



Galapagos Odyssey Day- to Day C
Around Isabela to the remote west
6 Days/ 5 Nights – Thursday to Tuesday – every 14 days



Important Note: Itinerary is subject to change in case of force majeure caused by exceptional and natural circumstances

Our 5-night western itinerary is an adventurous mini-expedition along the remote and geologic young western coast of Isabela (clockwise around this largest island) and the very pristine Fernandina. This adventurous route is different to mainstream routes and contains longer nightly navigation stretches. It also visits the northern island of Santiago and ends at the easternmost San Cristóbal.

Your cruise starts with an introduction at the Charles Darwin Research Station. After crossing to Isabela, you will visit the incredible tidal channel where **whitetip reef sharks** rest, and you can hike to the rim of the gigantic caldera of Sierra Negra Volcano; if you're lucky you can spot **American flamingos** as well! After this you will explore the furthest visitor's sites along the western coast of Isabela and Fernandina, home to unique creatures such as **flightless cormorants**, **marine iguanas** and **Galapagos penguins**. From the historic James Bay on the western coast of Santiago we will navigate the long stretch to Lobos Islet and San Cristóbal, **Galapagos sea lion** territory.

Day 1 – Thursday

Programme

This morning you will fly from Quito or Guayaquil to Baltra Airport. After welcome, check-in, lunch, briefing and the safety-drill you will visit the famous Charles Darwin Research Station for an interesting introduction to the Galapagos. You will also get some free time to stroll through the cosy town of Puerto Ayora.

Before dinner your guide will give the first daily briefing for tomorrow, and will explain the yacht's and National Park rules. The captain and his crew will then present you with a welcome cocktail and make a toast to celebrate your first evening on-board. Shortly before midnight we will lift the anchor and start our first nightly crossing to Puerto Villamil on Isabela. Depending on the sea state we will navigate about 6 hours in Western direction, leaving late at night.

AM: Arrival at Baltra Airport

At Baltra Airport you will have to pay your Galapagos National Park entrance fee and your luggage will be inspected. You will meet your naturalist guide and fellow passengers in the arrival hall, and the airport shuttle will transfer you to the ferry across the Itabaca Channel. On Santa Cruz you will continue by bus through the lush highlands to the harbour of Puerto Ayora. Our inflatable dinghies will bring you the last stretch to the yacht.



PM: Charles Darwin Research Station

On the outskirts of Puerto Ayora you will visit the shared area of the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) and the headquarters of the Galapagos National Park Service. From here the indispensable conservation management and biological research of this unique archipelago and its surrounding waters are directed. This complex houses several interpretation and information centres about the National Park and the Galapagos Marine Reserve.



The most memorable part of this visit will probably be the successful breeding centre and the enclosures with *Galapagos giant tortoises*; even after the death of its world-famous resident, emphatically called 'Lonesome George' († June 2012; the last known individual of the *Pinta subspecies*, who sadly failed to reproduce offspring). His remains have been mummified and stuffed, but the Galapagos currently have no climatic controlled facilities to show it in a conservative way to the public. For other species and subspecies the breeding project started just in time to save them from extinction. Most remaining adult *giant tortoises* in the corals are former pets and many of them are accustomed to human company.

For centuries these emblematic reptiles have made the Galapagos famous. Hundreds of thousands of them used to crawl around before the devastating epoch of poaching. Even the name of this archipelago refers to these prehistoric dwellers. On certain islands their shells evolved into pronounced riding saddles shapes or 'Galapagos' in Spanish. Nobody before Charles Darwin had noticed differences

in the tortoise shells from different islands, which put him on track of his evolution theory of natural selection. Because species from different islands are kept, the Charles Darwin Research Station is the place to compare the diverging saddle back shapes and the dome-shaped shells from the *Santa Cruz-subspecies*. 'Lonesome George' had an extremely high saddleback shell, long legs and a long neck to reach higher for food.

