

A Journey Through Ecuador and the Enchanting Galápagos Islands

Travel Consultant, Karen Swann
September 2024



Premier
travel
Bexhill

Tel:- (01424) 216161

It's not often that you get the chance to experience a destination so unique and awe-inspiring that it leaves an indelible mark on your soul. I was excited to be fortunate enough to embark on a fam trip with HX, taking me to the extraordinary landscapes of Ecuador and the unforgettable Galápagos Islands. Travelling with a group of 18 travel agents, I was treated to an itinerary that truly captures the magic of these diverse destinations, and I hope after reading this, you will see why this should be on your bucket list too!



Day 1 - Arrival in Quito – Gateway to Adventure

Our journey began at Heathrow, with a smooth connection in Amsterdam before landing in the vibrant city of **Quito**, Ecuador. Known as the 'Footsteps of Darwin', our itinerary included two nights here, soaking in the cultural and historical richness of this high-altitude city nestled in the foothills of the Andes. Quito, a bustling metropolis of 2.7 million, sits on an ancient Incan settlement, giving it an intriguing historical edge.



After a scenic 45-minute bus ride from the airport, we reached this UNESCO World Heritage site, where the colonial charm is simply captivating. It is situated on what was a major Incan settlement famed for its silver mines.

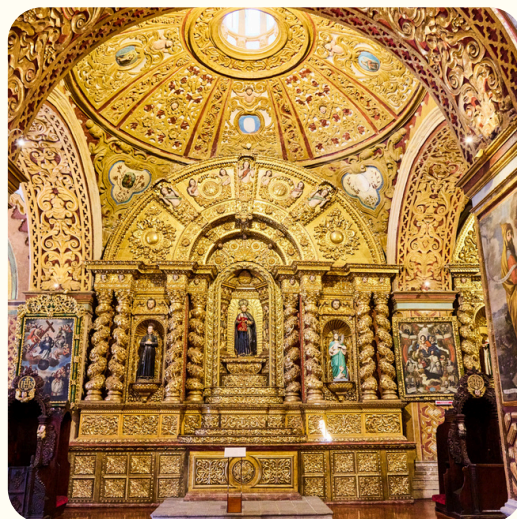
***Pro tip:** since the altitude is quite high, it's wise to take precautions for altitude sickness, but luckily, no one in our group was affected. Also, as the sun's rays are strongest at the equator, a high factor sun protection is advised.*

"Alternatively, HX offers the 'Nine of the Best Isles' itinerary, exploring the Western and Northern Galápagos, where you'll have the chance to spot penguins and flamingos—an unforgettable wildlife experience."



Day 2 - A Glimpse of Quito's Heritage and the Equator

The following day, we set off on a guided tour of **Quito's old town**, one of the best-preserved colonial districts in South America. Walking along cobblestone streets, admiring stunning baroque churches, and learning about Ecuador's famous Panama hats was a delight. Our highlight? Sampling exquisite chocolates at a local shop while learning the art of chocolate-making!



Our next stop was the iconic **Middle of the World City**, located around 16 miles north of Quito. Here we visited the famous monument that delineates the imaginary line of the Equator, you can literally stand with one foot in each hemisphere, taking the obligatory unforgettable photo too, with one foot in the southern and one in the northern hemisphere. The sense of being in the middle of the globe is simply surreal.

Day 3 - Into the Wild – Arriving in the Galápagos

We boarded a flight to **Baltra Island**, where our Galápagos adventure truly began. The island greeted us with its lunar-like landscapes and wildlife that seemed to materialise from a nature documentary. An iguana meeting us off the plane and a sea turtle making an appearance on the way to embark our home for the next 6 days, the ship Santa Cruz II. This a 5-deck sleeping up to 90 guests. Facilities include a small gym, a games room, bar with an indoor and outdoor seating area. There are also 2 hot tubs and outdoor washers and dryers which are complimentary to use throughout your cruise. Free WiFi is also included. Lectures and documentaries were shown in the library, that also stocked a coffee machine, biscuits, microscopes and a selection of destination-related books. Two of our group were lucky enough to see a whale whilst relaxing in a hot tub and I got to witness a hammer-head shark swim past us when out on the sky deck viewing the scenery.



