

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

POSTCARD

Galápagos Islands

Laura French embarks on a diving adventure to experience this wildlife-filled archipelago from an alternative angle

I'm floating, weightless, in a void of deep indigo, as fish glide past in glittering swarms like something from a cartoon film reel – first iridescent parrotfish shimmering pastel pink and turquoise, then blue-striped snappers patterned like tiny navy zebras, then comical bumpheads smiling with human-like lips and yellow-tailed fish darting around in colourful clans.

Then I glimpse the faint outline of an eagle ray, fins flapping gracefully like the wings of a giant butterfly as a turtle glides above it in a vision of silky green.

I'm diving in the Galápagos on an excursion from main island Santa Cruz, and I'm already in awe of everything around me.

But it's on our second dive that the real magic happens. Within minutes of descending, we spot a group of white-tipped sharks resting peacefully on the seabed, huge grey bodies camouflaged against the sand, triangular tails swishing behind them.

Then I follow my instructor into a deep, rocky crevasse and one dashes out right past my face, its icy-white fins so close I almost flinch, its big, beady-eyed face within a metre of my own.

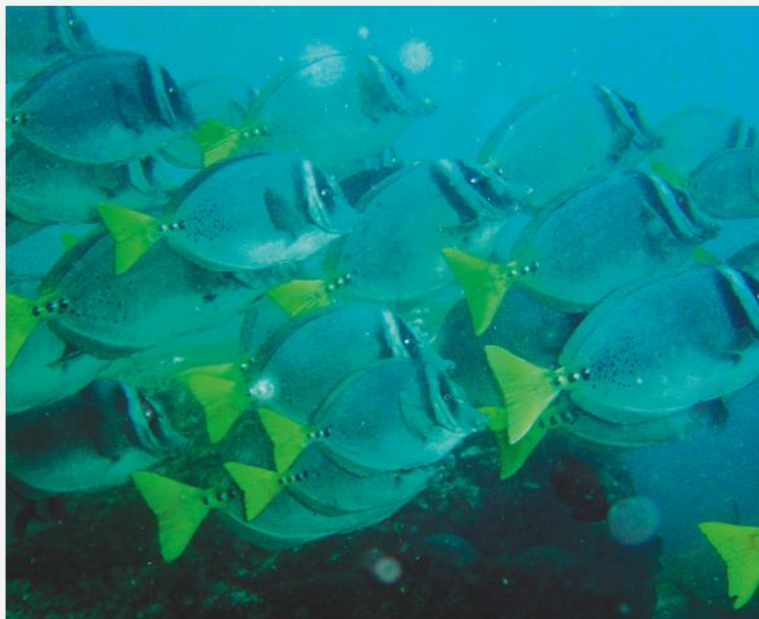
I peep my head into the gaping coral to see another group of three sheltering from the current, then take refuge myself by quickly retreating back into the cloudy blue that surrounds it.

The rest of the dive is more sedate; colourful king angelfish, razor-thin barracudas and a polka-dot starfish accompany me as I glide serenely along, intermittent bursts of freezing water awakening me from an otherwise calm daze, while the only things I can hear are the heavy sound of my breath and the tinny clink of my tank.

When we resurface an hour later, I'm not quite ready to re-enter the normal world, underwater peace interrupted by the crash of the waves, the howl of the wind, the sway of the boat.

But I'm soon reminded this is no normal world. We stop on our return to snorkel, jumping into a patch of water so perfectly curacao in colour you could put a straw in and swig from it. Within minutes I'm swimming alongside a duo of fur seals, their whiskers almost brushing my face, their sleek, shiny bodies darting beneath, around and above me like a pair of frolicking kittens.

It might well be the type of encounter I've got used to after a week exploring these other-worldly islands, but I'm just as awestruck as I was on the first day, and it etches a memory into my mind for ever. **TW**



BOOK IT

Metropolitan Touring offers a seven-day cruise on board yacht *La Pinta* from \$7,000. A full-day diving excursion from Finch Bay Hotel on Santa Cruz island costs \$253 per person, and requires a Padi diving certificate.

Book it: metropolitan-touring.com



FROM TOP: Yellowtail surgeonfish; fur seal

PICTURES: Francisco Dousdebés; Raúl Gil