Day 2 – Friday

Puerto Villamil is the 3rd settlement of the Galapagos on the south-eastern lobe of Isabela. This is by far the largest island on the Galapagos, covering almost 60% of the total land area of the archipelago. This larger living space seems to mean that almost everything on Isabela is bigger, and that evolution is hunting for records over here (although some are disputed). This younger island is less frequented and quieter than the central and south-eastern islands.

Programme

Today you have a full programme, so we will start with an early breakfast before leaving. First you will visit the Tintoreras-islets for a guided hike on a rough volcanic rock trail, passing a unique tidal channel which is a resting place for *white tip reef sharks*, among other trapped species, and where you will find huge *marine iguanas* (Easy/Moderate Level).

From there the inflatable dinghies will put you directly ashore to the harbour of Puerto Villamil, where you will board a bus that brings you to the lush highlands of Isabela. You will hike to the impressive rim of Sierra Negra Volcano and explore the mysterious and completely different world of the cloud-forest (Moderate Level; about 6.5 km / 4mi.). Back on-board you can enjoy a well-earned lunch. In the afternoon you will return to Puerto Villamil, where you will visit the local tortoise breeding centre and take a local bus tour through the surrounding marshes, where you can observe *American flamingos* and other aquatic and songbirds. Before returning aboard you will have the opportunity to enjoy the paradisiacal beaches teeming with *marine iguanas* and *Sally light foot crabs*.

After dinner we will lift the anchor and start to go round the southern lobe of Isabela to its far west coast. Navigation tonight will take about 8 hours.

Additional options scuba-diving: Isla Tortuga, Cuatro Hermanos or Roca Viuda (advanced).

AM: Whitetip reef shark channel (Isabela)

Just outside the harbour of Puerto Villamil on the largest island of Isabela, a group of islets protrude just above the ocean. These barely noticeable rocks form one of the most emblematic sites that you will visit during your cruise. The jagged black formations, dotted with *mangrove* and *candelabra-cactus*, are the remnants of a lava stream that has ended up in the ocean. While these are being demolished by the waves, and a collapsed lava tube forms a channel that fills-up on high tide, while the entrance is closed on low tide. Marine life gets trapped, including spectacular *white tip reef sharks* (called *tintoreras* in Spanish, as is the site's official name). This species of *shark* is fairly common in the archipelago, and generally spotted on the seabed when snorkelling, whilst these are resting from their nocturnal hunts. But on this unique place you can observe them comfortably from the bank in the crystal clear turquoise



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waters. Sometimes *turtles* and elegant *white-spotted eagle rays* or *golden rays* glide back and forth through this calm channel, as well as smaller fish and *Galapagos sea lions*.

Unlike the inviting beaches of Puerto Villamil, the tiny plaques on these rocky formations offer important and fully undisturbed breeding places for prehistoric-looking *marine iguanas*. Over here the largest Isabela subspecies (up to 1.5m / 5ft tall!) can reproduce successfully and thrive by hundreds. The rocky shoreline with its intertidal life also attracts *sally light foot crabs*, *lava herons* and *Galapagos penguins*, which mostly reside on the other (western) side of Isabela. *Galapagos sea lions* occupy the sand beach and complete this stereotypical Galapagos image.

AM: Sierra Negra (Isabela)

Sierra Negra is the 3rd highest volcano on Isabela and the 5th highest of the Galapagos (1124m / 3687ft.). It erupted a total of 7 times in the 20th century, the last time being in October 2005. It is the only major volcano on Isabela whose crater regions are actually open to tourism. A mysterious



half-day hike through the cloud forests takes you to a viewpoint at the rim, offering fantastic views into the impressive caldera (clear weather required, though unpredictable; prevailing winds mean that clouds usually tend to dissolve at the viewpoint). The caldera measures about 7 x 9km / 4.5 x 6mi across, and is the largest of the archipelago. Since the discovery of so-called super volcanoes like Yellowstone it is no longer listed as one of the largest craters in the world.

