

## North West Itinerary - Pristine and Born of Fire

Some highlights: Volcanoes, flightless cormorants and penguins, marine life and iguanas.

**TOUR-AT-A-GLANCE – Cruise only** (full itinerary details are found under the map below)

**Tuesday:** Travel to Galapagos. Embarkation - Santa Cruz Island: Mosquera. L, D.

**Wednesday:** Genovesa: Darwin Bay / Prince Phillip's Steps. B, L, D.

**Thursday:** Marchena: Punta Mejia / Playa Negra. B, L, D.

**Friday:** Isabela: Punta Albemarle / Punta Vicente Roca\*. B, L, D.

**Saturday:** Fernandina: Punta Espinosa / Isabela: Urbina Bay. B, L, D.

**Sunday:** Isabela: Elizabeth Bay / Punta Moreno. B, L, D.

**Monday:** Floreana: Asilo de la Paz, Cerro Alieri / Devil's Crown. B, L, D.

**Tuesday:** Santa Cruz highlands / disembarkation B, L.

\* Indicates visitor sites that are restricted to visits by small cruise ships only.

B = Breakfast, L = Lunch, D = Dinner.

## DETAILED ITINERARY

### DAY 1 – TUESDAY, SANTA CRUZ (INDEFATIGABLE)<sup>1</sup>

AM: FLIGHT TO BALTRA ISLAND, GALAPAGOS EMBARKATION

PM: LAS BACHAS, Santa Cruz Island

Up early this morning - a quick breakfast before the transfer to the airport. At the Quito airport you'll take your bags through the inspection for bio-control - please don't bring any organic matter to the islands (fruit etc...). The flight usually stops in Guayaquil, before heading off to Galapagos. Total transit time is about 2.5 hours. Upon arrival at Baltra Airport, you will pay your US\$100 National Park Entrance Fee. Your hand luggage will then be checked by the local Inspection and Quarantine staff again to ensure you have no organic matter. Exiting the arrival area, you will be met by the Samba's naturalist guide, who will assist you with the collection your luggage and will accompany you to the Samba.

After a light lunch, the Samba will navigate to Mosquera Islet, located between North Seymour and Baltra. It is one of the smallest Islands resulting from an uplift of sand, made up of coral reefs and rocks. It boasts one of the largest sea lion colonies in the Galapagos archipelago. There are occasional reports of Orca whales seen praying on the sea lion colony. You'll have the chance to jump into the Pacific for the first time - a great way to start your time in the islands.

Before dinner every night, your Naturalist Guide will re-cap the day and give a briefing on the next day's activities. During this briefing they will be describing the visitor sites you will see the following day, the wake-up call time, the types of landings, difficulty level, the required equipment (Eg hiking shoes and extra water), and approximately how long each activity will be. Feel free to ask questions during this time, in order to best prepare for the new day of your Galapagos adventure!

### DAY 2 - WEDNESDAY, GENOVESA (TOWER)

AM: DARWIN BAY

PM: PRINCE PHILIP'S STEPS

After an overnight navigation from Santa Cruz Island to Tower Island, you'll awaken to the cacophony of one of the largest tropical sea bird colonies on the planet. Disembarking at Darwin Bay, the first thing you'll notice are the cliff tops, decorated with frigate birds, red-footed boobies, Nazca boobies, swallow tailed gulls, tropic birds and many other pelagic

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<sup>1</sup> Islands have both English and Spanish versions for their names. We highlight the Spanish versions here as these reflect common usage today.

animals. Staring up the trail, the red-footed boobies are spotted displaying for potential mates as they collect nesting material and male great frigate birds are seen inflating their gulag sacks hoping to attract a mate while others play their favorite game: piracy. Darwin's finches, Galapagos doves and mocking birds stroll the area foraging for seeds and insects. The red mangroves, cactus and saltbushes contrast with the blue sky and the dark basaltic walls.

Following lunch, you'll climb Prince Philip's Steps. The steep ascent takes you 100 feet above sea level. At the summit, you may encounter the elegant silhouette of the red billed tropic bird and the aerobic Galapagos shearwater. Both interact with the precipice on fast approaches. The lava rock trail leads you through the endemic dwarf incense tree (*palo santo*) forest, where we'll encounter nesting red-footed "lancers" and many of their gannet-like relatives, the Nazcas, loudly claiming the earthen floor as their residence. The Palo Santo forest is dormant most of the year, and awakens only in the rainy season to infuse the air with its refreshing aroma. As you leave the forest, your breath may be taken away by the panoramic view of thousands of storm petrels flying erratically beyond the lava flows. This is the perfect scenario for the island's top predator to make a successful kill. The short-eared owl, known elsewhere around the world as a nocturnal predator, hunts in bright daylight in Genovesa. More cat than owl, it waits patiently outside lava tunnels and crevasses to capture the storm petrels as they leave their tunnel homes after feeding their young.

