

6 days / 5 nights – Thursday to Tuesday

Day 1 – Thursday

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 the airport shuttle will transfer you to the ferry across the Itabaca Channel. On Santa Cruz you continue by bus through the lush highlands to the harbour of Puerto Ayora. Our inflatable dinghies bring you the last stretch to the yacht.

PM: Charles Darwin Research Station

On the outskirts of Puerto Ayora you will visit the shared area of the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) and the headquarters of the Galapagos National Park Service. From here the indispensable conservation management and biological research of this unique archipelago and its surrounding waters are directed. This complex houses a bunch of interpretation and information centers about the National Park and the Galapagos Marine Reserve around.

Most memorable from this visit will probably be the successful breeding center and the enclosures with *Galapagos giant tortoises*; even after the death of its world famous resident, emphatically called 'Lonesome George' († June 2012; the last known individual of the *Pinta subspecies*, who sadly failed to reproduce offspring). Meanwhile its remains have been mummified and stuffed, but at present Galapagos has no climatic controlled facilities to show it in a conservative way to public. For other species and subspecies the breeding project started just in time to save them from extinction. Most remaining adult *giant tortoises* in the corals are former pets and many of them are accustomed to human company.

For centuries these emblematic reptiles have made Galapagos famous. Hundreds of thousands of them used to crawl around before the devastating epoch of pouching. Even the name of this archipelago refers to these prehistoric dwellers. On certain islands their shells evolved into pronounced shapes of riding saddles or 'galapagos' in Spanish. Nobody else than Charles Darwin already noticed differences in shells of tortoises from different islands, which put him on track of his evolution theory of natural selection. Because species from different islands are kept, the Charles Darwin Research Station is the place to compare the diverging saddle back shapes and the dome-shaped shells from the *Santa Cruz-subspecies*. 'Lonesome George' had got an extreme high saddleback shell, long legs and a long neck to reach higher for food. Charles Darwin already noticed differences in the shells from different islands, which put him on the track of his evolution theory of natural selection.

Day 2 – Friday

AM: Whitetip reef shark channel (Isabela)

Just outside the harbour of Puerto Villamil on the largest island of Isabela, a group of islets protrude just above the ocean. These barely noticeable rocks form one of the most emblematic sites that you will visit during your cruise. The jagged black formations, dotted with *mangrove* and *candelabra-cactus*, are the remnants of a lava stream that has ended up into the ocean. Meanwhile these are being demolished by the waves, and a collapsed lava tube forms a channel that fills-up on high tide, while the entrance is closed on low tide. Marine life gets trapped, including spectacular *whitetip reef sharks* (called *tintoreras* in Spanish, as is the site's official name). This species of *shark* is fairly common in the

archipelago, and generally spotted on the seabed when snorkelling, whilst these are resting from their nocturnal hunts. But on this unique place you can observe them comfortably from the bank in the crystal clear turquoise waters. Sometimes *turtles* and elegant *white-spotted eagle rays* or *golden rays* glide back and forth through this calm channel, as well as smaller fish and *Galapagos sea lions*.

Unlike the inviting beaches of Puerto Villamil, the tiny plaques on these rocky formations offer important and fully undisturbed breeding places for prehistoric-looking *marine iguanas*. Over here the largest Isabela subspecies (up to 1,5 m / 5 ft tall !) can reproduce successfully and thrive by hundreds. The rocky shoreline with its intertidal life also attracts *sally lightfoot crabs*, *lava herons* and *Galapagos penguins*, which particularly reside on the other (western) side of Isabela. *Galapagos sea lions* occupy the sand beach and complete this stereotypical Galapagos image.

AM: Sierra Negra (Isabela)

Sierra Negra is the 3rd highest volcano of Isabela and the 5th highest of Galapagos (1124 m / 3687 ft). It erupted 7 times in the 20th century, and last time in October 2005. It is the only major volcano of Isabela whose crater regions are actually opened to tourism. A mysterious half-day hike through the cloud forests takes you to a viewpoint at the rim, offering the opportunity of fantastic sights into the impressive caldera (clear weather required, though unpredictable; thanks to prevailing winds clouds usually tend to dissolve at the viewpoint). The caldera measures about 7 x 9 km / 4.5 x 6 mi across, and the largest of the archipelago. Since the discovery of so-called super volcanoes like Yellowstone it shouldn't appear any more in the listing of largest craters in the world.

A somewhat muddy trail to the rim will lead you through an unexpected, evergreen cloud forest that only exists in the highlands of the main islands. The dense and rich vegetation includes *ferns*, *tree ferns* and endemic *scalesia trees* laden with epiphytes like *lichens*, *orchids* and *bromeliads*. The fog and drizzle – more frequent in the cool garúa season (June-December) – contributes to the mysterious atmosphere. En route you can also spot striking song birds as the *vermillion flycatcher*, the *yellow warbler* and the *woodpecker finch* (among six more species of *Darwin's finches*); this peculiar one hammers on branches like a woodpecker and uses twigs as tools to capture insects!

