

EVOLUTION ON PARADE

Brett Atkinson cruises the astonishing Galapagos Islands – in rather more comfort than Charles Darwin.

Photos: Metropolitan Touring.

The food aboard the *La Pinta* is very good, but for the second time in two days I've had to abandon my breakfast and lunch buffets: when humpback whales are cruising past outside or spectacularly breaching on the near horizon, my grilled tuna and Chilean Sauvignon Blanc will just have to wait.

Thankfully, I haven't yet had to choose between world-beating wildlife and one of South America's best Mojitos during *La Pinta's* regular early-evening cocktail hour. With almost 30 years' experience, head barman Fernando probably deserves World Heritage status as much as the fascinating archipelago one hour's flight from mainland Ecuador.

In 1978 the Galapagos Islands were the first site to be inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage list. More than three decades later, Earth's second largest marine reserve – after the California-sized Phoenix Islands Protected Area near Kiribati – remains one of the planet's iconic travel destinations. And with a maximum of 48 guests on *La Pinta*, the luxury vessel is the best way to experience these islands, visited by Charles Darwin in 1835 and so important in developing his Theory of Evolution.

Despite the occasional non-scheduled interruption by humpback whales, life on *La Pinta* soon develops an irresistible routine. Days are arranged like an African safari, with morning and afternoon wildlife viewing excursions punctuated by excellent food and wine and underpinned with instruction and guidance by professional naturalists. From the naturalists, Galapagos newbies also quickly learn the local idiom. A "wet" landing just may mean there's a chance to swim with sea lions, penguins and shadowy, shape-shifting shoals of fish, while a "dry" landing often seems to be a twilight stroll across the islands'



idiosyncratic lunar landscapes. That's when travellers get the chance to spy juvenile albatrosses taking avian instruction as their elder siblings launch themselves into a gusty equatorial dusk.

With smooth organisation by *La Pinta's* crew, the astounding experiences come thick and fast. Just minutes after our humpback-interrupted breakfast of fresh fruit, pastries and coffee, it's back into the pangas – as inflatable Zodiacs are dubbed locally – for a wet landing on the perfect, sandy crescent of Isla Bartolomé. It's here that the versatility of the Galapagos experience is brought home. Working on your tan on the beach is an option, but you could be sharing the cove with waddling tuxedoed penguins and curious sea lions. Armed with snorkelling gear, it's best to encounter both species on their own terms – in the water. Penguins zip past in the crystalline depths, celebrating their place on the equator; one that's only made possible because the cool waters of the Humboldt Current swing past these isolated islands. Further around the rocky shoreline, iridescent orange Sally Lightfoot crabs stand sentinel around a natural marine cathedral. Shafts

of light pierce the indigo depths to reveal young sea lions twisting and turning like Cirque de Soleil performers. Soulful eyes make fleeting contact and then dart away, leaving just a shadowy underwater wake. Later on the same morning, I quietly navigate a sea kayak around a secluded cove. A nursery of sea lions darts quickly under my slowly gliding orange hull, emerging to toss fragments of seaweed in the air like a tiny Mexican wave. On the shoreline a lone penguin drinks in the equatorial sunshine before awkwardly negotiating the rocks to glide into the water.

Out of the water, the show is just as spectacular and it's on Isla Fernandina where the Galapagos promise of a quite surreal wildlife display comes true. After alighting on a rocky makeshift landing place, we're forced to negotiate around a couple of sea lions lounging on the sandy path along Fernandina's rocky shoreline. The bold duo is nothing compared to the display on the beach behind us. Scores of sea lions stretch out on the arc of white sand. Despite the megabytes of photographic memory being expended in their honour, their behaviour remains unaffected by human



Cruising aboard *La Pinta* is the perfect way to discover the wonders of the Galapagos Islands in comfort and in the company of wildlife experts.





Wildlife on the Galapagos, including sea lions, marine iguanas and blue-footed boobies, take little notice of visitors.

intervention. Pups continue to feed while older sea lions loll around in the warm shallows. The most common response to the human gallery seems to be a stifled yawn.

Further along Isla Fernandina's windswept crags it's the turn of birds and reptiles to take centre stage. Blue-footed boobies – a close relation of the gannet – conduct brief courtship rituals just metres from the carefully prescribed track and a lava terrace is slathered with hundreds of marine iguanas. The seemingly motionless reptiles lie beside, under, over and even on the heads of their amphibious buddies. Like little dragons, the iguanas sneeze and snort to expel salt water, leaving crusty white outcrops on their foreheads and nostrils. Charles Darwin called them the “imps of darkness” and Spanish sailors feared the expelled salt was venomous. Found only in the Galapagos Islands, the marine iguana is actually quite harmless, but still has the ability to conjure scary dreams.

It's an irrational human fear that's not reciprocated at all by the quirky reptiles. Like most species on the Galapagos, the iguanas simply do not possess a “fear gene”. The *La Pinta's*

head naturalist, Klaus Fleisch, proffers one of his cut-to-the-chase explanations.

“In the Galapagos, the worst thing that can happen is an attack by a hawk,” he says. And since a hawk isn't a threat to a robust iguana, with its tough-as-old-boots exo-skeleton, the species has developed across the centuries without any fear of predation.

“Elsewhere, it's an evolutionary advantage to flee when something unknown appears,” Fleisch explains, “but on the Galapagos there's little risk of anything bad happening. It's actually an evolutionary advantage to stay still and save energy.”

I'd heard before that being at Galapagos was like “walking as a ghost”. It's an excellent analogy. The Galapagos experience is akin to being a privileged phantom, as you walk through the most intense wildlife experience possible. It's a lesson in tolerance and respect, and a healthy injection of perspective for any traveller. 🌍

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