

Opuntia[®]

GALAPAGOS ECO JOURNEYS &
HOTELS

OPUNTIA NATURALIST EXPLORER, 6 DAYS



The Opuntia Naturalist Explorer is the utmost wildlife and natural history program. Explore the home to the living history of evolution! Learn about these islands' amazing geological and natural history and follow Darwin's footsteps to encounter incredibly friendly wildlife. Top naturalist guides will escort you throughout your journey, and at the end of the day you will be able to relax, dine, and rejuvenate at the oceanfront Opuntia Lodges - the Galapagos' premium hotels.

Effort: Easy to Moderate

Activities: Hiking, Wildlife Viewing, Snorkeling, and Swimming

Opuntia Lodges: Casa Opuntia - San Cristobal; Angermeyer Waterfront Inn - Santa Cruz; Iguana Crossing - Isabela

Trip highlights:

- Swim with sea turtles, sea lions, penguins, sharks, rays, and countless fish
- Learn about evolution as you meet finches, mockingbirds, boobies, penguins, endemic plants, giant tortoises, land iguanas, and marine iguanas
- See Lonesome George, the last living giant tortoise of his subspecies
- Overlook the rim of the 2nd largest volcano caldera in the world and discover extraordinary lava formations
- Hike an endemic forest of scalesia trees, a long-lost relative of daisy flowers
- Relax on sandy beaches amongst sea lions and marine iguanas
- Every step of your journey is expertly led by top-rated naturalist guides
- Enjoy the exceptional service, facilities, decor, privacy, and dining of the finest hotels in the Galapagos
- Support local communities through this sustainable program



DAY 1: ARRIVAL / INTERPRETATION CENTER / HIKE AND SNORKEL AT TIJERETAS

After a morning flight to San Cristobal Island, you are received at the airport and given a briefing over lunch at Casa Opuntia Hotel. We begin our journey at the Interpretation Center to learn about the Galapagos' unique wildlife, geology, history, and social dynamics. We then hike to Frigate Hill along lava rock trails. Along the way, your naturalist guide will explain all about the Galapagos cotton, palo santo, acacia, and cacti you encounter. You will also spot blue-footed boobies, frigate birds, pelicans, herons, gulls, warblers,



mockingbirds, and finches amongst the vegetation and sea cliffs. In addition to unique species, the hike provides marvelous views of the rugged coastline and the tranquil town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno.

On the way back, we stop for a refreshing snorkel or swim at post-card worthy Carola Beach. Here, you will find sea turtles, sea lions, and marine iguanas. After a gorgeous sunset and dinner, we explore the friendly and laid-back town. We recommend you take a 5-minute walk from the hotel down the boardwalk to view the immense colony of endemic Galapagos sea lions. Overnight at Casa Opuntia. (L, D)

DAY 2: WILDLIFE AND SNORKEL ALONG THE NORTHERN COAST



Today, we head out on an incredible snorkeling adventure. On our way to our first site, Isla Lobos, we take time to search coves and cliffs for sea turtles, sea lions, frigate birds, blue-footed boobies, and Nazca boobies. Once we reach Isla Lobos, you will be able to snorkel with sea lions, marine iguanas and countless reef fish. This site consistently proves to be the best sea lion encounter in the Galapagos – after all, Isla Lobos translates to Sea Lion Island.

We then head out towards the open sea to reach Kicker Rock, two breathtaking rock massifs (tuff cones) that jut out from the ocean. Above the waters, thousands of sea birds cling to its walls, and below millions of fish call the rock home. In the channel between the two rock walls, you will find some of the best snorkeling in the islands. You will likely

see spotted eagle rays, golden rays, Galapagos sharks, starfish, clams, and fish of every shape, size, and color. If you are lucky, you may even see hammerhead sharks! After a full day exploring the seas, head back to Casa Opuntia for a gourmet dinner and a well-earned rest. (B, L, D)

DAY 3: DISCOVER ISABELA ISLAND'S BEACHES, LAGOONS, AND ISLETS

After breakfast, we take a short plane ride over to Isabela Island. This is the largest island in the Galapagos and is still being formed by 6 shield volcanoes. Hence, Isabela is one of the most volcanically active spots on the planet.

This morning, we set out on one of the most scenically-varied hikes in the Galapagos. Along the way, we will visit El Muro de las Lagrimas (Wall of Tears). When Isabela was used as a penal colony, prisoners constructed a towering wall



of lava rocks for no other purpose than to keep them distracted from the madness of isolation. We continue along white sand beaches, an alluring poison apple forest, a lava tube, and dark mangroves and brackish lagoons. The area is filled with giant tortoises and birdlife including flamingos.

