

Another free guide from the experts at



# The Ultimate Galapagos Cruise Planning Guide

*No one can stand in these solitudes unmoved.*

(Charles Darwin)



## **Index**

<a href="#"><u>What size boat should I choose?</u></a> .....	3
<a href="#"><u>When to go</u></a> .....	4
<a href="#"><u>How long to go for</u></a> .....	7
<a href="#"><u>Where to go</u></a> .....	8
<a href="#"><u>Key experiences</u></a> .....	

## **What size boat should I choose?**

In Galapagos three different size ships operate. Small (8-20 passengers), Medium (up to 50 passengers) and Large (up to 100 passengers, the maximum allowed by law). So does it matter what size ship I choose for my Galapagos Cruise? Yes, it does. In general, the larger the ship, the more stability, which means less chance of sea sickness. Beyond that, each size has its pros and cons.

### **Small ships**

The advantages of small ships is that the captain gets more flexibility. He can choose to extend a snorkelling trip depending on the passengers age, ability and interests. Or, if a whale or a pod of dolphins is close to the ship, the captain can more easily manoeuvre the vessel closer to the animals. And with fewer passengers you are not competing for photography space. It is also much easier to connect with both crew and passengers. Smaller ships give you the feel that you are on an expedition rather than a cruise. Smaller boats tend to have smaller cabins and less public space, however, there are some very comfortable choices in this size.

### **Medium ships**

Medium ships will have more public space, more people to mingle with, more amenities (library, fitness room) and gear (underwater cameras). But with more passengers on board you do lose some of the intimacy and flexibility of smaller ships.

### **Larger ships**

Amenities of larger ships compare to those on a cruise ship, albeit on a smaller scale. Multiple dining options, a multitude of public spaces are the rigour. As there are more people on board you may feel crowded and you lose the intimacy of smaller ships. On the other hand, you do get more guides, each with their own speciality, so you have the chance to learn more. But, as groups do get split up, there is less time to explore different areas of each landing site, as landing times are strictly scheduled.



## **When to go**

There is never a bad time to go on an adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands. It all depends on what animals you would like to see and what you would like to do.

### **December through May - rainy season - great for land animals, swimming & snorkelling**

- ✓ water and air are warmer
- ✓ daily drizzle for a short period of time
- ✓ also the sunniest time of year
- ✓ great for swimming and snorkeling
- ✓ not as many fish
- ✓ breeding season for land birds (watch unusual mating rituals)
- ✓ sea turtles nest on the beach
- ✓ March through May land tortoises come down from the highlands in search of a mate
- ✓ sea lions mate (males fight it out for the females)
- ✓ March and April see newborn sea lion pups
- ✓ February, March, and April flowers bloom and the islands are awash in colours
- ✓ sea is calmer, so there is little chance of getting seasick.

### **June through November - dry season - fish & birds abound, great diving**

- ✓ cool water (bring a wet suit)
- ✓ cool weather
- ✓ water rich in nutrients and plankton, which attracts fish and birds
- ✓ often cloudy but rarely rainy
- ✓ windy - seas can be rougher (especially July & August)
- ✓ best time for diving
- ✓ Albatrosses on Espanola from April to December
- ✓ Penguins are more common
- ✓ Blue-footed boobies mate (beautiful mating ritual)

### **School Holidays**

During the school holidays - from mid-June through early September and from mid-December through mid-January - you need to book far ahead of time. And while the number of visitors to each island is strictly controlled, during school holidays you are less likely to get a sense of solitude and isolation.

Broken down by month, this is what you can expect to see on your adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands

### **January**

- ➔ Land birds start nesting, generally after the first rain.
- ➔ On Española adult male marine iguanas become brightly colored.

- green sea turtles arrive to lay their eggs.
- Land iguanas begin their reproductive cycles on Isabela.
- Hatching of giant tortoises eggs

## **February**

- greater flamingos start nesting on Floreana
- Bahamas pintails start breeding
- Masked boobies on Española end their nesting
- Marine iguanas nest on Santa Cruz.
- Penguins migrate from Bartolomé Island to cooler waters off Isabela and Fernandina Islands
- nesting season of Galapagos dove peaks

## **March**

- Sporadic tropical rains, intense sun and hot
- Marine iguanas nest on Fernandina and North Seymour
- Frigate birds mating season starts on San Cristobal and Genovesa

## **April**

- Massive arrival of waved albatross on Española; courtship starts.

End of hatching season of giant tortoises.

eggs of green sea turtles begin to hatch.

Sea turtles, marine iguanas and land iguanas nesting

## **May**

- North Seymour's blue footed boobies begin courtship.
- Sea turtles still hatching on Gardner Bay, Punta Cormorant and Puerto Egas.
- marine iguanas eggs hatch on Santa Cruz.
- Palo Santo trees begin to shed foliage.
- Albatross on Española start laying their eggs.
- Band-rumped storm petrels begin first nesting period.

