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Galapagos Birding Tour

8 DAY/ 7 NIGHT TOUR

with Optional Extension

OVERVIEW

The *Enchanted Archipelago* of the Galapagos is renowned as an iconic tourist destination, and with good reason. It features some of the world's most unique and endemic wildlife species, along with stunning natural beauty and some wonderful beaches that continually rank among the world's best. It was the world's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, declared in 1978.

The Archipelago is a group of 19 volcanic islands, 13 large and 6 small, and dozens of islets and rocks that cover an area of over 17,000 square miles as they straddle the Equator. Its closest point to the mainland is 600 miles (1000 kilometres) from the West coast of Ecuador in South America, the country to who they belong. The name 'galapagos', an old Spanish word for "saddle" or "tortoise", was originally used by Bishop Tomas and his crew to describe the giant tortoises but the name stuck.

The Galapagos are a naturalist's dream, filled with a diverse array of plant and animal life unique in the world. This includes such exotic flora and fauna as giant cacti, bizarre Flightless Cormorants, Darwin's famous Galapagos finches and the world renowned giant Galapagos Tortoise, whose average lifespan of 100 years makes it the longest living vertebrate on earth. The Galapagos marine animals include more than 2,900 species, 25% percent of which are endemic. Among the most notable species are the Galapagos Penguins (the only penguin species native to the Northern Hemisphere), Galapagos Sea Lions, Marine Iguanas, and many others. Birdwatchers come from all over the world to visit Galapagos, where there are hundreds of bird species to be seen, many of them truly and wonderfully unique, including about 30 endemic and restricted species.

The name of Charles Darwin and his famous book *On the Origin of Species* (1859) will forever be linked with the Galapagos Islands. Although he was only in the Galapagos for five weeks in 1835, it was the fascinating wildlife that he saw there that inspired him to develop his Theory of Evolution. Galapagos is a harsh, remote land, and the species that arrived there did not survive by diversifying, but rather by evolving specific traits to suit a certain niche in the environment. Although natural selection takes place all over the globe, nowhere is it more evident than in the Galapagos.

On this island-hopping cruise tour we will be on a very comfortable vessel, an ideal vantage point from which to observe some fantastic unfearful wildlife from up close, along with enjoying some breathtaking scenery. There will also be lots of time for hiking, swimming, snorkeling and scuba diving. This visit with the Nature Travel Group to the Galapagos is sure to affect you deeply, as one cannot help but feel the incredible evolutionary pull and spiritual power of this amazing place. Let's go birding!

DAILY SUMMARY

DAY 1	Arrival in the Galapagos Archipelago & Santa Cruz Island
DAY 2	Genovesa Island
DAY 3	Bartolome Island & Santiago Island
DAY 4	Santa Cruz Island
DAY 5	Santa Cruz Island
DAY 6	Floreana Island
DAY 7	Espanola Island
DAY 8	San Cristobal Island and transfer to San Cristobal Airport (end of tour)
extension	Optional Extension to Isabela Island

DETAILED DAILY ITINERARY

DAY 1: Arrival in Galapagos and transfer to boat; Santa Cruz Island

On the first day of this wonderful trip we will all meet up at Seymour Airport on Baltra, a small island of the Galápagos Archipelago. Also known as South Seymour (named after Lord Hugh Seymour), Baltra is a small flat island located near the center of the Galápagos. The island is very arid and vegetation consists of salt bushes, prickly pear cactus and palo santo trees. During World War II, Baltra was established as a United States Army Air Force base. Crews stationed at Baltra patrolled the eastern Pacific for enemy submarines and provided protection for the Panama Canal.

On arrival, we will hopefully see our first “Darwin finches”, including the inquisitive Small and Medium Ground Finches, and Baltra is also one of the best areas to see Galapagos Land Iguanas; they even walk across the airport runway sometimes!

On arriving at Baltra, we will be transported by bus to the dock where we will board our very comfortable vessel, the Eden motor yacht (our home for the next week!), meet our crew, receive an orientation session, and then have lunch. At the dock, look out for Elliott's Storm Petrel, Magnificent Frigatebird, Blue-footed Booby, and Nazca Booby.

Over the last few years, cruise itineraries have been highly controlled by the Galápagos National Park authorities. Our cruise has special permission, allowing us to combine the key islands and sites for the perfect Galápagos birding itinerary. Our sleek motor vessel was custom-built in 1996 specifically for Galapagos cruising, and completely refurbished in 2010. It's eight ocean view double

cabins all have private bathrooms, air-conditioning and generous hot water supply. Additionally, there is a library, TV area, restaurant/bar, and a sundeck on board. The food will be especially good and you will be able to enjoy delicious Ecuadorian and international delicacies in the buffet area, as well as socialising with fellow travellers over an ice-cold beer in one of two comfortable social areas.

