

Ecuador trip report – January/February 2010

By Peter

The Galapagos Islands lie in the Pacific Ocean 600 miles off the west coast of Ecuador. They straddle the equator (after which Ecuador is named). Similar to the Azores in the Atlantic Ocean, the islands are the top of very tall volcanoes that rise up from the sea bed 10,000 feet below. There are 13 large islands and a lot of smaller ones. Four of them are inhabited, with a total population of 30,000 people or so. The largest town, Puerto Ayora, has a population of 18,000, mainly to serve the tourist industry. The largest island, Isabela, is approximately the area of the Isle of Wight, although it has a tiny population of only 2,000 or so concentrated in one settlement. There is a large-scale map of the islands on the website.

The Islands' chief attraction is the ridiculous tameness of the wildlife and a few iconic species: think giant tortoise and marine iguana, endemic to the Galapagos. The birdlife is special too, with red-footed and blue-footed boobies standing around looking distinctive and frigatebirds in their dozens sailing overhead like miniature stealth bombers on the look out for other birds to predate.

We travelled once again with Naturetrek, which each year charts a boat called Cachelote for a number of two week cruises around the islands. The boat serves effectively as a floating hotel. She has eight small twin cabins, each with a small ensuite shower and loo. Seven are below deck level, although with a porthole just above the waterline high in the cabin. The eighth is part of the superstructure, along with a dining room that seats 16 at one sitting. Above the dining room is the bridge and accommodation for the captain and the guide, and an open area that is excellent for watching for whales and dolphins. The crew's accommodation is below deck at the bow (accessed by a ladder through a hatch in the foredeck) and the food is stored below deck at the stern, as well as under all of the seats and benches. Somewhere in the middle is a very noisy diesel engine.

Our guide, with us on the boat throughout the holiday, was improbably named Darwin. His parents clearly showed considerable foresight in naming him. Before qualifying as an official guide, he had been a lobster fisherman, and he was virtually a fish (see website). He was able to free-dive to 20 metres or more, which came in handy when one of the ladders was knocked off a zodiac and ended up on the seabed below. His other notable feat was that he almost always wore no shoes, including on the excursions over the lava fields. I sat down at one stage and tore my trousers standing back up again, so rough was the lava. And Darwin was happily walking over it with bare feet.

National Park

The whole of the Galapagos Islands, with the exception of small areas representing the town and the agricultural areas, are a national park run by the Ecuadorian government. One pays US\$100 in cash to enter, and it represents fantastic value – like a trip to Longleat, but better. The money is used to oversee the islands (and in particular to ensure that there are not too many people in one place), to create and maintain means of access such as jetties and paths, and to look after the wildlife, including various attempts to remove alien species such as goats, donkeys and rats. This is not as easy as it sounds: on one island there is a very successful goat-culling exercise in progress. The tortoises are thriving as the goats were eating their grass. But now the brambles (wild blackberries) are taking over. It was only the goats that were keeping down the brambles. Restoring a natural balance may never be possible.

One impact of the national park administration is that one's route is decided by administrators. This isn't so much of a problem for a one week holiday as the boats seem to have a fairly set route: we were in the company of the same three boats for the first six days. For our second week, we moved long distances overnight, motoring for eight or ten hours at a time – and often ending up very near to places we had visited in the first week. But it's only on two-week cruises that you end up in some of the most interesting islands, and in particular Genovesa. This is the only island that can be visited where the red-footed boobies breed, and they are wonderfully tame and photogenic (see photos).

What you see

As Charles Darwin discovered when he visited in 1835, the various islands are fairly similar but the wildlife differs in minor but important ways. All of the islands resemble volcanoes in some form, with peaks in the centre and slopes to the sea around the edge. The larger islands comprise several volcanoes. Some are still active, with eruptions within the last twenty years. One island had an eruption in 1877 and there are still acres of black lava punctuated only by occasional cactuses and mangroves that are beginning to break the surface. The lava creates strange shapes when it flows and sets (see website) that can keep a photographer happy for hours if not days. It's extremely difficult to land on, since it is slippery when wet.

