

Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

February 7 – 16, 2020 | Written by Carol Simon & Howard Topoff



With Naturalist Journeys' Guides Carol Simon and Howard Topoff, Galápagos Guides Ivan & Karina Lopez, and participants Jon, Jen, Jim, Karen, Susan, Rich, Amy, Larry, and Vivian.





Pre-Extension to Antisana

Sat., Feb. 8 Antisana National Park

By last night, all Naturalist Journeys' participants had arrived at the lovely San Jose Garden Hotel, high in the Andes. This morning at 6:00 a.m., we gathered for our first of many breakfasts together. By 6:30 a.m. Neblina Forest had sent our guide for the day, Andrea, as well as our transportation to the Antisana Ecological Reserve. After driving for several hours, we stopped at our first overlook and spotted a juvenile Andean Condor standing on a high rocky ledge directly across from us, but at a distance. A scope insured that everyone got a good look. During the day several other condors were spotted in flight.

We continued our drive to Laguna de la Mica at almost 13,000 feet. This lake is both a water source for Quito and home for many waterfowl. As we wound our way through the park through various habitats, we ended up on the high paramo, a tundra-like plain with tight groups of plants that resist the cold and wind. Antisana, a snow and glacier-covered stratovolcano, was partially visible. It is the fourth highest volcano in Ecuador at 18,714 feet.

Andrea helped us spot 30 birds on this day plus White-tailed Deer and Andean Cottontail. Not surprisingly, many of our birds had the name "Andean": Andean Duck, Andean Lapwing, Andean Gull, Andean Ibis and Andean Condor.

We returned back down the winding mountain road to have lunch at Tambo Condor, which means condor resting place. Here our photographers (and most others!) were thrilled to find the Shining Sunbeam and Giant Hummingbird.

We returned to our hotel, driving in a light rain, before 4:00 p.m. and had two hours to rest before Carol and Howard gave their first presentation: "An introduction to the Galapagos." The talk was followed by our first group dinner. Soon we were all in bed, dreaming of arriving in the fabled Galapagos Islands tomorrow.

Sun., Feb. 9 Flight to San Cristobal | Boarding the Origin | La Galapaguera Cerro Colorado Tortoise Breeding Center

On this most special day, we boarded an Avianca flight from Quito to Guayaquil to San Cristobal in the Galapagos. San Cristobal is one of the four islands visited by Darwin and is the fifth largest island in the archipelago. Soon we were met by our two superb Galapagos guides, Ivan and Karina Lopez. Carol and Howard



had traveled with Ivan before and were thrilled to have him with our group. His sister, Karina, also proved to be an exceptional guide.

A short bus trip took us to the harbor in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. Overwhelmed by Galapagos Sea Lions, frigate birds, Blue-footed Boobies and the sights and sounds of a busy harbor, we rode pangas or zodiacs to our ship, the Origin, our luxury home for the next seven nights. Here we would be comfortable, transported to the best visitor sites, well fed and always supplied with needed information.

After a briefing, lunch and unpacking, we returned by pangas to the town and boarded our bus to the tortoise breeding center on San Cristobal. At the Visitor Information Center, we learned about captive breeding and how the eggs had to be placed in the incubators with the top (marked by an X) up or the babies would die. We also learned that after hatching they would normally remain underground for about a month while using up the remains of their yolk sac. These were the San Cristobal Giant-Tortoises and we did see them roaming around their huge enclosures on the island.

On this island we also saw one of the four species of Galapagos Mockingbirds, the San Cristobal Mockingbird. The mockingbirds are especially important because they played an important role in Darwin's realization that species could change.

Returning to the harbor in a light rain, we boated out to our ship and prepared ourselves for our first night aboard the Origin—and our first five-course gourmet dinner. (We all learned the meaning of "Amuse Bouche.")

Mon., Feb. 10 Genovesa | Prince Philip's Steps | Darwin Bay

We were very fortunate to have such an exciting location for our first full day in Galapagos. By 8:00 a.m. our Naturalist Journeys' group was standing at the top of the Prince Philip's Steps on Genovesa in a very light rain. (We were lucky to have a cooling overcast on many of our excursions during the week.) Genovesa was named after the Italian city of Genoa, in honor of Christopher Columbus.

The Prince Philip's Steps climb steeply up an 82-foot-high cliff. But there are railings, and everyone was able to negotiate the climb. The scramble is well worth it since the path above winds through a magnificent seabird



colony in a thin Palo Santo Forest. (One has the feeling of being in a different world.) Because the rains had started, some of the Palo Santo had leafed out. Nesting birds included Red-footed Boobies, Nazca Boobies, Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels and the diurnal Short-eared Owl that likes to eat the petrels. Swallow-tailed Gulls were also greatly appreciated. We had to step over more than one Nazca Booby that was nesting the middle of the trail! We had our first glimpses of the lovely Red-billed Tropicbirds here too.

By 10:45 a.m., we returned to the Origin. Those of us with snorkeling on our agenda picked up our gear (full wetsuits were provided) and headed to struggle to put it all on! Others elected to sea kayak or to stay onboard and read, edit photos, talk or relax.

