

Ecuador & the Galapagos Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 January - 6 February 2013



Darwin and friend



Galapagos Mockingbird



Sailboat & frigatebirds



Sea Lion bonding

Report compiled by Darwin Álvarez
Images courtesy of Lynda Milner



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Day 1

Wednesday 23rd January

Baltra - Santa Cruz

The group arrived from Quito to the Galapagos Islands. From Baltra Island airport we took a bus for 10 minutes to reach the Itabaca Channel. This crystalline water passage separates Santa Cruz from Baltra Island. On board a ferry it took just ten minutes before we landed in Santa Cruz Island and there was a private bus waiting for us. We stopped for a while on the Scaecia Zone named after the dominant Scaecia tree species here. The sink holes attracted our attention too, one of the main indicators of how unstable the volcanic landscape is here. Some smaller land birds held our attention like; Darwin's Finches, Galapagos Doves and Mockingbirds.

Once we arrived at Puerto Ayora, the inhabited area in Santa Cruz Island, we enjoyed a walk around San Francisco Park seeing more Darwin's Finches like Small, Medium Ground Finches, as well as Galapagos Flycatcher, Marine Iguanas, Cattle Egrets, Sea Lion and Great Blue Heron. At about 6pm we were picked up to board the Cachalote boat. I briefed everyone on some instructions and details about the boat and then we were assigned our cabins before having dinner. We were now ready for bed and excited for the next great experience in South Plaza Island and Santa Fe Island tomorrow.

Day 2

Thursday 24th January

South Plaza - Santa Fe

In the early morning we set sail to South Plaza Island located to the east coast of Santa Cruz Island. About 5:30am some were already awake and searching for birdlife. People were so excited to see how active the sea birds colonies are in the early morning. Shearwaters dive shallow in order to get small fish, Elliot's Storm Petrels skimming the surface of the water to capture small fish or scraps left behind by larger predators, Blue-footed Boobies fishing by spectacular plunge-diving and wherever Red Tropicbirds fish, both species of Frigatebirds fly around in order to steal their catch.

Abel the waiter announced breakfast was ready by ringing the bell. Breakfast is usually served here at 7 o'clock and immediately we prepared for the first excursion in the morning. We were welcomed by inquisitive Galapagos Sea Lions, a group of juveniles playing in shallow tidal pools, whilst some babies were sucking milk and dominant males patrolled the coast to protect their territories against intruders and Bull Sharks were trying to capture unguarded pups. A brief explanation about marine and land iguanas captivated people's attention too. South Plaza Island is so different in geological terms and the rocks here reveal spherical shapes. We know that this kind of lava has its origin under water and there is a technical word for this "Pillow Lava". Geologically this block of land is the oldest in these islands with no any evidence of volcanic activity above the sea level.

During the hike we experienced a number of plants which are efficiently adapted to the lack of water and pioneer on this rocky terrain with no soil, making it difficult to anchor their roots, which is why Cactus, Thorn Shrub, Desert Plum, Bitter Bush and very few Palo Santo trees successfully occupy the northwestern part of this small island. There are only two species of plants we have seen on the eastern side of the island, *Potulaca* sp, and the endemic Carped Weed (*Sesuvium endmonstonei*), but these plants are quite prostrate, which wind doesn't affect at all. Walking at the edge of the cliff on the southern part of the island we saw Frigatebirds, Tropicbirds and Boobies soaring around using the thermals.

We set sail for Santa Fe Island, the sea is calm around this time of the year and people enjoyed the navigation. Manta Rays jumped and splashed, and flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes, Shearwaters, Nazca Boobies and Blue-footed Boobies flew around. In the afternoon we started to prepare for water activities so I briefed us with safety instructions for snorkelling and at 2:30pm we were in the water already. Water temperature fluctuates around 20 to 23 deg Celsius, and the high tide offered us the first opportunity to see a very rich marine environment, with colourful fish like Parrot Fish, King Angel Fish, Surgeon Fish, Butterfly Fish, an Eagle Ray, and some Stingrays.

