater. With a little luck we'll walk a few steps (very slowly) with giant tortoises. If you have some extra energy you can continue a little further to see a parasitic cone—a little volcanic cone within a bigger one. One thing is certain: you'll feel very small. Before returning to the ship we'll check the lagoon for flamingos and pay a visit to a natural shark's pool to see if our white-tipped friend is in the mood for visitors. If it hasn't happened yet, this may be the moment at which you catch yourself in complete awe of your surroundings.

Our course takes us further up the coast of Isabela to Tagus Cove, where we'll *panga* ashore for an invigorating walk to the summit of a baby volcano. Stunning though the geology and scenery may be, don't let them take your breath away... For this afternoon we'll be calling at Punta Espinoza on Fernandina Island, and you'll be glad you kept a few gasps in reserve. The nutrient-rich waters of this westernmost outpost support a staggering quantity and diversity of wildlife. Indeed, this is one of the biological all-stars of the Galapagos. On our relaxed walk you'll see tons of marine iguanas, sea lions, penguins, and birds, birds, birds—not the least of which is the peculiar flightless cormorant. This odd bird doesn't know how to fly, and must rely on its swimming prowess to track down food. Ill equipped with natural oils to keep their feathers dry, the flightless cormorant must air its little wings to dry. And so they stand, openly embracing the wind (and looking a tad silly). Then again, we might also look a little silly as we weave our way awkwardly across the rugged fields of fresh black lava. As the day draws to a close, you can rest easy in the comfort that you're one of only a few people in the world who had breakfast in the Southern Hemisphere and dinner in the Northern Hemisphere... in one day.

Visiting the Galapagos, we are "brought nearer to that great fact—the mystery of mysteries—the first appearance of new beings on this earth."
—Charles Darwin

DAY EIGHT**Well Centred**

Santiago & Bartolome Islands; walk to old salt mine, grottoes and tidal pools; walk and climb 300 steps to panorama lookout; beach walks, swimming, and snorkelling

Yesterday was a workout for your camera; today it's time to focus on the legs. While "workout" may be a bit strong of a term, our morning walk on Santiago Island will start the day off on the right foot. Some may opt for a gentle hike to an old salt mine via tidal pools and lava grottoes, while others head for the foothills of Sugarloaf Crater. Whichever path you choose, keep an eye open for the diminutive Darwin finch, shy wild goat, and independent Galapagos hawk. It wouldn't be fair to ask anyone to leave the Galapagos without one last good, long look. And what better place for this final glimpse than our final stop, Bartolome Island. A short walk (and 300 steps) leads us to the lookout point, with a sweeping view over the barren island landscape; were it not for the crescent beaches and picture-perfect Pinnacle Rock in the background, you might think you were on the moon. Just to prove we're not, we'll end the day with a walk on the beach and a snorkel with our flippered and finned friends. To soothe the inevitable Galapagos withdrawal symptoms, we'll celebrate our last day in the archipelago and our last night on the *Isabela II* with a fine meal and a toast to Charles Darwin (and the blue-footed boobies).

DAYS NINE, TEN, & ELEVEN**Otavalo & Quito**

Return to Baltra Island; return flight to Quito; 2.5 hour transfer to Andean highlands; walking and hiking in the highlands of the Otavalo region; visit local craft market and traditional weavers; optional walk around rim of volcano; walking tour of Colonial Quito

We return to Baltra Island early in the morning and transfer to the airport after breakfast to catch our flight back to Quito. After touching down in the early afternoon, we transfer north into the mountains for the next chapter of our journey. It may take a moment for your mind to shift gears as we leave the quiet islands behind and immerse ourselves in the spectacular culture and geography of the Andean highlands. Our destination is the

To set foot on the remote islands of the Galapagos is to return to a primeval age. Nearly one-quarter of the fish, one-third of the plant life, and virtually all of the reptiles are unique to these islands.

—National Geographic

small town of Cotacachi in the Otavalo region, and our home for the next two nights is an oasis of comfort known as **La Mirage**. As you're guided to your room through the immaculately tended grounds and maze of traditional casitas, it will quickly become apparent why this Relais & Chateaux property (the only one in Ecuador) is so adored. The combination of gracious service, delicious food, and a dreamy spa makes this the perfect base for our walks in the local countryside.

Tempted though you may be to sit in the breakfast room and stare out the window at the birds, I'd highly recommend you muster up some energy for a walk. Whether you opt for a vigorous hike around a crater lake or a gentler walk through the local villages, there's plenty to delight in. Join us for a visit with a traditional weaver; stroll into Cotacachi to inspect the handiwork of the famed leather craftsmen; or sample the healing powers of the neighbourhood medicine man—it's up to you. Naturally, you're always free to do nothing more than enjoy a massage at the hotel. Our meals in the mountains will be as memorable as the sights. We'll have an authentic Ecuadorian lunch at a nearby hacienda (over 250 years old), and La Mirage will serve some of the most refined food of the trip. It would be a pity for us to leave if it weren't for the pot of architectural gold at the end of our rainbow, Old Quito.

Returning to Quito on the afternoon of our last day together, we'll make tracks for this incredibly well preserved collection of colonial gems. After a guided walk through the streets, we return to the **Swissotel Quito** to freshen up and maybe do a spot of shopping before dinner. Just be sure to save a final burst of energy for our banquet tonight. Remember, it's all a question of survival of the fittest.

DROP-OFF

Homeward Bound

Transfer to the Quito airport

After breakfast at the hotel, your guides will help arrange transfers to the airport or ensure that you're prepared for a few more days of exploring Ecuador.

This is a typical itinerary for your B&R by Sea trip. However, please note that your specific departure may vary from this itinerary, as we continuously research and develop each trip. Inclement weather may also necessitate alterations to your itinerary.

There are three types of boobies in the Galapagos: masked, blue-footed and red-footed. Booby comes from the Spanish word *bobo*, which translates to clown—because they're such comical animals.

Bizarre fact about the Masked Booby: It dives into the water from a height of 15m, or more, to catch fish. It has airbags in its head to protect from the impact.