

Galapagos Island Expedition

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By Tim Getek

Expedition: For more than 20 years, National Geographic and Lindblad Expeditions have collaborated to connect curious travelers with transformative experiences. In essence, this was a scientific expedition for myself and many others on the National Geographic Endeavor II vessel. I was with a sub-group from Betchart Expeditions that arranges journeys for scientific groups such as the American Chemical Society.

Oddities: To say the Galapagos is a unique archipelago is an understatement. Think of any other island group on the equator, and one may think lush tropical jungle, but the Galapagos is a



arid landscape similar to what you may have in Arizona. Note the camouflaged land iguana under the cactus. That is the second oddity; the fauna is fearless of man. There are no predators



on the islands and the animals do not run from humans. In similar way to the Hawaiian chain, the Galapagos are sprouted from a hot spot that form these volcanic islands. The difference is that the newer islands are to the west and the Galapagos chain is moving eastward on the

Nazca tectonic plate. Similar to Hawaii, the life span of the Galapagos islands are only 5 million years before they erode and sink into the Pacific ocean. Another oddity is the types of animals that only exist on Galapagos. This varies from black marine iguanas, to flightless cormorants,



to penguins on the equator. Not to mention the unique species of tortoises on the various isles.



The final oddity is that there are no native human inhabitants on these islands. The first to see these islands was a priest in the year 1535 who drifted to the Galapagos islands by mistake.

National Park: Only about 30K people call the islands home. The Park retains 97% of the land mass and human towns are few and far between. Everything is regulated by the Park including visitations and activities in the Park. Ecuador is doing an amazing job in maintaining this special



place so the world can see this exotic crucible of fauna and flora which is like nowhere else on this planet.

Activities: As mentioned, this is not a cruise but an expedition and every day was jammed packed with precise scheduling. Usually there were two options: one easy and one not so easy. Prior to doing this trip, if one is still young, practice your kayaking and snorkeling and get some legwork for going uphill. Each day we jumped into the Zodiac and heading for a beach (wet landing) or



a manmade dock (dry landing). The wet ones could get exciting with a wave hitting shore just as you are getting out of the boat. The day did start with a delicious breakfast onboard which usually including some Ecuadoran native food; such as pineapple, mango and papaya. And for me, my day started with group stretching on the upper deck; need strong core when vessel is rocking back and forth. Morning walks were with a Naturalist (one for a group of 14). The Naturalists were amazing. They guided us along the pathways discussing the endemic animals and what is required to bring the islands back to their original state; currently there are feral cats, pigs and goats still remaining on some islands which are causing problems for endemic species. After morning hikes, then lunch was back on board ship with some presentation (scientific, photography, history, etc.). Afterwards back on the Zodiac for hiking, beachcombing, swimming and so on. Prior to dinner, there would be a recap of the day's events followed by the next day's schedule. This was followed by videos on the isles or star gazing on the observation deck.

Birds: The Galapagos is a bird watching haven. Of the many birds, there are the boobies to see.



There are 3 types: the famous blue footed boobie, red footed, and Nazca type. Each have their niche and feeding patterns; Nazca boobies feed at night on squid. There are, as mentioned earlier, the flightless cormorants, and beautiful



frigate birds. The males have the red puff neck. Each island has a unique set of birds; I was only on the western Galapagos tour which have the flightless cormorants and the eastern island tour (totally different) have waved albatrosses. There are the famous distinct Darwin finches but the key bird in understanding Natural Selection was actually the Galapagos mockingbirds.

Tortoises: Through evaluation and genetics, it has been determined that each isle had a varied form of tortoise. Much effort is ongoing to put



back each species of tortoise on its native island. This work is being done at the Charles Darwin Research Station: the famous Lonesome George is here and there is a replica in NYC's American Museum of Natural History. It may be possible one day to clone George and restore this tortoise variant to Pinta island. It is still uncertain how tortoises arrived in the Galapagos or when.

Sum Up: Truly, this trip was a *Tour de Force* of science and nature. For me, to encounter it was like a kid in a candy store; eating it all up!