At the end of the day we had a short walk. Sea Lions were the first animals -they are the most inquisitive of all. During the hike once again we had a chance to see how the isolation of the islands gave origin to new species so the iguanas here were clearly different and unique for this island. Cactuses respond to potential predators growing tall here. For tortoises and iguanas is a big challenge to reach higher. As a response of this phenomenon this reptiles develop a talent to reach them. Tortoises transform their morph type, telescopic heads and limbs with a shell shaped like a saddle it is an evolutionary advantage to help raise their heads up as high as possible. Land Iguanas simple wait patiently for something to fall thanks to the wind! Lava Lizards, small Darwin's Finches, Flycatchers and Mockingbirds were the main species we saw here. Philip spotted a Galapagos Hawk on the wing.

Once back on board the Captain invited us for a cocktail and officially welcomed us on board, this was followed for a delicious dinner and finally we were given some information about what the plan was for the next day.

Day 3

Friday 25th January

San Cristobal

The next destination was San Cristobal Island which is really special. Here the volcanic landscape is so different. These volcanoes and tuff cones are mysterious and captivating. A circumnavigation around the cliff revealed internal structures of the volcano - very deep gaps and caves carved by sea erosion of these fragile volcanoes. Marine invertebrates along the cliff such as sea anemones, Sally Light Foot Crabs, Orange Cup Corals and Acorn Volcano Barnacles were the dominant invertebrate species. There is a lovely sandy beach here, and the coral sand is a home for Ghost Crabs, whilst a few Marine Iguanas were basking the sun on top of black lava. Wandering Tattlers and Plovers are common waders here. A Dwarf Octopus was found in a small crack in the intertidal zone. Back at the beach Sea Lions were peacefully resting, and for people interested in plants we recorded pioneer plants colonizing sand dunes like Sea Grape, Sea Side Scorpion Weed, Salt Worth and Chamaesyce. Some snorkelled from the beach here; Sea Lions came to play and a variety of fish were seen well. Others decided to sit and relax for a while.

Back at the boat had a 1½ hours sail and during the cruise we passed near to Kicker Rock which is a famous snorkelling site. Lunch was during the navigation because the sea was so calm and once anchored in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno we prepared for the next adventure. San Cristobal was the next place to visit. After a 30 minute bus ride we saw dramatic changes in terms of vegetation; the first plants people introduced here became very invasive and secondly the amount of precipitation here. Weather was not favourable for the visit to El Junco, the only fresh water lagoon in the entire archipelago. Considering the conditions here we decided to go first to visit the Tortoise Breeding Centre. The breeding program is managed by Galapagos National Park in order to restore the endangered tortoise species. The first baby tortoise to hatch here is seven years old. Vegetation here is a mixture as plants from the humid zone and dry zone coexist peacefully here. Large Ground Finch is quite rare around here so we were lucky when one of the males appeared close by. Yellow Warblers, Fly Catchers and Chatham Mockingbirds sang everywhere. After the visit we expected better conditions around the fresh water lagoon but it was foggy and misty. These conditions are not common during this time of the year so unfortunately we couldn't visit the lagoon. Back at the coast people decided to stay in the town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno for a while and then came back on board. In spite of the weather conditions everybody still considered it a great day...

Day 4

Saturday 26th January

Espanola

Espanola Island is so isolated from the other islands, and new specimens evolve here. Very early in the morning Philip and Tony were looking for bird life so species like Wedge-Rumped Storm Petrel and the endemic Mockingbird improved our records. We also saw Small Ground Finch, Large Cactus Finch and Warbler Finch, Yellow Warblers searching for mosquitoes on the intertidal zone and Galapagos Doves flying around.

At the very end of the sandy beach the Marine Iguanas curiously display a strange colour; they are red with a very greenish-blue distinctive colour due to the current breeding season. Plant lovers found interesting vegetation like Salt Bush, Beach Morning Glory, Puncture Weed and a couple of Prickly Pear Cactus in the distance - this succulent plant species is critically endangered here due to feral goats, fortunately goats have now been successfully eradicated here.

During the ride back to the boat we planned to snorkel on the small satellite Gardner Island. As soon as we boarded the Cachalote we prepared to go in the water, visibility and light were extremely good as well. Here marine life is more abundant due to the upwelling produced by the convergence of Cromwell Humboldt and Panama marine currents. There is a vertical cliff here so we had to swim pretty close to the wall in order to see more marine life. Parrotfish, Damselfish, Puffers, Jacks and Grouper species were the most common. We were already 50 minutes in the water so time was over but was so much to see, and a young Sea Lion joined us to play.

