

Galapagos Odyssey - Route B 5 Tage

Day 1 – Sunday

AM: Arrival at Baltra Airport

At Baltra Airport you have to pay your Galapagos National Park entrance fee and your luggage is inspected. In front of the arrival hall you will meet your naturalist guide and fellow passengers, and be transferred to the landing dock by airport shuttle. Our inflatable dinghy brings you the last stretch to the yacht.

PM: Dragon Hill (Santa Cruz)

Dragon Hill offers you two key-species very liked to be seen during each Galapagos visit, though not too common distributed throughout the islands: *Galapagos land iguanas* and *American flamingos*. You will climb a hill with *giant opuntia cacti* where these 'dragons' feed and breed. By 1975 this was one of the last populations of *land iguanas* on Santa Cruz, threatened by wild dogs. A rescue plan was executed and the *iguanas* even had to be dislocated to nearby undisturbed Venice Islets for over a decade, where they successfully reproduced. In 1990 the population was replaced; just three years before this scenic site was opened to tourism. Although they are quite shy and elusive, you stand a fair chance to see the success of this project with your own eyes.

The short walk crosses the coastal vegetation zone, as well as the somewhat higher arid zone with vulnerable tropical dry forest. In the warm and wet season in the first half of the year all turns green. Evergreen *giant prickly pear cacti* with internal reservoirs followed a different survival tactic in this dry climate than the leaf dropping *palo santo* trees; finally both were successful. Moreover, this is a very photogenic spot as well, with breath-taking panoramas over the bay and towards an intriguing steep volcanic spout of red lava that overlooks the area. Not in the last place Dragon Hill has become popular because of its saline lagoons behind the beach; these contain algae and shrimp and attract seasonally foraging *American flamingos*. Dragon Hill is best location on Santa Cruz to observe them.

Day 2 – Monday

AM: Rabida

The anchorage-site at the northern headland of Rabida is the only point in its shoreline that is not guarded by a barrier of rocks and armed with *giant prickly pear cacti*. The sharp corner of the bay holds a striking red beach that adds colour to your photo album. Walk to the end of the beach, blocked by spectacular brick-reddish cliffs that contain oxidized iron. Especially short after sunrise and short before sunset, colours become more intense, and the rusty sand and rocks seem to blaze!

Outside the mating season this remarkable red beach is occupied by a large bachelor colony of *Galapagos sea lions* that will welcome you. The beach wall on this compact spot holds a small and shallow, green-fringed lagoon. Although the water is salty, this pool is the most fertile place on the otherwise very arid islet, so it attracts all kind of aquatic and wading birds such as *pintails* (or *Bahama ducks*) and sometimes even *American flamingos* (although these seem to have found better foraging places). In the surrounding *mangrove* bushes many different species of songbirds are looking for hiding and breeding places between the evergreen foliage. *Palo santo* trees that drop their leaves in the dry season cover the rest of the island.

Outstanding attraction is the major breeding colony of *brown pelicans*, and one of the best places in Galapagos to approach them. Their brown plumage becomes striking white with chestnut markings on head and necks and a yellowish crown in the breeding season (period shifts on our calendar). Both parents breed about 4 weeks and nurture some 10 weeks more. *Brown pelicans* are the only pelicans in the world that plunge-dive. From the beach you can see their spectacular hunting V-formations, low above the surface of the sea. Juveniles don't learn this fishing technique easily, resulting that many of them will starve short after fledging. It is interesting to compare the superficial dives of the pelicans with the rocket like plunge dives of the *boobies*.

PM: Chinese Hat

Chinese Hat is a 52 m / 170 ft high volcanic cone, forming another islet right out off the coast of Santiago. Approaching from the north you certainly will agree with its name. Because the primordial fire has been extinguished recently, you can learn more about volcanism, lava bombs and lava tunnels. On the beach there are also curious pillow-type lavas with coral heads on top! These spheres have a submarine history and were uplifted above sea level.

