

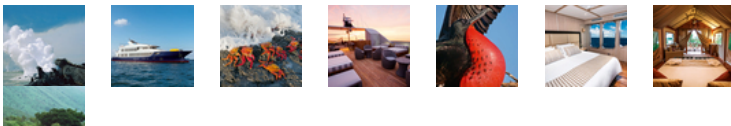
DESTINATIONS

A new launch in the Galápagos islands

The age-old natural wonders and endemic species of the more unfrequented Galápagos islands are now within reach thanks to a new ultra-fast boat that is evolving the definition of eco-luxury travel, says Lucia van der Post



Marine iguanas in the western Galápagos



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LUCIA VAN DER POST

It's mating time in the Galápagos and the frigate birds are feeling frisky. The shore and rock face of the tiny island of Genovesa, in whose bay our brand new boat, the *MV Origin*, is moored, are spattered with what look like shockingly scarlet balloons. These, it turns out, are the male birds' throat pouches, which inflate to a quite extraordinary size, and which are to the frigate male what six-packs, fathomless blue eyes or fat wallets are to the human male – they're his means of "pulling". The larger the

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Sonia Rykiel's artistic director shares her favourite sites in the City of Lights with Avril Groom. Portrait by Léa Crespi

balloon, the more likely he is to attract a mate. “In this species, you see,” says our guide, María Espinoza, “size matters.”

But the frigates aren't alone – the male marine iguanas have turned a telltale deep red (which means their hormones are up) and they're busy bagging the territory most likely to appeal to the females, raising their scales like hackles to keep their rivals out.

Meanwhile, the blue-footed boobies are engaged in a much gentler wooing routine. The male does a little dance, and if the female likes what she sees (the deeper the blue of the feet, the more likely she is to do so) she will join him for the booby two-step. He gives her little presents of stones and twigs, they both point their beaks to the sky, he whistles, she honks and, hey-ho, we have another happy couple.

In the Galápagos, we quickly learn that life is one big dating game, and every day in a myriad different settings the visitor gets to witness the powerful biological imperative of all living things to mate and ensure that their genes survive. Stranded as it is in the Pacific Ocean, about 1,000km west of Ecuador, the archipelago consists of some 13 large islands, six smaller ones and many tiny islets. It is said to be one of the few places on earth where no aboriginal people ever lived; this largely explains why bird, animal and marine life were able to evolve in such an extraordinarily untrammelled way, completely untroubled by human interference. It's why such a high proportion of the species found there are unique to the islands. As Charles Darwin wrote in his journal: “This archipelago seems to be a little world within itself, the greater number of its inhabitants, both vegetable and animal, being found nowhere else.” This largely explains why it is endlessly referred to as “a living laboratory” for studying the origin of the species. Here on these extraordinarily pristine islands are the age-old natural wonders that first shook Darwin's Christian belief in the Book of Genesis way back in 1835 and that today some 200,000 tourists a year come to see.

Nearly all visitors choose to tour the archipelago by boat, because most of the 70-odd licensed landing sites can be accessed only from the sea. So while the main draw is, of course, the natural wonders we've all heard so much about, the charms of the boats matter too. Upping the ante in the comfort stakes is the *MV Origin*, the newest boat from Ecoventura, with which company president Santiago Dunn (who already has four other craft cruising these seas), has aimed to come up with the most luxurious, most comfortable, most desirable way of seeing all that the Galápagos have to offer.

To start with, it is small – just 10 double cabins (pictured overleaf), all identical, all with large windows, cleverly planned with twin beds that convert into kings, ensuite showers and room for enough clothes and belongings to see you through the seven days and nights of the cruise. Along with the cabins on the Beagle deck is a Jacuzzi, while up on the Darwin deck is a large light-filled and elegant dining room, and on the top Sundeck (pictured left) are hammocks and soft beds to lounge around on. Less obvious but just as important is the fact the ship has been designed to be one of the most environmentally friendly boats in the archipelago, with fossil-fuel consumption reduced by over 30 per cent. In spite of this, it goes faster than most of the other smaller boats – which matters because it means that in either of the seven-day itineraries it can cover so

much more ground, leaving more time for guests to go ashore in more places. As Espinoza put it to me, “Fewer than 10 per cent of visitors get to see the red-footed boobies that are mainly found on the outer edges of the archipelago.” We, in fact, got to see them in abundance on Genovesa, in the Galápagos’ far northeast.

Many other boats do only four-day trips, which means they concentrate on the main central islands of Santa Cruz, Isabela and Santiago, where visitors are constant, leaving no time for some of the most interesting and least-frequented islands. The *MV Origin*’s seven-day cruises, alternating between a northern itinerary and a southern route, both go to the central islands, but the northern one also takes in the charms of Genovesa, while the southern one goes to Española (among the first of these volcanic islands to be “vomited” up 3-5m years ago, when the story of the Galápagos began) and offers the thrill of spotting the huge waved albatross, the only albatross found in tropical seas. Wherever we go (until we arrive at Puerto Ayora, the main port on Santa Cruz, on the last night), we see few other tourists and moor up in bays where there are never more than another couple of boats.