After lunch, we explore Tintorerías, a set of small islets filled with hidden coves and beaches. Here, we will find the endemic Galapagos penguin as well as reef sharks, sea turtles, and sea lions. At the end of the day, retire to the gorgeous Hotel Iguana Crossing. Relax in its infinity pool, hot tub, or neighboring white sand beach. After a gourmet dinner, feel free to take a stroll down the seemingly endless beach or down the sand streets of this idyllic beach town. (B, L, D)



DAY 4: ACTIVE VOLCANOES AND GEOLOGICAL HISTORY



This morning, we drive up to the highlands until the road ends. Here, we do our daypacks and hike into a world of recent geological history. On the hike up, admire the incredible views of the surrounding volcanoes and sea. However, when you arrive at the rim of Volcan Sierra Negra, your jaw will drop. This is the second largest active caldera on the planet. You will walk along the rim of this enormous 30 square mile crater, and if feeling energetic, continue your hike into the caldera of Volcan Chico. Volcan Chico is an otherworldly landscape with endless hues of oranges, reds, blacks, and yellows. Here, you can explore puffing fumaroles and spectacular lava formations.

After a day on terrain reminiscent of Mars, return to paradise on earth. Spend your last afternoon in this lazy beach town relaxing on its stunning beaches and soaking up the island-life atmosphere. (B, L, D)

DAY 5: TORTOISES, LAVA TUNNELS, PIRATES, SINKHOLES, AND ENDEMIC FORESTS

After breakfast, take a speedboat to Santa Cruz Island. Along the way we may see whales and dolphins. Upon arrival, we head to El Chato in the Santa Cruz highlands to find the giant tortoise in its natural habitat. It is truly an honor to hike amongst these fascinating giants, who can live to be over 175 years old. You will also see pintail ducks, finches, frigate birds, egrets, and hopefully the vermilion flycatcher - a red jewel of a bird.

We will then explore some incredible lava tunnels in which pirates frequented and perhaps hid Inca gold. We then carry on to Los Gemelos, two deep volcanic sinkholes at the top of the island. We will hike through a forest of endemic scalesia trees, where we will be on the lookout for the short-eared owl. The trees are covered with ferns and epiphytes and exude an almost eerie feel.

In the late afternoon, we retire to the Angermeyer Waterfront Inn. Expect fine pampering at this first-class guesthouse privately nestled on the outskirts of town. The beautiful waterfront property offers magnificent views of the bay, coastline, and town. (B, L, D)



DAY 6: VISIT TO THE CHARLES DARWIN RESEARCH STATION AND RETURN



After breakfast, we visit the Charles Darwin Research Station. Here, we learn about the ongoing conservation efforts on these enchanted islands. The Research Station rears endemic Galapagos plants, land iguanas, and giant Galapagos tortoises for educational, scientific, and conservation purposes. Here, we can compare the diverse evolutionary paths of the various giant tortoise subspecies from different islands. We will also meet Lonesome George, the only remaining member of the Pinta Island subspecies.

After our visit, we transfer to Baltra Island for our return flight to the mainland. (B)

INCLUDED

Accommodations in the premium Opuntia Lodges; all meals as described (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner); professional bilingual Galapagos naturalist guide; all sea, land, and inter-island air transportation.

Not included

Flights to and from Galapagos; Entrance fee to Galapagos National Park: USD 100 p/p (subject to change); Galapagos transit card: USD 10 p/p (subject to change); tips; hotel & restaurant beverages; personal expenses.

NOTE

This itinerary is subject to change without notice due to seasonal changes, last-minute weather conditions, and adjustments of Galapagos National Park policy.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

BOAT TRAVEL TIME: 2 to 3 hours

SMALL AIRCRAFT FLIGHT TIME: 50 minutes

SEASON: All year

ALTITUDE: 0 - 3,700 feet (1,124 meters) above sea level

AVERAGE TEMPERATURES: December to May: 80°F to 90°F / 25°C to 30°C. June to September: 60°F to 70°F / 15°C to 20°C. October to December: 70°F to 80°F / 15°C to 25°C.

WATER TEMPERATURE: The waters of the Galapagos Islands are a unique mixture of warm and cold water, ranging between 65°F and 85°F.

SUGGESTED ITEMS TO PACK: Hiking shoes, water sandals, rain jacket, flashlight, water bottle, non-cotton trekking gear, sunblock, hat, and mosquito repellent.

