

BEST FOR EXCLUSIVITY

THE GALÁPAGOS

A tour of the fauna-rich islands offers a rare chance to discover the archipelago at its most abundant and serene. Words: Jamie Lafferty

So much as anything is normal in the Galápagos, then its extraordinary marine life was as curious, colourful and unforgettable as ever. Surgefish still swam in shoals so tight they could have been canned; eagle rays still appeared to fly in eerily rehearsed formation; Pacific green sea turtles still swooped and meandered with the urgency of nonagenarians. Everything was as it should be, and below the waves there were no indications that surface-dwellers were being crushed by contagion and fear.

Cruising during a pandemic was surreal for a number of reasons, but I'd reasoned that doing so around the Galápagos was just about worth any perceived risk. The word 'unique' is used and abused too frequently in travel marketing, but this singular archipelago can be described in that true sense. Which is to say: if I was going to do it, I wanted to make sure it was destination worthy of the effort.

Still, there should be no glossing over the facts: during the onset of Covid-19, some large cruise ships became enormous petri dishes, many held at anchor while the virus ran rampant through their decks. As a result, amid all the protestations and grievances that accompanied global lockdown, few people defended huge cruise ships.

Ecoventura's luxury yacht the *Theory* shares little with those behemoths. Carrying a maximum of 20 passengers, it's easy to micromanage and so is therefore safer. Besides, the Galápagos is perhaps only second to Antarctica in providing visitors with a chance to see nature at its rawest.

Still, thoughts of being consigned to a plague vessel didn't exactly make for optimal holiday preparation, but few of the 14 other passengers aboard the *Theory* seemed overly burdened with concern. A Cuban-American family had travelled as a group of 10 and were joined by a mother and son from California, as well as a retirement-age couple from the UK. We all had to provide a negative PCR test to enter mainland Ecuador, then a second to transfer to the Galápagos.

Once on board, Ecoventura made sure we had more hand sanitiser than we could possibly use and explained that their system of virus management would essentially be to treat us all as a bubble. This meant mask-wearing was voluntary and that a lot of faith was being put in our negative results, but also that people could actually enjoy the

untrammelled luxury of forgetting about Covid-19 — at least for the week.

In order for this to work, it also meant we couldn't make scheduled excursions to any of the towns on the inhabited Galápagos islands. On the upside, it also meant we wouldn't be sharing any sublime beaches or cliff-top walks with other tourists.

Covid-19 had all but guaranteed exclusivity for us — normally, up to 100 ships may be circumnavigating the archipelago, but during my visit, the *Theory* was one of just three.

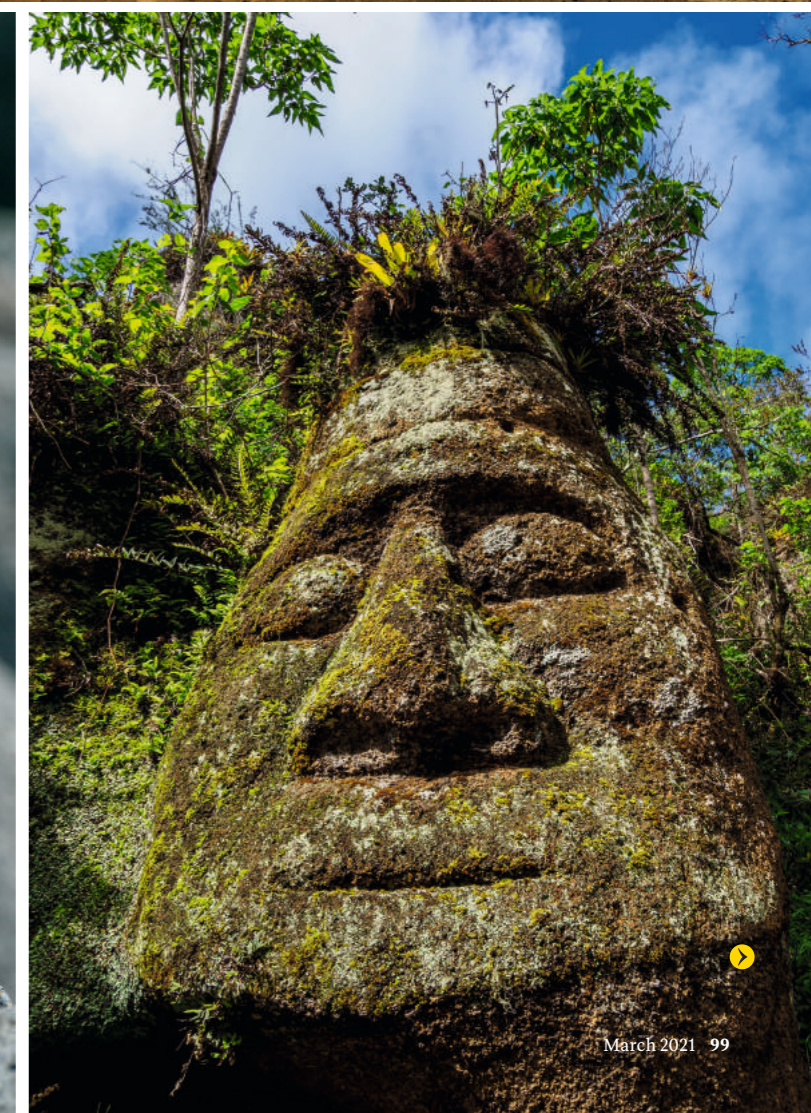
Ecoventura, like other companies, had advertised that this was a chance to see the islands as they were 30 years ago. This may have been true in terms of traffic, but for the gregarious animals, little had changed. Whereas it took a complete lockdown of commerce and community to have animals creep onto streets in major cities around the world, on the Galápagos, benches are often commandeered by sea lions while marine iguanas litter the pavements nearby.

On the more remote islands, the six-month absence of tourists hadn't altered things much, either. Humans have only had significant presence on the archipelago for a few centuries and so animals have, for the most part, evolved without us in their lives. Charles Darwin wrote that he was able to approach a Galápagos hawk that was so naive he could nudge it with the muzzle of his rifle.

We were lucky enough to watch some of the world's rarest creatures act out their daily dramas only a few feet away from us. The unrivalled elegance of the mating rituals of waved albatross on Española Island; the vicious squabbling of land iguanas on South Plaza; frigate birds harassing red-billed tropicbirds as though they were jealous of their startling beauty.

Time passed differently for those animals as it had done for us humans over the course of the carbuncle year that was 2020. But as I reluctantly disembarked the *Theory*, it seemed important to remember that time was indeed passing.

Last Frontiers can arrange a nine-day trip from £6,656 per person. The itinerary includes international flights with KLM, a night in Quito, return flights to the Galápagos, all national park fees and a seven-night cruise aboard the Theory on a full-board basis. lastfrontiers.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Bartolomé Island, with Santiago Island in the background, Galápagos; face sculpture, Asilo de la Paz, Floreana Island, Galápagos; Galápagos land iguana
PREVIOUS PAGE: Lofoten in the winter, Norway

IMAGES: AWL IMAGES