

Ecuador & the Galapagos Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

9th February – 3rd March 2026



Land Iguana



Galapagos Sea Lion



Short-eared Owl



Nazca Boobies

Tour report by Gill Burgess



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Day 1

Monday 9th February

A very early flight took ten of us to Madrid for a transfer to Quito, where we all met upon arrival, and found our guide, Gloria. Although it was only tea time in Quito, it was well past our bed time in England, so we were very grateful finally to make it to the very pleasant Mercure Hotel in the centre of the city. After receiving our instructions for the next day from Gloria, a few of us repaired to the bar to chill out and get acquainted for a while, before our beds proved irresistible!

Day 2

Tuesday 10th February

We had our first experience of Ecuadorian food at breakfast (very varied and plentiful) before we all met up for our city tour, including the remaining four members of the group who had travelled from England via a different route. Gloria proved a most informative guide: she was very knowledgeable on the history and architecture of the city, and particularly interesting in her observations on the way society was changing with in the age of the internet and globalisation. The basilica, with its grotesques depicting the indigenous fauna, the archaeological museum highlighting pre-colonial society, and the contrast of the overpowering gold leaf of the Jesuit church gave a real sense of the tension between what Gloria called “the colony” (during Spanish colonial period) and independent Ecuador.

The tour ended up above the city with amazing views of the Andes on each side, and our first bird sightings: Harris’s Hawks, two kinds of swallow and our first hummingbirds! Some members of the group decided to jump ship here and go back to the hotel via the metro, while others opted for a spot of birding in the botanical gardens or a visit to the local markets. None of us managed to escape the afternoon’s sudden torrential downpour, however, and many of us compared notes later in the hotel restaurant while sampling some exceedingly good local wine!

Day 3

Wednesday 11th February

We had been well-briefed by Gloria and had set our alarms for a very early breakfast, ready to meet our new guide, Wendy, at 5.00am in the hotel lobby. Fortunately, she had everything sorted for us, handing out all the necessary paperwork and guiding us through the somewhat tortuous airport procedures: check in, customs declaration for entering the Galápagos, and biological scanning of luggage before we boarded our flight to the Galápagos. By this time we were a very supportive little group of travellers, and we survived the stop over at Guayaquil and the equally tortuous process of showing all our documentation, paying our entry fees and surviving the sniffer dogs at the airport at Baltra. It helped that we were met on the walk from the plane to the terminal by our first Land Iguana! Meeting our guide for the next fourteen days, Juan, was almost as exciting!

After a short bus ride, followed by an equally short ferry from Baltra to Santa Cruz, the adventure began. A bus ride of about an hour took us into the Santa Cruz highlands for a delicious lunch at El Chato Ranch, followed by a walk to find our first giant tortoises, and our first lesson in identifying Darwin’s finches (Small and Large Tree Finches and Small and Medium Ground Finches) as well as several warblers, egrets and our first Blue-footed Boobies and Brown Noddies on the way to the boat.

Despite the excitement, we were all relieved when it was finally time to board the *pangas* to take us out to our home for the next two weeks, the Cachalote Explorer, and to unpack and settle into our cabins. It was equally pleasant to be able to familiarise ourselves with the WiFi, bar system and mealtimes, not necessarily in that order! Dinner was preceded by a safety briefing and a run through of the many rules governing travel in the Galápagos. Juan talked us through the following day's programme, and then we completed the first day's species checklist, before a very welcome early night for all concerned.

Day 4

Thursday 12th February

Breakfast at 7.00am and being ready for business at 8.00am quickly became the order of the day (with an occasionally earlier start). We had travelled through the night and anchored off Sombrero Chinois Island, named for its similarity to a traditional Chinese hat. Our first wet landing of the trip was on a sandy beach, where we walked for a couple of hours along the rocky track, encountering Galapagos Sea Lions of all sizes, including a mother which had just given birth: we saw the placenta on the rocks. The newborn was a bit harder to locate beside her, but we did manage glimpses, as well as seeing plenty of Marine Iguanas and Lava Lizards. We saw frigatebirds and boobies on the wing, plus a Galapagos Hawk, Brown Noddies and various petrels. Brown Pelicans were fishing very close in, and we had good views of our first Wandering Tattler.

It was getting very hot by the time we returned to the boat, so we were all glad to get kitted out with snorkelling equipment, ready for our first sortie into the water. It was beautifully clear, enabling us to see the wonderful shoals of colourful fish, and even a Reef Shark on the bottom.