A somewhat muddy trail to the rim will lead you through an unexpected, evergreen cloud forest that only exists in the highlands of the main islands. The dense and rich vegetation includes *ferns*, *tree ferns* and endemic *scalesia trees* laden with epiphytes like *lichens*, *orchids* and *bromeliads*. The fog and drizzle – more frequent in the cool *garúa* season (June-December) – contributes to the mysterious atmosphere. En route you can also spot striking songbirds such as the *vermillion flycatcher*, the *yellow warbler* and the *woodpecker finch* (among six more species of *Darwin's finches*); this peculiar one hammers on branches like a woodpecker and uses twigs as tools to capture insects!

PM: Wetlands & Beach (Isabela)

The tempting white sand beach of Puerto Villamil is home to far more *marine iguanas* and *Sally lightfoot crabs* than bathing guests. Its overgrown beach wall hides the largest coastal lagoon of the Galapagos, attracting lots of aquatic birds and wintering shore birds; some come from arctic regions! It is part of a swampy coastal zone known as the wetlands, with an old *mangrove* forest, collapsed lava tubes, and even more salt and brackish ponds. These are home to the largest concentration and breeding site of *American flamingos* on the Galapagos, although we cannot guarantee that you will see these shy and nervous birds.



Day 3 – Saturday

Today and tomorrow you can explore some of the most remote visitor's sites on the Galapagos, on the far West coast of Isabela. These coastal waters are very nutrient-rich, and a magnet to all kinds of marine and birdlife; thanks to major upwellings out of the deep sea: the so-called Cromwell Current.

Programme

After breakfast you will take a guided morning hike across the crumbling, pitch black lava fields of Moreno Point with its bird-rich pools and sparkling intertidal life (Moderate Level; about 2km / 1.25mi.). After a snack we can take an inflatable dinghy-ride or try out snorkelling for the first time.

At noon we sail for 2 hours to the next visitor's site, Elizabeth Bay, and meanwhile you can enjoy the delicious lunch buffet and a short siesta. We will then undertake an adventurous ride by inflatable dinghy to some offshore rocks with a *Galapagos penguin* colony and from there we will turn to the estuary of Elizabeth Bay and penetrate the forest-like mangles. At dinner time we will continue to Fernandina, where we will anchor at about midnight.

AM: Moreno Point (Isabela)

Moreno Point tells you the intriguing story of how the famous lunatic lava fields of Sullivan Bay (Santiago) could develop in the future, when parts of the crust break and fall into the undermining lava tunnels. Pits and holes close to the coast would gradually fill-up with seawater. The once lifeless area would then become dotted with tidal pools and filtration lagoons, offering new opportunities to pioneer vegetation; finally the lava cacti would get company. This site acquires two more species of *cacti*, from which the *candelabras* can grow up to 7m / 23ft. tall, and dominate the rest of the shrubby vegetation.



Fringes of *reed*, *sea grass* and *mangrove bushes* surround the picturesque lagoons that have been transformed into lush oases. Your photos get the perfect finishing touch when the bright *American flamingos* and aquatic birds come to forage in the largest lagoon as well. In the wet season the fresh, promising greens become even more intense and contrast strongly with the dead, pitch-black lava. The pioneer vegetation seems to be winning, but only until Sierra Negra volcano spits a new layering cover, and the story starts all over again.

During an inflatable dinghy-ride along the jagged shoreline, you will notice different species. The tidal pools form natural traps and attract scavengers and hunters, bright orange *sally light foot crabs*, *oystercatchers* and *herons*. *Marine iguanas* wait patiently for their turn to graze weeds on the seabed at lowest tide, while *brown pelicans* have found an undisturbed place to breed in the *mangroves*.

PM: Elizabeth Bay (Isabela)

Although there is no landing point, the marine visitor's site of Elizabeth Bay offers two in one. You will undertake a long ride by inflatable dinghy that combines a visit to the Marielas Islets in the mouth of the bay, with the mangles in its innermost heart. In 1963 these highest mangles of



Galapagos were close to complete destruction, when Volcán Chico, a parasitic cone of Sierra Negra, sent lava flows to this 20km (11mi) distant bay. Miraculously the flows came just a few kilometres back to a halt.