Following an onboard briefing and delicious lunch, we got our first taste of the islands' wildlife that afternoon at **Mosquera Islet**, where golden rays glided beneath us and brown pelicans, lava herons as well as the Sally lightfoot crab. There's something incredibly humbling about being surrounded by nature in its purest form.

Day 4 - Meeting the Blue-Footed Boobies on San Cristobal



Red-footed booby

Our first full day in the Galápagos was nothing short of extraordinary. We began with an early morning disembarkation at **Punta Pitt**, located on the eastern tip of **San Cristobal Island**. This rugged area, with its eroded volcanic cone, offered either a hiking trail with jaw-dropping views of the island's shoreline. Alternatively, there was a **panga ride** to nearby smaller islands to observe the vibrant seabird colonies.



I opted for the hike, and it was worth every step! We were lucky enough to see both the famous **blue-footed** and **red-footed boobies**, including the unforgettable sight of two blue-footed boobies performing their quirky and captivating mating dance.

After working up an appetite, we returned to the ship for a hearty breakfast. The day's choices didn't stop there – we could either go **deep-water snorkelling**, try **kayaking**, or enjoy a trip on a **glass-bottom boat** for a glimpse into the underwater world. For those who wanted to unwind, the **sky deck** or a soak in one of the hot tubs was the perfect spot to relax while soaking in the stunning scenery.

The afternoon took us to **Puerto Baquerizo Moreno**, San Cristobal's capital, where we visited **Cerro Colorado**. This lush breeding centre for **giant tortoises** is nestled in a mossy deciduous forest, creating a truly atmospheric backdrop. Walking among these ancient creatures felt like stepping into another era. The forest itself is also home to many fascinating species, and we were fortunate to spot both the **San Cristobal mockingbird** and the **San Cristobal lava lizard**, which are found nowhere else in the world. Seeing the mockingbird, which played such a pivotal role in Darwin's inspiration for the theory of evolution, made this experience even more profound.

Each step of the day brought us closer to the heart of the Galápagos and its incredible natural wonders. It was a day filled with awe, adventure, and a true connection to the wildlife that makes these islands so special.

Day 5 - Following in Darwin's Footsteps

This was my favourite day of the trip as we visited two islands that felt so unique and special. It was 15th September which was the anniversary of the day in 1835 that Charles Darwin first landed in the Galápagos Islands. His ship The Beagle spent five weeks here in total and from that visit the world was changed forever.

We took a panga over to the idyllic sandy-white beach of ****Sante Fe Island****, populated by lots of sea lions. We were incredibly lucky to spot the endemic land iguana, unique to this tiny spot. After a walk around the island coming face to face with its inhabitants, guests could snorkel from the small panga boats, or join a trip in the glass-bottomed boat to observe the marine life below. We saw around ten sea turtles in this beautiful bay.



Following lunch and a brief rest, we disembarked at ****Plaza Sur Island**** in a channel made up of turquoise waters that contrast beautifully with the white sand and black lava of the shoreline. Beyond the shore of South Plaza Island, a carpet of scarlet sesuvium succulents serves as groundcover for a grove of green prickly-pear cacti. Yellow-grey land iguanas sit beneath these, waiting patiently for pears to drop.



Along the coastline, we came across many sea lion colonies (incl. a nursing baby) while frigates and shearwaters were gliding around above. We also witnessed a mockingbird pecking at the placenta which was laying close by. We even saw two Galapagos hawks (the top predator) and a swallow-tailed gull caring for its egg inches from our feet! This day definitely had the best photo opportunities - all topped off by a lovely grill and happy hour on the outside deck of the bar after our return.



Day 6 - Santa Cruz and the Giants of Galápagos

****Santa Cruz Island**** is the heart of scientific research and conservation in the Galápagos, and today we got to experience this first-hand. Visiting the ****Charles Darwin Research Station****, we saw the preserved remains of ****Lonesome George****, the last of his species, which served as a reminder of the fragility of these ecosystems.



We then embarked on a 4 km bicycle ride to our next location. It was a bit challenging due to the many hills as well as a great deal of potholes on the way! If you preferred not to participate, then you were able to stay onboard the coach instead.

On our next stop, we visited a local farmer who arrived from Ecuador in the 1960s with nothing. Now, he grows bananas, cacao, coffee, and sugar cane, and we were treated to a taste of his homemade moonshine, which was a very enjoyable addition to the morning!