PM: Arnaldo Tupiza Tortoise Breeding Center (Isabela)

In the breeding center Arnaldo Tupiza you can see hundreds of giant Galapagos tortoises of all sizes (the vulnerable hatchlings are not gigantic at all, even smaller than the size of your hand)! This project just outside Puerto Villamil is created to rescue the endangered populations that live on five different locations on both southernmost volcanoes of Isabela. One thing becomes clear on your visit: it's hard work to save these queer creatures for extinction by reproduction in captivity and repopulation, but the good news is that these important programs are successful and so far have saved several species for extinction. Although centuries of massive pouching have fortunately come to an end, the surviving populations of giant tortoises are threatened because of wild dogs, pigs and donkeys destructing their nests, wild goats grazing their food, and even ants predated on their eggs, and also because of volcanic eruptions. From the almost incredible estimations of 250,000 tortoises in the 16th century only remained about 3,000 individuals in the 1970s; by 2015 their numbers have increased up to about 32,000 in all archipelago.

Don't forget to walk through the attractive botanic garden of this breeding centre. It is full of native species that attract colourful songbirds such as yellow warblers, Darwin's finches, Galapagos and vermillion flycatchers. Finally there is no greater counterpart to the cumbersome tortoises as the graceful flamingos that frequently filter the saline waters of the neighbouring lagoon Poza del Chapin for shrimp and algae. They are joined by a handful of species of aquatic and even shore birds, from which some even migrate from Canada and Alaska.

PM: Wetlands & Beach (Isabela)

The tempting white sand beach of Puerto Villamil counts far more *marine iguanas* and *Sally lightfoot crabs* than bathing guests. Its overgrown beach wall hides the largest coastal lagoon of Galapagos, attracting lots of aquatic birds and wintering shore birds; some come from arctic regions! It is part of a swampy coastal zone known as the wetlands, with an old *mangrove* forest, collapsed lava tubes, and even more salt and brackish ponds. These are home to the largest concentration and breeding site of *American flamingos* in Galapagos! But sightings are never fully guaranteed with these shy and nervous birds.

Day 3 – Saturday

AM: Moreno Point (Isabela)

Moreno Point tells you the intriguing story how the famous lunatic lava fields of Sullivan Bay (Santiago) could develop in future, when parts of the crust break and fall into the undermining lava tunnels. Pits and holes close to the coast gradually fill-up with seawater. The once lifeless area becomes dotted with tidal pools and filtration lagoons that offer new opportunities to pioneer vegetation; finally the lava cacti get company. This site counts with two more species of *cacti*, from which the *candelabras* can grow up to 7 m / 23 ft tall, and dominate the rest of the shrubby vegetation.

Fringes of *reed*, *sea grass* and *mangrove bushes* surround the picturesque lagoons that have been transformed in lush oases. Your pictures get the perfect finish touch when bright *American flamingos* and aquatic birds have come to forage in the largest lagoon as well. In the wet season the fresh, promising greens become even more intense and contrast strongly with the dead, pitch-black lava. The pioneer vegetation seems on the winning hand; just until Sierra Negra volcano spits a new layering cover, and the story starts all over again.

During an inflatable dinghy-ride along the jagged shoreline, you will notice different species. The tidal pools form natural traps and attract scavengers and hunters, bright orange *sally lightfoot crabs*, *oystercatchers* and *herons*. *Marine iguanas* wait patiently for their turn to graze weeds on the seabed at lowest tide, while *brown pelicans* have found an undisturbed place to breed in the *mangroves*.

PM: Marielas Islets & Elizabeth Bay (Isabela)

Although there is no landing point, the marine visitor's site of Elizabeth Bay offers actually two in one. You will undertake a prolonged ride by inflatable dinghy that combines a visit to the Marielas Islets in the mouth of the bay, with the mangles in its innermost heart. In 1963 these highest mangles of Galapagos were close to complete destruction, when Volcán Chico, a parasitic cone of Sierra Negra, sent lava flows to this 20 km (11 mi) distant bay. Miraculously the flows came just a few kms back to a halt.

The Marielas islets are an excellent place to spot *marine iguanas* and *Galapagos penguins*, which prefer places in the front row at the base of the cliffs. The *Galapagos penguin* is considered as endangered with just some 1500 birds over all archipelago, and therefore the rarest *penguin* species worldwide. So don't expect vast colonies of uncountable numbers as in Antarctic regions, but rather small family groups. On top of these ochre colored and reddish oxidized remnants of a crumbled tuff cone grow several lofty *palo santo*-trees. These provide *magnificent frigatebirds* a lookout far over the open sea to watch for and rob returning *blue-footed boobies*.