During lunch, and what became our daily "siesta/chill out on deck" time in the early afternoon, we travelled to Rabida, a tiny volcanic island where we first embarked on a *panga* cruise, which took us up close to fishing pelicans (close enough to see how their throats stretched and vibrated as they swallowed their catches whole) and plenty of Blue-footed Boobies resting on the rocks. We then landed for a short walk to a lagoon to see families of American Flamingoes, including grey-plumaged juveniles and white, fluffy babies, while a longer walk produced more finches, mockingbirds, flycatchers, doves and hawks. The walk took us over the rough, rock-strewn, red (from iron oxide) terrain, so we were a rather hot and tired group that returned to the Cachalote for a welcome shower and change before heading to the bar.

It was "meet the captain and crew" evening, which also involved a most delicious cocktail prepared by our barman-cum-pretty-much-everything-else, Ivan. This was followed by another very sociable dinner, a longer species list (to take account of all the fish), and the briefing for the following day, which certainly looked interesting, even though the earlier start of 6.00am for 7.00am was a bit daunting.

Day 5

Friday 13th February

We had completed the journey to Isla Isabela (about five hours) during the night. Isabela is the largest of the islands, and looks like a sea horse on the map. Our early start was to enable us to beat the heat a little as, after a dry landing at the town of Puerto Vilamil to drop off laundry and pick up a bus, we ventured to the Sierra Negra caldera, one of the more active of the many volcanoes which make up the Galápagos Islands, stopping for a brief comfort break on the way, where we had great views of a stunning Brujo (Vermilion) Flycatcher. When the bus dropped us at the top of the volcano, we could see the steam from the fumaroles in the distance. We all walked

down into the caldera, but not all of us attempted the further climb up to see the fumaroles, opting for a more leisurely climb back up to the bus for a rest. Those who did manage it were rewarded with good sightings of a Short-eared Owl, though.

After lunch and a rest, we returned to Puerto Vilamil for a visit to the tortoise breeding centre. It was amazing to see giant tortoises of all ages from newly hatched to maturity (thirty-five or so years old) when they could be released into the wild. Most were descendants of the turtles relocated when the volcano we visited this morning last erupted: they had been lifted from the lava by helicopters and transported to the centre. Who would have guessed that the gender is determined by heat: those eggs subjected to most heat in the incubator (or buried deepest by the mother) will be male, while those given less heat (nearer the top of the pile of buried eggs) will be female!

The heavens opened in a torrential downpour as we were looking round and, as most of us had ignored the warning to bring a raincoat, something of a dampener was put upon our enjoyment of the information centre. So we were quite glad to be dropped off for a bit of rest and relaxation in the town, where we repaired to a local bar for welcome refreshments. After a little wader-watching on the beach (Whimbrel, plovers, Turnstone, sandpipers) and a trip to the laundry to collect the washing (if only we'd known we would have laundry opportunities costing next to nothing: we wouldn't have brought nearly so many clothes!), we were soon back on the boat to start the evening routine.

Day 6

Saturday 14th February

After an uneventful night (it was a little warm owing to a hitch with the air conditioning, which was soon rectified), breakfast was followed by an 8.00am *panga* ride round the mangroves of Punta Moreno. This produced close views of pelicans fishing, lots of Blue-footed Boobies, nests full of fluffy pelican chicks and our first Flightless Cormorants. These looked very like their European cousins, until they spread out their ludicrously short wings to dry. Juan told us they were in a transitional stage of evolution and would eventually lose their wings altogether, as they did not need them to swim. Our first Galapagos Penguins caused some excitement; best of all were the rocky outcrops absolutely covered in Marine Iguanas of all sizes clinging to the sloping sides.

Back on board once more, we prepared to snorkel. The water was murkier today, without so many fish, but we did see turtles and the occasional penguin. One of the group had an encounter with a rather cross cormorant, which nipped him on the arm; sadly, this produced rather more humour than sympathy!

As we had a bit of a journey round to Elizabeth Bay, we all enjoyed a longer than usual rest after lunch, eventually leaving at 3.30pm for another *panga* trip. This time, some of the group decided to try out the kayaks: one of the clients, unfortunately, ended up in the water rather than the kayak! Luckily, no harm was done. It was hard to pick out highlights when we were seeing so many amazing things (more boobies and pelicans, mating penguins, cormorants, turtles swimming beside us, Lava Herons and Great Blue Herons), but a sea lion reclining on a mangrove branch, just like a Leopard might be seen on an African safari, was rather lovely. Less of a sea lion, more of a tree lion! After a particularly lovely meal of Red Snapper with prawns in a coconut sauce, and the usual briefing and species checklist, it was another early night all round.

