

Visiting 'the land that time forgot'

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By **Karen Walker**

The middle of nowhere isn't usually a prime destination for those seeking an exciting travel experience. A notable exception is the Galapagos Islands, a remote Pacific Ocean archipelago famed for its unique wildlife and unspoiled natural beauty.

Quito, the capital of Ecuador, is a popular starting point for a trip to the Galapagos. Highlights are the charming Old Town, the nearby President's Palace (inhabited by an Illinois graduate) and the 400-year-old Convent of St. Francis. Outside Quito is Middle of the World City, where visitors can stand on both sides of the equator and tour a museum of Ecuadorian cultures.

After two days in Quito, we boarded a 600-mile flight to Baltra, which was a U.S. Air Force base during World War II. It's one of five populated islands in the chain of 15 main islands and more than a hundred islets and rocks that straddle the equator. All were formed by volcanic activity, and new ones are still being created (the last was in 2009).

The region is a national park of Ecuador, which places strict limits on visitor numbers and tour length. Licensed guides are required to sail to the uninhabited islands. Some tourists stay in small hotels and take day excursions. More popular are accommodations on cruising boats and ships, which can travel farther and visit a wider variety of habitats.

We chose the 90-passenger Celebrity Xpedition because of its larger size (less chance of seasickness) and the expertise of its naturalists. The eight-day itinerary featured 15 land and shore safaris to seven islands. Every morning and afternoon, Zodiac rafts took small groups out for guided tours and other activities, including hiking, snorkeling and swimming.

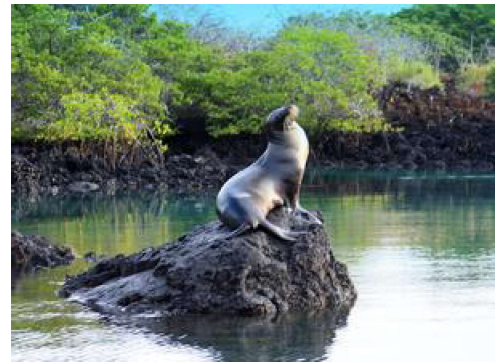
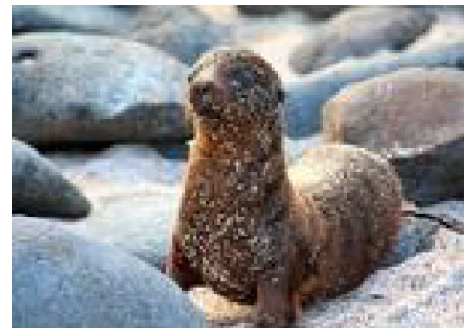


Photo by: Karen Walker
A Galapagos sea lion stands watch to protect his territory and harem of females.



Each outing offered spectacular scenery and dramatic contrasts — from deserts to forests to beaches of all colors, depending on the type of volcanic sand.

On Santiago, the western coast has white sand beaches with nesting turtles and lagoons frequented by flamingos and Galapagos hawks. The east side is covered by uneroded black lava that creates a desolate, moon-like landscape.

The main attraction on all the islands is the unusual wildlife, which were the basis for Charles Darwin's theories on evolution by natural selection. The Galapagos chain is home to numerous animal and plant species found nowhere else in the world.

All the animals, birds and marine life migrated here by air or sea, so there are no large mammals or other predators. The animals have no fear of humans and barely acknowledged our presence. We swam with sea lions, looked giant iguanas in the eye and were surrounded by birds in their nesting colonies. Galapagos penguins swam playfully alongside our raft.

Sea and land birds offered close-up views of their feeding habits. Magnificent frigatebirds snatched fish from the ocean and stole from other seabirds in flight. Flightless cormorants slid off high rocks to make deep dives for food. Unique to the islands, the cormorants are an evolved species with stubby wings but very strong legs for swimming.

Mating rituals were on display, too. Male frigatebirds, who nest near the ground, shake their wings and puff up bright-red throat pouches when a female flies overhead. Two blue-footed boobies performed an elaborate dance for us and their intended audience, a single female who eventually chose the higher stepper.

The islands' most famous residents are giant tortoises, which were hunted nearly to extinction by sailors in the 19th century. They live in inland forests but can be viewed in sanctuaries in the shore villages. We walked among dozens of tortoises in open fields and swamps at Darwin Station, a research and breeding center on Santa Cruz.

The Galapagos are often called "the land that time forgot," and we found that a fitting description. The environment is primitive and pristine, and it was enriching, sometimes exhilarating to be immersed in the natural habitats of the islands' beautiful and unusual creatures.

Karen Walker is a bridge teacher, journalist and professional player. She and her husband Mike Halvorsen live in Champaign.