After lunch we went back to Gardner Island. Marine iguanas were basking in the sun on top of the boulders, Sea Lions resting on the beach and large colonies of Nazca Boobies had some with very young chicks, Swallow Tailed Gulls were along the cliff's edge, and a few Blue-footed Boobies were protecting their chicks. Here the Galapagos Hawk preys on vulnerable chicks. The end of January is too late to see Waved Albatrosses here but we saw one...probably the last one around! Here a blow hole reveals the incredible force of the restless sea, where the waves are so strong due to the prevailing wind and once they break on the coast a plume of water rises high due to the mechanical force of water injected into a volcanic fissure. *Phylodryas hoodensis* is the endemic snake here and we had a good view of one among the boulders. We hiked now along the arid zone which was really interesting, seeing smaller land birds, Lava Lizards, Yellow Warblers and Galapagos Hawks. Every day after dinner we sort the programme for the next day activities and our check list was growing every day. We started to sail to Floreana Island for our visit the next day...

Day 5

Sunday 27th January

Floreana

The first island colonized officially by Ecuadorians just after Ecuador took possession of Galapagos is Floreana Island. Unfortunately due to the distance the first colonizers deserted rapidly. To live here at that time was very difficult. Political prisoners were sent here and most of them ended in tragedy. Cormorant Point was our landing site in the morning. The colour of the sand is different here, brown with a kind of green tinge. The erosion by wind, rain and wave motion on the surrounding tuff cones created this beach. A mixture of different elements like magnesium and iron with silicates give the green colour to this sand, this kind of mineral is called olivine. The brown colour is due to volcanic ash. Salt tolerant plants we did see at the beginning like Black Mangrove, Salt Bush and Leather Leave, during the hike on the arid zone a couple of daisies called our attention these are Floreana Daisy and Long Haired Scalecia. A lagoon close to the coast had some White Cheeked Pintails, a Laughing Gull flew nearby and a Lava Heron. Large quantities of marine turtles nest on the other side of the beach so there are sand dunes and less vegetation. This coral sandy beach provides a perfect shelter for small stingrays. We had time for a little snorkelling activity. Devil's Crown is a very famous snorkelling and diving site. This is because this satellite eroded volcano is exposed to the marine currents. Due to the upwelling visibility was not great but there was an enormous amount of fish, a lobster, quite a few reef sharks and rays making it one of the best sites.

During the afternoon we programmed a quick visit to Post Office Bay - we found many post cards with no stamps left in a post barrel. The traditions consists of collecting post cards addressed to people living close to our places of origin - the responsibility adopted by the visitors is to deliver the postcards by hand. The only possibility to see Medium Tree Finch is here in Floreana, and we succeeded... We landed here early so after staying here just for 40 minutes we had to return to the boat to depart towards Santa Cruz Island, our next destination. During navigation we used the sails as well as the engines. Everybody enjoy this navigation a lot with the sails up and there was a good record of sea birds as well. We arrived to Cerro Dragon on Santa Cruz Island at around 9pm. We had a chance to rest peacefully all night so no motoring and no navigation during the night.

Day 6

Monday 28th January

Santa Cruz - Santiago

Cerro Dragon on the north-western side of Santa Cruz Island offered us another opportunity to explore the wonderful landscapes of the Galapagos Islands. At 8am we landed on a much-eroded lava field where huge male Marine Iguanas were displaying territorial behaviour and some were courting. The low tide at that moment improved the opportunity to search for waders and herons foraging on the intertidal zone. Tidal pools are rich in small fish like Three-banded Gobies, Black-tailed Mulletts, Yellow-tailed Damselfish, and Sally Light Foot Crabs. There is a small lagoon behind some sand dunes. Here the salinity of the water is changeable due to evaporation, and brackish water improve conditions for microorganisms - crabs, blue -green algae and fungus were making this lagoon beneficial for Flamingos, Lesser Sandpipers, Black Necked Stilts, Wandering Tattlers and Whimbrels.

The dry ecological zone is dominated by Palo Santo vegetation, Cactus, Acacias, Leather Leave and Velvet Shrub. Land Iguanas range in populations of about 3,000 - this is thanks to the feral dog eradication program and regular control of black rats and feral cats. As soon as we were back on board Cachalote we lifted anchor and then we moved to Santiago Island. Some people was interested to go to the beach and some went snorkelling as this area is quite interesting. There were very colourful fish and a marine turtle and the temperature in the water was 23 degrees Celsius - perfect temperature to stay longer in the water!