Snorkeling on Tower offers a view of a wide variety of tropical fish.

Evening briefing with your Naturalist Guide.

### DAY 3 – THURSDAY, MARCHENA (BINDLOE)

AM: PUNTA MEJIA

PM: PLAYA NEGRA

All other cruise ships travel back south after sailing to Genovesa; the Samba is the only one heading west-northwest. The Galapagos National Park Directorate has granted us the rare opportunity to visit Marchena's magical shorelines to snorkel, dinghy ride and kayak. The forbidding endless and untouched lava flows, where only scientists are allowed, has no fresh water and very little precious soil. The island's serenity is awakened by the murmur and surge of the Pacific swells and musical argument of the castaway sea lions. Punta Mejía is one of the best sites in the Archipelago to snorkel. The calm and clear deep blue water of the northwest coast, and the dark hostile topography of the location give the sensation of witnessing the beginning of our planet and its underwater world. Apart from great fish diversity, when we snorkel, we often see rays, reef sharks and sea turtles.

Navigating southwest for 45 minutes to Playa Negra is always an exciting experience. We've often been delighted during this transit by the play of bottle nosed dolphins, other cetaceans or

feeding frenzies. After an early afternoon snorkel around a recently formed lava grotto where marine iguanas feed, we will start a 5 to 6 hour sail to the west. As we get further away from the island the sea floor changes dramatically and we enter deep water, an oceanic drop-off. The Cromwell current, which arrives from the west from the very deep waters, brings many nutrients to the surface, contributing to an outburst of marine life. As a result, there are positive effects throughout the marine food chain and we have a good record of spotting whales and other ocean wanderers on this navigation. Whales or dolphins are never a guaranteed, but we will do our best to find them (we'll need your help!). If we do spot whales, we'll see what we can do to get a better view.

Evening briefing with your Naturalist Guide.

#### DAY 4 – FRIDAY, ISABELA (ALBEMARLE)

AM: PUNTA ALBEMARLE

PM: PUNTA VICENTE ROCA

Human history has left its footprint on this small corner of the Galapagos. Punta Albemarle, the most northerly point of Isabela, was one of the most important US radar stations in the Pacific. Designed to guard against an eventual Japanese attack on the Panama Canal, all that remains is a small and deteriorated building, symbolic of the boredom and routine that was the daily grind experienced by junior navy officers who manned this desolate outpost for rotating three week shifts - where, in the end, the Japanese never came.

In contrast to the calm of the radar station, the wildlife of Punta Albemarle gives the best example of constant struggle for survival, a fight where only the fittest continue. The recent lava flows are nesting grounds for the flightless cormorant, found only in Galapagos. The largest marine iguanas of Galapagos can also be found basking in the sun here. Because not many boats visit this site, the cormorants, which are very shy birds by nature, are totally indifferent to human presence as they build their bulky nests of seaweed. As the morning advances the iguanas reveal their adaptation as they wander along the shoreline to feed on green and red algae. With this fantastic setting, you are reminded that the only constant in these Islands is change.

Punta Vicente Roca offers an overwhelming diversity of geological formations. Located on the southwest end of Ecuador Volcano, only a few miles south of latitude 0°, the area is an outstanding example of how the Islands were formed and how the forces of change have transformed the landscape and shaped the wildlife over thousands of years. Vicente Roca is the home of tuff cones and lava dikes and is fertile ground for erosion and the disaster of collapse. We will look at the dramatic structures from our dinghies, as we also enjoy watching the Galapagos penguins, brown noddies, blue-footed boobies and other marine life. When the waters are calm enough, the snorkelling is fascinating. The walls of the tuff cones are full of

colorful invertebrates and rich, blooming algae gives us of the opportunity to witness numerous sea turtles feeding.

Evening briefing with your Naturalist Guide.

#### DAY 5 – SATURDAY, FERNANDINA (NARBOROUGH) AND ISABELA

AM: PUNTA ESPINOZA, Fernandina Island

PM: URBINA BAY, Isabela Island

Only 30,000-100,000 years old, Fernandina is the youngest island of the Archipelago. This immature shield volcano is a newborn in geological terms. Not even in your wildest imagination can you conjure up a better setting to witness the start of life on an island. The whole Island is covered with hostile, sterile lava fields. Life has taken root in only a few places. However, at Punta Espinoza the shoreline is teeming with life. Reptiles, birds and mammals all coexist in this tiny island of life. Marine iguanas, playful sea lions, hard-working flightless cormorants, Galapagos penguins, busy Sally light-foot crabs and much more. Don't forget to look around because the Galapagos Hawk, the resident predator, is always on the hunt. The site is a true cradle of evolution. Snorkeling with turtles, iguanas, cormorants and plenty of fish is the best way to refresh after the lava walk. The geologic hotspot under the Galapagos generates intense volcanic activity. The western islands are the youngest and most active of the Archipelago. Located in the center of Isabela, Alcedo Volcano is a reminder of how volatile these Islands are. On the western shoreline of Alcedo lays Urbina Bay. Here, in 1954, more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile (1 km) of new shoreline was created overnight by a sudden geological uplifting event. Many coral reef extensions were exposed to air and fish were suddenly left stranded. Evidence is still graphic today. The new land became a perfect nesting terrain for the most beautiful land dragon. The land iguanas of Isabela are the largest in the Galapagos and in Urbina the colorful population offers a great example of the tendency towards gigantism in isolated island ecosystems. The impressive yellow, orange/brown iguanas roam the low lands foraging for the flowers, fruits, leaves and shoots of their favorite plants. Reminding one of the Jurassic Period, when the rains arrive, it is possible to see the land iguanas sharing their habitat with another primitive looking reptile, the giant tortoise.

