

EXPEDITION *to* GALAPÁGOS

*Exploring the legendarily remote islands on the lavishly-equipped
EcoVentura Evolve luxury yacht*

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*Clockwise from top left: Hammerhead sharks staking their ground. Giant crimson crabs add a startling pop of color.
The luxe Ecoventura 'Evolve' yacht*

These islands do not want you here, and they make that quite clear.

Factor in the heat: an equatorial sun scorching lasers onto any patch of exposed flesh, searing it like a prime A5 Wagyu in minutes. Then there's the water, or rather lack thereof. Of all the islands, only two boast any semblance of sweet water to quench thirst or refill barrels. No fruit-bearing trees spring from the volcanic dust. Flora bristles with spines—cacti, shrubs and trees—inimical in nearly every way. Little refuge exists in the inhospitable expanse.

But by God is it beautiful. You can thank this ruthless brutality for the archipelago's pristine state—it feels like it's plucked from the Cretaceous era, frozen in time. Over centuries wave after wave of human colonizers have attempted to settle this pitiless land, and time and time again the Galápagos have murdered them in their sleep or sent them home, broken and defeated.

Sure this hostility to mankind has kept these islands lost in time, untouched—but it also makes exploring their depths in a vessel like the Ecoventura Evolve so critical. Some luxury adventure cruiseships lean heavily on the adventure aspect. They're trafficking you to exotic locations unreachable by other craft, so the experience is in the exploration—not necessarily the appointments. Not Ecoventura, and certainly not in regards to the newest vessel in their fleet making its inauguration this year. The Ecuadorian company outfitted the Evolve with every comfort you could realistically hope for on a boat that services such remote reaches.

There are larger cruise ships that sail these waters, but the Evolve's size—142 feet, and only ten cabins for 20 guests with 13 crew to support—feels ideal. Dinghies are easy to allocate, the dining room is never packed, one never feels the anxiety of crowds. It's familial, yet as the only Relais & Châteaux property on the Galápagos, the Evolve's luxury standards are sky high. Large cabins, amply spacious for two to live comfortably, are cleaned three times a day. Day pillows are added and removed and sparkling water refilled while you blink. When not looking we caught the staff ironing the table linens, washing our cabin windows and even cutting the crusts off breakfast toast. The 24/7 satellite Wi-Fi is complimentary.

Nothing welcomes you home from an exhaustive hike or hours-long snorkel more lavishly than a steaming hot rainfall shower—and the Evolve's marble bathrooms will provide plenty. Luxurious design touches like exotic stone, agate-crystal bar tops lit from within, petrified-teak paneling, and modern furniture are complimented with a first-rate culinary program rich in local dishes like sustainably

caught lobster, a garlic-heavy Ecuadorian ceviche called canchagua, and plenty of craft beer and coffee sourced from Santa Cruz.

While breakfast and lunch are more casual, dinner consists of several courses of Instagram-worthy plated delicacies. Post-dinner the rooftop deck transforms into an ad-hoc cocktail bar where Alexander and his fellow vested bartenders mix superb Negronis, dirty martinis, and frozen piña colodas. Together the luxury appointments, superb F&B program and world-class staff ensure an opulent 360-degree experience that compliments the harshness of this land, hand-in-white-glove.

Of course one could book passage on a luxury yacht down the Merrimack River and still enjoy a splendid, leisurely time. So what

Above: A seal makes its presence known. Opposite: Captivating scenes from life on board and in the wild

makes the Ecoventura Evolve cruise a singular experience are, to no surprise, the Galápagos. There are landscapes that will make you contemplate God—such as the Mars-like Bartolomé, crowned by a volcano and spiked with geological spires like Pinnacle Rock, barren of nearly any flora except tequila plants dotting the ash soil. Or Isla Floreana bearded exclusively in Palo Santo trees, dripping in citrusy sap fragrant of sandalwood. Here an endemic species of bright pink flamingo patrols the brackish interior lake for shrimp with long-legged strides.

But as you might have guessed, what elevates the journey into something you're unlikely to experience anywhere on the planet is the wildlife. Consider the world's only tropical penguin—a colony now some 3,000 strong, the descendants of an intrepid pregnant female carried here over 10,000 miles by the frigid Humboldt current sweeping north from the Antarctic. These skinny pioneers dive off the lava rock to swim in densely populated waters teeming with angel, yellow-fin razor and parrot fish patrolling the coral; Pacific Rim sea turtles and giant marbled, spotted eagle and diamond rays flapping across the rocks; swarming crowds of hammerhead, Galápagos, black-tipped reef, and even whale sharks looking for a meal; and dense schools of tiny fish—red, silver or blue, shimmering through the crystal water like glitter. Thank Ecuador's diligently protected marine reserve for the abundant wildlife.

Then there are the birds, like the Pirates of the Air: the one seabird which never touches water, frigates instead punk other birds for their food. The male "Klepto Parasities" puff their huge red pouches to attract the fairer sex. The blue-footed booby, meanwhile, struts around flaunting giant webbed feet to attract its females. The brighter the hue the more chance for success—consider them G-Wagens for boobies. They match their dance with a construction worker-like whistle, the females responding with nasal

honks if they're interested. We turned a corner to witness a couple in mid-carnal act, pterodactyl eyes flashing. It's about as close as one can possibly come to watching dinosaurs breed.

But the undisputed kings of the Galápagos—indeed the animal that gave this place its name—are the tortoises. On his 1570 map, Portuguese cartographer Abraham Ortelius dubbed the archipelago "Insulae de los Galopegos," or Islands of the Tortoises. For four million years these noble giants lived a molasses-footed life of dissolution on these remote isles. Later, in the whaling era, they were known as Las Encanta-

das, or the Enchanted Isles.

Not for their otherworldly beauty, mind you, but from the supernatural attributes sailors lent to this bizarre dreamworld. Apparently unorthodox wind and water currents pushed early navigators away, contributing to why it took so long for the remote archipelago to be discovered. It wasn't until a storm knocked the Bishop of Panamá's boat off course in 1535 that a human ever stepped foot on them. Conversely, once on the islands these same wind and current patterns make them incredibly difficult to escape—as if Homer's sirens sing you back to shore. This dark magic persists—undoubtedly you too will feel its magnetism, a melancholic yearning calling you to return.



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“LITTLE REFUGE EXISTS IN THE INHOSPITABLE EXPANSE, BUT BY GOD IS IT BEAUTIFUL”