Next the inflatable dinghy will turn landwards, leaving the surf behind and enter the calm estuary of Elizabeth Bay through a quite narrow entrance. Whilst exploring the lagoons and shallow creeks, the outboard engine is turned off, so that you can enjoy the sounds of

nature. Graceful *Pacific green turtles* swim in slow motion around, sometimes popping-up their heads for breathing. In December and January you stand a fair chance to encounter them mating at the surface. Maybe you can also see *spotted eagle rays* or *sharks*, looking for protected inlets to give birth and leave their young alone. *Brown pelicans* and *blue-footed boobies* show diverging plunge-diving techniques, while *lava herons* and *great blue herons* prefer to wait patiently for what comes along. You can also compare the huge *red mangroves* (with their characteristic prop roots) with *black*, *white* and *button mangroves*. Actually *mangroves* are from different botanic families and only have in common that all thrive in brackish waters.

Day 4 – Sunday

AM: Espinoza Point (Fernandina)

Fernandina, located right above the Galapagos hotspot in the farthest west of the archipelago, is still under construction. It is estimated that between 60.000 and 400.000 years ago the top of this underwater shield volcano rose above sea level, which makes it the youngest of the main islands. Fernandina harbours one of the worlds most virgin, untouched ecosystems, and is therefore very well protected. This exclusive and fascinating island will make you eyewitness of evolution, which is happening right in front of you!

Espinoza Point is Fernandina's only terrestrial visitors site, and one of the few locations where you will find some bizarre outgrowths of natural selection. Figurehead is the emblematic *flightless cormorant* that lives exclusively in the remote west of Galapagos, and could be considered as the 'holy grail of evolution'. Thanks to the fact that this island has been spared for the introduction of invading species and because it is even uninhabitable for most land mammals, the *cormorant* had not to fear terrestrial enemies. This miraculous bird lets you approach very close. Next generations gradually lost their flying capabilities to become excellent divers, but still stuck with the typical habit of drying and showing their unfolded 'wings' to you. Together with its neighbour, the *Galapagos penguin*, these are two of the rarest and most vulnerable bird species in the world, with less than 2000 individuals each.

Besides the endemic wildlife, you will also love the almost unworldly views with the dominating cone of Volcán La Cumbre (= the summit) as a spectacular backdrop. The narrow headland that you walk is the end of a lava tongue that has reached the coast and solidified on contact with the cold seawater. The black rocks are not yet covered by more vegetation than lava cacti and mangroves, but are teeming with hundreds of dragon-like *marine iguanas* that breed and conglomerate in larger groups than in any other island.

PM: Tagus Cove (Isabela)

Right on the eastern shore of the Bolivar Channel are two tuff cones containing ultra saline crater lakes: Tagus Cove and Beagle Crater. Both present spectacular layered cliffs at their sea faces, providing plenty nesting places for sea and coastal birds. From the inflatable dinghy you can observe *marine iguanas*, *flightless cormorants*, *Galapagos penguins* and *storm petrels*. It's impressive to see flocks of *blue-footed boobies* and *brown pelicans* plunge diving from considerable altitudes.

Explosive eruptions have blown out a part of the outer rims of both tuff cones, creating their characteristic horseshoe shapes. On one of these events the sea has entered the caldera of the northern cone and has formed Tagus Cove. The inner crater rim has remained intact and spared the region for an even more violent detonation when the seawater would have mixed up with the boiling volcanic materials. Nowadays it contains emerald Darwin Lake (though Darwin visited the neighbouring crater lake). On the ground you can find small little lapilli-balls, which have rained down when ash particles solidified in the air.

Traditionally sailors started to write the names of their vessels on the eastern cliffs of Tagus cove and inside caves. The oldest graffiti dates back from 1836, a year after Darwin's visit. The crew of HMS Beagle didn't find the necessary fresh water, but nevertheless the young naturalist got very impressed by this spot.

Less thirsty you will also begin the somewhat strenuous and sometimes-hot hike, following the inner ridge around Darwin Lake. On the inland side of the crater you can continue the last stretch to a great viewpoint on the outer caldera rim, with views to the nearby and outstretched lava slopes of Darwin Volcano (1280 m / 4200 ft). On clear days you can even distinguish the volcanoes Ecuador and Wolf, the highest point of Galapagos (1707 m/ 5600 ft, located exactly on the equator).

The arid zone of the inlands is overgrown with characteristic tropical dry forest vegetation such as a special variety of *palo santo*, *Galapagos cotton* and *yellow cordia (muyuyu)*. Depending on the months of your visit these trees and bushes will be leafless; or abundant and green in the wet season (first half of the year). During the hike you can spot different *Darwin's finches*, *flycatchers* and *Galapagos hawks*.