We stayed on board until 4pm until we went on a hike on a very young volcanic lava field. The young lava is so barren with almost no life except a couple of plants; here Mollugo crockeri and the Lava cactus (*Brachycereus nesioticus*) are the dominant species here and are also the pioneers. People were really surprised here how these plants can survive in this conditions, practically no water, no soil and the temperature is incredibly hot. Around the middle of the trail we started to turn around and walked back to the coast along the second part of the loop. There are older volcanic formations here which were engulfed by the new lava called kipukas. A kind of rusty colour dominates the volcanic rock due to iron oxide. Before boarding the Cachalote we went for a short panga ride near to Bartolome Island to record the first Galapagos Penguins.

Day 7

Tuesday 29th January

Genovesa

Genovesa Island on the northern part of the archipelago is considered by geologists as a dormant volcano and is one of the most pristine. At 6am sea birds were everywhere, some were perched on the wire at the top of the masts.

The Red-footed Booby colony here is the largest colony worldwide; they nest on trees because of their very short and prehensile feet. The population here ranges about 140,000 pairs! Nazca Boobies breed here too and some were nesting, some were feeding chicks and some were fighting for territories. There are also Great Frigatebirds here so this was the best opportunity to learn how to recognize them from the Magnificent Frigatebird species. Vegetation was dense and dry at the beginning and dominated by Palo Santo tress, Yellow Cordia, Velvet Shrub, Lava Morning Glory and Galapagos Croton. Plants suddenly cleared up close to a fissure volcano, due to exposure to prevailing wind, salinity and unfertile terrain. Thousands of Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels and Madeiran Storm Petrels nested on the plain lava field. The top of the food chain here in Genovesa Island is the Short Eared Owl. Yellow Crowned Night Herons as well are very common. We found three of the four species of Darwin Finches; Large Cactus Finch, Warbler Finch and as a new record - Sharp Billed Ground Finch. Some people mentioned seeing a swift-like bird, I supposed it was a Galapagos Martin. We decided after the hike to find it by having a quick ride along the coast. We couldn't find any but we had a chance to see Red-billed Tropicbirds perched on the cliff. Once back on board we prepared for snorkelling activities. We had a good record of fish and in addition saw Devil Ray (*Mobula* sp).

Afternoon the plan was kayaking along the cliff - some participated in this activity whilst some came for a ride in the panga. In order to avoid the sun we landed at 4 o'clock. There was time to relax, and the walk here was along the beach. We saw here the same species as in the morning but in addition we spotted the 4th and last species of Darwin's Finches, Large Cactus Finch. Once back on board we departed as soon as dinner finished because this is the long navigation towards Santa Cruz Island, approximately 9 hours.

Day 8

Wednesday 30th January

Santa Cruz

Santa Cruz Island is the second largest island in Galapagos and one of the inhabited islands. Human population in Puerto Ayora is about 20.000 people and increasing rapidly. It is also considered the economical capital of the Galapagos province. During the morning we prepared for the hike on the highlands. Mariposa's farm is a private area where Giant Tortoises wander all around so there is an agreement between the Galapagos National Park and the owner of the property to take care of them. We had a lovely hike; birds and tortoises are very well adapted to invasive plant species and some are already part of their diets. Tortoises here are really giant...there was an adult male possibly older than a hundred years which captured our attention. Large streams of molten rock had created lava tubes and we had a chance to explore them on this farm as well. The most common of the introduced plants and the most invasive around here are: Cuban Cedar, Hill Raspberry, Quinine Tree, Pennisetum Grass, Bamboo and Common Guava. At the end of the visit the owner invited us to taste Galapagos Coffee and Lemon Grass juice. In a small store room a Short-eared Owl slept, looking a plastic toy.

It was then time to move towards a coffee farm called Lava Java to participate in a very interesting program. We were told about the treatment in order to produce a good quality coffee to export. We tasted the delicious organic coffee and afterwards returned back to the boat for lunch. Next we had a walk around a Tortoise Breeding Centre. So far four of the tortoise populations which were critically endangered are now healthier. The baby tortoises are kept here for 3 to 5 years and then are ready to be repatriated to their natural habitats. The Galapagos National Park expends about USA \$ 5000 for each individual repatriated! After this, some decided to visit the town and at 6 o'clock we came back on board. Dinner was served at seven.