At 1:00 p.m. we were invited to lunch and after a rest, at 2:45 p.m., we gathered to listen to a very special guest. Somehow Naturalist Journeys had arranged for Charles Darwin (complete, with hat, cape and wearing crocs on his feet) to speak to us. His topic was “Charles Darwin in the Galapagos.” We gained insights about his life as a young man on the Beagle, his decades of processing the vast amounts of information he had gathered to conclude that organisms change through natural selection and evolution, and a bit about his personal life.

Today we were anchored in Darwin Bay, a large ocean filled crater that has a gap for ships to sail through. At 4:00 p.m. we took the pangas to shore and had a wet landing on a coral sand beach. Here we walked past Swallow-tailed Gulls and Lava Gulls and then entered a prickly pear and mangrove forest. A colony of nesting Great Frigate Birds was just getting going. Those that wished swam or snorkeled from the beach, returning to the ship at will and preparing for our evening briefing and dinner.

Tues., Feb. 11 Santa Cruz | Playa las Bachas | Dragon’s Hill

This morning we awakened off the coast of Santa Cruz, the most populated island in the Galapagos. Today, however, was not our day to see the town or many other people at all. At 8:00 a.m. we were walking on Las Bachas Beach, named for the rusting barges left over from World War II that poke out of the ever-shifting sand. Here we saw Santa Cruz Lava Lizards, Galapagos Marine Iguanas, Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Galapagos Hermit Crabs and one lonely American Flamingo, standing in a small lagoon. After our walk, we could swim.

Returning to the Origin by 11:00 a.m., one of our participants, Dr. Jonathan Waage, Professor Emeritus at Brown University, graciously agreed to talk about the evolution of Darwin’s Finches on Daphne Major. Sitting and looking at that island, we learned of the rapid evolutionary changes seen in finch beaks by Peter and Rosemary Grant. Jon provided us with an excellent explanation of rapid adaptation, evolution and speciation.



In the afternoon the ship spent some time refueling off Santa Cruz Island. Afterwards, as we were sailing along, we noted a large group of frigate birds floating effortlessly overhead and keeping pace with our moving ship. THAT observation was good for several days of explanations and speculation.

At 4:30 p.m. we arrived on the other side of Santa Cruz for a walk on Dragon's Hill, or Cerro Dragon. This side of the island was notably drier than the other; rains had not yet started here, and no Palo Santo had leafed out. Here we saw a Black-necked Stilt in a brackish lagoon, and many Galapagos Land Iguanas. There are only three species of these huge, mostly herbivorous lizards on these islands, a pink one on Isabela's Wolf Volcano, a unique species on Santa Fe and the Galapagos Land Iguana that is widely distributed throughout the archipelago.



Wed., Feb. 12 Isabela | Punta Vincente Roca | Urbina Bay

This morning we loaded into our two pangas to see what was along the northern shores of Isabela. This rich area gave us one of our most exciting observations of the week. Spotting a group of five orcas nearby, our two pangas headed in their direction. After a short while one of the orcas approached a panga, tail-slapping right next to it on three sides. It was startling, thrilling and of great interest. Could the whale have been saying, "You are floating on top of my tuna?"



There was plenty else to look at this morning also. Large flocks of Elliott's Storm Petrels swirled above us, Blue-footed Boobies and the coveted Flightless Cormorants stood on rock ledges, Green Sea Turtles surfaced here and there, and we spotted one large *Mola mola*, or Ocean Sunfish.

The snorkelers also had a great time in this area, swimming with green Sea Turtles, our FIRST Galapagos Penguin, great schools of Galapagos Mullet and King Angelfish—and so much more. Water was murky here because of the upwelling of the rich Cromwell Current. None of us really minded the lack of visibility, however, because we could SEE the nutrients floating in the water. It is these cold, rich waters that contain the most sea life in Galapagos and we were rewarded with glimpses of creatures here and there. The majority of us were happy to have full wetsuits for the cooler waters off Isabela.

After lunch and a rest, at 2:45 p.m., Carol and Howard presented "Conservation in the Galapagos." We were joined by



Karina and Ivan and the four of us gave a complex picture of problems and difficult solutions for the Galapagos Islands. The bottom line is that PEOPLE have introduced a great number of invasive species.

At 4:00 p.m. we divided into “long” and “short” hikers once we landed at Urbina Bay. This site is located on the southeast side of Alcedo volcano on Isabela Island. This area was thrust upward from beneath the sea by volcanic activity in 1954. A lot of coral and marine formations can be seen here. Highlights included many Alcedo Giant-Tortoises and Galapagos Land Iguanas. As always there were birds including the endemic Lava Gull, Red-necked Phalaropes and Royal Terns. This area was quite green and the “long” hikers especially had to fight their way through vegetation in places. As we returned via pangas to the Origin, we could see plenty of rain showers over the ocean in the distance.