Day 7

Sunday 15th February

We set off at 4.00am for Urbina Bay (still on Isla Isabela); apparently the idea was that we would not notice the big swell if we were asleep, just maybe be woken up by the sound of the engine! No-one seemed to have been troubled by rough seas so far anyway.

We had a wet landing at 8.00am for a walk along a gritty grey beach. then returned inland on a better path where we saw a variety of small birds (finches, Smooth-billed Anis and a Mangrove (Yellow) Warbler), as well as several giant tortoises. The latter were endemic to the particular volcano we were on, and we were made aware of the evidence of previous volcanic activity, land and shoreline shifts and so on. We also had great views of three Galapagos Hawks. The highlight had to be our close sightings of Land Iguanas. These were more uniform in size than the marine variety, all pretty big and with gorgeous colouring: all shades of sand, through yellow, to orange. Their skin looked gilded in the sunshine, especially on their legs down to their digits (five on each leg). Juan always told us, with such certainty, the age of the iguanas and tortoises we were seeing; he could have been making it all up for all we knew, but apparently these Land Iguanas have something akin to a human lifespan, whereas the tortoises can live to be two hundred, and they stay sexually active throughout their lives!

When we got back to the beach, we had time for a blissful (if short) swim to cool off, finding the water surprisingly buoyant. We were back on board for 10.30am, as we had to navigate to Tagus Cove for the afternoon.

We were joined after lunch by a surprise passenger: a sea lion hitching a ride on the lower deck. Almost the first thing we saw when we went snorkelling mid-afternoon was a sea lion: maybe it was this same beast. We also shared the water with several turtles and the usual colourful fish.

For our afternoon excursion, two of us took the option of a *panga* ride, and were rewarded with more close sightings of all the seabirds, especially great views of diving boobies; it was easy to see how similarly they behave to European Gannets, to which they are closely related. Those who opted for the walk added to their tally of finches and herons; they were also lucky enough to see a Dark-billed Cuckoo.

For the first time tonight after dinner, briefing and checklist, a few of us played cards for a while, and this was to become another regular element of our evening routine.

Day 8

Monday 16th February

By breakfast, we had travelled to Fernandina, east of Isabela, for a dry landing at Punta Espinosa. The day was hotter than ever as we neared the equator; although we walked for only two hours, the going wasn't easy in an area where there had been significant volcanic activity as recently as 2024. Fernandina was the location for David Attenborough's amazing sequence of the racer snakes chasing newly-hatched Marine Iguanas, so were all hoping for some action! Sadly, we saw no snakes, but perhaps that was good news for the huge number of female iguanas busy burying their eggs in the sand, or just lazing around in the sun, often with a Lava Lizard on their head! Apparently, the iguanas excrete salt in a kind of a sneeze, and this is what the lizards are after.

I think we were all relieved to get back to the *pangas* again for a little moving air, and then we went back to the boat to wrestle wet suits over our sweaty bodies and to cool off in the water. We were snorkelling with a couple of large

Green Turtles and Marine Iguanas; accidentally brushing against the tail of one that got rather close was like being scraped by rough wire rope. It was quite choppy today, with a bit of a swell, so we all stayed close to Juan, and benefitted from his running commentary on the different fishes.

We sailed back to the north of Isabela after lunch, to Punta Vicente Roca, for an hour's *panga* ride. We pulled in close to the sheer cliffs for great views of the seabirds, especially Nazca Booby families, our first. The volcanic scenery was stunning again. The water looked very clear, but when we snorkelled again afterwards, it turned out to be surprisingly murky. We did, however, see more turtles, a Galapagos Shark and, of course, lots of colourful fish.

We had plenty of time to shower, before gathering up on the bridge to cross the equator for the first time. We all got a signed certificate and another lovely cocktail. Juan even led us in a sing song of nautical tunes before dinner, and the evening routine began.

Day 9

Tuesday 17th February

A somewhat choppier overnight passage than usual took us to Santiago, for a landing at James Bay and a morning walk over a mixture of gritty sand and volcanic rock: but for once it was relatively flat! As always, we were greeted on the beach by sea lions, and added the Sharp-beaked Ground Finch to our "Darwin's finches" list.

The snorkelling equipment was brought over from the boat so that we could round off the morning in the water. We snorkelled again during the afternoon, when the highlight was sharing the water with a couple of sea lions. They were actually quite hard to avoid as they swam around and beneath us. What a privilege they were to see.