You arrive exactly on time to witness next chapter about colonization by pioneers! Chinese Hat does not appear that inhospitable any more as Bartolome and Lunatic Sullivan Bay. This tiny, rusty-coloured islet just begins to sprout. Beautiful beaches of white coral sand arose, and holes in the infertile, but eroding lava fields are getting filled up with lava sand, facilitating as well inland places for rooting. *Galapagos sea lions* and countless marine iguanas contribute to fertilization. Everything together creates more favourable options for newcomers, like *saltbush*, which sticks at the beach and *sesuvium* that rolls out a discolouring carpet, turning from green into red in the dry season. Colonization of Chinese Hat will probably occur in a much higher pace than elsewhere; hence Santiago is just a stone's throw away, although its eastern tip is also lifeless. The separating channel with its turquoise waters is about 100 m / 300 ft wide. Across, at the foot of the cliffs lives a small colony of *Galapagos penguins*, which you might see occasionally during the inflatable dinghy-ride.

Day 3 – Tuesday

AM: Darwin Bay (Genovesa)

Inside the submerged caldera of Genovesa lies Darwin Bay, with a diameter of more than 1,5 km / 1 mi and it is almost 200 m / 650 ft deep. Confusingly the beach deep inside the caldera has been called Darwin Bay as well... This quiet site is Galapagos in miniature! The small-scaled area will surprise you again and again, walking along a coral sand beach, crossing barren lava formations and creeks, passing tidal pools, shrubs and further ahead following the top of some cliffs. In this extremely varied and peaceful ambience, every single species has occupied its own ecological niche (or preferred habitat) without disturbing others.

Whimbrels and *wandering tattlers* forage actively along the surf, next to resting *Galapagos sea lions*. *Herons* wait motionless at the tidal pools and creeks behind the *saltbushes*. Impressive *frigatebirds* (both species, as on North Seymour and Pitt Point) and *red-footed boobies* nest in the *mangroves*, where you can also notice vocalists such as the *yellow warbler*, *Darwin's finches* and the *Galapagos mockingbird* (although this island is: similar to Española: relatively poor in song bird species). Unique is that two subpopulations of the same species *large cactus finch* differ from singing.

Tropicbirds, *Nazca boobies*, *storm petrels*, endemic *lava-* and *swallow-tailed gulls* among others soar along the cliffs. When you already have seen marine iguanas elsewhere, the Genovesa species might not look too impressive. But consider that these are virtually the

only reptiles that succeeded to reach and survive on this remote, upstream island, and meanwhile have become endemic.

PM: Prince Philip's Steps (Genovesa)

Genovesa has a royal touch. And that's not only because of its former English name Tower (after the Royal Palace in London). The often used English name of the visitor's site El Barranco commemorates the 1964 visit of the Duke of Edinburgh, a Galapagos lover since the first hour and patron of the Charles Darwin Foundation. In his footsteps (and in those of Prince Charles) you will be able to admire one of Galapagos' favourite birding spots with largest breeding colonies of *Nazca* and *red-footed boobies*.

Before landing you will make an inflatable dinghy-ride along the eastern arm of the caldera. On approach, the massive 25 m / 80 ft high walls become overwhelming, and will give you a better impression of the dimensions of this crater. Sometimes a *Galapagos fur seal* is resting on one of the ledges at the base. You also will see first seabirds, although the real spectacle finds place on top and on the outside of the rim, which provide better perching and nesting places.

Therefore you have to hike and overcome the steep stairs from the landing dock to a bush of *palo santo* shrubs on top. Tropical dry forest vegetation appears dead during most months of the year, but just drops its leaves to prevent drying out by evaporation. It's a very threatened ecosystem. *Red-footed boobies* with different plumages gratefully use these scarce nesting-places; different to their relatives 'red feet' don't nest on the rocky ground.

On arriving at the seaside of the rim, the bushes open up and you can enjoy wide views, a strong sea breeze and the amazing flying skills of uncountable seabirds. Following the exposed seaside rim you will first pass the *Nazca boobies* and finally reach the extensive *storm petrel* nesting places, where you might be lucky spotting how the well-camouflaged *short-eared owl* is hunting for them on foot!

Day 4 – Wednesday

AM: Bartolome

Nothing is too much promised when the National Park authorities praise Bartolome as 'flagship site of the Galapagos Islands'. Although tiny (just 1,2 km² / 0,46 sq. mi) and lifeless at first sight, this young islet offers you some of the best panoramas and wildest landscapes in the entire archipelago. Surprisingly these warm equatorial waters with coral reefs are even one of the best places in the archipelago to encounter endangered *Galapagos penguins*!

