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THE BOCA RATON observer

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The
TRAVEL ISSUE

IRRESISTIBLE IRELAND

Falling In Love With The Emerald Isle Has Never Been So Tempting

WINTER WONDER

A Perfect Weekend Getaway To Charming Stowe, Vermont

DREAMY DESTINATIONS

Top Places That Inspire Love

GET PACKING

From Luggage To Technology, Our Favorites In Travel Trends

Glorious Galápagos

The Bucket List Destination Of A Lifetime

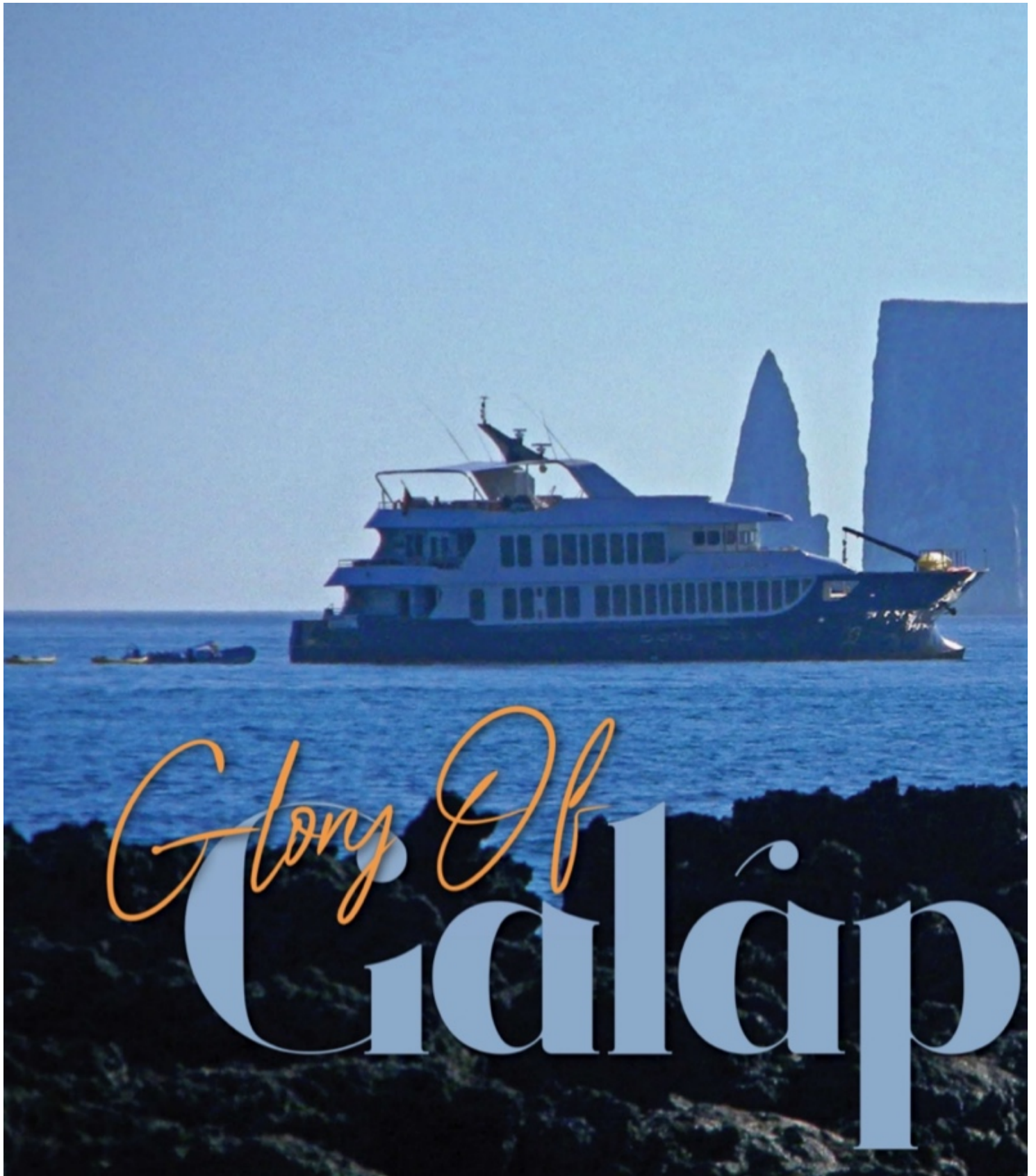
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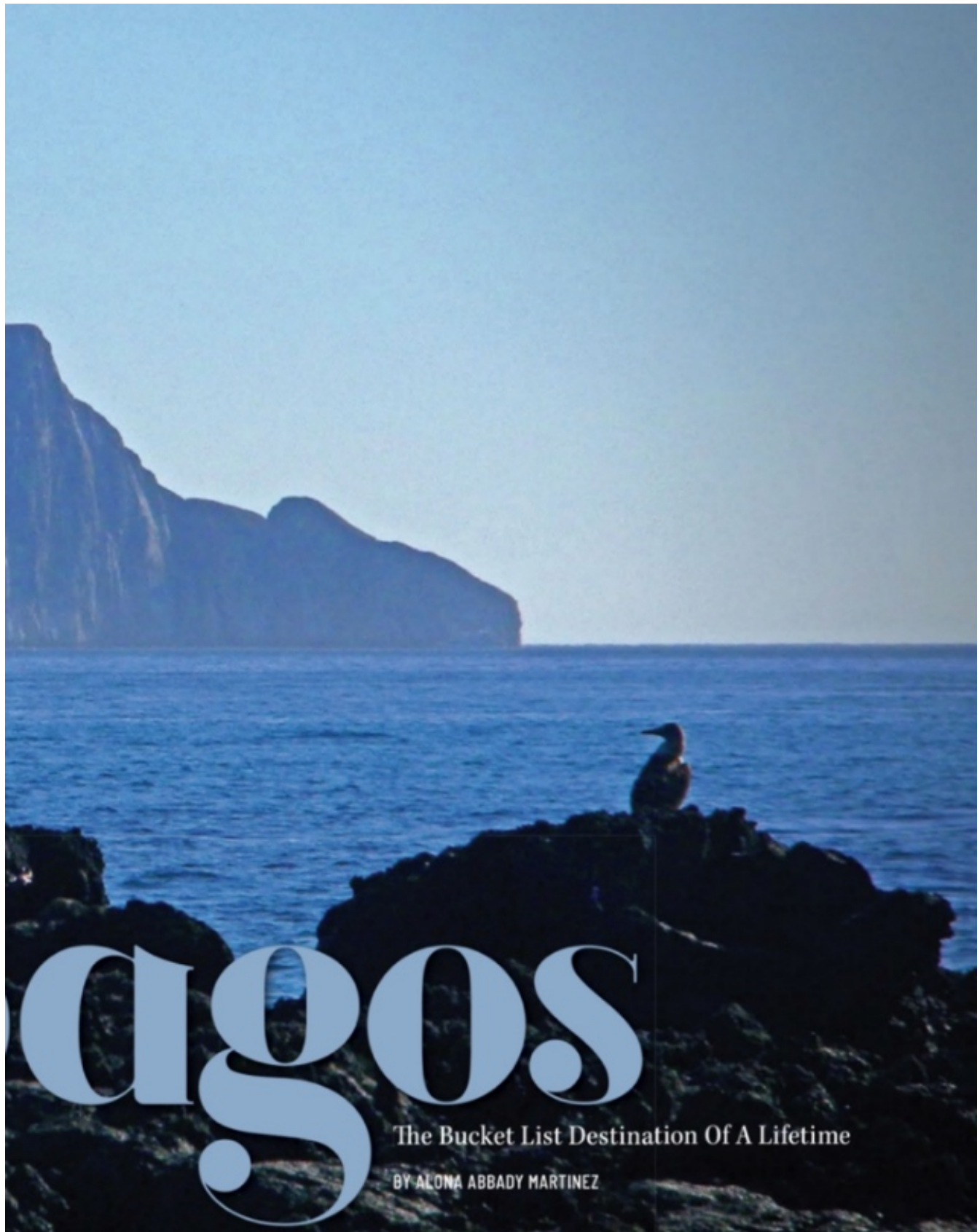


