

A cruise through the  
pure new world of the

# Galápagos Islands

Story and photography  
by Bill Schanen





was ready for the iguanas. All right, maybe I wasn't ready for such a grand assembly of iguanas that they were stacked in piles on lava the same carbon color as their skin.

Let's just say I expected an ample supply of lizards. And I wasn't surprised to share beaches with snorting sea lions or to stroll through veritable cities of nesting boobies. Nothing, though, prepared me for the meeting with the manta ray, an intimate encounter with a creature of such majestic size and carriage that it still seems like a dream vision from the cold currents of the Galápagos Islands.

It was no dream. The ray was real—I have witnesses. Four fellow snorkelers were with me in the swift water bending around an islet off the island of Isabela when the black and white giant glided up from the Pacific deep and with a grace that made us human swimmers appear hopelessly awkward passed almost close enough to touch, close enough for a good look at the two-foot long remora riding on the ray's shoulder. The consensus of the awe-struck group sputtering on the surface moments later was that the animal had a wing span of at least 20 feet.

In spite of all we know about the Galápagos—visitors were broadcasting their marvels long before Charles Darwin celebrated them in his writings about natural selection—the place's ability to surprise, as the ray proved, goes on undiminished. Another of the surprises yielded by our cruise through the archipelago was learning how challenging it is to sail in the Galápagos Islands.

I don't mean it's challenging to sail to the Galápagos. All that takes is some time and a good boat. The islands certainly aren't hard to find. Even if your GPS fetches up and you're only capable of a basic noon sight with a sextant, you can't miss them. They sit on the most prominent parallel of them all, the equator.

I don't mean it's hard to sail among the islands either. The weather is moderate, there's little fog, the water is generally deep and there are plenty of good anchorages. The problem is, the authorities discourage sailing among the islands by private boats.

Boats are welcome to stay at the inhabited islands, principally San Cristobal and Santa Cruz, but with byzantine regulations, exorbitant cruising fees and the cost of paying for the mandatory onboard certified naturalist and guide, the government of

Ecuador, owner of the Galápagos, sends a clear signal discouraging do-it-yourself explorers. And with good reason—the Galápagos are too precious, and vulnerable, to be tramped over by sightseers without expert guidance. Most cruising sailors get the point, park their boats, and book one of the excellent available touring vessels for a week or more.

That's the right way to do it, regardless of how you get there. We got to the Galápagos by commercial plane and then, in the crowded, eclectic anchorage at Puerto Baquerizo Moreno at the island of San Cristobal, boarded the boat that would take us to islands populated only by the animal immigrants that arrived on currents of water and air and adapted and thrived like nowhere else on earth.

Since my purpose for being in the Galápagos was to describe their wonders to the sailors who read this magazine, the plan was to explore the islands under sail. We arranged to be aboard the most impressive sailboat in the Galápagos fleet, the 140-foot, three-masted schooner *Alta*. Alas, as I said, sailing in the Galápagos is harder than you would think.

Our boat turned out to be not a three-masted, but a no-master, a 125-foot motoryacht of a certain age. *Alta* was still in a mainland

port in the last stages of a refit. She was scheduled to be ready for us but, Ecuador being situated deep in the Latin American mañana time zone, the work was lagging.

My credibility as a sailing correspondent aside, the failure of the *Alta* to appear didn't sit well with our mates on the voyage, 14 seasoned travelers who had counted on a natural history expedition that would also be a sailing adventure. There was a bit of grumbling, but all it took to quiet it was for our sturdy vessel,



Bitinia Espinoza, Galápagos National Park guide and naturalist in her element.

*Parranda*, to lift her anchor and steam into a world of such astonishing revelations that it made the mode of getting there a minor concern. Besides, we were assured *Alta* would meet us mañana or the next day.



Green rollers from the far Pacific break on the volcanic shore of a Galápagos island.



With or without sails, a sailing mind-set was helpful. For this was no lay-about cruise-ship vacation, but an island-hopping voyage of open-water passages, beach landings, treks across jagged volcanic landscapes, snorkeling in currents that were a veritable stew of aquatic animals and long sojourns among abundant and unafraid wildlife.

All of these experiences were enriched by the presence of Bitinia Espinoza, the National Park-certified naturalist assigned to *Parranda*. Native of the Galápagos, daughter of a fisherman, Biti led us to what were for her familiar sights and encounters but for us amazing discoveries. As we took them in, at first awed by and then accustomed to the innocently trusting nature of the wild creatures at our feet, Biti shared her encyclopedic knowledge of the birds, mammals, reptiles, fish and invertebrates that populate the islands of her homeland.

We settled into an agreeable routine of days that started with an early beach landing. Sometimes these took place on actual beaches—sandy, in calm, crescent-shaped bays. Other times it was a jumble of surf-battered rocks onto

which we scrambled over the bow of one of the husky 20-foot inflatables that Galapaguenos insist on calling “pangas,” even though they have nothing in common with the native-built skiffs that have gone by that name for eons.

world, and watched. In the inflatables, we explored partially submerged caves and deep-water shores built of massive spilled shards of volcanic matter to see miniature penguins, flightless cormorants and marine iguanas. In snorkeling gear, we swam with

turtles and more fish than I’ve seen on any tropical reef. And then it would be time for Biti’s cocktail-hour review of the ecological high points of the day’s activities in *Parranda*’s huge saloon, followed by evenings mellowed by tolerable Chilean wine and satisfying dinners served on the after deck.