Today was Valentines’ Day, Lincoln’s birthday, Darwin’s birthday and Jen’s birthday too. We had also crossed the equator several times in recent days. To celebrate all of this we had a blow-out party after dinner with Captain Nemo, pirates, musicians, original Galapagos music, birthday cake, dancing and you-name it. A good time was had by all before we collapsed into our beds. Galapagos trips are ACTIVE and BUSY.

Thurs., Feb. 13 Punta Espinoza of Fernandina | Tagus Cove of Isabela

Fernandina is Carol’s favorite island for a variety of reasons. It is pristine, the newest island, is a stunning landscape and it has a great view of the volcanoes in the area, looking over towards Isabela. But the biggest reason may be that it is crawling with her favorite lizard, the Galapagos Marine Iguana, which is blessedly still all one species. These lizards feed underwater on algae, sneeze salt all over themselves, and grow smaller (reducing bone) in times of stress. They look primeval and on Fernandina there are so many of them that you have to STEP over them. The island has many Flightless Cormorants and Galapagos Penguins too. We were lucky to see American Oystercatchers and Galapagos Hawks, the islands’ top predator, on this day also.

By the afternoon the Origin had moved back to Isabela, to a location named Tagus Cove. Our schedule was frenetic. Participants scrambled to choose from paddle boards, the glass-bottomed boat, kayaking, snorkeling and hiking. Ivan and Karina were very good at optimizing the schedule and many of us participated in several of the events.

Snorkeling at Tagus Cove had fair visibility, again because of the upwelling of nutrients in the Cromwell Current. We had fun swimming with Galapagos Penguins, Golden Manta Rays, King Angel Fish, Sergeant Majors, Yellow-tailed Surgeon Fish, Blue Parrotfish and so much more!

A late afternoon hike to Darwin Lake and beyond rounded out our day. Highlights were Small Ground Finches, Galapagos Mockingbirds and the Isabela Lava Lizard. The Palo Santo here had just leafed out in the past few weeks and there was rain in the distance.



Fri., Feb. 14 Rabida | Black Turtle Cove

Ah, Rabida. This island is pleasant enough with its red sand and short walk. We saw a few birds like the Brown pelican and Galapagos Dove. But it was the WATER events that really stood out here. Participants opted for the glass-bottomed boat or snorkeling. The water was crystal clear and teemed with King Angel Fish, Yellow-tailed Surgeon Fish, Blue Parrot Fish, Concentric Puffer Fish, Black-striped Salema and much more. In addition, there was the Stone Scorpion Fish, numerous White-tipped Reef Sharks, some as long as we were, and a Golden Manta Ray with a TEN-FOOT WINGSPAN! Yes, swimming with us.

After lunch and a rest, Carol and Howard gave their final presentation “Life in Paradise: Adaptations for Living in Galapagos.” This was followed by a panga ride to Black Turtle Cove. Here there were many swimming Green Sea Turtles, which have a black color in the Galapagos, hence the name Black Turtle Cove. This area is a Red and White Mangrove nursery for Golden Manta Rays, Black-tipped Reef Sharks, Concentric Puffer Fish and many, many more species. (Yes, we saw all of those here.) There were also many birds such as Great Blue Herons, Lava Herons and Blue-footed Boobies. It is an area rich in wildlife and was well worth the visit.

Sat., Feb. 15 Santa Cruz | Darwin Station | Highlands

The Darwin Research Station was our goal this morning. We had a fairly extensive tour of the breeding facility. This is a facility that breeds and takes care of baby tortoises from many different islands and then makes sure they get back to their proper place when the young are big enough to survive in the wild. This is a research facility that monitors scientific research all over the islands, and along with the Galapagos Park Service, trains the approximately 950 Galapagos Guides. It does good work.

After lunch onboard the Origin we returned to town to take our bus to the highlands. Here amongst lush Scalesia forests we walked through an extensive lava tube, visited “los Gemalos,” twin craters, and walked the pathways on a farm with many wild Santa Cruz Giant-Tortoises. The lava tube was result of lava cooling faster on the outside than on the inside of the tube. At the craters we saw our first Woodpecker Finch and many Yellow Warblers, which we had seen previously. The tall Scalesia are part of a group of “daisy trees” that underwent adaptive radiation just like Darwin’s finches. Never a dull moment in Galapagos.

Returning to the ship we experienced our farewell dinner, saying goodbye to the captain, our concierge, our Galapagos guides and the rest of the ship’s staff. Then Ivan treated us to a visual review of our trip with pictures and movies, making it available to all of us to take home. Thank you, Ivan!



Sun., Feb. 16 San Cristobal | Interpretation Center | Departures

This morning we disembarked from the Origin for the last time and headed for the Interpretation Center in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on the island of San Cristobal. It was VERY hot; somehow, we lost our overcast skies. After checking our bags at the airport, we returned to the town for lunch on our own and a bit of shopping. Our Avianca flight to Guayaquil and then Quito was on time. We arrived in Quito before 5:00 p.m., said our goodbyes to new friends and then traveled on our own paths—some on the post-tour extension to Mindo, some to visit a friend in Quito, some for additional adventures and some to return home. All in all, it was a breath-taking week with something to please everyone every day. For Howard and Carol, it will always be a favorite trip.

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