The Marielas islets are an excellent place to spot *marine iguanas* and *Galapagos penguins*, which tend to stay in the front row at the base of the cliffs. The *Galapagos penguin* is considered as endangered with just some 1500 birds across the whole archipelago, and therefore the rarest *penguin* species worldwide. You therefore shouldn't expect vast colonies of countless numbers like in Antarctic regions, but rather small family groups. On top of these ochre-coloured and reddish oxidised remnants of a crumbled tuff cone there are several lofty *palo santo*-trees growing. These provide *magnificent frigate birds* with a lookout far over the open sea to watch for and rob returning *blue-footed boobies*.

Next the inflatable dinghy will turn landwards, leaving the surf behind and enter the calm estuary of Elizabeth Bay through a rather narrow entrance. Whilst exploring the lagoons and shallow creeks, the outboard engine is turned off, so that you can enjoy the sounds of nature. Graceful *Pacific green turtles* swim slowly around you, sometimes popping their heads above the surface to breathe. In December and January you stand a fair chance of seeing them mating at the surface. You might also see *spotted eagle rays* or *sharks*, looking for protected inlets to give birth and leave their young alone. *Brown pelicans* and *blue-footed boobies* show diverging plunge-diving techniques, while *lava herons* and *great blue herons* prefer to wait patiently for what comes along. You can also compare the huge *red mangroves* (with their characteristic prop roots) with *black*, *white* and *button mangroves*. These *mangroves* are actually from different botanic families and the only thing they have in common is that they all thrive in brackish waters.

Day 4 – Sunday

This morning you will visit one of the most exclusive sites of this cruise route, Espinoza Point on Fernandina. This island harbours one of the world's most virgin, untouched ecosystems, and is therefore very well-protected.

Programme

You will start with a guided walk on the lava tongue of Espinoza Point, which is full of *marine iguanas*, the iconic *flightless cormorant* and the *Galapagos penguin*! (Easy / Moderate Level; about 2km / 1.25mi.). After a snack we will bring you to today's snorkelling site.

While having lunch we will cross the Bolivar Channel, back to Isabela's western coast. On the bridge and through the panoramic windows of the dining room we will carefully watch for fountains, hence this is one of the best places on the Galapagos for viewing *whales* and *dolphins*.

At Tagus Cove you will take the longer guided nature walk at this geologic and historic interesting site (Moderate Level; about 3km / 2mi.). Subsequently we will take a dinghy-ride along the shoreline, or you will have today's second snorkelling opportunity.

Before dinner we will start our 12 hours-navigation around the Northern Cape of Isabela to Santiago (and we will cross the equator twice).

AM: Espinoza Point (Fernandina)

Fernandina, located right above the Galapagos hotspot in the farthest west of the archipelago, is still under construction. It is estimated that between 60.000 and



400.000 years ago the top of this underwater shield volcano rose above sea level, which makes it the youngest of the main islands. Fernandina harbours one of the world's most virgin, untouched ecosystems, and is therefore very well-protected. This exclusive and fascinating island will make you an eyewitness of evolution, which is happening right before your eyes!

Espinoza Point is Fernandina's only terrestrial visitor's site, and one of the few locations where you will find some bizarre outgrowths of natural selection. The figurehead is the emblematic *flightless cormorant* that lives exclusively in the remote west of the Galapagos, and could be considered as the 'holy grail of evolution'. Thanks to the fact that this island has been spared from the introduction of invading species and because it is even uninhabitable for most land mammals, the *cormorant* needn't fear terrestrial enemies. This miraculous bird lets you approach it very closely. The next generations gradually lost their flying capabilities to become excellent divers, but still stuck with the typical habit of drying and showing their unfolded 'wings' to you. Together with its neighbour, the *Galapagos penguin*, these are two of the rarest and most vulnerable bird species in the world, with less than 2000 individuals each.

Besides the endemic wildlife, you will also love the almost unworldly views with the dominating cone of Volcán La Cumbre ('the summit' in Spanish) as a spectacular backdrop. The narrow headland that you walk along is the end of a lava tongue that has reached the coast and solidified from contact with the cold seawater. The black rocks are not yet covered by more vegetation than lava cacti and mangroves, but are teeming with hundreds of dragon-like *marine iguanas* that breed and conglomerate in larger groups than on any other island.

