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Galápagos by Land: You've Never Seen the Islands This Way

By Ashlea Halpern | Oct 1, 2020



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Mohawked iguanas and blue-footed boobies welcome you to the Galápagos.

As Ecuador reopens to international visitors, we recall a trip earlier in 2020 that feels like a lifetime ago.

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Editor's note: In early March, AFAR editor at large Ashlea Halpern was swimming with sea turtles in the Galápagos at a time when echoes of "COVID shutdowns" were just starting to hit the United States. Ecuador announced its borders would close to all foreign travelers on March 15; after enduring a [headline-making COVID outbreak](#), the South American country reopened its international airports in July. The first travelers returned to the Galápagos on August 9, and they continue to tiptoe back (with proof of a [negative PCR result within 10 days of arriving](#)). Classic Journeys, which hosted Ashlea's trip, has created a "travel bubble" (inclusive of same-day PCR testing and "safe travels" protocols developed with an infectious disease doctor) to begin land-based Galápagos trips once again. You can find more information on its [blog](#).

Imagining my first trip to the Galápagos, I pictured myself paddling up to blue-footed boobies and clapping with glee at my first sea lion sighting. What I didn't envision was saving sea turtles.

The rescue operation unfolded during a [five-day multisport adventure](#) with [Classic Journeys](#), a La Jolla, California-based luxury tour operator that runs small group trips to more than 50 countries. Our day had been blissfully relaxing so far: We snorkeled with sea lions, swam on the tails of spiky marine iguanas, and watched two stingrays dance an underwater tango. But as we speed-boated back to Santa Cruz, one of our two basecamp islands for the duration of the trip, Captain Pedro noticed something odd in the distance.

He leapt into action, cutting the motor and hauling up a tangle of rope and fishing net attached to a buoy. I had no idea what was going on—until I saw an endangered green sea turtle the size of a semi-truck tire bound in the net. The poor thing looked terrified, but the captain knew just what to do: With surgical precision, he and his crew flipped the turtle on its back, slit the knotting with a belt knife, and gently shimmed a large fishing hook out of its flipper. A deckhand named Eric kissed his fingers and tapped the turtle's chest—"buena suerte," he said—and then heave, ho! Back into the water the turtle went.

Their work wasn't done. A second turtle was struggling to free itself further down the line. Cue the same action sequence: haul, flip, slice, shimmy, kiss, swoosh—back into the water he goes. I did nothing meaningful to help, other than get out of their way, but what a privilege it was to watch this rescue and know that I was traveling with the kind of company that sees protecting the environment as both a spiritual calling and a moral duty.



Courtesy of Classic Journeys

Encountering a giant Galápagos tortoise on Santa Cruz Island

Most travelers choose to experience the UNESCO-protected archipelago and marine reserve via liveaboard boats, but a land-based Galápagos excursion is arguably more sustainable. Travelers who sleep in island hotels have a lower carbon footprint than those constantly at sea; they also tend to engage more with locally owned businesses, including restaurants, shops, and outfitters. (Many liveaboards in the Galápagos are foreign owned, so the money doesn't always trickle back down to residents.)

Land-based tourism is catching on, too. When Classic Journeys guide Sebastian Jurado started leading trips here 20 years ago, there were three brick-and-mortar hotels. Now there are nearly 50. My room at [Iguana Crossing](#) on Isla Isabela was wall-to-wall windows with a spectacular view of the beach. There was a swimming pool and the Pozas Salinas de Puerto Villamil nature preserve next door, complete with a flamboyance of pink flamingos. While ship-based guests are isolated overnight off the coast, I could wake up for a crack-of-dawn stroll and see tubby sea lions in repose on park benches and mohawked iguanas lurking in the shadows.

And though my trip was land based, I still logged plenty of water time. Before the rescue, Captain Pedro ferried us to a snorkeling spot near a colony of sea lions. One guest, armed with a GoPro, inched too close and the harem leader plunged into the water, swimming loop-de-loops around him with bared teeth. I squealed through my snorkel and stroked away fast. That's when I encountered another sea turtle, arcing gracefully through the hazy teal water. We swam together for 15 minutes—just the two of us, submerged in nothingness, rays of sunlight filtering down from above. At that moment, I finally understood why my hippie neighbor stuck a *Save the Turtles* bumper sticker on her station wagon.

