

Ecuador & the Galapagos Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 - 26 January 2012

Report compiled by Darwin Alvarez



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Day 1

Monday 9th January

Darwin and Alfredo were waiting at the airport to transfer us to Dan Carlton Hotel. We were briefed about what to do on the next day to be prepared for our great first experience in a country with lovely people and extraordinary history and culture.

Day 2

Tuesday 10th January

QUITO

At 9 am Alfredo the local guide was ready waiting to show us the wonders of this Latin American city - the venerated Catholic religion, and extraordinary scenery, improving economy and friendly people. We drove across the town, from the northern part of Quito (the modern part) towards the south, the colonial part; for our first stop at La Basilica el Voto Nacional Church. One of the architectural styles built during the 19th Century. This church has an amazing gothic style, of the type of architecture that flourished during the last 350 years of the medieval era. Other places visited were the monastery of El Carmen de la Santisima Trinidad, Church of La Compania, Plaza Grande and San Francisco Square. Lastly we went to El Panecillo meaning 'little bread' which is also a historical site and the view of the city from here is astonishing.

Day 3

Wednesday 11th January

IN GALAPAGOS

The Galapagos islands are arranged by nature's powerful forces of crystallized rock piles and enormous edifices in the middle of the Pacific Ocean – they are lands of strange and unimaginable creatures, and Naturetrek offers us the opportunity to discover the uniqueness of these islands.

Our adventure started early in the morning, Monserrat Rodriguez was in charge of the transfer to the airport, as all the luggage had to pass through the Quarantine System Institution in charge of controlling any kind of undesirable life entering into these very pristine islands (seeds, soil, insects and so on). The flight on LAN aircraft was assigned for 9 15am. After 2 ½ hours and 30 minutes in Guayaquil city we saw the very arid island of Baltra. Ten minutes later we reached the Itabaca Channel where there was a lovely view of Santa Cruz, and after another five minutes we boarded a ferry. On the northern side of this island the arid zone predominates, with Incense Trees, Opuntia Cactus, Galapagos Cotton etc. At an altitude of about 550 metres above sea level the Scaevola zone transforms completely from the first appearance of these islands; different microclimates establish in these strange and complex ecosystems. The southern slopes are practically occupied by the agricultural zone. Mariposas farm is one of the best places to see the endemic tortoises from Santa Cruz - there were plenty of them every where.

Quite soon we moved to the largest town in the south of the island Puerto Ayora. It was in la Garrapata restaurant where lunch was ready. The Galapagos National Park and Charles Darwin Research Station are settled here; we saw the astonishing work of the park wardens in order to restore some of the tortoises populations which were highly impacted by humans. In addition we saw the Giant Tortoise Lonesome George - an icon, so famous because he is the end of the line, the only survivor from Pinta Island - it is a shame all efforts to breed him have so far failed.

We had a quick walk in the town and then we were welcomed by the crew who were waiting for us on board. After some instructions we were assigned our cabins. We proceeded to our cabins, and the luggage was already there. In a few minutes dinner was announced. After dinner Darwin briefed us about important details of safety and the next day's program.

Day 4

Thursday 12th January

South Plaza Island is the oldest of all, the lava has got a geological age of 4.2 million years, and the trail around the island shows it used to be under water by the coral remnants among the boulders (pillow lava) actually raising 25 metres above sea level! The north coast has one of the most successful and abundant Sea lion breeding colonies, where several males side by side patrol their territories, protecting females and babies from intruders and predators. Walking to the eroded southern part, the arid zone has an unusual cactus forest, and the reddish tinge of the ice plant (named also carpet weed) attracted our attention. This 0.13 square km island is a laboratory of evolution, and Marine and Land Iguanas hybridize here. The cliffs are a suitable nesting site for a variety of sea birds like Shearwaters, Swallow Tailed Gulls, Red Billed Tropicbirds which frequently glide around, as well as some Blue-footed and Nazca Boobies which were also sighted. At the end of the hike around the cliffs was a Sea lion bachelor colony – we were amazed at what skillful climbers they were.

