

JETSETTER

A diver is shown underwater, upside down, in a deep blue environment. The diver is wearing a dark wetsuit and fins, and is surrounded by bubbles and light rays filtering through the water.

ICELAND

Feeling the Heat in Reykjavik

SPAIN

A Taste of La Rioja

ITALY

Finding Wellness in Tuscany

GALAPAGOS

PIONEERING SUSTAINABILITY
IN THE LAST EDEN

SINGAPORE BOUTIQUE HOTELS



A DAY IN CAIRO



TOKYO'S COOLEST SUBURB





Pioneering Sustainability in the GALAPAGOS

One of the world's most fragile environments, the Galápagos Islands are the perfect destination for small ship adventures, says **Kaila Yu.**

DESTINATION

The gargantuan 750-pound Galápagos tortoise groaned something between a cow's moo and a sea lion's belch. As I approached, he crouched atop a smaller female tortoise with her head retracted as if feeling bashful of their roll in the saltbush. While the male tortoise paused momentarily, eyeing us warily, he soon commenced his reptilian thrusts.

We had arrived in the Galápagos – named after these lustful beasts by the Spaniards – in February on the new *Evolve* ship from Ecoventura (ecoventura.com), an Ecuadorian family-owned micro-cruise company. We're not the only travellers seeking intimate animal encounters; luxury expedition cruises are one of the fastest-growing market niches, according to the 2022 Cruise Industry News Annual Report. Within this market are micro cruises, and even smaller micro sails like Ecoventura, carrying 25 passengers or less.

SUSTAINABILITY PIONEERS

Ecoventura has pioneered sustainability in the region and received UNESCO-recognised SmartVoyager ecological certification back in 2000. As the first carbon-neutral operation in the Galápagos, Ecoventura's yachts' innovative bow designs and steel hulls are not only built with ecology in mind but also move the yachts





30 per cent faster. The increased speed results in six hours less cruising time and fuel combustion. Solar panels and wind turbines provide power, while the yacht additionally includes dual-flush toilets that use a specialised water treatment system to protect the ocean and the Galápagos' adorable underwater critters from untreated water.

Sustainability is also built into the itineraries and activities. Ecoventura refuses to offer three to five-day itineraries and instead has just two one-week routes, which results in less island footfall, flights, and visitor turnover.

Meals onboard benefit, too. Food is sourced locally with eggs and bread from the Galápagos islands, fruits and vegetables from the main island, and local seafood replacing imported produce, with *brujo* (scorpionfish) served onboard instead of salmon. Dishes on my trip included Ecuadorian sea bass, grilled langostino in garlic aioli, grilled prawns with cilantro gremolata, and mushroom risotto with goat's cheese and truffle.

WILDLIFE INTIMACY

Sustainability was top of mind as we landed on the delicate ecosystem of Floreana, one of the most remote inhabited islands in the Galápagos, with only 100 residents. As our group tiptoed underneath the shade of palo verde and scalesia trees, we watched a flamboyance of flamingos preening and gyrating as if circus performers inside the brackish lagoon beside

the comparably ordinary Bahama ducks and Galápagos flycatchers. Suddenly a trio of flamingos took flight, and I gasped, not realising that flamingos could fly. It seemed as if the animals didn't notice our presence or care that we were there.

Later we followed a trail to the volcanic island's beach, unique for its grass-green-tinged sand from ancient iron and manganese lava deposits. As sand sifted through my fingertips, what appeared to be a large rock in the surf suddenly gyrated. Our naturalist Fernando Sanchez explained that the "rock" was a nearly 100-pound female Galápagos green turtle that two giant males had simultaneously mounted. Sadly, we learned that females are particularly at-risk during mating, the hours of exuberant mounting sometimes exhausting and drowning them. Wishing we could help, we watched silently, lost in thought.

We observed Galápagos' animals, including the turtle threesome, steps away without agitating them, or helping, as there were never more than 20 guests (our entire cruise capacity) on the island at once. Ecoventura has the lowest guest-to-naturalist ratio in the Galápagos at 10 guests per



clockwise from bottom left:

A magnificent Frigatebird attracts a mate; many cruise companies offer kayaking; giant tortoises are an icon of the Galapagos Islands; the islands boast unique flora and fauna; Ecoventura operates small vessels with minimal environmental impact



RICH FRIENDSHIPS

Afterwards, we gathered for a lunch barbecue of grilled squid, parrotfish, and skirt steak on the deck, sharing photos of our favourite moments. With a maximum capacity of 20 guests, the intimacy of the yacht enabled us to make deeper connections with each other. We explored at least two daily excursions and enjoyed meals together, including a three-course seated dinner in the dining room. I never sat with the same group twice, and because of our shared experiences, we swapped small talk for more meaningful conversations.

On one of our last snorkels, one of my new friends and I found ourselves alone in a cove after watching a duo of silly baby monk seals playing King of the Rock. As they frolicked and flopped, the rest of our group moved on, but suddenly one of the monk seals dove in between us.

clockwise from top left:
A male peacock struts his stuff;
the Galápagos sealions are
always a crowd favourite; a
basking land iguana

guide. Besides beating the crowds, fewer feet on shore means less impact on wildlife and vegetation, especially significant during shore landings, which can disturb wildlife with noise and movement.

Another morning on Punta Suarez on Española (Hood) Island, we encountered a blue-footed boobie and her newborn nesting in the middle of the pathway. The mother and baby were so comfortable that photographers could capture images just inches from the baby chick. As we carefully stepped around the nest, we marched right into a real-time blue-footed boobie love triangle. Sanchez narrated for the group as the confused female bobbed back and forth between both males, each lifting one foot for her inspection – apparently, brighter is better. We watched, heartbroken for the losing suitor slinking away dejectedly as the female stood proudly beside her final pick.







Without thinking, my friend and I instantly dove to meet the twirling creature; our guide taught us to twist and turn underwater, as sea lions and seals may interpret this as playing and join in. As we gyrated underwater like the clumsiest of ballerinas, the graceful sea lion snatched the plastic hair clip falling out of my hair. I reached out to grab the plastic from his mouth, and we locked eyes before he whirled into the abyss. My new friend and I shared a look underwater, not needing to say a word, and grateful for our private encounter with one of the most iconic creatures of the Galápagos. ■

clockwise from top left:
Sustainably sourced seafood on Evolve; the ship's zodiac fleet allows for coastal exploration; a hike across a volcanic plateau; snorkellers often encounter playful sea lions