PM: Tagus Cove (Isabela)

Right on the eastern shores of the Bolivar Channel are two tuff cones containing ultra-saline crater lakes: Tagus Cove and Beagle Crater. Both present spectacular layered cliffs at their sea faces, providing numerous nesting places for sea and coastal birds. From the inflatable dinghy you can observe *marine iguanas*, *flightless cormorants*, *Galapagos penguins* and *storm petrels*. It's impressive to see flocks of *blue-footed boobies* and *brown pelicans* plunge diving from considerable altitudes.



Explosive eruptions have blown out a part of the outer rims of both tuff cones, creating their characteristic horseshoe shapes. On one of these events the sea entered the caldera of the northern cone and formed Tagus Cove. The inner crater rim has remained intact and spared the region from an even more violent detonation when the seawater would have mixed up with the boiling volcanic materials. Nowadays it contains emerald Darwin Lake (though Darwin visited the neighbouring Crater Lake). On the ground you can find small lapilli-balls, which rained down when ash particles solidified in the air.

Traditionally sailors started to write the names of their vessels on the eastern cliffs of Tagus cove and inside caves. The oldest graffiti dates back from 1836, a year after Darwin's visit. The crew of HMS Beagle didn't find the necessary fresh water, but nevertheless the young naturalist became very impressed with this spot.

Less thirsty than the HMS crew, you will also begin the somewhat strenuous and sometimes hot hike, following the inner ridge around Darwin Lake. On the inland side of the crater you can continue the last stretch to a great viewpoint on the outer caldera rim, with views to the nearby and outstretched lava slopes of Darwin Volcano (1280m / 4200ft.). On clear days you can even distinguish the Ecuador and Wolf volcanoes, the highest point of the Galapagos (1707m/ 5600ft, located exactly on the equator).

The arid zone of the inlands is overgrown with characteristic tropical dry forest vegetation such as a special variety of *palo santo*, *Galapagos cotton* and *yellow cordia (muyuyu)*. Depending on the months of your visit these trees and bushes will be leafless; or abundant and green in the wet season (first half of the year). During the hike you can spot different *Darwin's finches*, *flycatchers* and *Galapagos hawks*.

Day 5 – Monday

While HMS Beagle was mapping the Archipelago, Charles Darwin had been dropped off on the Western coast of Santiago, where he spent most of his time on the Galapagos. You will visit the necklace of visitor's sites along this historic James Bay.

Programme

From Espumilla Beach you will take a guided walk; uphill and inland (Easy Level; about 2km, 1.25mi.). Afterwards you can explore the Galapagos' submarine world again, which is even more varied than island life. Around lunch-time we navigate 12km / 7mi south and reach Puerto Egas with its famous *fur seal* grottos, where you will take another, very different guided walk along the coastline (Easy Level). After this impressive day we leave for the longest navigation of this cruise route to the easternmost San Cristóbal (about 13 hours). During this last night on-board, you can enjoy a farewell cocktail with the crew and your fellow passengers.

AM: Espumilla Beach (Santiago)

Espumilla Beach is a visitor's site at the northern end of James Bay, on the western coast of Santiago. This beach has been revived as an important breeding site for *turtles*, as it is no longer suffering from digging wild pigs. The *turtles* return year after year to bury their eggs in the cinnamon coloured sand dunes. About two months later (roughly from February to August) the eggs hatch all at the same time. Most vulnerable hatchlings will sadly never reach the sea, and form a banquet for predators such as *herons*, *frigate birds*, *mockingbirds* and *ghost crabs*. The beach ridge hides a mangle with two picturesque lagoons on the backside. The colony of *American flamingos* and aquatic birds used to be its main attraction, but after the climate phenomenon of El Niño, strong sedimentation altered the brackish water environment, and it no longer contains their food... As often seen on the Galapagos, different vegetation zones are very close by, providing great scenic contrasts. Upon climbing a hill you will be rewarded with a beautiful view of the transitions from sea into beach into *mangrove* into dry *palo santo* forest.