We completed the loop seeing migrant birds like Ruddy Turnstones, and Wandering Tattlers. Afterwards we departed for 2 hours sailing towards our next destination. From the sun deck it was possible to see Manta Rays jumping and splashing (thought to reduce parasites).

The anchorage site in Santa Fe Island is really peaceful; and the air temperature was 35 degrees C so the water was inviting for our first snorkelling experience. We saw Sea lions, Parrot fish, Yellow tail Mullet, Stingrays and hundreds of Surgeon fish. Green Sea Turtles were also included in the party! Some people participated in a panga ride along the coast, they saw sea birds, iguanas, turtles, sharks, and several species of ray.

We started a hike at 4pm - baby Sea lions were suckling from their mothers on the first coral sandy beach we landed at. We then searched for the endemic Santa Fe Land Iguana - a very strange creature which differentiated from other species in colour and size. The lack of fresh water kept the vegetation a grey colour so only the cacti forest stays green all year around. After 700 metres walking we returned to the pangas and saw Spotted Eagle Rays as we made our way back on board.

Day 5

Friday 13th January

Cerro Brujo on San Cristobal Island is the remains of a tuff cone; it erupted in the open sea, and even contained a small lava lake. It has since been eroded by rain and wind and the sea and recently by feral goats. On visiting the coralline sandy beach, very rich in calcium carbonate, little crabs were intimidated by our passage, and still 10 metres away from them they hid in their shelters immediately. Sand dunes are nesting sites for Green Sea Turtles so there are many depressions on the upper part of the beach. The second species of mocking bird restricted just to this island *Nesomimus melanonis* stirred our interest in discovering more species of smaller land birds, and Darwin's Finches delighted our interest.

The lagoon right behind the sand dunes was a salt mine exploited by ancient colonizers, but is now a suitable habitat for Common Stilt, Ruddy Turnstones, Least Sandpipers, Sanderlings and White Cheeked Pintails. Bordering the lagoon halophytes (plants that tolerate salinity efficiently) give a green tinge to the area. Plants included Sea Grape (*Scaevola plumieri*) White and Black Mangroves, Carpet Weed, Beach Drop Seed and further on the arid zone pioneering the lava fields were *Cactae*, *Scaevola*, Croton and Palo Santo Trees. Snorkelling off the beach was a good option for some of our guests to start practicing and gaining more confidence, young Sea lions were encouraging snorkelers to follow them to deep water.

As we left we collected everything from the beach and once on board, we navigated to the oldest tuff cone in the Galapagos; Kicker Rock, a small eroded tuff located three nautical miles west of San Cristobal (the main island). This is an extraordinary geological landscape rising 140 metres above sea level where on the edifice Frigatebirds, Nazca and Blue Footed Boobies nest.

We started a bus ride from the political capital of Galapagos - Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. After 30 minutes we reached the Jacinto Gordillo Tortoises Breeding Centre created in 2002. The tortoises here were unlike those in Santa Cruz Island. The shell in the front part was partially modified and was caused by food availability in a different ecological zone. Chatham Mockingbirds, Small Ground Finches, Small Tree Finches, and a couple of Warbler Finches were spotted.

El Junco Lagoon is a type of volcano formed by shallow explosive eruptions due to the interaction of magma into the ground water table. It is the only permanent resource of fresh water in the Galapagos. It is a crater that during the last ice age, had 52.5 feet thick layers of sediment deposited, making this an impermeable lagoon capable of keeping rainwater in it long term. The name of the lagoon is after a plant locally known as El Junco (*Eleocharis mutata*). Besides White Cheeked Pintails, Moorhens were diving for food. Back at the town some people were interested on a short walk around. After dinner we set sail to Gardner Bay on Espanola.