Some of our stops had specialties—frigate birds on Genovesa, blue-footed boobies and Galápagos penguins on Isabella, marine iguanas on Fernandina. Others had a little, or a lot, of everything—from sea lions to Sally Lightfoot crabs.

On some islands the geology was as fascinating as the zoology.

Fernandina’s black lava

appeared so freshly minted it seemed it should have been smoking. Bartolome offered the towering volcanic cone called Pinnacle Rock at sunset. Near its base, from the inflatables, we watched the moon rise



*A sea lion ignores iguanas piled on a jagged shore, some nearly invisible on lava of the same carbon color as their skin.*

Ashore, we walked, always at a sedate pace so as not to step on a sunbathing iguana or booby chick or other residents of the islands that seemed to accept us as just another strange species adapting to their







*Red-footed booby*



*Sea lion pup*



*Baby albatross*



*Galápagos penguins*



and for an instant saw the orange orb stuck on its jagged point like an ornament.

Not a compact group of islands, the Galápagos sprawl over hundreds of square miles of the Pacific. *Parranda*, which cruised at about 14 knots, had plenty of miles to cover, and sometimes steamed through the night. Though conditions are usually pacific in this region of the Pacific, some of the between-island passages are exposed to the ocean swell. On an evening when *Parranda* got an early start on the long haul to Isabella, dinner ended with skidding wine glasses and flying silverware. Down below in our compact cabin that bumpy night, I felt at home, if not exactly comfortable—the thrum of the engine, the whiff of diesel fuel, the slap of the seas against the hull and the plunge and roll of the boat reminded me of delivering a sailboat to a race on a boisterous night. That touch of *déjà vu* was as close to sailing as I would get during this cruise.

Plenty of sailing has gone on in the Galápagos, of course. Long a crossroads for ships in need of provisions, they suffered at the hands of sailors and still pay a price for their depredations. Ancient graffiti carved in the soft rock of the cliffs overlooking Tagus cove on Isabella, now an historical curiosity rather than an environmental outrage, give testimony to the visits of sailors who all but wiped out the tortoise population and left behind the forebears of the goats that are regarded as a threat to the survival of some Galápagos species.

The Galápagos of today, safe from those who would plunder its resources, are,

frankly, overwhelming, at least when experienced in a tightly packed week—the abundance of life is almost too much to process. From a blur of astonishing images and sounds, a few stand out in unforgettable detail. I can't get over swimming with the giant ray. My wife Jean tells friends about the perfectly choreographed mating dance performed by a pair of albatrosses within a few yards of our astonished group. We both took home visions of landscapes and seascapes that have not changed since the earth was young and pure—of volcanic promontories, seabirds nesting in their fissures, albatrosses riding the currents overhead, great, green combers breaking on the black stone in explosions of spray.

In the end, though, the most powerful impression left by our Galápagos experience was the heartening realization that a place like this exists, and that it survives and thrives under the stewardship of a small South American country (with the help of UNESCO and other international agencies) in a world that has ruined so much of what was natural and original. Ultimately, what you take away from the Galápagos is an understanding that some things are right in the world.

In that context, it was hard to get too worked up about whether the boat that carried us through the Galápagos had sails or not. For the record, *Alta* finally appeared—in the harbor at San Cristobal the morning the cruise ended. I hitched a ride over to the stout 140-foot double-ender on a panga, and the captain was kind enough to take me for a short sail. So, dear readers, I can truly say I sailed in the Galápagos.





*A pair of boobies go about their domestic business without a care about a watching visitor, above. A schooner and the motoryacht Parranda, above left, are anchored in a bay formed by black volcanic rock. Spray explodes through a blow-hole, right.*

## To go to the Galápagos ...

involves a number of flights, a night in Quito, Ecuador, a stop in Guayaquil and ground transportation and tour boat connections in the Galápagos. A travel agent specializing in adventure travel can pull it all together.

One of them is Cregor Adventures representing Quasar Nautica, which has a fleet of seven tour vessels, four of them sailboats, in the Galápagos. The agency puts together Galápagos packages that can include airline connections, hotels in Quito, ground transportation in the Galápagos and the cruise through the islands.



*The 140-foot staysail schooner Alta is one of the tour boats in the Galápagos fleet.*

Overnight stays in Quito inbound and outbound are usually required, which is not a bad thing because the city is worth seeing, especially the old colonial city with its museums and cathedrals. Plus you can have your picture taken at the monument on the equator. Restaurants and shopping opportunities are abundant, good and cheap in Quito, and the American dollar is the official currency. It's worth it to book a guide for a city tour.

Peggy Cregor, a sailor and veteran of Galápagos exploring, can give good advice on what to pack for a Galápagos cruise. The simple answer is not much—everything is casual, in Quito and the islands, and the weather is moderate.

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