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8 Reasons to Visit the Galapagos Islands

by Fiona Harper



Far from Australia, it's not easy to get to the Galapagos Islands. Fiona Harper found the islands are worth every jet-lagged minute.

The Galapagos Islands are difficult to get to from Australia, requiring a number of flights spaced over a couple of days. However, they are well worth it. Nature rarely gets better than this.

Here are 8 enticing reasons to visit -

1. Expedition cruising

The Galapagos Islands are protected under strict environmental control that promotes tourism while providing sustainable income for the 30,000 or so locals. Partnering with National Geographic, Lindblad Expeditions is the stand out cruise operator with their 96 passenger National Geographic Endeavour expedition vessel. Heavily focused on protecting, preserving and showcasing this fragile environment by a team of naturalist crew, founder Lars-Eric Lindblad says, 'we have a duty to pass the planet along to future generations in as unspoiled way as possible'.

2. Blue footed boobies

Twitchees please contain your excitement. Blue footed boobies rank right up there with albatrosses for those inclined to ticking off exceptional avian sightings.

The poster child for the Galapagos Islands, blue footed boobies are comical, rather gorgeous and mesmerising. A coastal seabird with wings spanning up 1.5m apparently their name derives from the Spanish word bobo, meaning clown. Watching their antics, as they hop from one striking blue foot to the other, kicking out one foot to the side in a sort of dance with head bobbing in unison and wings spread, it's easy to see how they got their name.

3. Charles Darwin

A lapsed student more inclined towards the natural world than studies in medicine or Christ, Charles Darwin leapt at the chance to become a gentleman's companion to Capt Robert Fitzroy on-board HMS Beagle. Though prone to seasickness the budding naturalist spent just 5 weeks in the Galapagos Islands, spending his entire time taking notes and collecting samples. His observations would later challenge the world's perception of nature and evolution.

Publishing Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection almost thirty years later, the Charles Darwin Foundation on Santa Cruz Island conducts scientific research based on Darwin's original theory. Visitors are welcome at the Charles Darwin Research Station where giant tortoises are bred in captivity.

4. Giant Tortoises

Seriously endangered, Galapagos giant tortoises are the world's largest, weighing up to 250 kg and up to 1.5 metres long. When Darwin visited in 1835 he observed 15 distinct species though only 11 species remain. Hunted as food by whalers, pirates and explorers as well as being decimated by introduced pigs, dogs, rats, cats and goats, less than 20,000 giant tortoises remain.

Centenarian Lonesome George was the last of his particular species, becoming a conservation figurehead long before he passed away in captivity in 2012.

5. Green Turtles

Turtles are usually skittish, ducking swiftly below the surface the moment they spot a human within cooee. Not in the Galapagos though. Seemingly knowing no fear of Homo sapiens, they forage, mate or simply hover (are they sleeping?) motionless allowing swimmers to admire the intricate patterns of their carapace. Snorkelers may feel inclined to reach out and touch them they're so docile. But I wouldn't recommend it. Like everything in this precious ecosystem, visitors should admire but don't touch.

6. Marine Iguanas

Found nowhere else but the Galapagos, marine iguanas are butt ugly. Darwin described them as 'hideous looking'. He was spot on. Proving that beauty is ultimately irrelevant they're also rather fascinating.

Congregating in large colonies known as a mess of iguanas, they'd be right at home on the set of a Mad Max movie. With smashed in snouts concealing razor sharp teeth, heavily lidded beady eyes, a spiky dorsal ridge atop fat bellies covered in charcoal coloured scales, pretty they're not. They're not nearly as fierce as the look though. Unique ecological adaptations allow them to move comfortably between land and sea, surviving on marine algae but spending most of their time prostrate and unmoving in the sun.

7. Sea lions

Sassy and mischievous, sea lions perform elegant pirouettes within inches of snorkeler's masks. Faces dominated by long-lashed doe eyes glinting beneath rays of sunlight streaming through gin clear water, it's hard not to laugh out loud watching them. Curious and inquisitive, they'll circle snorkelers, glancing cheekily sideways before diving deep, as if a challenge to follow them.

On land, they're more ungainly, plopping down on the sand forcing beach walkers to skirt around them. They're almost a nuisance in the way that seagulls are an urban pest, lazing on waterfront footpaths of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno or tenaciously waiting for handouts at the open air Puerto Ayora fish market.

8. Geography

One of the most active volcanic regions on the planet, for an archipelago straddling the Equator the islands are surprisingly barren with not a hint of lush tropical landscape. The odd palm tree has sprouted up from coconuts washed ashore but they are the exception. Frigid waters of the deep Equatorial Counter current cause thick sea fog and cool sea temperatures. Wetsuits are recommended year round for divers and snorkelers.

Sitting atop the Nazca tectonic plate, thermal plumes of hot magma rising to the surface created the islands. Stepping ashore on inky black former lava flows at Fernandina Island, the world's most active volcano, marine iguanas, sea lions and flightless cormorants thrive in this dramatic landscape.

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