Day 6

Saturday 14th January

Espanola, named after the country of Spain, so isolated and one of the oldest in geological terms. It is gorgeous and is now one of the best tourist attractions. The beach of Gardner Bay was our landing spot in the morning, where a large colony of Sea lions welcomed us. With no time to loose, ornithologists prepared their cameras as the three species of Darwin's Finches had to be recorded, and fortunately we succeeded this morning!

Some people decided to explore the beach on their own others come with me. Along the beach the endemic Espanola Mockingbirds were always following us, and at the end of the beach were the red Marine Iguanas and a Galapagos Hawk was flying high in circles possibly searching for prey nearby. It was hot and humid so everybody was ready to go back on board and prepare for a refreshing snorkel near to Gardner Island. The water visibility was so clear it was very easy for all participants to spot and recognize a wide range of fish such as: Yellow-tailed Surgeonfish, Blue Chin Parrotfish, Cornet fish, Trumpet fish, Porcupine Puffer fish, Guinea fowl Puffer fish, Diamond Stingrays and lots of Sea Stars. Back on board people were questioning and checking an identification book to have a better idea about the new fish we had seen.

During lunch I asked what time we should disembark and all agreed to start at 4 o'clock because there is not too hot at that time. There were hundreds of Marine Iguanas, Mockingbirds, Galapagos Doves, and Darwin's Finches as well. Lava Lizards inspired somebody to ask; are they baby iguanas? The question was really inviting since Espanola Island houses the largest of the Lava Lizards that really resemble baby Marine Iguanas. Walking along the coast we got to the Nazca Boobies nesting colony and the blow hole. Waved Albatrosses used to be absent during this time of the year but we were so lucky to see a some of them still practicing how to fly - this was probably due to the delayed wet season so these young quite soon will be absent at least for the next five years when they will be back to start their first breeding...

On the way back plants like Muyuyo (Yellow cordia) Galapagos Licium, Galapagos Croton, Salt Bush and Carpet Weed caught our attention, and suddenly the only snake species (*Pseudis hooedensis*) surprised us climbing on the lava, but it was time to come back to the boat before dusk. We had a 5 hour crossing tonight to Floreana Island our next destination.

Day 7

Sunday 15th January

Floreana is the most southern of all the Galapagos islands; one of the islands with a large scenic freshwater lagoon that is usually inhabited by Greater Flamingos, White-Cheeked Pintails, and migrant shore birds; and it is also home to Post Office Bay, where the famous barrel "Post Office" is set up and still used. There is outstanding diving and snorkelling at Devil's Crown; and it also has a green beach with greenish-brown sand and flour beach, made up of ground coral. It is one of the four Galapagos islands visited by Darwin.

Cormorant Point is a visitor site surrounded by tuff cones. The sand colour has a little tinge of green thanks to the intrusive igneous rock “olivine” (a mixture of silica, magnesium and iron). Black and White Mangroves, Salt Bush, and Lather Leave bushes engulfed lagoon making it a suitable nesting site for flamingos. At another site amazingly there were lots of Pacific Green Turtles. Sand dunes here provide the most successful nesting site for these marine reptiles. Male Small Ground Finches were calling for a mate on the way back.

Devil’s Crown is an eroded crater near to the main island, one of the best snorkelling sites. Here marine currents produce a rich upwelling attracting enormous amounts of fish; we had the first chance to see White tipped Reef Sharks.

Once back on board we started to move to Post Office Bay and had lunch. At 2 o’clock we disembarked to check the post cards left them behind by other visitors in this ancient barrel - some were found to deliver them by hand (to continue with the tradition) and we left some as well...maybe in the near future we will get them back by other visitors delivering them by hand?! Now it was time to move to visit an extraordinary volcanic formation near the beach, a lava tube that starts 35metres above sea level! During the short walk Galapagos Cotton, Palo Santo trees and Yellow Cordia decorated the borders of the trail, some people decided to stay on the beach for swimming, snorkelling or walking, and the idea was to return early on board to take advantage of the wind to raise the sails and set route to Cerro Dragon on Santa Cruz Island. During the navigation, people stayed on the sun deck looking for Red Necked Phalaropes, Galapagos Petrels and large flocks of Shearwaters.