The last activity of the day involved a climb up Pinnacle Rock to study the volcanic landscapes, which the hardier members of the group undertook, while others made the most of the opportunity for a rest and a long shower. After another lovely dinner and an earlyish night for most, we set off for Seymour Island, and another early start.

Day 10

Wednesday 18th February

We were up at 6.00am for a very early start, but what a start to the day it was. We all negotiated what was described as an "acrobatic" dry landing on North Seymour Island just as the sun was coming up, which was absolutely perfect for photos of birds silhouetted against the dawn sky! We were greeted by Swallow-tailed Gulls and countless frigatebirds displaying their huge red pouches. We had a lesson on the differences between the Great and the Magnificent varieties – green-sheened plumage for the Great Frigatebirds it seems. Juan also entertained us with the different mating calls of each! We were also treated to a gorgeous juvenile Blue-footed Booby with grey legs that had not yet turned blue, and practising for a lifetime of posing for tourists!

We were back on board for a slightly late and very welcome breakfast, before making another landing at the port of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz, a very lively town with a backpacker vibe and lots of shops and cafés. We boarded a bus to visit the volcanic sink holes and to walk in the forest for about an hour: we were treated to the sight of a Dark-billed Cuckoo.

Our next stop was the Enchanted Lodge, for a touch of luxury. We were greeted with cool face flannels and a refreshing drink, before taking a walk round the grounds for an hour before lunch. As well as the usual array of finches, a highlight of this was the American Barn Owl nesting, unsurprisingly, in a barn. Interestingly, its plumage was a lot darker than that of European birds.

A very superior lunch was followed by a couple of hours relaxation, either in the shady hammocks or the swimming pool, before we were back on the bus into town to drop off more laundry and to visit the Charles Darwin Research Centre. This involved a walk through the grounds (we thankfully spotted the promised Cactus Finches), many information boards, tortoise breeding pens and, finally, a chance to visit the famous (stuffed) Lonesome George, the fabled last Pinta Island giant tortoise, who died in 2012. The air-controlled chamber we had to pass through first was blissful, as was the cold beer many of us enjoyed in the café afterwards.

We were then left to walk the mile or so back through the town to the ferry terminal, taking in some retail therapy on our way, before the *pangas* arrived to take us back on board the Cachalote, to get ready for dinner.

Day 11

Thursday 19th February

How many boatloads can you fit on one little island? Our first outing of the day was to South Plaza, still on Santa Cruz. There was a bit of a queue to disembark on to the little rocky island, though we actually only crossed paths with the group from our sister vessel, the Beluga. We were also greeted by quite a creche of young sea lions on the rocks, and then the curious sight of very white rocks glistening in the sunlight, apparently a result of the salt-heavy sea water calcifying. We did a circular walk, hugging the rocky shoreline, and then back along the cliffs on the other side, mercifully always with a breeze from the sea. It proved very productive, with lots of Swallow-tailed Gulls, including a juvenile and an abandoned egg. It was also heaving with Land Iguanas, some moving around at surprising speed, while others were just flaked out under the enormous cacti, usually with a gull or two sharing the shade. The iguanas feed on the seed pods from the cacti, so they wait for either birds or the wind to shake the tree and make their food fall to the ground. We had a good look at a sea lion that had been dead for a day or so; either its mother was got by something, or maybe she was too inexperienced and forgot where she had left her pup. It was such a mournful sight but, of course, nothing is ever wasted in nature, and within the month the carcass would have been stripped, mainly by the Sally Lightfoot crabs (named after a dancer of dubious repute!) that are ubiquitous on all the islands. On the cliffs, we had sightings of Nazca Boobies, and even a wonderfully elegant tropicbird, but sadly only in flight.

We went back to the boat for juice, snacks and a rest both before and after lunch, while the boat travelled to Santa Fe (Barrington) Island. The afternoon snorkel was notable for the first good sighting of rays under water, and was followed by a wet landing for a two-hour walk around the island. We landed on a beach that was heaving with sea lions, which made it impossible not to get too close. They were so fascinating, and the babies were just adorable. The walk was more of a scramble over hard, rocky ground, and unfortunately with no sightings of either Rice Rats or racer snakes, which proved as elusive as their reputation. We finished at a different beach, absolutely laden with sea lions, which were again totally unconcerned by our presence.

The *pangas* picked us up for our return to the boat for very welcome showers, before we all congregated in the bar once again for the start of the evening, followed by what turned out to be the choppiest of nights so far. There was no shortage of movement to rock us all to sleep as we sailed to San Cristobal for the next day's adventures.