## **June**

- Giant tortoises on Santa Cruz migrate from highlands to lowlands
- Whale sharks in the northwestern islands toward the end of the month
- Humpback whales can be seen

## **July**

- Sea bird communities very active, especially blue footed boobies on Española.
- Flightless cormorants court and nest on Fernandina.
- Nesting season for American oystercatchers, waved albatross
- Lava lizards mating rituals until November.
- Whale sightings, especially off the Western coast of Isabela

- Start of sea lion breeding season

## **August**

- Galapagos hawks court on Española and Santiago.
- Mask boobies and swallow-tailed gulls nest on Genovesa.
- Migrant shore birds arrive and stay until March.
- Giant tortoises return to the highlands of Santa Cruz.
- Frigate bird chicks hatch
- Sea lions give birth

## **September**

- Penguins active on Bartolomé until December.
- Sea lions very active, especially in western and central islands.
- good month to see baby sea lions.
- most marine birds remain active at nesting sites

## **October**

- Lava herons nest until March.
- Galapagos fur seals begin mating
- Boobies raise chicks on Española & Isabela
- Giant tortoises still lay eggs

## **November**

- Sea lions sexually active on Eastern islands
- Band-rumped storm petrels begin second nesting period.
- whale sharks in the far northwest
- Green sea turtle mating season starts
- snorkeling with baby sea lions

## **December**

- Hatching of giant tortoise eggs begins - lasts until April.
- Green sea turtles mate
- young albatrosses fledge; waved-albatross nesting season ends
- Marine and land iguanas mate
- Sea lions and fur seals breed



## **How long to go for**

My recommendation is to spend as much time as you can on your adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands. Operators often add one night on either end in Quito and two days are used up for travel back and forth to the islands. So what may look like a 10-day adventure cruise in the Galapagos means you only spend six days on the ship.

Having said that, many people will be looking to combine Galapagos with Machu Picchu on a two-week vacation, in which case your Galapagos cruise will more likely be 4-5 days.



## Where to go

If you want to get the most out of your adventure cruise to the Galapagos Islands, it pays to do some planning. Ask yourself what you would like to see - birds, mammals, reptiles, marine animals, flora or landscapes. Or perhaps a little of each?

At a minimum you should try to include Fernandina, Isabela and Española in your itinerary. They offer a lot of the different species you can see on your adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands. If you are looking for specific animal species, check out my blog post on where to find what animals in Galapagos.

Rábida (Jervis) and Santiago (James) offer the best snorkeling in the islands.



Map of Galapagos picturing the main 15 species and their occurrence. (Map courtesy of Metropolitan Tours)



Here, listed island by island, are the highlights of what you can see on each island during your adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands.

**Baltra Island** is where most visitors arrive. It is a dry island, with vegetation to match. Boobies and frigate birds can be seen here.

**Bartolomé** is the most photographed island on any cruise in the Galapagos Islands. There is an incredible viewpoint and a beach with good snorkeling and swimming. Birds common here are Galapagos Penguins, herons, and Galapagos Hawks.

**Española** is one of the most isolated islands in Galapagos. Wildlife is varied and there are a large number of endemic species, including the Española Mockingbird, the Española Lava Lizard, and the Waved Albatross. It is one of the most popular islands in the Galapagos.

**Fernandina**, with its large land iguana population, is the most pristine of the Galapagos volcanoes and another highlight of any Galapagos cruise. The waters surrounding Fernandina and western Isabela are the richest waters in the archipelago, providing great habitat for Flightless Cormorants and Galapagos Penguins.



**Floreana** is the site of the first “post office”, established in 1793. The island offers a flamingo lagoon, where you can also see Pintail ducks, stilts, Large-billed Flycatchers, and several species of finch shorebirds. Green Sea Turtles nest here and rays glide through the shallow waters. The highlands are of interest for plantlovers and for historical reasons. Inside Devil's crown, an eroded crater, snorkelers find an underwater oasis of coral reefs along with playful sea lions, King Angel Fish, Balloon Fish, Tiger Snake Eels, rays, sharks and sea turtles. There are also plenty of boobies, pelicans, and frigatebirds.

**Isabela** has lots of new lava fields and the island's rich fauna is beyond compare. Wild tortoises abound and the waters along the west coast are a rich feeding ground for fish, whales, dolphins, and birds. Whale watching, with up to 16 species, is excellent here.

**Genovesa** has an abundance of birdlife, including frigatebirds, Nazca and Red-footed Boobies (the latter in large numbers), Swallow-tailed Gulls, storm petrels, Red-billed Tropicbirds, finches, and mockingbirds.

**North Seymour** has plenty of land iguanas as well as large numbers of blue-footed boobies, swallow-tailed gulls and frigatebirds.

**Pinta** is home to unique bird, reptile, and plant species. Swallow-tailed Gulls, marine iguanas, Galapagos Hawks and fur seals are but some of the species found here.

**South Plaza** is famous for its extraordinary flora and marine and land iguanas are abundant. Plenty of birds nest in the cliffs around the island.