Day 8

Monday 16th January

The majority of *Cactaceae* vegetation on this region is quite young, and a very healthy Palo Santo (Incense Tree) forest dominates the place. The brackish lagoon attracts Greater Flamingos, Black Necked Stilts, Lesser Yellow Legs, Grey Plovers, Sanderlings, Semipalmated Plovers, and so on. Later we walked around the hill to find the largest Land Iguanas (*Conolophus subcristatus*). These inoffensive reptiles had been suffering a critical threat - back in the mid 70’s, feral dogs preyed on them; feral goats competed for food, and rats and cats fed on their eggs. Thanks to the efforts of the Galapagos National Park, Charles Darwin Research Station concluded with the eradication successfully.

After 2 1/2 hours hiking we were back at the boat ready to lift anchor and move to Sullivan Bay on Santiago Island where we snorkelled with White Tip Reef Sharks, Stingrays, and a flock of Galapagos Penguins which was very satisfying. Here was almost desolated lava fields so there was not much to see just a couple of plants pioneering on this rash landscape *Mullogo flavescens* and Lava Cactus, with Lava Lizards and Painted Locusts representing the animal kingdom. We travelled overnight heading north east to Genovesa Island (Tower).

Day 9

Tuesday 17th January

The Prince Philip’s Steps or el Barranco (the Cliff) was the first appearance of this site. Woah!! Birds were everywhere! Genovesa Island houses the largest of the Red-footed Boobies colonies in the world, the only of the booby species that nest on trees. Nazca Boobies, Great Frigatebirds courting and three Short eared Owls were seen quite close. We also saw Madeiran Storm Petrels, and a couple of people were looking desperately for Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels.

Today some decided a panga ride was a good option this morning. We saw Galapagos Fur Sea Lions, Red Billed Tropicbirds nesting in the cliff, and Shearwaters passing by. Frigatebirds were chasing other sea birds and stealing food on the wing - that's why they gain the title of kleptomaniac birds. Snorkelers swam with Galapagos Fur Seals, and saw Moorish Idols, Parrotfish, Pufferfish, Surgeon fish and so on.

In the afternoon we planned to land at 4 o'clock, at a coralline sandy beach called Darwin's Bay; there were thousands of sea birds again. The purpose of recording Darwin's Finches succeeded in the morning, and in the afternoon we found the last one, a Large Ground Finch was on the beach searching for food just at the water's edge, (somebody mention that it should be called a Wader Finch because of its behaviour). Yellow-crowned Night-herons of different ages were waiting for the high tide. We headed south again retracing our steps to Santa Cruz Island.

Day 10

Wednesday 18th January

At 5:30am there was a general wake up call to visit Black Turtle Cove. There is no landing site and only a panga ride is possible, and after passing the islets at the entrance to the cove engines are not used to avoid frightening wildlife here such as sea turtles, Diamond Stingrays, Black Tipped Reef Sharks, White Tipped Reef Sharks etc, Brown Pelicans are apparently establishing nesting sites on the mangrove vegetation. Back on board our breakfast was ready, and then we had to drop some independent travellers off at the end of their tour. We moved to Santa Cruz Island and the first stop was the Twin Craters, which are huge depressions provoked by the island's crust instability. The dominant vegetation is *Scaevola pedunculata* one of the best examples of Adaptive Radiation which is the number of species that evolves from a common ancestor. It is one of the seven endemic genus of plants in the *Asteraceae* family and definitely the largest family in the Galapagos islands.