Evening briefing with your Naturalist Guide.

#### DAY 6 – SUNDAY, ISABELA

AM: ELIZABETH BAY

PM: PUNTA MORENO

Isabela Island constitutes almost half of the entire surface of the Archipelago. It is nearly 100 miles (160 km) long and offers a remarkable diversity of habitats. Shaped like a seahorse and with volcanoes over 5000 feet (1.5 km) high, it is also the birth place of vast mangrove extensions. Elizabeth Bay is the only place on Earth where mature tropical mangrove forests and penguins co-exist. The ecosystem is also the residence of spotted eagle rays, sea turtles and a nursery for fish and marine invertebrates. We'll opt for rowing our boats here instead of using the motors, so that we can take in the full display of life in its undisturbed condition. When you land on Punta Moreno you understand why the Spanish Bishop that discovered the Islands said: "It was as if God had decided to rain stones". When he first set foot on a lava field he struggled to find fresh water and in desperation was reduced to chew on cactus pads to quench his thirst. More than three centuries later a young Naturalist saw beyond the lava. Charles Darwin was amazed by the colonization of plants and the start of life proceeding on this terrain. He thought this process somehow provided clues to the origin of life on our planet. The mystery of mysteries...<sup>2</sup> The pioneer cactus growing over the lava landscape is contrasted with stunning oases. Where lava tunnel roofs have collapsed, brackish water accumulates to give life to greater flamingoes, moorhens, black-necked stilts and Galapagos Martins.

Evening briefing with your Naturalist Guide.

DAY 7 – MONDAY, FLOREANA

AM: ASILO DE LA PAZ, CERRO ALIERI

PM: DEVIL'S CROWN

After breakfast we land on Puerto Velasco Ibarra - this is where Charles Darwin was told by the governor at the time that the shape of tortoise shells differed from one island to the next... further piquing Darwin's curiosity. Here, you'll embark on a *chiva* (endemic transportation - making for unique pictures) to visit the highlands of Floreana. On the way to the humid zone we stop for a vigorous hike to the top of Cerro Alieri for breathtaking view the island. Thanks to goats, which used to roam the island, some of the rarest plants on earth live here, with only a handful of living individuals. You'll see a fantastic landscape decorated with lichens and epiphytes. The mysteries of this Island are hidden in the pirates' cave. At Asilo de Paz we will engage with the fascinating story of the Wittmers, Doctor Ritter and Dora, and the famous "disappearing" Baroness and her three lovers, who mostly died mysterious deaths. You might also learn about the major embarrassment caused to the famous trans-pacific reed-ship sailor, Thor Hyedrahl, when the locals decided to pull a prank on him...

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<sup>2</sup> "The natural history of these islands is eminently curious, and well deserves attention... Considering the small size of these islands, we feel the more astonished at the number of their aboriginal beings, and at their confined range... Hence, both in space and time, we seem to be brought somewhat near that great fact--mystery of mysteries--the first appearance of new beings on this earth..." Charles Darwin, "The Voyage of the Beagle".

In the afternoon we boat over to Devil's Crown for some excellent snorkeling, a submerged volcanic cone, with only partial remains of rim emerging from the sea. A combination of vertical submerged walls, varying sea depths, areas of protected waters, and areas subjected to marine currents have made for a diverse marine environment here, where many fish can be spotted, rays and sharks are not uncommon, and sea birds dive for prey.

Your last evening briefing with your Naturalist Guide.

#### DAY 8 – TUESDAY, SANTA CRUZ (INDEFATIGABLE)

##### AM: DISEMBARKATION, SANTA CRUZ HIGHLANDS

Visit the Highlands of Santa Cruz island. At 1800 feet (550 metres) the greenery offers the opportunity to admire the remnant of a Galapagos mature forest. The broccoli shaped Daisy trees of the genus *Scalesia* decorate a couple of extraordinary geological formations. Known as "Los Gemelos", these collapsed twin craters and their surroundings are the home of many Darwin's finches, mocking birds, vermilion flycatcher and a wonderful diversity of indigenous plants. If anyone is leaving the trip at this point, they will be taken to the airport.