And since it is the guides who help bring the whole experience alive, it’s important to note that while most of those in the Galápagos look after 16 people at a time, the *MV Origin* has two highly knowledgeable naturalists on board, meaning that groups can be broken up into two smaller ones for any excursion, and guests are able to choose between different options.

Life on the boat turns out to be surprisingly hectic. Back in damp London I had imagined drifting about onboard in my floaty summer dresses, watching all the drama from the deck. I should have read the advice notes more carefully. The travel agent in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Galápagos* (very surreal but well worth a read) – who tells the character James Wait that he “had better be in reasonably good physical condition and have sturdy boots and rough clothing, since they would often have to wade ashore and scramble up rock faces like amphibious infantry” – had it spot-on.

We were up each morning some time between 6am and 7am, and from then on the days were punctuated by visits ashore, small hikes along coasts, up hills, round lagoons, snorkelling in the sea, kayaking or riding in tenders round the rocky shores. On San Cristóbal we saw where the Pacific green turtles make their nests, while over the rocks scramble legions of bright red Sally Lightfoot crabs. We snorkelled alongside rocky cliffs teeming with sea lions and eyeballed the brilliant king angelfish and the rainbow wrasse. Some swam side by side with a hammerhead shark; others saw manta rays. On land we watched the giant tortoises that are such an integral part of the Galápagos story and after which the islands themselves are named. They’re huge, lumbering, seemingly prehistoric, and theirs is a poignant tale of survival and adaptation. Each evening we’d be regaled with some aspect of the story of the islands – their geology, history, natural life – and be given advice about the excursions of the following day.

What we soon learnt is that it isn’t just size that matters; the story of evolution emerges through the observation of tiny details. In the Galápagos it’s all about the smallest modifications that mark out one

generation from another and denote a species that will flourish – it's not brains or brawn that matter, it's adaptability.

Take the marine iguana “that come like T-shirts”, according to Espinoza, “petite, medium, large and extra large”. An endemic species, it probably evolved from the great land reptiles of millions of years ago, but has now become a creature that – because needs must – feeds on the ocean's depths. Over the millennia its scales have turned black (to absorb the heat) and it has developed what is virtually a desalination plant in its head, filtering the salt from the water and then sneezing it out. Then there's the endemic flightless cormorant, a bird that has vestigial wings to aid its balance but has lost the ability to fly because it has no need – there in the sea is all it could possibly need to survive.

And, of course, every visitor sees at least a few of Darwin's famous species of finches and, with a good enough view, can observe the different beaks that have evolved to cope with the variety of foods – some shaped to crack nuts or seeds, others to catch insects and yet others to feed on fruit. And every visitor is left amazed at quite how unperturbed the animal world – whether sea lion, small penguin, bird or tortoise – is by the intrusion of humans. We walked up to within a few feet of a Galápagos hawk sitting on a wooden pole; it merely blinked, but didn't move.

For some the islands offer an almost mystical experience; they respond rather as Darwin himself did when he wrote that in the Galápagos “we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact – that mystery of mysteries – the first appearance of beings on this earth”. Others feel rather like Vonnegut's character Mary Hepburn: “All of a sudden,” she says, “I have this feeling that I never want to see another blue-footed booby as long as I live.”

André Degel, the wonderful guide the Galapagos Safari Camp organised to take us round Santa Cruz for the two days we spent there after the cruise, is firmly in the Darwin camp. “The answers to all mankind's questions,” he tells us, “whether spiritual, scientific or philosophical, can be found in the Galápagos. Once you understand the laws of evolution you are not just an observer of nature – nature opens itself up to you.”

High up in the hills of Santa Cruz, the camp has something rather magical about it. Set in 55 hectares, it is part farm (cacao, fruit, cattle) and part nature reserve. Created with love and passion by Stephanie Bonham-Carter and Michael Mesdag and inspired by the [safari lodges of Botswana](#), it has great tented rooms (pictured above left) with vast views all the way to the sea and lush foliage filled with birdlife all around. It is the perfect place to rest awhile, to reflect upon the sights and sounds and ponder on these great questions.

Lucia van der Post travelled as a guest of **Cazenove + Loyd** (020-7384 2332; www.cazloyd.com), from £6,800 per person, based on two sharing, for a 10-night trip comprising one night on mainland Ecuador in Guayaquil with breakfast, seven nights onboard the MV Origin and two nights at Galapagos Safari Camp, both full board, including transfers, international flights with Iberia and domestic flights with Avianca. **Ecoventura**, +1305-262 6264; www.ecoventura.com. **Galapagos Safari Camp**, +1805-995 4093; www.galapagossafaricamp.com.

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