Day 5 – Monday

AM: Espumilla Beach (Santiago)

Espumilla Beach is a visitor's site at the northern end of James Bay, on the western coast of Santiago. This beach has revived as an important breeding site for *turtles*, as it is no longer suffering from digging wild pigs. The *turtles* return year after year to bury their eggs into the cinnamon coloured sand dunes. About two months later (roughly from February to August) the eggs hatch at once. Most vulnerable hatchlings never will reach sea, and form a banquet for predators such as *herons*, *frigatebirds*, *mockingbirds* and *ghost crabs*. The beach ridge hides a mangrove with two picturesque lagoons on the backside. The colony of *American flamingos* and aquatic birds used to be its main attraction, but after the climate phenomenon of El Niño, strong sedimentation altered the brackish water environment, and it no longer contains their food... As often in Galapagos, different vegetation zones are very close by, providing great scenic contrasts. During the climb of a hill you will be rewarded with a beautiful overview of the transitions from sea into beach into *mangrove* into dry *palo santo* forest.

PM: Puerto Egas (Santiago)

Dominated by the 395 m / 1300 ft high Pan de Azúcar (Sugarloaf), Puerto Egas is the southernmost pearl in the necklace of visitors sites along James Bay. It is named after Héctor Egas, who made a second attempt to mine salt commercially out of an inland crater lake in the 1960s. Santiago and its surrounding islets stand out by their spectacular and unique volcanic and coastal landscapes, and Puerto Egas is no exception. The masterly sculptured coastline of black basalts, polished multi-coloured ash-layers, collapsed lava tunnels, natural arches, caves and blowholes such as 'Darwin's toilet' and tidal pools form again very photogenic scenery. If you are rather a wildlife lover, you will also fully enjoy this unique place that probably will become your favourite on this island. You will find lots of representative members of the Galapagos-population.

Right below a spectacular rock arch in a grotto at the end of the beach a colony of *Galapagos fur seals* has occupied the shade, sheltering from the equatorial sun. Unlike the more common *Galapagos sea lion* this smaller species of seal is no beach lover at all, due to their adorable, but insulating coats. This outstanding refuge is the very best place throughout the archipelago to see these endemic, shy and once heavily hunted marine mammals.

Puerto Egas also teems with extremely varied intertidal life, especially on low tide. You can notice how *marine iguanas* just leave, or return cold and exhausted from grazing weeds on the seabed at lowest tide, or how they warm-up afterwards while sunbathing on the black rocks. Ossified *night herons* and *lava herons* keep an eye on the tidal pools that are refilled every flood again with small fish, *octopuses*, *star fish*, *snails*, *urchins*, *shells*, *green algae* and many other snacks for all tastes. Noisy *oystercatchers*, *turnstones*, *plovers* and *whimbrels* inspect these pools zealously. Hundreds of *sally lightfoot crabs* seem even brighter orange against the pitch-black rocks (the immature are dark-coloured). These crabs scratch *algae* from the rocks, but are also scavengers, and a prey themselves for the *herons*.

Day 6 – Tuesday

AM: Lobos Islet (San Cristobal)

Guess only once what you get to see at Lobos Islet... If you know a few words of Spanish, you will not be surprised that its beach harbours a colony of *Galapagos sea lions*. As in other colonies in the archipelago you can approach nurturing females within a few meters. In the breeding season this colony is also visited by very territorial males, defending and mating the harem on their part of the beach.

Though at first sight barren rocks overgrown by *palo santo*, this low islet houses more than just *Galapagos sea lions*. Two other emblematic species of Galapagos also breed here. Male *blue-footed boobies* and *great frigate birds* try to impress the females (and tourists) with clumsy dances heaving their striking blue feet or blow-up their balloon-sized scarlet pouches. Later in the breeding season the fluffy and hungry chicks cry for food and when their wings get strong enough these will learn to fly.

You can also find a lot of life in the intertidal zone, including striking bright orange *sally lightfoot crabs* and *marine iguanas* on the boulders. *Sand dollars* (a kind of *sea urchin*) among other marine life have been washed ashore on the beach and remained at low tide. It doesn't matter that these dollars are not be made of brass, hence it's strictly forbidden to take home everything you find in the National Park. On the horizon you can distinguish the contours of 10 km / 6.2 mi distant Kicker Rock. That impressive rock islet has become one of the landmarks of Galapagos, together with the blowhole on Española, Pinnacle Rock on Bartolome, and the remote northern rock arch of Darwin.

AM: Transfer to San Cristobal airport

Check-in and flight back to Guayaquil or Quito.

Assisted by the guide and some crew-members the dinghy will bring you and your luggage to Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, where we board a private bus to the airport. 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!