Galapagos' landmark 'Pinnacle Rock' towers prominently over an isthmus with paradisiacal sand beaches on each side, and emerald coloured bays. Underwater, a second, completely distinctive world opens up to you. The warm, clear and shallow waters are ideally for snorkelling between *surgeonfishes*, harmless *whitetip reef sharks* and *Pacific green turtles*. If you are lucky you can even catch the sight of fishing *Galapagos penguins*.

To enjoy the postcard view of the idyllic 'Pinnacle Bay' you have to cross a third, dramatic type of scenery, climbing the stairs to the viewpoint on top of the island (114 m / 375 ft). During this geologically and botanical interesting climb, you will find yourself in the middle of several very close spatter cones, craters, and lightweight lava droplets, that where spewed out by spectacular fountains and cooled and solidified in the air. Bartolome is among the youngest of the islands, and on a geological scale just recently born out off fire. The Summit Trail is ideal to witness how scanty pioneer vegetation such as lava cactus is struggling to cover the lunar-like volcanic landscape of majorly virgin, uneroded lava fields.

PM: Sullivan Bay

Sullivan Bay is incomparable to any other visitor's site; the miraculous bas-reliefs you will observe in the crust of the lava flow are unique to Galapagos and Hawaii. Those who are interested in geology and volcanology really should not miss the opportunity to witness earth formation in process, although it is unlikely that you will notice real fireworks and lava fountains on spot. Anyway, the power of volcanic activity will impress you forever. Setting foot at the Sullivan lava stream is like landing on the moon.

The desolate, stretched-out fields seem mostly lifeless, but this doesn't mean that there is nothing to see. In contrary! And this can best be proofed by its popularity amongst photographers, especially those who have eye for detail and love close-ups. And there is even some life! *Pacific green turtles* sometimes use the tiny white sand beach to lay their eggs, and eventually you also might spot a strayed *heron*, *oystercatcher*, or some *crabs*. Behind the beach there is just some sparse pioneer vegetation such as *lava cacti* and *carpetweed*. At best you will encounter a *lava lizard*, surprising locusts or the small snake-species *Galapagos racer* hunting for them (or for *turtle* hatchlings on the beach).

The barely eroded flow seems to have been solidified for short, and suggests that you are just able to set foot on it. The winding and rippled pahoehoe rope-lava still contains intriguing traces, which tell flaming stories about vaporized leatherleaf trees and miniature cones of volcanic glass. The surface may have cooled down, but the baking sun completes the sensation of heat.

Distinctive tuff cones pockmark the new-formed lunatic landscape. Their rusty, oxidized colours and the vegetation reveal that these cones are from an older generation, and count with a very different geological history. Originally these were volcano islets on their own, but have become part of Santiago when a hot flood of ooze filled up large parts of Sullivan Bay during the last eruption of 1897, which in fact is the black crust you walk on. For the time being only the opposite islet of Bartolome escaped from incorporation. In a certain way the distinctive cones still can be considered as islands, though no longer surrounded by sea, but by wide infertile lava fields.

Day 5 – Thursday

AM: Highlands (Santa Cruz)

Because wild *Galapagos giant tortoises* don't stop at official National Park boundaries, dozens of them also roam and even mate on the adjacent woodlands in the populated agricultural zone of Santa Cruz. Thanks to the semi-open pastures and scalesia-woodlands, and their concentration around muddy pools, these farmlands are best place for a quick visit. Armed with a rain poncho and (provided) rubber boots you will get good chances to approach wild *Galapagos giant tortoises* just within a few meters.

Most time of their stretched lives is spent slowly and silently, except for a warning hiss, or loud screams during mating, which you can hear from far in the first half of the year. Subsequently females leave the highlands and descend all the way down to the beaches to dig holes and lay their eggs. It is estimated that in 2015 about 32.000 tortoises live in the wild in all the islands, most on restricted locations of Isabela.

AM: Transfer to Baltra airport

Assisted by the guide and some crew-members the inflatable dinghy will bring you and your luggage to Baltra, where we take the airport shuttle. Your guide will accompany you to the check-in counters in the departure hall.

We expect that you will return home with stunning pictures and unforgettable memories for life!