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THE WATER WAS FRIGID, but nothing my wetsuit wouldn't withstand nor the thrill of seeing hundreds of beautiful sea creatures would distract me from. With mask, snorkel and flippers on, I jumped off the "panga" (an Ecuadorian dinghy boat) right into a kaleidoscope of fish. Hues of blue, yellow, red and pink in all shapes and sizes and in the hundreds, welcomed me into the eastern Pacific Ocean. Below, the sandy bottom was blanketed by speckled, copper diamonds as a flock of Golden Cownose Rays, almost fifty of them, swam past. When kicking became a challenge (had I bumped into a reef or another snorkeler?) I turned around to find a playful baby sea lion gnawing on the tip of one of my flippers. This was not a dream. This was one wondrous moment, out of so many, in the remarkable Galápagos Islands.

You'll find this enchanted spot six hundred miles off the coast of Ecuador. The archipelago is comprised of 13 main islands and a handful of smaller ones, all of which remained relatively isolated — save for passing pirates and, later, whalers — for roughly five million years. Many species are endemic, meaning they are not found



Bartholomé Pinnacle Rock

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ECOVENTURA

anywhere else in the world. These include the giant Galápagos tortoise, the marine iguana and the Galápagos penguin — the only penguin species to live in the Northern Hemisphere. Of course, one cannot say “Galápagos” without thinking of Charles Darwin, the British naturalist who traveled here in 1835 and whose observations inspired the publication of “On the Origin of Species,” where he famously debunked the established view that God created all living creatures and brought forth his revolutionary theory of evolution.

But enough of the history lesson.

I want to tell you about these islands, some verdant and lush, others with Mars-like or lunar terrain, the creatures on them and their remarkable docility around humans as they navigate the exotic landscape that resulted in repeated volcanic eruptions creating this singular, bucket list destination.

And the best way to experience it all.

Cue in Ecoventura, a family-owned expedition cruise company that combines luxury, sustainability and adventure in an expertly curated week-long journey. Travelers choose between two high-end yachts,



While the Origin is luxurious, it is the staff that genuinely elevates the experience.

Origin and Theory, each holding 20 passengers and running (mostly) parallel itineraries. There are two routes to choose from: Itinerary A explores the larger islands, Itinerary B, the smaller. Those with time and budget to spare can opt for the full two weeks and experience both. My journey took place on Origin and visited the larger islands.

Explore the extraordinary in luxury

Ecoventura is part of the prestigious Relais & Châteaux collection — a title that guarantees service excellence. Begin with the 10 ocean-facing rooms, featuring eco-friendly amenities and expansive windows for magnificent views. The bed is so plush and comfortable, you'll sink into a deep sleep at the end of each adventure-filled day. There are two sun decks, one with a Jacuzzi hot tub, the other, on the top floor of the yacht, boasts an array of daybeds and chaise lounges for guests to unwind, read a book or simply take in the view.

The ship's interior is spacious, offering an expansive dining area where guests are pampered with three gourmet meals, a lounge as well as another bar — because mixologists Diego and Luis have the innate skill of fixing your favorite cocktail better than anyone else.

Below deck, aside from the cabins, guests will find a compact library rich with interesting reads. Whether you crave to learn more about the history of Galápagos or simply dive into an indulgent novel (Nicholas Sparks, anyone?) there's a book waiting for you. The “shop” (a few shelves in the concierge's office) sells essentials and Ecoventura swag.

While the Origin is luxurious, it is the staff that genuinely elevates the experience. Scarlett Briones, the affable concierge, greets passengers returning from each excursion and is happy to assist with passengers' whims (even asking the chef to prepare my teenage son a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when he needed a break from all the fancy fare.) Captain Gerardo Duran, decked in his crisp, white uniform, resonates with calm, expertise and friendliness.

Erosion has split the rock in two and Captain Duran expertly navigates past it so the sun dipping in the horizon is caught in the gap, creating the first of many opportunities for a striking photograph.

