

Life in the slow lane

Following in Darwin's footsteps in style

By Lauren Steventon

Within an hour of setting sail around the Galapagos, the boat's public address system announces: 'Dolphins!' And sure enough, a pod of bottlenose dolphins is swimming alongside to the delight of passengers. After a couple of days this graceful entourage is as familiar as surfer dudes in Malibu – as are many other extraordinary creatures. During a seven-day vacation here you can sunbathe next to sea lions, swim with turtles and sharks, get sprayed by a salty marine iguana and stare into the beguiling eyes of a century-old tortoise.

No matter how well travelled you may be, this volcanic archipelago off the west coast of Ecuador is something totally different. Many of the species are found nowhere else on the planet. While tourists sigh and point in excitement, sea lions snooze on the sand, affording

everyone that *National Geographic* shot.

The ocean is just as thrilling. Snorkelling, you'll come face to face with playful sea lion pups, turtles, rays and even reef sharks. It seems that almost every other name begins with the word 'endemic' or 'Galapagos': the endemic lava heron and endemic lava lizard, the Galapagos penguin, Galapagos shark... but among all the unique creatures, the most iconic residents are the giant tortoises.

Although they have come to symbolise the islands, tortoises are surprisingly hard to find. Numbers were decimated by sailors in the 18th and 19th centuries when thousands were eaten, and although there are still populations on several islands they tend to live in the highlands away from the hiking paths. The best place to see them is the El Chato Tortoise Reserve on Santa Cruz, where they roam freely through the undergrowth, or at the Charles Darwin Research Centre, where eggs are collected, incubated and hatched in an attempt to protect and rebuild the populations.



One of the islands' iconic giant tortoises

However, there is one individual for whom this is too little, too late. At the research centre lives Lonesome George, the last of his particular tortoise species. It is hard not to be charmed by the tortoises' ponderous movements and leathery faces, but looking at George it is impossible not to feel the weight of responsibility of the human impact on the islands.

Tourism here only properly got going less than 30 years ago, but today it is a rapidly growing industry: in 2011 more than 150,000 people visited.

In an attempt to reduce the effects of visitor growth, the Ecuadorian government has just passed legislation to limit the number of times a cruise ship can visit an individual site. This is to encourage itineraries which spread the pressure of tourism across the whole archipelago.

Yet despite the fresh restrictions on cruise ships, there is no real limit to the number of visitors who can arrive on the islands, and an increase in unregulated hotels and cheap-but-irresponsible tours are encouraging more and more to do so.

Most of the better cruises last at least a week, placing less pressure on the islands' delicate infrastructure by demanding fewer daily flights and less frequent cargo ships.



Swimming with sharks



Bartolomé Island



Lazing with sea lions

You'll need at least seven days to truly appreciate all that the Galapagos have to offer. The current itinerary for Quasar Expeditions' *Evolution*, for example, takes in nine islands, from the lush highlands of Santa Cruz to the barren lava landscape of the youngest island, Fernandina. One day might be spent in the realm of the red-footed boobie (Genovesa, to the north of the archipelago) and the next in the far west, swimming with penguins in the cool waters of the Humboldt Current.

Staying aboard a ship is not the only way to explore – there are hotels, mostly in the port towns on the islands of Santa Cruz or San Cristóbal – but for at least part of a trip it is the easiest option. At the high end, the vessels operated by Quasar or Metropolitan Touring combine high-class amenities with a full crew, including naturalists who accompany guests on their hiking, snorkelling and dinghy tours.

Here luxury is more than a wetsuit that fits and a whirlpool to jump into after snorkelling in chilly waters. *Evolution's* comfortable ensuite cabins vary from smaller lower-deck bedrooms to larger suites on the upper decks with views over the horizon. However, even guests

Lonesome George is the last of his particular tortoise species

in the smallest will have little to complain about – deck space is generous, with a sundeck and bar that is perfect for relaxing and reading, or whalespotting.

Three chefs prepare three meals a day from fresh produce, and local fishermen pull up in their boats throughout the cruise. Committing to local produce is important for supporting the islands' infrastructure and almost every meal has an Ecuadorian twist: plantain fritters for breakfast, ceviche for lunch and sea bass with banana at dinnertime.

Quasar can also organise flights from the mainland. As there are no direct

international flights to the Galapagos, visitors have to travel via the Ecuadorian capital Quito or the equally bustling Guayaquil. Neither used to be particularly attractive. However, a recent renovation of Quito's picturesque historic centre – ahead of the opening next year of the city's new €450m airport – has made it a much easier and pleasant stopover. Buildings have been scrubbed up, including the Teatro Sucre, where the National Orchestra performs each week, and the infamous Calle La Ronda. The city's eclectic dining scene is increasingly dynamic and a smattering of boutique hotels have also recently opened, including Casa Gangotena, a former colonial mansion with a wraparound rooftop terrace overlooking Plaza San Francisco – an appropriately majestic way to top or tail any trip. ■

Quasar Expeditions' (galapagosexpeditions.com) cruises cost from \$4,800 per person. The room rates at Casa Gangotena (casagangotena.com) start at \$457.50.