Day 9

Thursday 31st January

Chinese Hat - Rabida

Conditions were good from the early morning, and some Brown Noddies, Shearwaters and Blue Footed Boobies were flying around looking for small fish. After breakfast we started to disembark on to Chinese Hat Island and the crystalline water had the best visibility ever. As soon as we landed there was a male Sea Lion rolling over and scratching in the coralline sand. We started to walk on lava field colonized by very few plants like Galapagos Tomato, Cyperus Sedge, Chamaesyce, Salt Bush, Portulaca and Sesuvium. Tiny Lava Lizards were crossing the trail indicating the current breeding season. Small coralline sandy beaches offer a good and safety place for Sea Lions so as a coincidence there was a new born pup...only a few hours old. The placenta was left behind and Galapagos Hawks were fighting for it. The trail here is quite short; seven hundred meters along the coast line, but spectacular.

We returned on board to prepare for snorkelling. The idea here was to go in the water with the excellent conditions caused by light and low tide. We split into two groups; one went to the beach for relaxing, swimming and snorkelling, the others jumped from the panga and snorkelled along the coast of Santiago Island where there was an incredible variety of fish, White Tipped Sharks, Marbled Stingrays and lots of sea stars made this snorkelling the best so far. Even around the boat a big shoal of Creole Fish were scavenging for scraps thrown from the galley. After dinner everybody enjoy a fantastic view during the navigation to Rabida Island.

At 2:30pm we saw an enormous shoal of salemas, anchovies, and sardines and we understood why the boobies were diving everywhere, and that was not all; Galapagos Sharks joined in the feast. Close to the shore reef fish as well appeared to prey on the small salemas and sardines. Close to the beach we saw Sea Lions, marine Turtles and Diamond Stingrays. At 4pm we landed on the reddish sandy beach of this paradise at a time when the sun was not too strong. Sea Lions on the beach were resting peacefully, and the males were barking loudly to protect their territories. At the beginning of the hike we stopped for an explanation about Mangrove vegetation and the arid zone when a Peregrine Falcon interrupted us - this is a rare vagrant raptor around the islands. There are few records from November to March. From the view point it was possible to see three of the northern shield volcanoes on Isabela Island; Alcedo, Darwin and Wolf. The hike continued into the arid zone, and many birds were flying and hopping from tree to tree in order to search for food; Darwin's Finches, Yellow Warblers, Galapagos Doves and Galapagos Flycatchers all captivated our attention. The salty lagoon was colonized 20 years ago by American Flamingos. They fully occupied and successfully nested here, but not any more since the El Nino phenomenon in 1982. We stayed for a while on the beach relaxing before boarding the boat. Dinner and briefing were as normal after 7pm, and at 9pm we departed to Isabela Island

Day 10

Friday 1 February

Isabela - Sierra Negra Volcano

At 6am in Puerto Villamil it was overcast but previous days conditions were like this and gradually it had changed. We received reports by the Port Captain everyday about the weather. We had a 40 minute bus ride and afterwards started the 7 kilometres hike although some people decided to walk just part of the trail. We had excellent records of birds. First of all a female Vermillion Flycatcher, Galapagos Rail which is one of the most difficult species to record here, and a few minutes later a Paint-Billed Crake appeared on the trail as well.

At the the view point there was no view on the arrival but after waiting patiently for 10 minutes conditions were much better so it was possible to partially see the largest caldera in the Galapagos. This enormous elliptical depression is about 11 kilometres at the widest part and 9 kilometres at the narrowest. We saw the floor of the crater clearly, the part which was covered by the very new volcanic terrain in 2005 when the caldera filled up by 5 metres. We returned to the bus station and later we stopped in some areas for plants, snails and something we have been looking for so long a male Vermilion Flycatcher. Many Darwin's Finches were seen, but we were still looking for Large Tree Finch and Vegetarian Finch. After this adventure we were back on board at 1 o'clock for lunch.

During the afternoon we decided to visit the town of Puerto Villamil. Three thousand people live here and this is the only one with a very long sandy beach and lots of wetland nearby. Here people explored on their own and enjoyed themselves. Sailing along the southern coast of Isabela Island during the night for six hours we moved to Punta Moreno on the western side of the island.