We climbed up to the very high part of the island, el Puntudo, Cerro Crocker and media Luna volcanoes, and the landscape was spectacular. Walking through the Miconia Zone we appreciated how much the National Park staff is doing to preserve a worthy ecological zone. We found raspberries (*Rubus niveus*), and Cascarilla (*Cinchona puberula*). The view of the most dramatic spatter cone on this island El Puntudo was astonishing. On the way back a Galapagos Rail with a couple of chicks stopped us and we took so many pictures - they are quite shy so we were lucky to see something like this! After three hours walking we returned to the bus ride to the town (Puerto Ayora) and did an hour of exploring the town before making our way back on board after our full day in Santa Cruz.

Day 11

Thursday 19th January

Lava called cinder cone offered us some prehistoric scenery today - the view is so spectacular; streams of solidified lava clearly appear on the volcano slopes and some reach the sea. The shape of steep slopes and flat gave it the name Chinese Hat, and very few plants pioneer this lava terrain. Thanks to the current rainy season some annual plants appear - the most remarkable is the Galapagos Tomato (*Lycopersicon chesmanii*). Near to the coast lots of baby Sea lions re playing in the shallow water which acted as a nursery, they fascinated us, and we all took dozens of pictures. We then had to go back to the boat to prepare for water activities.

At 10:00 snorkelling activities were planned with two options: some people with better experience jumped from the panga which meant deep water snorkelling, and the beginners went from the beach. Marine Iguanas were feeding under water, and White Tipped Reef Shark, Galapagos Sea Lions, reef fish and also a Galapagos Penguin delighted us.

Our boat, the Cachalote, is a two mast sailing boat. After lunch we had another opportunity to rise the sails up, this really was the best experience, the captain turned the engines off for a while in order to save diesel; it was so relaxing. Rabida is a circular 2.5 to 3 km big island and the remnant top of a much bigger volcano. Marine erosion is cutting sea cliffs and mainly at the northern coast of the island some cliffs higher than 80 metres reveal part of the internal structure of the volcano. The exposed rocks range in age from 1.0 to 0.7 million years and are tholeitic indicating a more explosive activity.

We had a second opportunity for snorkelling - we saw large schools of Black Striped Salemas, Mexican Hog Fish, Diamond Stingrays, Leopard Flounders and even a big octopus; it was so enjoyable. We had to come back on board to take a quick shower and disembark for the hike following the coast and arid zone. On the way we saw finches, mockingbirds, Galapagos Doves; flycatchers in the Palo Santo forest, cacti and Yellow Cordia. Walking along the shore of the saline lagoon we were surprised by something unusual in this area, a male Vermilion Flycatcher. We then returned to the boat.

Day 12

Friday 20th January

Isabela Island is the largest of all, and one of the youngest. Sierra Negra is a shield volcano approx 50 km wide and has a 7 to 10 km caldera – it is the largest and simultaneously the shallowest of all calderas in the Galapagos. The Galapagos National Park assigns schedules for visits and we had permission to visit Tintoreras Islet early in the morning. We decided to disembark at 7:00 for a quick visit - the main purpose was to see the White Tipped Reef Sharks that give the name to this island. We were riding for a while along the shore searching for Galapagos Penguins, Sea lions, rays etc and once landing there was already a local bus waiting for us. After 45 minutes drive we arrived at the highlands of Isabela and the “Sierra Negra Volcano”. We started to walk towards the summit of this spectacular natural monument. After one and a half hours walking we got to the summit. Our effort was rewarded by an astonishing clear view of the largest caldera on the Galapagos Islands - we stayed there for more than 30 minutes to enjoy this experience. On the way back it was more relaxing and we walked slowly - a couple of Vermilion Flycatchers were perched on Guaba Trees. We then returned to the boat for lunch.

In the afternoon several options were given. We could walk along the beach, where there is a flamingo’s lagoon as well, and some people decided to visit the tortoise breeding centre and wet lands (brackish lagoons) and the town of Puerto Villamil. At 5:30 everybody agreed to return on board.