Culinary Excellence

It's understandable why Chef Jose Villavicencio and Sous-chef Bolivar Zavala are so beloved on the Origin. From sumptuous breakfasts that merge traditional Ecuadorian staples like "tigrillo" (mashed green plantains with crumbled fresh cheese) with classics like eggs benedict to multi-course dinners serving the likes of pumpkin cream soup with goat cheese and toasted pumpkin seeds, pork tenderloin in garlic confit sauce and Basque-style grilled octopus, culinary excellence is central to a trip aboard an Ecoventura vessel.

Plus, there are snacks. I'm not talking about the plethora of local chocolate bars (there are plenty of those for guests to grab and nosh on at any given moment), but, rather, light bites carefully crafted by Villavicencio to greet guests upon returning from hikes, kayaking or a morning sunbathe on the deck. Whether it's a charcuterie board, puff pastry with sautéed mushrooms or artisanal pizza, these midday treats become yet another beloved part of the trip.

Learn With The Best

The Galápagos Islands are a protected area governed by strict rules and regulations that includes requiring each tourist vessel to have a certified naturalist guide on board. Ecoventura offers two. Guides undergo extensive training in ecology and conservation, wildlife, geology and volcanology as well as the history of Ecuador and Galápagos.

They are also fluent in English.

Yvonne Mortola, 57 and Ivan Lopez, 40 were the guides aboard my trip. Mortola, who's been working as a guide since 1984, is curious, focused and extremely learned: like that cool aunt you wish you could travel the world with. Lopez, who holds the unique title of being the youngest of Ecoventura's guides yet the one who's been working with the company the longest, is a charismatic, fun-loving and personable guide. Like Mortola, Lopez has an uncanny knowledge of all things Galápagos. He's also an avid scuba diver and instructor.

The dedication and unrelenting passion both have for the Galápagos and the desire to share this with the visitors is clear.

"Besides the memories of Galápagos, I hope guests leave with a greater respect for nature, that people become aware that the future of this and all the other great places we have in the world is actually in our hands," Mortola offers when asked what she hopes the take-away for this trip to be.

As a child, Lopez watched a Jacques Cousteau program playing on his neighbor's television through his window (his home did not have a TV). It had such an impact on him, he decided to pursue a similar path early on.

"Everything I have, everything I am, is because of the Galápagos," he says.

New Friends

With a cap of 20 passengers (my cruise had 19), you're bound to make friends. And while there are plenty of opportunities for "alone time," whether relaxing in your cabin, taking a snooze on the sundeck or even opting for a solo dine (the dining area offers options for both small and large groups), there's something about experiencing a black-tip shark zooming past you while snorkeling or witnessing a baby bird



PHOTO BY ALMA ARRIAGU MARTINEZ



being fed by its mother or the odd-looking albatross doing an even odder mating dance that makes once-strangers fast friends.

Here are some of the highlights you can expect on Ecoventura's "Beaches and Bays" Itinerary A, The Southern and Central Route.

Explore

SUNDAY

You'll begin the journey of a lifetime on San Cristóbal Island (home to the oldest permanent settlement and where Darwin landed on his famous journey) for an awe-inspiring sunset sail around León Dormido, a vertical tuff cone (cemented volcanic ash resulting from extreme lava explosions) formation rising 500 feet above the water. Erosion has split the rock in two and Captain Duran expertly navigates past it so the sun dipping in the horizon is caught in the gap, creating the first of many opportunities for a striking photograph.

MONDAY

A morning hike at "Cerro Brujo," which translates to Wizard Hill, is where, to quote Lopez, "the greeting committee" (your first encounter with curious sea lions), mans the beach. Sally lightfoot crabs, seen by the hundreds on the cliff rocks here, are black when

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Christmas Iguana

Pink Flamingos

The highlight of the morning is a visit to Rancho Primicias, a privately-owned animal sanctuary for Galápagos tortoises. Weighing over 500 pounds, these gentle giants are among the longest-living land vertebrates, with the oldest recorded to have lived to 175.

