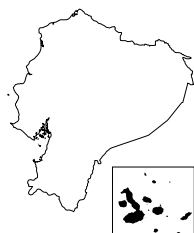


# The Galápagos Islands



Much like the revolutionary scientific idea with which they've become synonymous, the Galápagos Islands may inspire you to think differently about the world. Nowhere else can you engage in a staring contest with wild animals and lose. You can't help thinking you've stumbled upon an alternate universe, some strange utopian colony organized by sea lions – the golden retrievers of the Galápagos – and arranged on principles of mutual cooperation. Don't come expecting to see bizarre wildlife – there are no half-penguin, half-turtle 'penurtles,' no large mammals with shark fins. What's truly special is this: the creatures that call the islands home act as if humans are nothing more than slightly annoying paparazzi.

This is not the Bahamas – though some of the cruise boats will remind you of a Caribbean luxury resort – and these aren't Pacific paradises; in fact, most of the islands are devoid of vegetation and look more like the moon than Hawaii. There are more humans living here than is commonly assumed – more than 30,000 and growing – and for such isolated specks of land (over 1000km from mainland Ecuador), there's a surprising level of development, most of it is geared toward sustaining a thriving tourism industry.

The islands have taken on a mythological status, and their relationship with Charles Darwin, the most famous visitor, who undoubtedly violated several park rules in riding and eating the Galápagos turtles, has become distorted and romanticized. Yet you don't have to be an evolutionary biologist or an ornithologist to appreciate one of the few places left on the planet where the footprint of the human presence is kept to a minimum.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Just off Isla Floreana, relax and let the current zip you past rays, turtles and sharks while snorkeling around **Devil's Crown** (p374).
- On northern Isla Isabela, huff it up to the trail above **Darwin Lake** (p371) for inspired views.
- On Isla Española, witness the pageantry of wildlife on the dramatic cliffs at **Punta Suárez** (p375)
- In the highlands of Santa Cruz, see who blinks first in a staring contest with the massive beasts in the **El Chato Tortoise Reserve** (p355)
- Pick your outdoor adventure – surf, snorkel, kayak, bike or dive – within minutes of the sleepy town of **Puerto Baquerizo Moreno** (p365) on Isla San Cristóbal.



■ AVERAGE TEMP IN PUERTO BAQUERIZO MORENO: 23°C (73°F)

■ RAINIEST MONTH IN PUERTO BAQUERIZO MORENO: FEB

## Orientation

There are around 12 main islands and 12 minor islands. Five of the islands are inhabited. About half the residents live in Puerto Ayora, on Isla Santa Cruz in the middle of the archipelago, which is also the most important island from the traveler's point of view. North of Santa Cruz, separated by a narrow strait, is Isla Baltra, home to one of the islands' major airports. A public bus and a ferry connect the Isla Baltra airport with Puerto Ayora (see p362).

Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on Isla San Cristóbal, the easternmost island, has become more important with regards to tourism. Its airport receives an almost equal number of flights from the mainland and while more tours start from Isla Santa Cruz, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno is another option.

The other inhabited islands are Isla Isabela, with the small port of Puerto Villamil, and Isla Santa María (Floreana), with Puerto Velasco Ibarra – both have places to stay and eat. Regular public ferries or private boats provide interisland transportation (see p353).

The remaining islands are not inhabited by people but are visited on tours. See p14 for information on planning your trip and for recommended books about the islands. See p65 for a brief introduction to the wildlife of the islands.

## History

The Galápagos Archipelago was discovered by accident in 1535, when Tomás de Berlanga, the first Bishop of Panama, drifted off course while sailing from Panama to Peru. The bishop reported his discovery to King Charles V of Spain and included in his report a description of the giant Galápagos tortoises, from which the islands received their name, and an amusing note about the islands' birds that any visitor today can appreciate: '...so silly that they didn't know how to flee and many were caught by hand.'

It is possible that the indigenous inhabitants of South America were aware of the islands' existence before 1535, but there are no definite records of this and the islands don't appear on a world map until 1570 when they are identified as the 'island of the tortoises.' In 1953, Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl discovered what he thought to be pre-Columbian pottery shards on the islands, but the evidence seems inconclusive. The first rough charts of the archipelago were made by buccaneers in

the late 17th century, and scientific exploration began in the late 18th century.

For more than three centuries after their discovery, the Galápagos were used as a base by a succession of buccaneers, sealers and whalers. The islands provided sheltered anchorage, firewood, water and an abundance of fresh food in the form of the giant Galápagos tortoises, which were caught by the thousands and stacked, alive, in the ships' holds. More than 100,000 are estimated to have been taken between 1811 and 1844. The tortoises could survive for a year or more and thus provided fresh meat for the sailors long after they had left the islands. The fur seal population was also decimated, thousands killed for their valuable pelts.

The first resident of the islands was Patrick Watkins, an Irishman who was marooned on Isla Santa María in 1807 and spent two years living there, growing vegetables and trading his produce for rum from passing boats. The story goes that he managed to remain drunk for most of his stay, then stole a ship's boat and set out for Guayaquil accompanied by five slaves. No one knows what happened to the slaves – only Watkins reached the mainland.

Ecuador officially claimed the Galápagos Archipelago in 1832 and General Villamil was named the first governor – basically in charge of a single colony on Floreana of ex-rebel soldiers. For roughly one century thereafter, the islands were inhabited by only a few settlers and were used as penal colonies, the last of which, on Isla Isabela, was closed in 1959.

The Galápagos' most famous visitor was Charles Darwin, who arrived in 1835 aboard the British naval vessel the *Beagle*. Darwin stayed for five weeks, 19 days of which were spent on four of the larger islands, making notes and collecting specimens that provided important evidence for his theory of evolution, which he would later formulate and publish, but not until decades later. He spent the most time on Isla San Salvador observing and, for that matter, eating tortoises. The truth is that Darwin devoted as much of his attention to geology and botany as he did to the animals and marine life of the Galápagos.

Some islands were declared wildlife sanctuaries in 1934, and 97% of the archipelago officially became a national park in 1959. Organized tourism began in the late 1960s and in 1986 the government formed the Marine Resources Reserve.