Day 13

Saturday 21st January

After breakfast we landed on a very barren landscape called Moreno Point - here the plants demonstrate they have talents to survive in any kind of habitat, no soil, no water, no place for rooting but cacti, *Scaevolas*, sedges and spurges have evolved to find a way. Brackish water in a volcanic depression has created an oasis where plants, pintails, moorhens, flamingos and fish thrive.

Sea horses are also here, and snorkelling was programmed in a peaceful cove and the only place to see these wonderful creatures in very shallow water. A Pacific Green Sea Turtle was not missed; these are some of the most productive waters in these enchanted islands.

We sailed for a couple of hours towards Elizabeth Bay, a shelter for a variety of species that find shelter here especially the juveniles like Stingrays, Eagle Rays, Golden Cow Nose Rays, sharks etc. Marine turtles also mate here during this time of the year.

Penguins are definitely out of place so ironically they are spotted here, they swim among mangrove roots and nest here. *Spheniscus mendiculus*, the Galapagos Penguin is the only penguin that exists north of the equator. The Galapagos National Park closed panga ride activities around the tiny Marielas Islands nearby because these are a fragile nesting penguin sanctuary.

Day 14

Sunday 22nd January

Urbina Bay is a visitor site with vegetation that is quite young, because this huge block of land appeared here since 1954! The vegetation is mainly dominated by Yellow Cordia, Palo Santo Trees, Velvet Shrub, Galapagos Cotton and Poison Apple Trees. These are so healthy thanks to the feral goats eradication programme. Along the trail it is still possible to see remnants of marine life, and clear evidence that this tectonic event occurred in a very short period of time with no chance for the marine animals to escape from here - wherever we walked we found coral remnants. Land Iguanas forage on this healthy vegetation; they are huge because there is plenty of food at this time of the year. Suddenly a Giant Tortoise surprised us, *Geochelone vanderburghi*, is the largest of all the tortoise populations (restricted to Alcedo Volcano) - we were so lucky to record this species...here is practically the only chance to see them in the wild!

On the way back to the beach we decided to do some snorkelling but visibility was not good as a result of the sandy bottom. In spite of the murky water we saw marine turtles, eagle rays, a couple of penguins, and somebody mentioned seeing a White-tipped Reef Shark.

We returned to the boat about 10:30am, and during the navigation towards Tagus Cove, a fresh breeze helped us to use our sails. During the navigation about a dozen Bottle Nose Dolphins approached the bow of the Cachalote because of the surf created in front of the boat.

Tagus Cove is one of the Darwin Landing sites - park wardens ensure we see the graffiti of the Beagle carved on the compacted tuff by one of the crew members. The lake into the caldera is named after him; everyone was astonished by the hospitable landscape, a contrast of the very young geological ancestry and successful plant colonization. We snorkelled here along with Galapagos Penguins, Flightless Cormorants, lots of marine turtles, and with different species of ray. Kayaking was another alternative to snorkelling.

Day 15

Monday 23rd January

Very close another island was sighted one of the youngest of all and luckily no introduced mammals wander around here, which is the reason for the greatest Marine Iguana population.

There are very few nesting sites for them in Fernandina like Espinosa Point, and we got here when they were breeding and nesting. People found it difficult to distinguish iguanas from rocks because of their perfect camouflage. We watched very few natural predators around here like hawks, herons and snakes but they were only targeting iguana hatchlings. On the way, baby Sea lions showed off in shallow tidal pools. These nurseries appeared everywhere. All the time they were looked after by a dominant beach master. The tide was changing rapidly and we decided to return to the boat to prepare for snorkelling activities when hundreds of the marine iguanas we saw at the beginning were now all marching towards the intertidal zone for an appetizer of “green algae”. We saw them during the snorkelling, the adult males especially - they dive for food, maybe a couple of metres deep if food is available in the shallows, if not they have to go deeper for fish and invertebrates.

