

NATURAL SELECTION

*Embark on a voyage of discovery to one of Earth's ultimate bucket list destinations:
the Galápagos Islands.*

BY PAUL RUBIO





A view of Pinnacle Rock from Bartolomé Island

Whether inspired by the pages of *National Geographic* or wowed by Discovery Channel specials, the Galápagos Islands have headlined bucket lists since the advent of leisure travel. And even as today's travel savvy search for the next great "it" destination, the Galápagos prevail as an undisputed must-see.

THE LAND BEFORE TIME

More than 500 nautical miles west of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean, the Galápagos Islands remain one of Earth's final untouched frontiers. The archipelago of 13 larger islands and seven islets comprises a living museum of natural history—a mind-boggling, foreign landscape where plants and animals have evolved for centuries without human interference. Each isle houses remarkably different species of birds, reptiles and plants, juxtaposed over a contrast of dry, volcanic landscapes and plant-rich, larger-than-life backdrops. Each day in the Galápagos feels like a new chapter in your own personal "Choose Your Own Adventure" book, exploring the gotta-see-it-to-believe-it wonders of evolutionary biology through hikes, photographic safaris, underwater adventures and *panga* (or zodiac) boat rides.

SAIL AWAY

With 97 percent of its total landmass protected as national parks and just 3 percent inhabited, only a carefully controlled inventory of small ships and yachts are able to island-hop this fantasyland. Since ferries do not connect the islands and permits are required for landing on the majority of them, the principal method for visiting and exploring the Galápagos is by cruise ship.

Ships sail a variety of eastern, northern and western circuits in three-, four- and seven-night itineraries determined by the park service. In general, most ships make two stops daily, each one an ambush of the senses. A number of these ships, such as Silversea's *Silver Galápagos*, have undergone head-to-toe renovations, rebranding the Galápagos as an experiential, luxury travel destination. In the case of *Silver Galápagos*, seven-night voyages are enhanced by butler-serviced suites, marble bathrooms, fine wines, presentations in the Explorer's Lounge, fun nights in the slick piano bar and a fabulous onboard restaurant where you can experience barbecue cuisine Galápagos-style—over indigenous volcanic rock.

NORTH CENTRAL CIRCUIT

This exciting route journeys to six islands, starting with the archipelago's northernmost, **Genovesa ("Tower") Island**. Prepare to saturate memory cards with prize-worthy images of red-footed boobies, Nazca boobies, great frigate birds and short-eared owls. Home to more than 30 species, this "Bird Island" lives up to its nickname, and these fearless feathered friends have no qualms introducing themselves and invading your personal space. You'll also have the opportunity to snorkel the surrounding waters of Bahía Darwin (Darwin Bay) on the lookout for schools of vibrantly colored tropical fish and hammerhead sharks.

On **Santiago Island**, you'll traverse the craggy lava-hewn coastline of Sullivan Bay, hiking across ethereal remnants of previous lava flows. Then, you'll hop onto the zodiac, keeping an eye out for curious penguins and possibly whales on your way to the stunning red-rock landscapes of **Rábida Island** to search for Darwin's finches and snorkel among fur seals, marine iguanas and reef sharks.

On **San Cristóbal**, witness conservation in action at the Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado, where endemic Galápagos giant tortoises are being bred in hopes of spawning their triumphant return to the wild. Browse the visitors' center to learn about the history of this island, along with why this area is needed to ensure long-term survival of the endangered tortoise population.

At Gardner Bay on **Española Island**, venture under the sea with the prolific sea lion population before visiting the nesting colonies of waved Galápagos albatross at Punta Suárez. You'll end the trip on the island of **Santa Cruz**, patronizing the Charles Darwin Research Station and honing your photography skills on the wild giant tortoises roaming the rolling hills.

WESTERN CIRCUIT

This equally interesting route also visits six islands, several of which differ from the north central circuit. You'll begin the sojourn on **Bartolomé**, summiting the island to take in the grandeur of Pinnacle Rock, the triangular-shaped rock form that's become an iconic symbol of the Galápagos. Next, you'll visit green turtle nesting sites or snorkel the crystalline waters among schools of parrotfish, eagle rays and fur seals.

On **Fernandina Island**, gawk at the stunning arid landscape of one of the Galápagos' largest volcanoes while blazing orange Sally Lightfoot crabs, flightless cormorants and charismatic marine iguanas ham it up for the lens.

Other highlights on this circuit include snorkeling with the penguins on **Isabela Island** and mailing postcards home from Post Office Bay on **Floreana Island**, an ancient yet functioning drop box. Zoom up close to a sea lion rookery aboard your zodiac, then head to Punta Cormorant to see some unlikely residents of the islands: pink flamingoes.

Similar to the north central circuit, you'll visit San Cristóbal to witness conservation in action at the Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado and end the trip on the island of Santa Cruz, impressed by the work of the Charles Darwin Research Station.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Regardless of the itinerary, these incredibly diverse, wildlife-rich islands and the dazzling waters in between never fail to impress. All routings yield supreme encounters with the Galápagos varied wildlife and surreal natural formations—and the photos to prove it! If venturing to the islands for a second or third time (admittedly, this author has already been three times, a testament to the fact that the Galápagos are worth the repeat visit), discuss with your Travel Leaders agent which route will reveal some new Galápagos treasures. **TL**

**LET'S
GO**

Explore these world-renowned, remote and unique wildlife islands with **Silversea Cruises** aboard the *Silver Galápagos* on the **7-day Baltra to Baltra (Galápagos) cruise**. You'll discover this remarkable cruise is unlike any you have ever experienced. Departs August 27, 2016, from \$6,950 per person (airfare additional). Call us today to learn more about the cruise and other ways to visit this bucket-list destination.



WHEN TO GO:

Galápagos wildlife and landscapes shine year-round; however, during the season known as *la garúa* (June to November, often peaking in August and September), you'll generally encounter some drizzle and fog over the islands and out at sea.

MONEY MATTERS:

Be sure to bring enough U.S. dollars to pay the mandatory \$100 park entry fee (upon arrival at the airport) and money for tipping the crew.

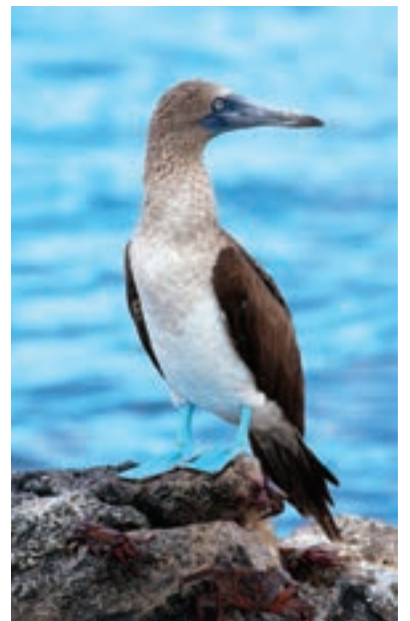
GETTING THERE:

All flights to the Galápagos' Seymour Airport in Baltra originate in Guayaquil or Quito, Ecuador. Once on Baltra, ship staff will transfer you by bus and boat to neighboring Santa Cruz Island for embarkation.



CALL US

To book your Galápagos Islands cruise, contact our Travel Leaders agency today.



Clockwise from top: Family exploring Floreana Island; giant tortoise; fur seals lounging on the beach; blue-footed booby; view of the clear, shallow waters that surround the islands; Silversea Cruises' *Silver Galápagos*.