

STRANGER THINGS

An adventure in the remote Galápagos Islands is not the ‘hush-hush’ David Attenborough experience you may expect. In fact, you might find you’re laughing out loud for most of it.

WORDS BY SUSAN ELLIOTT

I’m looking at a beautiful pair of boobies. I’m trying not to stare, scared I’ll throw them off their game. Beaks stab at the sky, heads bow, wings splayed, fish regurgitated, shared, and fabulous blue feet stomp the ground – a square dance, two-step, and line dance all in one crazy display. The mating ritual of the blue-footed booby is a love scene like nothing else in the bird world. Love is in the air, and it’s hilarious.

I’m 1,000km from the coast of Ecuador in the Galápagos Islands, and, only an hour into a five-day cruise, I’ve evolved into a better person simply by being here.

Unknowningly, botanist, geologist and naturalist Charles Darwin put this archipelago on our 21st-century travel itineraries when he published his theory of evolution in 1859, not imagining that centuries after his expedition, it would be one of the world’s most treasured and popular tourist destinations.

EcoGalaxy is our vessel, an excellent evolution of Darwin’s *HMS Beagle* and a natural selection if you want luxury in the wild.

The crew of the eight-cabin catamaran meet me off my flight from Guayaquil to San Cristóbal Island, and our first laughs happen on the dock where a dozen lounging sea lions block the gangway. “Don’t stop for photos; just keep walking!” says our guide, Walter Sotomayor. I stop for a photo until a big one starts barking. I’m walking!

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Our first landing is on Lobos Island, where the treetops heave with hundreds of Magnificent frigatebirds, the females roost cool, nonchalant, and the males flap around, inflating their scarlet red throat pouch to look well, magnificent! The things boys do to get a date. On the shore, sea lions

Clockwise from opposite page, top left: Charles Darwin might not have liked their faces, but it’s hard not to love the Galápagos land iguana; The world-famous Galápagos giant tortoise; The scenery is as mesmerising as its inhabitants; Sea lions enjoying a sunbake; Dive under the water and the rich natural diversity continues; The mating ritual of the blue-footed booby must be seen to be believed.



SHIP SHAPE

Cruises on *EcoGalaxy* in the Galápagos can be booked with Chimu Adventures, an Australian-based company specialising in Latin America. Chimu made world headlines in 2020 when it helped evacuate hundreds of Australians trapped in South America at the start of the pandemic and won Most Outstanding Tour Operator at the 2022 AFTA National Travel Industry Awards.

lounge like celebrities at a resort pool, and Sally Lightfoot crabs scamper everywhere – their bright red shells and blue bellies screaming two conflicting messages – dangerous and delicious. Good luck to predators; these light-footed crabs can flee in four directions, jump like Michael Jordan, and scamper vertical slopes like rappellers in reverse. What evolution missed in the camouflage category is made up with speed.

What you learn quickly in the Galápagos is that wildlife is anything but wild. It is fearless.

While there are rules in this UNESCO Marine National Park about approaching wildlife, they don’t know the rules, which makes the interactions extra extraordinary.

On Sante Fe Island, the land iguana is my next big laugh. Not that I would laugh in its stupid face. Just quoting Darwin!

He wrote: “From their low facial angle, they have a singularly stupid appearance.” I love them. They hug the hot rocks and pose, reptilian bodybuilders, flexing in the equatorial sun. Walter tells us they survive on opuntia, prickly pear cactus, eating the flowers, pads – pricks and all. Tough guys.

It’s tough walking. Scorching hot. On South Plaza Island, the marine iguanas toast themselves on lava rocks before plunging into the cool Pacific. They’ve been doing their version of Nordic ice bathing for centuries before Scandinavians claimed it.

Underwater, the world’s only sea-going lizards graze on algae then spend hours on shore reheating their bodies in a scene American author Herman Melville described as “a basking mass of thorny heads, tangled limbs and scaly tails”. It’s a beautiful, messy mass.

SEALS, SHARKS & SNORKELS

I’m not sure I want to swim with hammerhead sharks. But peer pressure is a powerful force, so here I am, deep-water snorkelling in Darwin Bay, Genovesa Island, looking for hammerheads. With my eyes shut. I want to kiss Walter’s face (mask) when he says the waters are too murky and we should get out. I’m the first soul back in the Zodiac.

Snorkelling and swimming are daily excursions. There’s kayaking and stand-up paddling, too. One day, I stand in an ocean nursery of baby sea lions, knowing the bulls are patrolling

the perimeter for sharks; the next, I loll in a shore break where teenage sea lions rock and roll in the surf, then tumble in the white sands. I’m smiling; they look like fat black sausages dusted in icing sugar.

And let’s have a good laugh at the Galápagos cormorant, the only cormorant in the world that can’t fly. There’s the Gálapagos brown pelican, that clumsy guest at the party who is an absolute fashion disaster, and the red-footed booby with clown feet and a face that looks like Mum did its makeup after too many wines. The evolutionary waiting list is long.

MEETING THE TORTOISES

Five islands, five days, my trip ends at El Chato Ranch in the highlands of Santa Cruz to see the mighty giant tortoise for which the Galápagos Islands were named. Spanish explorers who discovered the islands in the 16th century named them after the tortoise, in Spanish, ‘galápagos’. They don’t do much. Nor will I if I get to one hundred.

Back to our beautiful boobies. Booby boy is whistling. Booby girl is honking. The soprano and the tenor have finished their date with a musical finale. I believe we have a commitment. He’s got about a minute to put a ring on it.  chimuadventures.com

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A species of giant tortoise believed to have gone extinct more than 100 years ago – Fernandina giant tortoise – has been spotted in the Galápagos Islands. mindfood.com/giant-tortoise

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