

# Wild wonders



## EXPEDITION

The Galápagos Islands are the ultimate in expedition cruising, finds [Katie McGonagle](#)

"Welcome to the Galápagos. You are about to be touched by Mother Nature," says naturalist guide Celso Montalvo as he steers the Zodiac from the dock at Baltra towards our first glimpse of *National Geographic Endeavour II*. "Your job is difficult. You're going to try to explain this place with your words, but how are you going to explain the heart of the Galápagos?"

He smiles and rests his hand over his heart as if to emphasise the pride in his country's most prized natural asset. As part of a group of UK agents who have been brought together for the fam trip of a lifetime with National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions, it doesn't feel like a particularly difficult job right now – but with a week to explore the wild western isles of the Galápagos, we're happy to take on the challenge.

### EAST MEETS WEST

The western itinerary visits the youngest islands in the archipelago, where volcanic activity has shaped a landscape of black lava fields and created a rich feeding ground for the area's endemic wildlife. The ship alternates between this route and a journey through the eastern and southern isles, home to white-sand beaches and well-established albatross colonies, to avoid landing in any site more than once in a two-week period.

With 97% of the archipelago designated as protected national parkland, this is one of the most highly regulated marine environments in the world. Only 87 ships are licensed to operate here, each carrying a maximum of 100 passengers. National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions operates four of those vessels (see box, page 47), so perhaps it's no surprise these wish-list itineraries make up 40% of the line's sales in the UK, of which 15% are families making the most of its young explorer programme.

### ON THE WING

We don't have to wait very long for our first glimpse of wildlife. Before we'd even boarded, there were sea lions lounging on the docks barking for our attention, bright red Sally Lightfoot crabs scampering over the rocks and frigatebirds soaring overhead. ➔

Sea lions on Cerro Brujo beach, with Kicker Rock and *National Geographic Endeavour II* in the distance PICTURE: Akvile Marozaitė



ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Some of the agent group on a hike at Isabela Island; adult green sea turtle; blue-footed boobies on the rock with *National Geographic Endeavour II* in the background PICTURES: Michael S. Nolan, Alex Joseph

## Ask the agents



**Olivia Edwards,**  
content manager,  
Panache Cruises  
"Seeing giant tortoises on  
Santa Cruz is incredible –

I shed a tear as it's been a dream of mine to see them since I was little. The crew are all local so they have great insight into culture and wildlife."



**Louise Harmer,**  
marketing executive,  
Mundy Cruising  
"In just one day on  
Isabela Island, we enjoyed

a nature walk and saw tortoises and iguanas; a swim; a kayaking excursion seeing turtles; then a sunset Zodiac tour where the light was beautiful, with amazing birdlife and penguins."



**Tracy Clenshaw,**  
head of commercial,  
Fred Olsen Travel  
"The Galápagos is suited  
to all ages – families,

young people, mature clients. I've gone snorkelling, hiking, kayaking. Guides are there to make you feel confident, so you can embrace the experience. The Galápagos will change your life."

I only have eyes for the blue-footed booby, with its comically bright feet and jaunty waddle, and am soon rewarded with not just a sighting but a feeding frenzy. Landing on the iron-rich red sands of Rábida Island, we take a short walk past snoozing sea lions to a saltwater pool filled with flamingos. They stretch their long, thin necks down into the water in search of food before one takes to the skies, its black-tipped wings enormous in flight. But the best is yet to come.

We wander back to the beach just as the light begins to fade, ready to get back on board and see what delights the chefs have rustled up for tonight – but it's dinnertime for the island's birdlife too. We marvel as blue-footed boobies, brown pelicans and sharp-tailed frigatebirds swoop and swirl over the shoreline, diving down to the shallows with exhilarating speed as they pluck unsuspecting fish from just below the surface.

Bird-spotting was bound to be a highlight of these wildlife-rich islands – it was the Galápagos mockingbird that helped Darwin towards his theory of evolution, after all – but this is like having a front-row seat on a real-life nature documentary.

## AS SEEN ON SCREEN

Many people will have had their first taste of the Galápagos via David Attenborough documentaries – and no scene is more memorable than that of dozens of racer snakes chasing after a hatchling iguana as it makes its way across a jagged landscape of jet-black rocks. As we set foot on Fernandina Island for a 1.3-mile walk over hardened lava fields, it's like being in the midst of that Attenborough series all over again.

It soon becomes clear why the island is known for its 'mess' of marine iguanas, as we see hundreds sunning themselves along the craggy coastline, their prehistoric-like scales blending in with the surroundings while little lava lizards skitter to and fro. Photography instructor Bernie Jacome shows us how to capture the best shots amid this dark, dramatic landscape, leading us to the shoreline where a young sea lion pup is cautiously dipping its head under the water before plopping straight in with a splash.

## MOMENT IN THE SUN

This is the epitome of adventure cruising, so clients should prepare for early starts and busy days.



There are plenty of gentle options – wildlife-spotting from the comfort of a Zodiac, easy shore walks and glass-bottomed boat tours for those who don't want to get in the water – but active types will find plenty of snorkelling, kayaking and hiking to get their hearts pumping.

On deep-water snorkelling trips, we spot dozens of rainbow-bright fish, green turtles floating on the currents letting their flippers waft like fans, and some guests even spot the tell-tale fins of a small Galápagos shark.

But it's from a kayak that I enjoy my most memorable sighting. Having missed seeing the colony of Galápagos penguins along the shores of seahorse-shaped island Isabela – the only place north of the equator where these flightless birds are found – the day before, I thought I'd lost my chance to view this native species. Yet as we set off for a kayaking trip around Santiago Island, once a haunt of pirates seeking coves to hide in, a shout went up from the first kayak to the last: "Penguin!"

There, perching on a rock lapped by the wild waves, sits a lone penguin that had strayed away from the cooler waters of the Humboldt Current that

sweeps from southern Chile to the outer edges of the archipelago. It's proof that just when you think you've seen all the Galápagos has to offer, nature can always surprise you.

Guide Celso is back at the helm of the lead Zodiac, urging us to kayak across the bay and live our "Nat Geo moment" to the fullest, so I speed ahead, now appreciating more of the marine life that lies below and the seabirds soaring above.

These enchanted isles are truly a world away from anywhere else on Earth, where even the everyday is always special. It turns out Celso was right: the Galápagos can only be felt with the heart. ●



**BOOK IT:** *National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions offers a 10-day Exploring Galapagos cruise on National Geographic Endeavour II from £8,399 per person, including international flights from Heathrow, recommended domestic flights, pre and post-cruise hotel, meals and drinks on board, guided excursions, \$200 conservation fee and transit card, for a November 27 departure.*  
[uk.expeditions.com](http://uk.expeditions.com)

## THE FLEET

### ■ *National Geographic Endeavour II*

This 96-passenger ship has a sociable atmosphere with no need to lock doors, a sizeable lounge and dining room serving Ecuadorian specialities. It offers the best value for budget-conscious travellers with sunset drinks on the observation deck among the highlights.

### ■ *National Geographic Gemini*

This former *Celebrity* ship holds just 48 passengers with accommodation ranging from large suites to solo cabins. The upper deck includes a whirlpool hot tub and its restaurant is due to be refurbished this year.

### ■ *National Geographic Islander II*

Formerly *Crystal Esprit*, this all-suite ship is incredibly spacious for just 48 guests, with a one-to-one staff-to-passenger ratio, a pool on the top deck and a 'science hub' for kids.

### ■ *National Geographic Delfina*

With eight cabins, this catamaran would suit a family or private group charter, with open dining in the kitchen and a comfortable lounge space to reflect on the day.