Day 12

Friday 20th February

We began the day with a landing at Cerro Brujo, with swimsuits under our clothes, but following strict instructions to cover up completely to avoid being bitten by the rampant local horse flies. We climbed up to a brackish lagoon to try to see waders. There was great excitement when someone thought they had spotted phalaropes. They turned out to be Black-necked Stilts, which were equally elegant and another first for the trip! We then had a long barefoot walk along the beautifully white sandy beach, looking for shorebirds. We turned back for home in dribs and drabs, all the ladies finally ending up cooling off in the sea. Bird of the morning was a Least Sandpiper, the smallest wader in the world, which showed really well for all of us.

Once back on the boat, the captain navigated around Kicker Rock, also known as ‘the sleeping lion’ and ‘the crab’, depending on your vantage point. After lunch, we landed in San Cristobal Town for a drive up to the Junco Lagoon, after the all-important job of dropping off our last lot of laundry! The town could have been a holiday port in so many parts of the world. There was an element of culture shock in seeing so much human activity: boats of all sizes, lots of people, and yet the inevitable sea lions hanging out on the dock and attempting to board the boats. It was very misty up in the highlands, which made for a nice cool walk, although the sun came out eventually. The walk was circular with lots of ups and downs: the highlight was probably a mother and fledgling warbler-finch obligingly posing for us all. It was also fascinating to see frigatebirds coming in to wash their wings in the fresh water.

We had an hour or so back in the town for last-chance shopping before going back to Quito, and welcome cold drinks, before it was time to return to the Cachalote for dinner, the briefing, the species checklist ... and cards!

Day 13

Saturday 21st February

We woke to find ourselves off the island of Española, ready for a wet landing at Gardner Bay. This proved quite interesting, as there was quite a significant swell and a very steep beach to navigate. We were greeted by the usual reception committee of friendly sea lions. We walked along the top edge, spotting the Espanola Cactus Finches and Mockingbirds. The latter very cheekily tried to attack our rucksacks when we piled them up, and then accompanied us on our walk, posing almost jealously as we found more exciting things to photograph: American Oystercatchers, hermit crabs and a dead seahorse! For a change, we had enjoyed a cloudy and slightly cooler morning for our walk, and it began to rain while some of the group enjoyed a quick dip in the sea. We headed back to the boat for the day’s snorkelling, which we shared with a group of sea lions, as well as the ubiquitous “colourful fish”. It started to rain quite hard on the way back to the boat, which was surprisingly unpleasant, but the sun came out in time for our afternoon walk

Over lunch and siesta time, we had moved around to Punta Suarez for a dry landing on another part of Española. It was hotter than ever, and felt twice as humid after the rain! We set off in search of a Waved Albatross that had apparently delayed its summer migration; we had no luck, but we did see lots of finches and beautiful Land Iguanas. The Española variety are called Christmas Iguanas, because of their gorgeous red-and-green colouring. The Lava Lizards were noticeably bigger than on the other islands as well. All in all, they compensated for the very difficult bouldery terrain, which had made for quite a gruelling walk. The return along the cliffs was much more comfortable, and included a rest while we watched an enormous blowhole. We didn’t see any iguanas being blown out with the water, which Juan had suggested might happen, but it was still very impressive. We then began to see

more seabirds: plenty of Red-billed Tropicbirds on the wing, and then a colony of Nazca Boobies. These were our first really good views of this species, and how beautiful it was to see adults, juveniles and lots of fluffy chicks, all totally unconcerned by our presence at such close range.

Unusually, when we got back to the landing stage, we were confronted by a couple of very aggressive sea lions, and a water level significantly higher on the jetty than when we arrived, so we decamped to the next bay for a wet embarkation.

Day 14

Sunday 22nd February

Overnight, we had travelled the short distance from Española to the island of Floreana for our first activity of the day, a *panga* ride around Champions Rock. We hoped to have sightings of the endemic Floreana Mockingbird, a rarity with only about a hundred and fifty breeding pairs, and we were not disappointed. As well as a nesting tropicbird, we saw many Swallow-tailed Gulls and Brown Noddies, not exactly getting on with each other, and were treated to a very playful display by young sea lions all around the *pangas*.

Again, we were assailed by an uncomfortably heavy rain shower as we moved to the snorkelling site, so it was quite a relief to get into the water, which was very clear today, with plenty of fish around. The rain seemed to have sent most of the sea lions ashore, but we were joined by a few. They were so beautiful to watch, and so much more graceful in the water than on land. How lucky were we to share this?