From Isabela, we piled into kayaks and paddled out to Las Tintoreras, a cluster of islets where Galápagos penguins reside. Passing half a dozen liveboards and tourists packed shoulder to shoulder on Zodiacs, I felt drunk with freedom. Blue-footed boobies perched on jagged lava rocks cocked their heads upon our approach. The penguins splashed playfully in the equatorial water; I was also taken by swooping pelicans with jowls like Mitch McConnell, gulping down chrome-colored fish as long as my forearm. Snorkeling at Las Tintoreras, we were blessed with a panoply of bicolor parrotfish, king angels, and barracuda moving like slow-motion missiles.

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“It’s a wild zoo!” bellowed Sebastian Estrada, a naturalist guide for [Galápagos National Park](#) and the Isabela-born grandson of the former president of Ecuador. Here’s a guy who has seen these fish hundreds (thousands?!) of times, yet he’s as enamored with the prismatic spectacle as a toddler chomping into his first doughnut. I was equally tickled by a raft of sea lions who’d taken over an abandoned fishing boat. As one sunned himself lazily on the stern, another vaulted his body out of the water and thudded onto the deck like a bag of wet garbage. It was the ultimate buddy comedy and I could’ve happily watched them for hours. That’s another special thing about a land-based Galápagos trip: While others are clambering onto their ships for dinner, we move at a leisurely pace, savoring the scenery.



Photo by Ashlea Halpern

Sea lions, living their best life

Back on Isabela, Jurado and Estrada led our group on a 12-mile hike up the 500,000-year-old Sierra Negra, one of the most active volcanic craters in the world. Trekking to the rim, we saw the landscape shift from lush tropical greenery to a vast desert of postapocalyptic blackness. Plumes of steam rose off the caldera's inky floor. At the precipice, Estrada slipped his fingers between his lips and blew hard. We listened as his whistle traveled in a circle around the abyss. Hobbling with walking sticks, specks of flesh crossing a barren landscape, I nearly pulled a neck muscle trying to take it all in.

Another land-based highlight was a visit to [El Chato 2 Ranch](#), a guava farm turned turtle reserve in Santa Cruz. El Chato is a beneficiary of the Charles Darwin Foundation's [Galápagos Verde 2050](#) project, which focuses on the ecological restoration of degraded ecosystems. Traipsing through the mist and mud, this is where I met my first giant turtle: a 300-pound female chomping on wet grass, unfazed by the paparazzi. Deeper in the reserve, I spotted a few males twice her size. Two were facing off over a mud pit, straining their necks like giraffes and doing their best Darth Vader hisses. After the ranch, we stopped at [El Trapiche Ecológico Galápagos](#), a 50-acre working hacienda. Farmer Adriano Cabrera gave us the grand tour: Here's where he grows the bananas, cocoa, and coffee; here's where he distills the moonshine.

During my last hours in Santa Cruz, I explored the bustling town of Puerto Ayora on foot. I saw men playing *ecuavóley*, an Ecuadorian twist on volleyball. I browsed handmade souvenirs at [Exótico Ecuador](#), scoring a trio of chocolate bars from [Kallari](#), a co-op of 850 indigenous Kichwa farmers from Ecuador's Napo province, as well as a *mucahua* bowl painted with the hair of indigenous Quichua Canelo women. I even paid my respects to [Lonesome George](#), a taxidermied tortoise from Pinta Island, at the storied [Charles Darwin Research Station](#). When George slipped through the pearly gates in 2012, he was the last known turtle of his species.

After wandering through [Los Kioskos](#), an outdoor market lined with vendors grilling googly-eyed fish, I climbed to the top floor of the [Santa Cruz Brewery](#). Whispery pink clouds streaked across the sky and motorbikes rumbled on the cobblestoned streets below. In the distance, a dozen ships bobbed on the horizon, filled with guests who'll never see the islands from this vantage point.

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