The plan of the afternoon depends on various factors, but we'll do some birding at well-known nearby sites, and our first stop on this tour will be Santa Cruz Island, a large dormant volcano. Situated in the center of the archipelago, Santa Cruz is the second largest island after Isabela. Its capital is Puerto Ayora, the most populated urban centre in the islands. Santa Cruz is the home of the Charles Darwin Research Station, operated by the Charles Darwin Foundation.

Specifically, we will visit Las Bachas. Located on the north shore of Santa Cruz Island, Las Bachas is a swimming beach. One of the few remnants of the U.S. World War II presence in the Galapagos, a floating pier, can be seen here. Here we have a chance to see Brown Noddy, Blue-footed Booby, Galápagos Shearwater, various Darwin finches and perhaps our first Lava Heron, along with flamingos, Sally Lightfoot Crabs, Black-necked Stilts, and Whimbrels. Pacific Green Turtles also nest off the beach.

Tonight we will spend our first night aboard the Eden, a fantastic never-to-forget experience!

DAY 2: Genovesa Island

Today we will explore Genovesa Island, named after the Italian city of Genoa, in honour of Christopher Columbus. The island is known for its cliffs packed with seabirds, and is therefore also known as "Bird Island".

This small (14 square kilometres/5 square miles) and pristine uninhabited island lies in the far northeast of the archipelago. It is a shield volcano of which the caldera walls have collapsed, forming a spectacular bay named the Great Darwin Bay. This will be today's first stop, and here, after our wet landing, we will enjoy the nesting colonies of Magnificent and Great Frigatebirds and the fascinating Red-footed Boobies (the largest colony in the world), seldom encountered elsewhere in the islands. Nazca Boobies and Swallow-tailed Gulls also nest here and shall be at close range. The two island endemics, Genovesa Ground Finch and Genovesa Cactus Finch, are the main targets here, along with Large Ground Finch and Lava Gull.

Later, we will climb up some very steep steps to a large colony of Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels. Also known as Prince Phillip's Steps, El Barranco's steep, rocky path leads up to a high cliff-face. A marvelous view can be appreciated from here. This site is also home to palo santo vegetation as well as avian gems like Red-footed Booby, Galapagos Dove, as well as the Galapagos subspecies of Short-eared Owl, Great Blue Heron and American Oystercatcher.

Other targets on Genovesa is Red-billed Tropicbird, Sharp-beaked Ground Finch and Warbler Finch.

Genovesa Island is also an ideal spot for our first chance at some snorkeling or even scuba diving on the trip.

DAY 3: Bartolome Island & Santiago Island

This morning we will head for the tiny and barren Bartolomé Island, just off the east coast of Santiago Island. It is named after naturalist and lifelong friend of Charles Darwin, Sir Bartholomew James Sullivan, who was a lieutenant aboard HMS *Beagle*.

It's the most visited island in the Galapagos and also the most photographed. Home of the famous Pinnacle Rock (probably the Galapagos' most distinctive landmark), Bartolome consists of an extinct volcano with a variety of red, orange, black and even green volcanic formations. A trail of stairs leads to the summit of the volcano, boasting one of the best views of the islands. Also look for the fascinating lava cacti that grow here. The beach is perfect for swimming and snorkeling and possible sightings of the Galapagos Hawk and Galapagos Penguin. It is also a major mating and nesting site of Pacific Green Turtles.

In the afternoon we will explore Sullivan Bay on nearby Santiago Island. Santiago Island has a narrow, steep-sided point of land, which provides an extraordinarily beautiful landscape complete with cliffs and pinnacles where hundreds of marine birds rest. During the 17th and 18th centuries, pirates used this site for maintaining their ships, and supplying themselves with fresh water, meat, and firewood.

The visitor site at Sullivan Bay provides a unique opportunity to walk across a recent (second half of the 19th century) black lava flow and view its beautiful structural characteristics from up close. Here we will look out for Galapagos Hawk and some of the Darwin finches. There are also two small beaches where turtles come for nesting.

A major highlight on the island are the reddish-black Marine Iguanas and the Galapagos Land Iguanas found on the lava beds. Galapagos Fur Seals and Galapagos Sea Lions can be seen along the rocky coastline and in the waters of the bay.

DAY 4: Santa Cruz Island

Today we will again visit Santa Cruz Island. Situated in the middle of the archipelago, Santa Cruz is the second largest island after Isabela. The island has a large variety of vegetation. Pit craters, Scalesia Forest, cacti and ferns are found in its six different vegetation zones.

In the morning we will visit Black Turtle Cove, situated in the northern part of Santa Cruz. This inlet is surrounded by mangroves and is only accessible by dinghy. The shallow cove is a safe haven for young marine life. Blacktip and Whitetip Reef Sharks, Loggerhead Sea Turtles, and a variety of rays are often spotted here. Also look out for Sally Lightfoot Crabs and maybe even a giant Galapagos Tortoise.