PHOTO BY NABERT SWENSON

young and turn scarlet red when mature, serving as a stark contrast to the ebony volcanic rock.

This walk will introduce you to another Galápagos icon: the blue-footed booby. One of six species of boobies, they are marked by their cerulean blue feet. You'll find they tend to nest right on the trail, so be careful where you step!

End the day with snorkeling, where you'll be privy to the endless and beautiful ocean life. Pro Tip: Anytime there is a snorkel excursion, go! You'll inevitably see something phenomenal each time. (Plus, have I mentioned the playful baby sea lions?)

TUESDAY

If you thought dating today was tough, you should see the exhaustive efforts the Waved Albatross undergoes to woo a mate at Punta Suarez, Española Island. The highly ritualized dance can go on for hours and involves precise movements initiated by one and exactly mimicked by the other (precision is key as it tells much about potential future compatibility) and marked by an exotic, lengthy and audible clacking of beaks. Albatross mate for life so you can't fault them for being

thorough. Note: Mating season runs from April to December, so if you're keen on experiencing this special sight, plan accordingly.

Along the way you'll spot multiple marine iguanas sunbathing on the dark lava rocks. Usually black, they turn bright green and red (earning the nickname "Christmas iguanas") during mating season from the algae they eat.

Follow the trail to the ocean blowhole and favorite hangout for multiple endemic birds. Ecoventura provides each cabin with a pair of binoculars to best see Darwin's Finches, Hood mockingbirds, red-billed tropicbirds and Galápagos Hawks, among others. You'll also use them to spy sea lions chasing marine iguanas in tidal pools at the bottom of the cliff.

Sightseeing builds up an appetite, so you'll be thrilled to partake in a ceviche-making class taught on the upper deck by Chef and followed by lunch showcasing Ecuadorian lobster tails prepared on the grill.

The day wraps up inside a postcard scene: Gardner Bay, a beach boasting powder white sand, more of those adorable sea lions and turquoise water so clear you can easily spot multiple massive sea turtles swimming by.



WEDNESDAY

Today is all about Floreana, the first island to be colonized by Ecuadorians in 1832. Begin at Punta Cormorant (Cormorant's Point) and make your way to the brackish lagoon — home of bright pink flamingos — before continuing on to Flour Beach (yes, because of the sand) where turtles come to lay their eggs. It's a surreal experience walking right up to these mellow creatures and watching them head to the ocean for a swim.

There's a deep-water snorkel today. That's when you head out to a chosen spot on the "panga" and jump off to explore. White-tipped reef sharks, sea turtles, spotted eagle rays and jumbo-sized sea stars with bright brown spots called "chocolate chip starfish" are some of the incredible finds. By now you're a pro at recognizing fish: Blue-chin Parrotfish (picture a fish that doubles as a neon sign), Yellowtail Surgeonfish (named after its razor-sharp tail thorns resembling a scalpel), Cardinal (same color as the bird) and Moorish Idol, a distinctive and elegant black and white-striped number with yellow hues can be seen nibbling on the coral.

Floreana also boasts Post Office Bay, set up by whalers who placed a barrel on the island and called it a post office in 1793. Traveling seamen would leave addressed letters in the barrel with the hopes that the next seamen to stop by may be heading that way and would be able to hand-deliver their correspondence. Today the tradition continues, with visitors leaving their postcards while sifting through the stacks left behind to see if there are any left they can take with them.

THURSDAY

Wake up in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz, the largest town in Galapagos (population approximately 24,000) brimming with a lush landscape quite different from the volcanic, craggy islands seen up until now. It's also the most civilization you've encountered in a while — with a harbor filled with boats and a bustling town lined with cute cafes and boutiques, it may



take a minute readjusting to mankind. The sea lions, of course, have no problems. You'll find them lackadaisically sleeping on the port's many benches.

The highlight of the morning is a visit to Rancho Primicias, a privately-owned animal sanctuary for Galápagos tortoises. Weighing over 500 pounds, these gentle giants are among the longest-living land vertebrates, with the oldest recorded to have lived to 175.