Our afternoon visit was to Puerto Velasco Ibarra, a tiny little settlement, albeit with its own ferry, church, doctors and pharmacy, as well as the odd guesthouse and bar. It also had a fascinating history, as related to us by Juan during the course of our expedition. We travelled in a kind of cattle truck with bench seats, which took us into the highlands in search of the Floreana Medium Tree Finch. It was an eight-kilometre ride, all in first and second gear, but we survived and, as soon as we got off the truck, we spotted the target bird. There was a suggestion that we could now turn round and go back, but of course we didn't! In fact, we had a very pleasant leafy walk for about ninety minutes, seeing many small woodland birds (finches, warblers and flycatchers) and, when we got to the freshwater spring, we were treated to the scandalous story of the island's serial killer. This tale of love, deception and murder was told in a book called "Satan Came To Eden" and a film/documentary called simply "Eden", but Juan's telling of it was hilarious.

The ride back down to the port was exciting to say the least: it was much quicker in this direction and in fourth gear all the way, with a lot of horrendous-sounding braking taking place, but we all made it safely back to the port for ice creams while we waited for the *pangas* and our return to the ship.

Day 15

Monday 23rd February

We had arrived overnight back at Santa Cruz Island. The first activity of the day was a walk up and around Dragon Hill. This was billed as a very hot, humid, insect-ridden and possibly muddy walk, so Juan wasn't exactly selling it to everyone! Not surprisingly, a few of us decided to give it a miss. It turned out to be not nearly as difficult as described, and the intrepid members were rewarded with sightings of a Large Tree Finch, an elusive Dark-billed Cuckoo and a lone American Flamingo. A little swim off the boat before lunch was very welcome.

Over lunch and siesta time, we travelled to Santiago for an excellent snorkel session off Sullivan Bay. We were greeted almost immediately by two huge stingrays on the bottom, and then up to seven White-tipped Reef Sharks (or possibly the same three or four following us around), including two swimming around in a “yin and yang circle” for quite some time below some of us! We clocked up several new fish, and an enormous Bradley’s Sea Star.

We finished the day with a short but fascinating walk around a very new volcanic landscape, formed after an eruption in 1897. The island gained several kilometres in size and is still like a moonscape: we saw ripples and swirls of lava forming all kinds of weird and wonderful shapes and patterns. We had quite a lecture about how new life establishes itself: there were lichens beginning to grow, and tiny clusters of Common Carpetweed springing up, colonising spaces in the rock, the seeds having been brought here by wind or birds. There was also a well-established lava cactus which had been growing for about twenty years. The small number of Lava Lizards were yet more evidence of the food chain establishing itself on the new land. Before returning to the boat, we were encouraged to lie down and enjoy a back massage on the striated rock! It began to rain just as we got back to the shore (it never rains but it pours here!) so we were well and truly soaked by the time we reached the Cachalote. Fortunately, it was time to shower and settle down for a very sociable evening, enhanced by Juan’s renditions of Spanish songs on his guitar.

Day 16

Tuesday 24th February

Could we really have reached our last full day in the Galápagos Islands? We awoke to darker skies: we had travelled due north all night to Genovese, and had a slightly earlier than usual start as there was so much to pack in. The cooler temperature made for a comfortable landing in Darwin Bay, where we immediately encountered Red-footed Boobies at last! Like their blue-footed cousins, they very obligingly perched in the trees and on their nests for us to enjoy and photograph: adults, juveniles and chicks all in their different plumages. There were also plenty of adorable Nazca Boobies, including a very recently-hatched one sitting under its mum, alongside an as yet unhatched egg. According to Juan, that one is unlikely to survive if it hatches, as there will be only enough food for one chick. Nature can be very harsh, but one cannot doubt the impetus for survival: that had been very obvious throughout this trip! On a happier note, we had fabulous close-up encounters with Swallow-tailed and Lava Gulls, as well as a family of beautiful Yellow-crowned Night Herons and a Short-eared Owl. Our walk turned a little tricky when we had to abandon footwear and wade to the next beach, as the incoming tide had taken us by surprise. This unfortunately involved a scramble over the usual painful volcanic rock! Luckily the tide had gone out by our return.

We had been promised Hammerhead Sharks for our last snorkel of the holiday, and rather scary-sounding Medusa Jellyfish. Fortunately, the latter were nowhere to be seen, but we were treated to both Hammerhead and Galapagos Sharks and, as we were preparing to return to the *pangas*, a squadron of about eight Mobula Rays appeared. All in all, it was an amazing finale to our underwater adventures!