In the afternoon we will go to the very dry habitat of Dragon Hill (Cerro Dragon). It is one of the few visitor sites directly related to a conservation program of the Charles Darwin Foundation and the Galapagos National Park. The landing site at the rocky shore is a wonderful place for snorkeling. Heading inland on a trail, we will pass two small salt-water lagoons where it is sometimes possible to see American Flamingo, White-cheeked Pintail and other shorebirds. The trail continues on and circles Dragon Hill where we can observe the main attraction of this site, namely the small population of Galapagos Land Iguanas and their many burrows on the hillside.

DAY 5: Santa Cruz Island

We have another full day to explore Santa Cruz Island.

In the morning we will visit The Charles Darwin Research Station. It is home to tortoises ranging from 3-inches (new hatchlings) to 4 feet long. Subspecies of tortoises interact with one another and many of the older tortoises are accustomed to humans, stretching out their heads for a photo opportunity. The babies are kept until they are about four years old and strong enough to survive on their own. The Fausto Llerena Tortoise Center, a long-term program run jointly by the Galapagos National Park Directorate and the Charles Darwin Foundation, began in 1965 to save the giant tortoise population on Pinzón. At the Tortoise Center, visitors can observe a variety of tortoises, including hatchlings, juveniles, and full-grown individuals. *Please remember you cannot touch the tortoises (or any other animals for that matter) in the Galapagos.*

After that exciting morning, our afternoon will be spent on the “highlands”. Reached by bus from Puerto Ayora, the highlands of Santa Cruz are a deep green, contrasting beautifully with much of the dry, lower islands. The dominant vegetation in the highlands is the Scalesia trees, creating the lush green color. The lava tubes, over half a mile long, are underground and walking through them is a unique, surreal experience.

DAY 6: Floreana Island

Today we move on to Floreana Island. The 173 square kilometres (67 sq mi) island was named after Juan José Flores, the first president of Ecuador, during whose administration the government of Ecuador took possession of the archipelago. The official name of the island is "Santa Maria" and its English name is "Charles," but it is most commonly known as "Floreana." Due to its relatively flat surface, supply of fresh water as well as plants and animals, Floreana was a favorite stop for whalers, pirates, convicts and buccaneers who frequented the Galápagos.

In the morning we will enjoy Post Office Bay with its beautiful sandy beach. In the 18th century, whalers passing through the islands placed a wooden barrel on Floreana Island for use as an unofficial mail box. The tradition continues today as visitors leave addressed postcards in the barrel and sort through left mail to deliver at home. This is also an ideal place for some snorkeling.

A number of marine birds can be seen around Floreana, including Galapagos Penguin, Red-billed Tropicbird, Blue-footed Booby, Nazca Booby and Swallow-tailed Gull. Land birds on the island include Galapagos Flycatcher, Medium Ground Finch, Small Ground Finch, Medium Tree Finch and Small Tree Finch.

In the afternoon we visit Cormorant Point and Devil's Crown. Cormorant Point has a beautiful large lagoon where we can see birds such as American Flamingo, Common Stilt and White-cheeked Pintails. The beaches on this island are distinct: The Green Beach is named so due to its green color, which comes from a high percentage of olivine crystals in the sand, and the Four Sand Beach is composed of white coral.

One of the best snorkeling sites in the Galapagos, the volcanic crater of Devil's Crown has been eroded by the waves leaving the northern and southern sides poking out of the water. The coral reef in the middle is perfect for attracting marine life. Snorkelers enjoy the variety of marine life

and exciting currents that rush through the crown, creating an exhilarating experience. Snorkelers can expect to see a variety of dazzling species at Devil's Crown, such as hammerhead sharks, Whitetip Reef Shark, Pacific Green Turtle, or large rays such as a manta or Spotted Eagle Ray. Not everyone will get to swim with a shark, but you can pretty much bank on seeing schools of surgeonfish, large, colourful parrotfish, dazzling King Angelfish and a variety of wrasses, blennies and other common Galapagos fish. On the shallow side of the rocks, look for a variety of sea stars on the bottom.

DAY 7: Espanola Island

Today we explore Espanola Island. A popular tourist stop, Isla Española (Hood Island as named by the English) is the most southerly island in the Galápagos Archipelago. This island is actually dying, slowly becoming a rocky, barren land with little or no vegetation. But this does give large bays, with sand and soft shingle which attracts a healthy number of Galapagos Sea Lions.

