

Natural connection

Embrace the communities and cultures of the Galápagos Islands by adding time on land, writes **Karen Edwards**

"for a long time, tourists coming to the Galápagos didn't realise we were here," says artist Magno Bennett. It's understandable, he says, because for decades, tourism focused on the animals, with little investment in the infrastructure.

The charming Galapagueño (the name for a local in the Galápagos) smiles as he speaks, his eyes alive with passion for the thriving Santa Cruz community to which he belongs.

"But that's changing: specialist tour companies are introducing our arts, craft, dance and way of life. Visitors are realising there's much more to see and that the humans of the Galápagos are interesting."

We're sitting at a quiet table in one of the popular bar-restaurants on the main strip in Puerto Ayora, the biggest town on Santa Cruz island. I can tell this is a local favourite because several people have come over to greet Bennett with a handshake or a hug.

"We are such a mixed, diverse community of people," he adds, his eyes creasing with warmth. "We are Indigenous, European-Ecuadorian, African-Ecuadorian, European and of mixed ethnic backgrounds – and we are all Galapagueños. We have so much to share with visitors, but to do that, they must know we are here, and that takes education."

I come across this deep blend of cultures the same evening at Samay Latin Art, a gallery on the backstreets of Puerto Ayora, where Bennett displays

his work. Inside, the walls are adorned with canvas art and craftworks, many of which are created by grassroots Galapagueño artists. Bennett's work – an ode to the natural world – is particularly striking: his painting of sea lions swimming against a cobalt-blue ocean holds the room like a beacon. Each piece, from portraits to abstract landscapes, shares a perspective of this community's connection to the environment. It's deep, absorbing and vivacious – a definitive representation of Galapagueño culture.

PEOPLE POWER

I had arrived in Santa Cruz – the destination's second-largest and most populous isle – earlier that day on board *La Pinta*, a 32-passenger expedition yacht run by Ecuadorian operator Metropolitan Touring. In our five days spent sailing, hiking and snorkelling around the southeastern Galápagos Islands, I'd already seen countless species up close. There had been sleepy Galápagos sea lions, scores of land and marine iguanas, the iconic blue-footed booby and green turtles.

On Santa Fe, we'd spotted the cactus and ground finches that shaped Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' theory, while on San Cristóbal – home to the islands' capital and a population of 6,000 – we'd watched 10 sleepy sea lions snooze on the steps of an old concrete pier. I was now embarking on the second leg of the itinerary, a stay at Finch Bay Hotel. ➤

PICTURE: IAN ALBERT

DESTINATIONS

LATIN AMERICA | GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Galapagueñian artist Magno Bennett; sea lions in San Cristóbal; Finch Bay Galápagos Hotel; Galápagos land iguana **PICTURES:** Alicia Warner; We The Food Snobs; Karen Edwards; BICUBIK

However, something had struck me as we made our way around the islands: many of my fellow travellers hadn't realised there were people living here, alongside the wildlife. An estimated 32,000 people call the Galápagos home, and four of the islands – San Cristóbal, Isabela, Floreana and Santa Cruz – are widely inhabited.

Thankfully, travelling with a locally owned and run operator has given us several opportunities to learn about the human history of the islands.

"A good number of travellers are shocked by three things," said *La Pinta's* guest lecturer and former expedition leader, Francisco Dousdebés. "First, that the islands were only founded by accident in 1535 by the Spanish bishop Tomás de Berlanga. Second, [following independence in 1832] that Ecuador annexed the islands and, finally, that the islands have remained inhabited ever since."

During our nightly lectures, I learnt that the majority of people migrating here came from the

Andes, Amazon and coastal Ecuador, bringing with them longstanding customs and traditions from Indigenous and European heritages. Typically, most would have come as fishermen or farmers.

Many of those generational family farms still exist in the highlands and inland regions of San Cristóbal and Isabela – with pineapple, yucca and coffee grown alongside dairy and poultry production.

EVOLVING CULTURE

"Our culture is dynamic and constantly evolving," explains San Cristóbal resident Ana Lucia Carrión Bonilla. "Over time, our diverse influences have adapted to the realities of island life, creating new customs and shaping a distinctive way of life. But what stands out to me is how people maintain connections to their roots while developing shared traditions that reflect the island's environment and conservation priorities. Strong environmental stewardship and cultural heritage are our community values."

A part of that evolution comes with the growing tourism industry. Many young people are turning to careers in hospitality, conservation and guiding.

"We can confidently say that around 90% of the population depends directly or indirectly on tourism income," says Dousdebés. Still, a connection to the environment remains the backbone of Galapagueñian life.

Bonilla adds: "People continue to balance their livelihoods with the responsibility of protecting a fragile ecosystem. And the best way to support this [as a whole] is to visit the communities settled in the

NEED TO KNOW

✿ The Galápagos Islands is a year-round destination, with September to November and February to May the best times to visit.

✿ A package combining a five-day cruise with two days on land offers a balance of wildlife and culture.

✿ Ecuadorian operator Metropolitan Touring supports conservation initiatives such as the Galápagos Whale Shark project and the Gills Girls Club, which teaches young women about the marine environment.

✿ The islands' rugged terrain can be challenging for people who aren't able-bodied. Ecuador for All provides accessible tours and works with UK partners including 2by2 Holidays and Enable Holidays.

ports and the higher areas of the inhabited islands.

"Residents and visitors tend to mingle at the markets, art galleries and cafes of San Cristóbal and Puerto Ayora, while visits to fishing villages and farms on Isabela and Floreana provide a more intimate glimpse into daily island life."

While these experiences aren't as commonly featured on Galápagos itineraries as giant tortoises or blue-footed boobies, the benefits of an insightful cultural introduction are clear – for local residents, for environmental preservation and for a more immersive travel experience. **TW**

BOOK IT

Metropolitan Touring runs three cruise itineraries covering the southeastern, southwestern and northeastern islands, operating three yachts along with the Finch Bay Galápagos Hotel. metropolitan-touring.com

Latin Routes can book a five-day Humboldt Isles Expedition onboard *La Pinta*, with one night at Casa Gangotena in Quito, and two nights at Finch Bay Galápagos Hotel on Santa Cruz. Prices start at £8,099 per person, based on two sharing, including international and domestic flights, and all transfers. latinroutes.co.uk