Lunch, was on a farm in the misty hills, a favourite spot for wild giant tortoises. We spotted over 80 tortoises from main road, either wallowing in the mud or slowly making their way across the grassy terrain. Getting so close to these ancient creatures and hearing the distinctive 'whoosh' as they pulled their necks into their shells was an unforgettable experience, rounding off a fantastic day immersed in local culture and wildlife.



Day 7 - Seabirds and Iguanas on Española Island

Today, we explored ****Punta Suarez**** on ****Española Island****, home to some of the Galápagos' most unique seabird colonies. We were lucky enough to spot waved albatrosses (seen from April to December), Nazca boobies, and swallow-tailed gulls. With this, we'd officially completed sightings of all three types of boobies in the Galápagos! The visit also took us to the island's iconic blowhole, where the ocean surges up in a spectacular spray of water.



The island's marine iguanas were also out in full force, their vibrant red and green hues on full display during breeding season. These so-called 'Christmas iguanas' were everywhere, and we often had to watch our step to avoid disturbing their sunbathing spots!

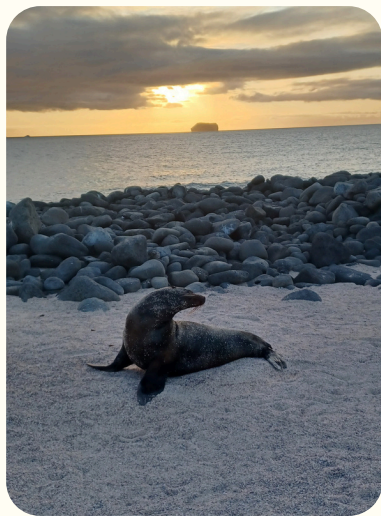
After lunch, we ventured to ****Osborn Islet**** and the stunning Gardner Bay. The white coral beaches provided the perfect setting to observe sea lions, mockingbirds, and finches. The highlight, however, was seeing a majestic Galápagos hawk resting on a whalebone just a few feet from us—a moment that truly captured the raw beauty of these islands.



Day 8 - A Final Farewell to the Galápagos Adventure

Our last day began with a panga ride to the serene ****Eden Islet****, located off the coast of ****Santa Cruz Island****. We had the option to snorkel twice, and I jumped at the chance. The waters didn't disappoint—reef sharks swam gracefully beneath us, about ten in total! The sea lions were in a playful mood as well, with one curiously circling our panga after we finished snorkelling, even making a few attempts to hop onboard! Another day, I spotted one lounging in a panga, ready to relax in the sun. On land, we were advised to keep a respectful two-metre distance from these playful animals, as they can get quite territorial, especially during breeding season.

Later, we visited ****North Seymour Island****, a place born from the ocean floor, lifted by volcanic forces. Its low, flat profile was unlike the other islands we'd seen. A small, ghostly forest of Palo Santo trees stood near where we disembarked, waiting for the rainy season to burst into bloom. The island is home to thriving bird colonies, including blue-footed boobies, two types of frigate birds, swallow-tailed gulls, and more sea lions and marine iguanas. The sight of the male frigates puffing up their bright red throats in a mating display was unforgettable, a true highlight of the day.



As the sun set in the distance, we enjoyed one last panga ride back to the ship, with the sky painted in stunning colours.

That evening, our crew treated us to a heartwarming slideshow, put together by the ship's photographer, capturing all the incredible highlights of our trip. Each of us received a copy as a keepsake, a beautiful way to remember our unforgettable adventure in the Galápagos.

It was the perfect way to end such a remarkable journey, leaving us all with memories to cherish for a lifetime.

In Conclusion

The food onboard was consistently excellent, catering to every need. Breakfast and lunch were buffet-style, while dinner was served by waiters, offering a more refined dining experience. Complimentary soft drinks, wine, and beer were included with meals, and from October 2024, HX will be offering unlimited alcoholic drinks with all their packages, adding an extra touch of luxury to this already fantastic experience.

I wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to HX for such an extraordinary trip. This adventure gave me a true taste of what one of their expertly curated expeditions has to offer, from the unforgettable breathtaking wildlife encounters to the fascinating landscapes.

This is the holiday of a lifetime—perfect for anyone with a passion for wildlife, nature, and adventure. If this journey has sparked your sense of adventure, I'd be thrilled to help you book this incredible Galápagos expedition with HX, ensuring you get to enjoy every magical moment just like I did.