This small, low-lying island in the south-east is probably best known for its colony of Waved Albatross, specifically at Gardner Bay on the eastern side of the island. Currently classified as Critically Endangered, almost the entire world population (12 000 pairs) nests on this island. Gardner Bay has an ample white sandy beach with a myriad of Galapagos Sea Lions, perfect for relaxing. Its rocky shores make this site a great place for swimming, diving and snorkeling. If you're lucky, a sea lion may want to swim with you! The colony at Gardner Bay is quite friendly and unafraid of tourists.

We will also visit Suarez Point, a beautiful site on the ocean front, where the albatrosses use the cliff as a launching pad. Another famous attraction is the magnificent blowhole, spurting water high into the air. This site presents wonderful photograph opportunities. Also look out for the mean-looking and localised Espanola Lava Lizard and the red and green subspecies of the Marine Iguana, appropriately nicknamed "Christmas Iguanas", which are also only found on Espanola Island.

The albatross will be the star attraction on Espanola Island, but there are also other important species that occur on the island. We will look for the very clever must-see Española Mockingbird, Nazca and Blue-footed Booby, Red-billed Tropicbird, American Oystercatcher, Swallow-tailed Gull, Española Cactus Finch, Grey Warbler-Finch, Galápagos Dove and Galápagos Hawk.

DAY 8: San Cristobal Island and transfer to San Cristobal Airport (end of tour)

Today is unfortunately our last day of our Galapagos trip, and we will visit our final island, namely San Cristobal Island, the administrative center of the islands.

We will visit the Gianni Arismendy Interpretation Center. It was opened in 1998 as a phase of the project Interpretation and Environment Education Project. We will enjoy expositions on natural history, human history, and conservation, specifically relating to the Galapagos Archipelago.

San Cristobal is the easternmost and geologically oldest island of the archipelago. The endemic and endangered San Cristóbal Mockingbird is our principal birding target here. We will also look for Grey Warbler-Finch, Vegetarian Finch, Woodpecker Finch, White-cheeked Pintail, Great Blue Heron, Lava Heron, Common Gallinule and Dark-billed Cuckoo.

We will then be transferred to the San Cristobal Airport for onward flights home after an amazing, life-changing Galapagos trip.

OPTIONAL EXTENSION: Isabela Island

The archipelago's largest island (4,640 square kilometres (1,790 sq mi), Isabela, was formed by the joining of five young volcanoes, all of which are still active. While these volcanic regions contain extensive lava fields and little vegetation, the southern highlands and various other regions are covered by dense vegetation including the unique red mangrove. Isabela Island is also home to many native Galapageños living in the island's largest town, Puerto Villamil.

The island, that straddles the equator, was named after Queen Isabella of Spain. It was originally named Albemarle after the Duke of Albemarle.

Isabela's rich bird, animal and marine life is beyond compare. Isabela is home to more wild tortoises than all the other islands. The west coast of Isabela in the Bolivar Channel is the best place in Galápagos for viewing whales (Right Whale, Humpback Whale, Sperm Whale, Minke Whale, and Orcas) and dolphins.

The longish sea voyage to get to Isabela will be well worth it. This passage is a major attraction because it's one of the few places where the now rare Galapagos Shearwater can still be seen. Thousands of Red-necked Phalaropes and some Red Phalaropes can be seen flying over the ocean near the island, so keep an eye out!

Depending on the length of your Isabela extension, we may drive up to the Sierra Negra Volcano, one of the most impressive volcanoes in the archipelago. Here we can hike up to the caldera, one of the largest of all of the Galápagos volcanoes. The caldera is our best chance at finding the rare and erratic Galápagos Martin, a species that is chiefly found in the highlands of Isabela. We will also search in this area for the elusive Galápagos Rail, Woodpecker Finch, Green Warbler-Finch, Small Tree Finch and Galápagos and Darwin's Flycatcher, Common Cactus Finch, Galapagos Mockingbird, Mangrove Warbler and several species of Darwin flycatchers.

On Isabela's remote northern tip at Albemarle Point the remains of a US World War II radar base line the shore. The Point is the nesting site for the amazing Flightless Cormorant, and home to a colony of the largest Marine Iguanas in the Islands. One of the most pristine visitor sites within the Galapagos National Park, here you can also see a pahoehoe lava flow.

Located in the Port of Villamil, the Concha de Perla can be reached via a wooden pathway. The bay's calm, shallow, clear waters are ideal for observing the incredible array of marine life. If there is time we can swim and snorkel alongside tropical fish, sea lions, penguins and turtles and it is also possible to observe up to 20 bird species here.

Again, depending on the length of your extension, we might visit Elizabeth Bay with its Blue-footed Boobies, Pacific Green Turtles and Galapagos Penguins, or Flamingos Lake where the

Galapagos' highest concentration of American Flamingos live, or even the Wetlands where we can observe many waterbird species.

The Isabela Island extension can be catered to your specific needs.

Thank you for choosing Nature Travel Birding.