Day 11

Saturday 2nd February

Moreno Point - Elizabeth Bay

Sierra Negra volcano is about 35 km from here. Punta Moreno has 3000 year old lava fields which come from this distant volcano. Vegetation around is poor, and the prehistoric landscape is colonized by cactus, sedges and spurges but after walking 700 metres we surprisingly found a place fully vegetated like an oasis. This volcanic depression is so rich in plants due to brackish water and additionally a rich accumulation in terms of microorganisms, tiny crabs, aquatic insects, shrimp and blue-green algae which creates a profitable niche for waders like; Flamingos, Pintails and Moorhens. Fish possibly colonized this lagoon by being transported by birds. At the end of the walk we explored a small lagoon, where there is salt water which flows directly from the ocean through an underground cave - fish easily came in and out; a White Tip Reef Shark, a variety of snappers, and puffer fish were the most common species here.

After this, some of the group decided to stay on board while the rest jumped from the pangas for a new snorkelling experience. Lots of Turtles appeared feeding on brown algae, and there were schools of salemas, chubb and very colourful wrasse. Things got more exciting when a flock of Penguins reached the surface so people started to swim closer. Things were getting even better and quite soon there was a feeding frenzy with blue footed boobies, pelicans, terns fishing from the air, and mackerels, mullet, tuna, groupers, cormorants and penguins fishing under water! We had a chance to see in the very shallow water a Sea Horse as well, which was an extraordinary experience.

Elizabeth Bay is managed by the Galapagos Marine Reserve authority and here we could not disembark. The volcanic landscape is so dramatic so the lava field is too sharp as well. The panga ride along the coast was enjoyable. We approached close to a small off shore rock where penguins and cormorants nest successfully - this is because there are no black rats. Red and White Mangrove vegetation has created a much more protected shelter against big waves. It is very calm in here, and Lava and Striated Herons nest here too. Pelicans and Boobies were searching for small fish and a school of Devil Rays courting captured our attention. Once into the cove and completely surrounded by mangrove vegetation many Turtles appeared, and riding close to the mangrove vegetation we saw Sea Lions perched on mangrove trees as it is practically the only place they can rest!

There were Penguins nesting in caves among the mangrove roots - a very unusual nesting site for them. Here in the Galapagos is the only place you can see penguins in the northern hemisphere. The mangrove swamps are a healthy environment that many species thrive in. On the way back on board we saw a couple of Devil Rays jump out of the water as a response of their courting ritual. Here on Elizabeth Bay, a very peaceful cove, we moored for the night, and people had a chance to rest all night as navigation was programmed for the next day early in the morning.

Day 12

Sunday 3rd February

Urbina Bay - Tagus Cove

We sailed just 15 nautical miles north towards Urbina Bay. Here in 1954 a film crew witnessed an unusual phenomenon - they were astonished to see marine life exposed on land - intense heat and water interaction underground pushed an enormous block of land upwards. Marine life were trapped on dry land and all died. This event took place in just one night and the coast rose up an average of 5 metres! Here in Urbina Bay is practically the only opportunity to see tortoises in the wild. Land iguanas displayed yellow, red and brown bright colours showing us their current breeding season. Lots of tree and ground Darwin's Finches were here, but one we spotted for the very first time, the Large Tree Finch. Other smaller land birds like Galapagos Flycatcher, Galapagos Mockingbirds and Yellow Warblers delighted us as well.

After the short walk and back to the beach some went snorkelling while others decided to return to the boat. Marine Turtles appeared in the very shallow water. They mate here because there is a nesting site on the sandy beach. A variety of fish and additionally a very large Green-spined Lobster was seen partially hidden in a cave. After snorkelling, the Cachalote proceeded for a couple of hour's navigation towards our next destination Tagus Cove.

We landed at 2 o'clock at this very young tuff cone where erosion has already carved the slopes dramatically. The view is so scenic revealing the cove where the boats were anchored in part of a caldera. A big variety of evergreen plants appear here like Scaevola, Acacia, Rosemary and Thorn Shrub. Smaller land birds were very common especially ground finches, flycatchers and mockingbirds.

Once back on board we prepared for water activities. Different options were offered. Some people decided to go for a panga ride, some went kayaking and some went snorkelling. We anchored at this tranquil cove overnight.