PM: Puerto Egas (Santiago)

Dominated by the 395m / 1300ft. high Pan de Azúcar (Sugarloaf), Puerto Egas is the southernmost pearl in the necklace of visitor's sites along James Bay. It is



named after Héctor Egas, who made a second attempt to mine salt commercially out of an inland crater lake in the 1960s. Santiago and its surrounding islets stand out due to their spectacular and unique volcanic and coastal landscapes, and Puerto Egas is no exception. The masterly sculptured coastline of black basalts, polished multi-coloured ash-layers, collapsed lava tunnels, natural arches, caves and blowholes such as 'Darwin's toilet' and tidal pools form very photogenic scenery. If you are a wildlife lover, you will also fully enjoy this unique place that will probably become your favourite on this island. You will find lots of representative members of the Galapagos-population.

Right below a spectacular rock arch in a grotto at the end of the beach, a colony of *Galapagos fur seals* has occupied the shade, sheltering from the equatorial sun. Unlike the more common *Galapagos sea lion*, these smaller species of seal are no beach-lovers, due to their adorable, but insulating coats. This outstanding refuge is the best place throughout the archipelago to see these endemic, shy and once heavily hunted marine mammals.

Puerto Egas is also teeming with extremely varied intertidal life, especially at low tide. You will notice how *marine iguanas* just leave, or return cold and exhausted from grazing weeds on the seabed at lowest tide, or how they warm up afterwards while sunbathing on the black rocks. Ossified *night herons* and *lava herons* keep an eye on the tidal pools that are refilled during every flood with small fish, *octopuses*, *star fish*, *snails*, *urchins*, *shells*, *green algae* and many other snacks for all tastes. Noisy *oystercatchers*, *turnstones*, *plovers* and *whimbrels* inspect these pools zealously. Hundreds of *sally light foot crabs* seem even brighter orange against the pitch-black rocks (the immature are dark-coloured). These crabs scratch *algae* from the rocks, but are also scavengers and a prey themselves for the *herons*.

Day 6 – Tuesday

Programme

On the eastern end of the archipelago you can enjoy one more morning excursion. After a dry landing you will take a guided nature walk on the rocky trail of Lobos Islet, with its *Galapagos sea lions* and lots of birds; including *blue-footed boobies* (Moderate Level; About 850m / 0.6 miles or 400m / 0.25mi.). Subsequently we will navigate to the harbour of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno and it's time to leave the yacht and say goodbye.

AM: Lobos Islet (San Cristóbal)

If you already know a bit of Spanish, you will not be surprised by what you will get to see at Lobos Islet... its beach harbours a colony of *Galapagos sea lions*. As in other colonies in the archipelago you can approach nurturing females within a few metres. In the breeding season this colony is also visited by very territorial males, defending and mating the harem on their part of the beach. Though at first sight the barren rocks are overgrown by *palo santo*, this low islet houses has more than just *Galapagos sea lions*. Two other emblematic species of the Galapagos also breed here. Male *blue-footed boobies* and *great frigate birds* try to impress the females (and tourists) with clumsy dances, heaving their striking blue feet or blowing up their balloon-sized scarlet pouches. Later in the breeding season the fluffy and hungry chicks cry for food and when their wings are strong enough they will learn to fly.



You can also find a lot of life in the intertidal zone, including the striking bright orange *sally light foot crabs* and *marine iguanas* on the boulders. *Sand dollars* (a kind of *sea urchin*), among other marine life, have been washed ashore on the beach and remained at low tide. Remember that it's strictly forbidden to take home anything you find in the National Park. On the horizon you can distinguish the contours of 10km / 6.2mi distant Kicker Rock. That impressive rock islet has become one of the landmarks of Galapagos, together with the blowhole on Española, Pinnacle Rock on Bartolome, and the remote northern rock arch of Darwin.

AM: Transfer to San Cristóbal airport

Check-in and flight back to Guayaquil or Quito.

Assisted by the guide and some crew-members the dinghy will bring you and your luggage to Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, where we board a private bus to the airport. Your guide will accompany you to the check-in counter in the departure hall. You will return home not only with stunning pictures, but also unforgettable lifelong memories!