The afternoon began with a short *panga* ride, with kayaking for the more adventurous among us, before we made landing at Prince Phillip’s Steps for our final Galápagos adventure. This turned out to be a wonderful couple of hours’ walk across the usual volcanic terrain, with plenty of luscious vegetation and all our favourite birds. We were surrounded by boobies, mainly Nazcas, but also Red-footed Boobies and trees full of displaying frigatebirds. The big highlight, though, was the number of obliging Short-eared Owls. Once we’d seen one, it seemed we couldn’t turn a corner without another appearing; there were six in all, close enough for fabulous photo

opportunities. It felt very sad as we retraced our steps to the *pangas* and said goodbye to the amazing birdlife all around us, with which we had been so privileged to share these amazing islands for the previous two weeks.

Thank goodness for another yummy cocktail, dinner, goodbyes and thank yous to the crew. Bar bills needed to be paid, before we enjoyed some more of Juan's songs!

Day 17

Wednesday 25th February

After a long night's motoring back to Santa Cruz.,there had been some uncertainty as to whether we would all make it up in time for a final *panga* ride at 6.00am, around Black Turtle Bay. Thank goodness we all managed it, as it was truly magical to set off as the sun was just rising and all the birds were calling. We made a quick buzz across the water (accompanied by four other *pangas* from two different boats), then took a quiet glide through the lagoon to see rays, turtles and Black-tipped Reef Sharks. With impeccable timing, we were back on board for breakfast at 7.00am before the *panga*, bus, plane and another bus ride, with lots of hanging about in between, took us all back to Quito by teatime.

Our next guide, Raul, met us at the airport,to take us to the Garden San José Hotel at Puembo, which was a bit of a culture shock, with llamas grazing in the grounds and rooms that seemed enormous after our little cabins on the Cachalote. With plans all made for the final day, we shared a convivial dinner in the hotel restaurant.

Day 18

Thursday 26th February

This was the day we had all chosen to spend either birdwatching at the Antisana volcano, or on a cultural trip to the Otavalo markets. The birdwatchers had a very early start, while the Otavalo group were collected by Raul at the more civilised time of 8.00am. He proved to be another very informative and engaging guide, and by the end of the day we had learnt an awful lot about the economy of Ecuador and the ethnic/cultural mix of its people, as well as seeing varied countryside as we travelled along the Avenue of Volcanoes (Pichincha and Cotopaxi: such names to conjure with!) and the Pan-American Highway.

First, we visited the small town of El Quinche, where we had a brief stop at a very ornate nineteenth-century church, the site of an annual pilgrimage from Quito, which culminates in a huge open-air service in the adjoining sports stadium! Of much greater interest was our visit to the local market with an amazing array of fruit and vegetables, many of which we did not recognise, but some of which Raul bought so we could taste them! Everything was packaged up into bags and trays, all costing a dollar: amazing, and presumably a reflection of local wages.

Our second stop was at Cayambe, which is exactly on the equator. Of course, the name of the country is taken from the word "equator" and got its name after independence in 1834. We all aligned the GPS on our phones to zero degrees, and took photos of the equatorial marker. We then spent some time in the small café/artisanal bakery observing *bizcochi* being made, and sampling them the traditional way with salted caramel spread and a slice of mozzarella. After coffee, we were also shown how agave juice is harvested and turned into various products, both fermented and unfermented.

We finally arrived at Otavalo for the market. It was quite a small affair midweek, but with plenty of fabrics, jewellery, indigenous artwork, musical instruments and the like to keep us all occupied and practising our bargaining

skills for an hour or two. Our visit ended with a slap-up lunch at a beautiful old hacienda, before the journey back to Quito. We travelled by main roads this time, but still through stunning hills, valleys and waterfalls, albeit also through mining country, illustrating the dichotomy the government faces between exploiting the rich mineral reserves (hopefully, for the general good) and protecting biodiversity and the environment.

Dinner in the hotel was an opportunity to catch up with the rest of the group and hear about their very successful day at Antisana: they had seen forty of fifty different bird species, including several Andean Condors, and had had no issues with the altitude. It was quite sad, as this was the last time our little group would all be together. The majority were travelling directly home the next day and had the luxury of a late start, while four of us were going on to the Amazon rainforest. We said our goodbyes after dinner, promising to share photos and videos on the WhatsApp group we had created, and congratulating ourselves on being such a happy little band of travellers.