The wildlife on the islands arrived from the nearby continent, either by flying or by being washed up on floating vegetation. There are therefore plenty of birds but no native mammals. Reptiles seem to have taken the place of mammals, and grown accordingly – such as the giant tortoises and the land and marine iguanas. All of these are vegetarian. Evolution happens virtually as you watch. On the island that never had tortoises, the cactuses have lost the spikes on their leaves; on the island with the tortoises with long necks, the cactuses have developed longer trunks to keep their leaves safe – or is it the other way around. It's a battleground out there.

Darwin's most famous discovery was that there are 13 different types of finch, as they had developed individually on each island. Actually (sotto voce) they are all small black or brown birds and are very difficult to tell apart, even by those people who care. For those who don't, it's a lost cause. Other birds were much more satisfying for non-birders, being bigger and brighter. Birds with bright blue feet are relatively rare worldwide, actually. So are the Galapagos penguins. These are the only penguins (outside zoos) in the Northern hemisphere, and there are only about 3,000 of them. We saw a good many of them – at least 100, probably.

Underwater

Underwater is fascinating as well. The daily timetable of (generally) visiting two different locations each day allowed for one, and sometimes two, snorkeling sessions of about 45 minutes each time. Sometime this was off the beach but at other times we were able to drop straight off the zodiacs into the water, which is scary at first, and never ceases to be so however many times you do it. I perfected the backward somersault method of getting into the water, which is amusing and takes away the fear – until you hit the water and the Jaws music starts up. We were in the company of sharks of various types for much of the time underwater. Darwin told us, reassuringly, that the sharks ate only vegetarians – which comforted us but wasn't much help to the three vegetarians in the group. We never appeared to be in any danger, even when we were looking down into the clear blue water around Leon Dormido – the rock formation resembling a sleeping lion – to see literally dozens of sharks beneath us, and dozens below that. Unfortunately we never saw any hammerhead sharks which tend to stay deep, but five foot long reef sharks were sufficiently satisfying. There were also large shoals of multi-coloured fish –

see website. These were particularly good as they didn't look as if they were out to eat us and ignored us completely.

Food

No trip report would be complete without a reference to the food. One cook on the boat fed all 16 guests and the six crew from a relatively small kitchen next to the main cabin where we ate. Astonishingly, despite being on a boat, we ate fresh fruit and vegetables, and fresh fruit juices, every day in profusion. The food wasn't exactly the kind that you look forward to in anticipation as you sit down at the start of the meal, but it was wholesome and lovingly prepared. The two highlights (for me) were prawns in their shells (probably frozen I suspect) fried in garlic, and freshly caught lobster. We felt a bit bad eating the local wildlife, especially since the local wildlife had refrained from eating us. But we survived – which is more than you can say for the lobsters.

Before and after

Ecuador is a long way away – 16 hours or so on a plane from Amsterdam to Quito, stopping off on the way at Bonaire, the Dutch version of Jamaica, and Guayaquil, Ecuador's main port. So we gave ourselves three days extra at the start of the holiday to visit Tandayapa Bird Lodge. There are more bird species in Ecuador than almost anywhere else and you don't see many of them in the Galapagos Islands. So Penny needed to visit other places as well. Tandayapa is in the cloud forest a few hundred metres lower than Quito. It rained quite a lot there, as one might expect in the rainy season.

There were also two spare days at the end of the cruise. For one of them, Naturetrek had arranged a day of high-altitude birding – at 4,000 metres, on the plateau beneath Altisana volcano (dormant). We had a clear day and the views were outstanding. Some of the birds were pretty spectacular as well (I'm told).

On our final day, Susan and I had a day's tour of Quito, which has a fantastic history stretching back to the 15th century and some very ornate baroque churches. Also a trip to the equator park – tacky but essential. Does water really go straight down a plughole on the equator, rather than swirl around first? And is the equator the only place where you can balance an egg on end on the head of a screw? Apparently, but I'm not wholly convinced.

Penny arranged a further day's birding and managed to see the sword-billed hummingbird, which has a bill longer than its body so that it can feed on the nectar from brugmansia flowers, as well as a few hummingbirds with the word "puffleg" in their name – see website.