Day 13

Monday 4th February

Fernandina - Espinoza Point

The next day Cachalote moved just 30 minutes towards the neighbouring island Fernandina. At 8am we stepped on to Fernandina Island, the youngest of the islands and the most active. In May 2009 the southwest reef zone became alive when molten rock transformed the coast of this part of the island after three weeks of volcanic activity. We landed on a small pier among mangrove vegetation. The sandy beach in the centre of this little peninsula is the most successful nesting site for Marine Iguanas. Definitely a walk here was a challenge because it is difficult to distinguish iguanas from rocks!

We stopped for a while to take pictures of a back bone of a Minke Whale placed here by National Park personnel. They tried to rescue the whale stranded here with no success. It was then time to go back on board and prepare for snorkelling activities. Water was quite murky here in the shallow water but there were lots of fish, green turtles and many invertebrates which showed us how rich this water is in nutrients.

At 11:30am we sailed to Vicente Roca Point on the northern side of Isabela Island. The geological scenery is so captivating here. At 2 o'clock we started the panga ride along this cliff. Erosion of this soft and unstable slope revealed ancient features of the genesis of this island. Equator volcano is the most eroded of all the larger volcanoes in Isabela, only half of the volcano remains now. During navigation we could clearly see the floor of the caldera from the boat and the rim of the caldera with different levels of collapse. There is an interesting cave carved by the waves and we had a chance to explore it, lots of turtles, fish and rays were here.

The panga ride was fantastic then it is time to change for snorkelling activities. An octopus appeared - all had a chance to see it but once on the rock it totally disappeared. We saw how it changed colours so quickly. We used a waterproof torch because it is dark, and saw lots of Creole Fish, some Beak Fish, Stingrays and Spotted Porcupine Fish. Penguins were interacting with a very dense school of salemas. At the end of the cove in very shallow water we saw many Green Sea Turtles; they are here because in deep water they are the favourite food of Killer Whales. A very small shark related to a dog fish appeared - the Bull-head Shark, and additionally many Diamond Stingrays were partially hidden under the sand. We departed as soon as we re-boarded the boat, and a few more minutes later the captain announced the Equator...so we took pictures of the GPS screen at the time the latitude marked 00.00'00".

Day 14

Tuesday 5th February

Santiago - Bartolome

We decided to land here a little bit early so breakfast was served at 6:45 to start disembarking at 7:30. We landed on a beautiful volcanic sandy beach, and explored the arid zone and the coastal zone and then from a nice view point we saw Sea Lions playing in small tidal pools. Other people were looking for waders, Liz for shells and some others for plants. We continued along the coast towards the grottos. From the coast Philip spotted Bottle-nose Dolphins passing by. Once at the eroded lava tubes we saw Sea Lions floating upside down in this narrow channel. Back at the beach some asked for a panga to go back on board and some others stayed for a while on the beach. Later we sailed for 3 ½ hours. At the end of lunch time the captain announced dolphins were at the bow of the boat. They were surfing with the waves on the bow. We stayed about 30 minutes with these intelligent creatures; they seemed to enjoy themselves, like us.

We arrived at Bartolome Island and disembarked for snorkelling at 2:45; snorkelling in here is really spectacular, and people had the opportunity to discover something new; a Flounder and a Moray Eel. We had a lovely time on the beach. Once back on board we changed for our next adventure, to climb all the way up to the top of Bartolome Island. There is a spectacular view from the top. From here you can see some of the islands we visited already and around the view point, where there is the main volcanic vent, we saw many small parasitic volcanoes, with the appearance of a moonscape. Once on board, the Captain then started sailing to North Seymour Island.

Day 15

Wednesday 6th February

North Seymour

The best time to visit this island is very early in the morning as this is practically the only chance to see Frigatebirds courting. The only two species of Frigatebirds in Galapagos share the same habitat, but only the Magnificent Frigatebirds breed all year around as these birds are quite opportunistic, meanwhile the Great Frigatebirds are more seasonal. Blue-footed Boobies displayed their spectacular dance for courting. Land Iguanas as well appeared here and the Dwarf Palo Santo tree is endemic to this island. After this visit we had to go to the airport. After breakfast, there was some time to finish packing and once at the airport it was sad to say good bye, but I was happy as I heard some people say this had been the best trip ever.

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