Day 19

Friday 27th February

As ever, we were thoroughly looked-after: Raul took us to the airport and handed us over to the representatives of Sacha Lodge, who had already organised our boarding passes for the brief flight to Coca, where we were met by the guides. We handed over our luggage and were then taken to their offices for refreshments and a briefing about the journey, before boarding the motorised canoe for a very exhilarating two-hour ride along the Napo River (a tributary of the Amazon). A twenty-minute walk through the rainforest led us to the next canoe ride, this time a boat just for us, paddled by our guide for the weekend, Dorian. On arrival at Sacha Lodge, we were first of all kitted out with our wellies for wet walks, and then shown to our very luxurious cabins for a chance to unpack and take stock before lunch in La Balsa restaurant/lounge.

In the late afternoon, we had our first canoe trip, along channels overhanging with vegetation, with sightings of a variety of birds and lots of Capuchin Monkeys in the canopy. Our night walk after dinner provided a plethora of frogs, insects and the occasional tarantula to keep us on our toes.

Day 20

Saturday 28th February

Breakfast at 5.00am ready for a 6.00am start was the order of the day for our stay at Sacha and it was something of an endurance test with heat, sweat, suncream and insect repellent all vying with each other as they trickled down our faces! We set off in our wellies for a walk to one of the observation towers, around two hundred steps up above the canopy, plus a trip across the walkway to a second tower! We saw so many birds: macaws, parrots, toucans, herons, hawks, vultures and so much more. Dorian used his telescope to take photos of some of them on our phones. A pair of Crested Owls as we walked back to the lodge was certainly one of the morning's highlights.

Lunch was a special affair shared with our guides, who talked us through the array of Amazonian foods, which were all absolutely delicious. We certainly needed a break after that, before our late afternoon trip, another canoe ride to another tower (with another two hundred steps). As usual, Dorian was very adept at finding lots of interesting birds, and we started to familiarise ourselves with the commoner species, especially the bizarre-looking Hoatzin, otherwise known as "stinky turkey birds"! On our ride back to the lodge in the growing gloom, we saw a

huge tropical lizard and two varieties of caiman, and arrived back for a most welcome shower, followed by dinner in the restaurant. After that, our heads barely had time to touch the pillow before we were fast asleep.

Day 21

Sunday 1st March

Although we made the same early start to beat the heat, our morning activity was relatively leisurely: a trip downriver on the motorised canoe to the clay lick where hundreds of parrots congregate. It was quite a spectacle, and one that was shared with several boats from other lodges. We all also enjoyed the sight of many Howler Monkeys swinging through the trees, especially a baby clinging to its father's shoulders! A fast trip back kept us cool, at least until the walk back to our small canoes to paddle home to Sacha for a lovely barbecue lunch.

By late afternoon, we were back in the canoe for a short trip upriver to the crane tower. This involved a metal cage which was lifted above the canopy, and then turned through intervals of ninety degrees over the course of about an hour, to give us 360° views above the rainforest. Although we didn't actually see anything new, it was an amazing experience. When we descended back to the forest floor, the operating engineer showed us a video of an armadillo he had just seen, literally minutes before we got back to earth. So frustrating! We went in search of it, but to no avail. If there was one disappointment about the rain forest extension, it would be that we failed to see any mammals apart from the three species of monkeys; the wrong time of year, perhaps, and it's unlikely we'd get any sympathy, considering the amazing experiences we had been privileged to enjoy. We were, however, rewarded with the sight of an enormous caiman in the lake as we paddled back to the lodge at dusk.

Sadly, it was the last night of the holiday, but between packing, dinner and bedtime there was still time to sit on the verandah and listen to the night sounds of the jungle for the last time on this amazing tour.

Day 22

Monday 2nd March

With over thirty hours travelling ahead of us, the day began before 4.00am: final packing, bags out for collection, very early breakfast! It was quite surreal being paddled across the lake and along the channels in total darkness. Thankfully, the weather gods were on our side, and we were able to leave wellies and ponchos behind. We disembarked for the twenty-minute walk to the river, where we boarded the motorised canoe for the two-hour trip to Coca, and the first of our flights.

On arrival at Quito, we were taken to the Puembo Bird Garden, which was an oasis of calm in a very gruelling day. The lovely ladies there had prepared lunch for us and provided rooms where we could have a nap and a shower in beautiful surroundings, with hummingbirds outside to entertain us, before the return of the taxi to take us back to the airport.

Day 23

Tuesday 3rd March

Luckily, the flight connections all went according to plan, and by tea-time we were going our separate ways from Heathrow, with so many memories of a fabulous holiday. The wildlife had been incomparable, and the whole experience had been much enhanced by the wonderful guides and the perfect company we had enjoyed!

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