**Rábida** consists of several volcanic craters with a distinctive red color. Brown Pelicans can be seen up close nesting behind the beach, while Blue-footed and Nazca Boobies visit the cliffs. Flamingos can sometimes be seen in the lagoon, alongside Pintail Ducks and Common Stilts. There is short trail, along which you can observe birds such as finches, Galapagos Doves, Yellow Warblers, and mockingbirds. Swimming and snorkeling are very good on Rábida.

**San Cristóbal** has an interpretation centre, a sea lion rookery and a colony with both Magnificent Frigate Birds and Great Frigate Birds. Snorkelling is particularly good at many of the sites on and around the island, as are sightings of coastal and migratory birds. Punta Pitt is the only place in Galapagos where you can see all three boobie species nest together, along with two species of frigatebirds. Views of the sea lions from the top of the cliff as well as the eroded peaks of the island are magnificent. Kicker Rock is the most dramatic snorkelling and dive site here, with vertical cliffs rising almost 150 metres straight out of the sea. Small vessels can pass through a narrow channel in the rock and while in the water you may see Manta Rays, sea turtles, and sharks.

On **Santa Cruz** you can experience the interior and higher grounds of the islands, including magma chambers and lava tunnels. The town of Puerto Ayora is the main tourism hub and has plenty of good restaurants. The Charles Darwin Research Station has exhibits on climate, geography, the evolution of flora and fauna as well as conservation programs.

Santa Cruz has wonderful beaches as well as all the various life zones present in the archipelago - almost every land bird present in the islands can be found here. The island also offers excellent opportunities for viewing wild tortoises.

**Santa Fe** is home to large numbers of sea lions. There are two trails, one short loop and one up a steep cliff, providing possible sightings of the endemic Santa Fe Land Iguana.

Finally, James Bay on **Santiago** offers one of the best opportunities for visitors to see the Galapagos fur seal and there are several walking trails here. On the opposite side of the island, Sullivan Bay sees you walk across a recent lava flow. Chinese Hat off the coast of Santiago is a beautiful snorkeling site where you can see sharks, sea lions, penguins and rays.



## **Key Experiences**

### **Getting close to nature**

Walk the trails in the Galapagos and come up close to nesting birds, iguanas, tortoises and sea lions. Colourful crabs and majestic albatrosses, blue and red-footed boobies and stately flamingoes are but some of the animals you will see.

### **Swimming with sea lions and turtles**

While snorkelling in the Galapagos it is not uncommon to come eye to eye (or should we say nose to nose) with sea lions and turtles. They are as curious as you are about them! Santa Fe and Isabela offer some of the best opportunities to swim with sea lions.

### **Watching whales**

There is nothing more awesome than seeing a whale breach the waters of the Pacific, raise up in to the air, then explode back into the water. 20+ Species inhabit these waters. You can see them yearround, but July through November are the best months. Whales are more common in the western part of the island group, particularly between Isabela and Fernandina.

### **I wanna iguana**

With the islands so hot and dry, reptiles are the predominant type of animals in Galapagos. Marine iguanas, the world's only sea-going lizzard, can be seen almost anywhere. There are three species of land iguanas. One can be found on Fernandina, Isabela, Santa Cruz, Seymour, and South Plaza, one on Wolf Volcano on Isabela Island and one only on Santa Fe.

### **Who doesn't love boobies**

Blue-footed boobies are the most iconic bird in Galapagos and large yearround colonies can be found on Seymour and Hood. Nazca boobies, the island's largest can be found on Genovesa from May through January and on Hood from September to May. The Red-footed booby, while most numerous, is least frequently seen as it lives on the outerlying islands like Genovesa.

Punta Pitt is the only place in Galapagos where you can see all three boobie species nest together.

### **Trail a tortoise**

Giant tortoises can weigh up to 500 pounds and there are 11 distinct species in the Galapagos. They are most easily seen in the Tortoise Reserve in the Santa Cruz Highlands and at the Charles Darwin Research Station on the same island. Wild populations are most likely encountered on San Cristóbal, Santa Cruz, and around Alcedo Volcano on Isabella.

### **Sinister birds**

Hanging in the sky like sinister kites, frigatebirds harrass gulls and terns into dropping their catch. North Seymour offers the best opportunity to see magnificent frigatebird, while Great frigatebirds are more often seen on the outlying islands such as Genovesa. San Cristóbal is an island where you can see both species.

**Albatross, get your albatross!**

The waved albatross can spend years out at sea without touching land. With a wingspan of up to 8 feet, these magnificent birds are a sight to behold. The entire world population of some 12,000 pairs nests on Hood. Adults lay their eggs from mid-April to late June. October is the busiest month for the spectacular courtship ritual. Colonies are at their most active once the chicks have hatched (through December). January through March the birds are out at sea.

**Penguins? Here?**

The cool Humboldt current, which flows up from Antarctica, allows the world's most northerly penguin, the Galapagos penguin, to thrive here. They breed on the western part of Isabela and Fernandina and are often seen on Bartolomé and sometimes on Floreana and James. If you can, snorkel with them, just don't try to keep up!