They were once so abundant that Spanish sailors visiting the archipelago in 1535 named it after their curved shell, which they believed resembled a women's saddle ("galápagos") at the time. Numbers dwindled from at least 250,000 to around 15,000 in the wild today. Because they can live up to one year without food and water, they were hunted as food by pirates, whalers and traders from the 17th through 19th Century.

Charles Darwin Research Station, dedicated to the preservation and conservation of the Galápagos Islands is where you'll get to see baby tortoises, visit the exhibit of Lonesome George (whose death marked the extinction of the species of tortoise from Pinta Island) and learn about Diego, a tortoise from the San Diego zoo who brought his species back from the brink of extinction by fathering hundreds of offspring.

If you want to pull a prank on a friend and tell them you visited Mars, take a selfie here. Shades of rust red, ochre yellow and charred black (volcanic rocks emerging from the sea around 2 million years ago) define the terrain.

FRIDAY

Awake to solitude again. I recommend heading up to the top deck before sunrise while the rest of the guests sleep. Luis (bartender by night, barista by day) will greet you with a friendly "buenos dias" and bring you coffee, just as you like it, without you having to ask.

Start the morning with a fun kayak excursion (or paddleboard, if you prefer) along the island of Bartolomé. The mission: to spot the elusive Galápagos penguins that tend to favor this spot. On my trip, I was fortunate to see three swimming and sunbathing on the rocks. One of the smallest penguins in the world, they can survive near the equator thanks to the cool water currents as well as their tiny size which allows them to squeeze into caves and crevices to keep away from the sun.

Return to Scarlett's warm welcome and what will quickly become one of your favorite announcements: "Snacks and drinks are served!" Triangular egg and bacon tea sandwiches, caramelized onion galettes and fresh mora (Ecuadorian blackberry) juice help replenish you for the afternoon activity to come — a return to Bartolomé Island for a long climb. 400 steps to be specific.

First, let's talk about the landscape. If you want to pull a prank on a friend and tell them you visited Mars, take a selfie here. Shades of rust red, ochre yellow and charred black (volcanic rocks emerging from the sea around 2 million years ago) define the terrain. Lava bombs formed by flowing magma from past eruptions are frozen remnants of time. The equatorial sun is strong and casts dramatic shadows throughout. The unmistakable landmark is Pinnacle Rock, your prize for making it to the top. A part of Sullivan Bay, the unusual rock formation juts out of the water in the shape of a shark

tooth. If it looks familiar, it also made an appearance in the 2003 Russell Crowe film "Master and Commander."

SATURDAY

The first thing you'll wonder when you wake up is, "How is it already Saturday?" Yes, this trip will fly by. South Plaza Island, where colors enjoyed in glorious sunsets are mirrored in the vegetation, waits to be explored. Dense blankets of Galápagos carpetweed (endemic to the archipelago) coat the ground in red, yellow and plum. Cacti trees (yes, cacti with actual tree bark) complement the weirdness of the terrain as do the land and marine iguanas (the only island they both share) casually roaming around. You'll feel like you've walked into a Dr. Seuss book.

The last snorkel excursion takes place mid-afternoon, another deep-sea drop with currents so strong and tricky that Lopez nicknames the more intrepid snorkelers the "Super Rambo" group. Not to worry, there's also a "Micky Mouse" option for those not comfortable pretending to be Sylvester Stallone.

A final hike at North Seymour Island, home of the largest Frigate birds' nesting colony is the ideal place to witness the large, black birds' mating process, which involves the male inflating its throat to look like a large bright red balloon in order to lure a female bird.

SUNDAY

They say, "all good things must come to an end," but surrounded by such striking flora and fauna in the company of friends and under the expert guise of Ecoventura, you'll find yourself wishing an exception could be made. ○

For more information visit ecoventura.com.

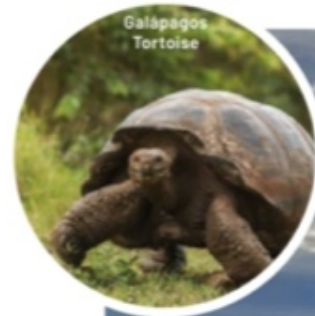


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