

Daydreams

A Cruise—Yes, a Cruise—Will Be the Way I Recover After All This

Dreaming of a luxury aquatic safari through the Galapagos Islands is how this writer imagines happier days ahead.

By [Fran Golden](#)

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M/V Theory Source: Ecoventura

At the moment, all of our plans are on hold. But that doesn't mean we here at Bloomberg Pursuits aren't planning the experiences we'll rush out to enjoy when it's safe to do so. We're sharing our ideas with you in the hopes that they will help inspire you—and we'd love to hear what you are daydreaming about, too. Send us your ideas at daydreams@bloomberg.net, and we'll flesh some of them out for this column.

As we live through these life-changing times, cruise expert Fran Golden is brought back to memories of a life-changing trip she took to the Galapagos Islands. When it's safe to sail again, she dreams of doing it all over, again basking in unspoiled nature—although this time with a whole lot of luxury.

When I think of the Galapagos, I have a vision of a sea lion wearing a diamond stud earring.

When I met the sea lion in question, he came so close, I could feel his body heat. He wasn't wearing jewelry at the time, of course. Through my snorkel mask, his big brown eyes met mine. We both waved, me a hand, he a flipper, and then he was gone.

It's a happy memory, but my vision is also tinged with guilt. When I surfaced and flipped off my mask, I dropped an earring into the pristine, protected waters. In my imagination, it now adorns my new marine mammal friend. I hope it did no harm.



Galapagos prickly pear on Rabida Island in Galapagos National Park, Ecuador. *Photographer: Donyanedomam/iStockphoto*

Eight years ago, on my first cruise in Ecuador's Galapagos National Park, I was living in Boston, stressed-out managing a news operation remotely while seriously dating a man from Ohio.

Already qualified for AARP membership, I needed to start thinking about next steps, such as whether I should persuade myself to move to a red-ish state. I had brought a girlfriend along on the venture, and over Ecuadorian pilsner and rum drinks, we plotted out my life. (Eventually, I moved to Cleveland and married the guy.)

Decisions come easy in a place where you can ignore human civilization for a while. Between naturalist-led excursions that explored uninhabited islands of various volcanic hues, through scrubland, in the water, and across sandy beaches, there is a lot of downtime.

What will draw me back, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, is that wandering among animals in this raw and wild place, 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, I had never felt so in tune with nature—and alive.

Imagine you're walking in the middle of nowhere and hear a rustling. Suddenly a huge black and red iguana runs through your legs. Maybe a tortoise cocks its head at you, or a blue-footed booby waddles over to check you out. The animals of the Galapagos are fearless, viewing you as a curiosity, much as you view them.



More than 100 years old, [Diego the giant tortoise](#) is responsible for about 40% of the now 2,000 (from 15) tortoises on Española Island. *Photographer: RODRIGO BUENDIA/AFP*

It's both scary and exhilarating on this land-based Noah's Ark, where you are just one of the critters. An adrenaline rush comes from realizing you are part of something that's bigger than yourself, bigger than humankind. And there are lessons to be learned. In his darkly satirical book, *Galápagos*, writer Kurt Vonnegut imagines a world in the midst of both a global economic crisis and a virus that is making humans sterile. A few travelers head off on a nature cruise, shipwreck on the islands and up being the only propagating humans on earth. Over a million years, their species evolves to resemble sea lions—complete with fur and flippers for hands.

I was hoping to return to the Galapagos in fall 2020 during the dry season, when temperatures are in the 70sF. That's when the waved albatross, with eight-foot wingspans, and whale sharks hang around. I don't see that happening this year, as much as I want to support the local economy.

Ecuador, a country of more than 17 million, is among the worst-hit by the coronavirus pandemic in Latin America. While Galapagos is far from the mainland and has been closed to visitors since March 16, a few dozen residents on the four populated islands are among those who have tested positive, as have 50 crew members of Royal Caribbean International's Galapagos-based, 100-passenger *Celebrity Flora*.

Glamping at sea





A stateroom on the *M/V Theory*. Source: *Ecoventura*

When I do make it back, it will be on a floating boutique hotel with a French-trained chef. Weighty topics such as Charles Darwin's theories on natural selection may be approached while sitting in a hot tub sipping Champagne.

Ecoventura offers the experience on new, fuel efficient, Ecuadorian-flagged yachts that carry up to 20 passengers and 13 crew members—in addition to the chef, a maître de maison. This is a luxury experience, but it's totally casual, the floating equivalent to glamping: Leave the heels (and jewelry) at home, pack an extra sunhat.

The nearly identical *M/V Origin* and *M/V Theory* are members of the prestigious, culinary-focused Relais & Châteaux collection. The arrival of a sister ship, *Evolve*, has been delayed from March to June 2021, due to work stoppages at its Ecuadorian shipyard. If that schedule holds (a big if), perhaps I can be on its maiden voyage.