Punta Vicente Roca on the north-western part of Isabela is evidence of a catastrophic collapse. It is still possible to see part of the volcano; this landslide would have generated a mega tsunami 100.000 years ago. If an event like this occurred again, according to Teofilos Toulkerides geology professor of the Polytechnic University, the inhabitants of the islands would have no choice, no more than 35 minutes and all ports could be totally flooded. There is a very high level of erosion here, factors like wind, rain and the mighty waves carved the volcano flank rapidly, a phenomenon that helps us to read geological details on the steep wall, which we experienced during our panga ride along the coast.

Then it was time to explore this amazing place under water, the best way of snorkelling was from the panga; at the beginning it was quite disappointing but for some of us a Sun Fish (*Mola mola*) surprised us, because of its size (1 ½ tons approximately), but which is completely harmless. At the peaceful coves, the Pacific Green Sea Turtle abounds like nowhere else, it is shallow and the bottom is sandy - a perfect shelter during this time of the year when they mate.

We departed from here as soon as everybody returned so 30 minutes later everybody was invited to the command house to celebrate crossing the equator, we were all waiting patiently to take a picture of the 00° 00' 00" latitude and as a nice coincidence the sunset was the perfect complement for this afternoon...

Day 16

Tuesday 24th January

On Santiago Island a salt mine was established around the 1950s, and the government monopolized the extraction of this resource that exists only here, making this activity so profitable. Eventually workers had to abandon this island when the National Park was created and 97% of the entire archipelago was declared as a protected area not leaving enough territory for human occupation. We started our adventure along the arid zone and the trail continued towards the coast. The perfect time to visit this place is during the low tide, the birdwatchers were really enthusiastic for the variety of waders on the intertidal zone. We saw other species of pinnipeds; including Fur Sals (which really deserve to be called a Sea lion because of their external ears – a taxonomic characteristic of this family *otariidae*.)

On the way back we saw a couple of Galapagos Hawks and once on the beach we had the opportunity for swimming, snorkelling and kayaking. Sailing for about three hours around the northern side of Santiago Island the aim was to arrive to Bartholomew Island for a last snorkel. This is one of the most popular islands because of the geographical location and dramatic volcanic landscape. White Tipped Reef Sharks, Galapagos Penguins, Moray Eels, Flounders, Diamond Stingrays and a variety of colourful fish made it special.

There are about 370 steps to reach the summit of this volcano, the tuff is so fertile but here the vegetation is so poor, not because of lack of nutrients but lack of water. Very few plants stabilize the terrain, the Grey Mat Plant is the most remarkable (*Tiquilia nesiotica*) thanks to its root system, and some other plants like Lava Cactus, *Chamaesyse amplexicaulis*, *Scaecia stewartii* and the Galapagos Tomato were seen on the way.

The altitude here is 114 metres above sea/level with unimaginable volcanic scenery, more than 100 small parasitic volcanoes named spatter cones are visible from here, and small versions of lava tubes, lava channels, phae hoe-hoe lava, AA lava etc are the geological features that create one of the best geologic laboratories. After this visit we sailed for a couple of hours towards North Seymour Island, the last place we were going to visit.

Day 17

Wednesday 25th January

We had to disembark very early because we had to travel to the airport, but we didn't mind as this is the best time to see things, including Magnificent Frigatebirds actively displaying their large red gular patch during the courting ritual. Here it is easy to see the two species; the Magnificent and the Great Frigatebird peacefully coexisting. There were Blue footed Boobies, Swallow-tailed Gulls, and Lava Gulls breed here as well. It is a great time to see baby Sea lions playing near to the shore protected by a beach master. At the end of an hour's walk we had a chance to record a Land Iguana, but unlike in other places that iguanas exist, the cacti here is so prostrate which is an indicator that these reptiles are not originally from here, they were introduced in 1930 with the purpose of saving them. The population was critically endangered because of potential food competitors, feral goats, and they become extinct around 1940s during the presence of American militaries in Baltra Island. Back on board breakfast was ready and then we got ready to go to the airport for the start of the journey back to the UK.

Day 18

Thursday 26th January

Return to the UK

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