The bar of the *M/V Theory*. Source: *Ecoventura*

I'll sleep in a suite and dine on dishes created with a focus on sustainable local ingredients—perhaps fresh-mushroom risotto with goat cheese and truffle oil, grilled grouper fish with citrus sauce and ripe plantains purée, and mille-feuille with diplomat cream and berries. Onboard the intimate ship, I anticipate the kind of camaraderie that comes naturally when small groups of world travelers gather. It's amazing what people will reveal to strangers.

Fares run from \$8,050 per person, double-occupancy for one week. Although I don't plan to travel with grandkids, children age 5 and up are welcome—the line even offers special sailings for families with children and those with teens. My ultimate dream, though, would be to get a bunch of quarantining friends together: a full-ship charter is \$161,000, and I can think of no better way to travel in socially distant fashion than with a group of loved ones. (Hey, it's a dream. I can think big!)

A stopover first, on the mainland



Quito, Ecuador's capital. *Photographer: Eduardo Fonseca Arraes/Moment RF*

Included in the fare are Avianca Airlines flights to Baltra Island. Since they don't quite match up with international flights, I'll probably need to spend some pre-cruise time on the mainland.

Guayaquil is on the coast, with its modern seaside walk, the Malecón, and seafood restaurants with harbor views. But when I return, it will feature a stop in **Quito**, high in the Andes.

The catch with Quito is it lies at 9,350 feet, the second-highest capital city in the world, after La Paz, Bolivia. Acclimating to the thin air will take some time. In the historic Old Town, **Casa Gangotena** is an art nouveau mansion converted into a boutique hotel, a member of Relais & Châteaux, and it seems like a fine place to lay your head. Plus, its afternoon tea gets raves.

The city of 1.8 million residents is built on the ruins of an Inca city on the slopes of the **Pichincha Volcano**, a dramatically beautiful location accessible via a modern cable car. The big draw for me is the 17th century Spanish colonial architecture in the city center, so impressive that Quito was the first city in the world to receive Unesco World Heritage Site status in 1978. (Krakow, Poland, was also protected that year.) But I also want to check out the contemporary art scene, including a visit to a former military hospital that now houses the galleries of the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo.

Where we will sail



Kayaking is one of the active adventures cruise guests can have. *Source: Ecoventura*

Ecuador's national park authorities regulate ships so as not to overwhelm the uninhabited islands. One-week itineraries offer comparable experiences. As if to make the point, Ecoventura labels its itinerary options simply as "A" and "B."

The A itinerary explores the south and central islands. B heads north and west, which means an increased chance of seeing Charles Darwin's finches. It'd be possible to combine the itinerary for a two-week trip. To me, that's overkill; after a week, I was ready to get back to civilization.

Each day is like being on safari: I'll do two or three naturalist-led activities—maybe a beach walk past sunbathing sea lions, followed by a boulder hike—then allow myself free time for snorkeling, paddleboarding, or kayaking. A cool thing about the Galapagos is that you rarely see other ships pass, let alone tourists, on the remote islands. (You see them in the populated areas.)

Two guides on each yacht means I'd never be with more than 10 of my fellow passengers. I'm fine with those numbers. I enjoy companionship. I see no reason to splurge an additional \$2,000 on Ecoventura's upgraded package, which includes a private guide.

Learning from the animals





Blue-footed boobies on North Seymour Island. *Photographer: Paul Souders/Digital Vision*

Humans were first recorded arriving in the Galapagos in 1535, when a Spanish ship was blown off course. Onboard was the Bishop of Panama, who reported a place with weird, unafraid creatures. The animals are still that way.

Sea lions, including mothers with their pups, lounge by the dozens on beaches, unbothered when you walk by. (I want to learn to lounge as peacefully as a sea lion.) A frigate bird ignores your presence and puffs out his red chest to show he's a catch for any nearby female. Five penguins paddle past, oblivious to your snorkeling.

Some creatures will approach to check you out, as my sea lion friend did on my previous trip. You may find yourself in view of a dozen species at any given time, with an eerie feeling that they all have their eyes on you.

If I'm to be truthful, it does get a bit boring after a while—too much of a good thing—but I look at going back as if visiting an old friend. And as tempting as it is to bring a girlfriend again, perhaps I'll introduce my husband to the magic this time. (He might learn a thing or two from the horny frigates!)

When they can get back into the field, scientists will look into whether the animals were affected by the absence of humans during the Covid-19 pandemic. There's no question the critters will have survived—but did they miss us?

Focused on preserving the island's biodiversity and best known for its giant tortoise conservation program, the Charles Darwin Foundation manages more than 20 scientific research projects, including monitoring ecological changes. It feels good to support those dedicated to protecting the beasts.

In this article

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