

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

Experience a different kind of island time with Classic Journeys'
Multi-Sport Island-Based Trip in the Galápagos Islands

Written by Bridget Williams

The first tourists arrived in the Galápagos Islands via cruise ship in 1934, initiating a travel trend that has persisted for decades until operators like Classic Journeys chose to defy the status quo and offer island-based tours of the islands. "It really comes down to the amount of quality time you get to spend engaged in activities, and shuttling back-and-forth to your boat really cuts into that," explained Edward Piegza, who founded Classic Journeys 25 years ago. He added that his company has "kissed a lot of frogs" to assemble island-based tours that use the luxury of time to go beyond where boat tourists tread.

I unwrapped the gift of surplus seconds on my second day in the Galápagos. Rising before the crack of dawn at my oceanfront hotel on Isabela Island, I set out to do some solo exploring with a run along the beach and into the national park. Even before the first boat-based tourists were loading into inflatable boats for transport to shore, I was hurdling the island's famous giant tortoises. These

behemoths, the longest-lived of all vertebrates, appeared unphased by my presence as they languidly chewed tiny green "poisoned" apples along an aptly named tortuga allée. At this early hour, the humidity hung on my shoulders like a weighted blanket, and I was relieved that the sound of bird calls and the rhythmic beating of waves on the beach was enough to mask my labored breathing. By the time our scheduled itinerary kicked off at 9 am, I was elated that I'd already enjoyed my fair share of awe-inducing moments.

Within the first few hours on a Classic Journeys-led trip, it's easy to see why the company was named the *World's Best Tour Operator* in 2019, by the readers of *Travel + Leisure* (the second time in the past five years). The secret sauce ladled over its diverse menu of tours around the globe includes heavy hyper-local involvement, which Piegza likens to applying the farm-to-table concept to travel. From native guides to locally-owned hotels and restaurants, guests receive a comprehensive cultural immersion at every step.



Our Galápagos adventure commenced at Seymour Airport on arid Baltra Island, home to a United States Army Air Force base during World War II. Sebastian, our primary guide for the trip, awaited us. The Quito, Ecuador native said he fell in love with guiding at age 17 and feels lucky to have spent the past two decades doing what he loves. Attentive and affable, we knew right away that we were in good hands. A short, scenic small craft flight took us to Isabela Island, where we met another Sebastian, one of the island's 2,000 residents. He introduced us to his infectious and endearing enthusiasm with a booming "Hello my beautiful travelers!" as soon as we deplaned.

Ninety-seven percent of the Galápagos is a national park, and humans have only been living on its five habitable islands since the beginning of the 19th century. On Isabela, buildings reflect island life where resources are scarce (there's no fresh water), and the most is made of what's available. Just outside the heart of town, Iguana Crossing, our home base for the first part of our trip, is a family-owned and eco-friendly beachfront hotel that provides quick access to the aforementioned national park trail.

Classic Journeys offers several versions of their island-based Galápagos trips, from a five-day multi-sport jaunt to a nine-day culture and walking tour that includes a stop at Machu Picchu.

What I loved most about my small-group multi-sport adventure was the ability to actively explore both above and below the water. From coming face-to-face with a sea lion in the water near Santa Fe Island (who let us know quite emphatically that we were getting a little too close to his pup), to hiking 11 miles round-trip to the top of the six-mile-wide crater of Volcan Sierra Negra (one of the most active calderas on the planet), the itinerary accommodated our group's varied interests and physical abilities.

During the volcano hike, where we observed boat-based tourists turning around at the half-way mark due to time constraints, we stopped periodically to taste wild plants and admire a landscape that went from a scrubby beach, up to a lush jungle, and topped out with at a vast lunar-like lava field. As someone who has set off on more than one outdoor adventure woefully underprepared, I appreciated that the guides think of (and carry) everything, from bottled water to fresh aloe vera.

Adventures in the field are supplemented by opportunities to discuss local culture, politics, and quality of life with our guide and fellow guests. Before a dinner at Iguana Crossing, we enjoyed a ceviche-making demonstration and learned that Ecuadorans garnish the traditional Latin American dish with popcorn.



The affable Adriano Cabrera demonstrates how donkey power, elbow grease, and ingenuity are employed to produce everything from coffee to moonshine at El Trapiche.



A giant tortoise at the El Charo Reserve on Santa Cruz Island.



Snorkeling, exploring, and a barbecue on the boat at Santa Fe Island.



Guide Sebastian explaining the topography of the Sierra Negra shield volcano, one of the largest and most active volcanoes in the Galápagos.



Ceviche at Hotel Iguana



Catch of the day on Santa Cruz.



Food stalls on Santa Cruz Island.



Blue-footed boobies are one of three booby species found on the Galápagos Islands.



A marine iguana on Santa Fe Island.



A pink-hued lake in the national park on Isabela Island.




Options to extend your adventures in Ecuador can include a visit to La Danesa, a working dairy, cacao farm and upscale hacienda about an hour drive from Guayaquil.

We island-hopped from Isabela to Santa Cruz via private boat. The two-hour ride was quite scenic and relatively smooth, which was a great relief for someone like me who is prone to seasickness. Unique lodging continued at the Angermeyer Waterfront Hotel, accessible via a five-minute water taxi from Santa Cruz across Puerto Ayora Bay. While there are a host of upscale lodging options in this high cotton district, only Angermeyer can lay claim to being operated by the first person born on nearby Baltra Island. Teppy Angermeyer's family relocated to the island from Germany in the 1940s to escape the war. "There was literally nothing here," he said while recounting the realities of a subsistence existence. Today Teppy's father's boat is permanently "docked" on the hillside, where it's now into a one-of-a-kind suite. My favorite spot on the property was a 1960s era grotto, where groovy vibes are served up alongside a hearty breakfast buffet.

At the El Chato Reserve on Santa Cruz, we walked alongside giant tortoises, who generally went about chomping grass as if we weren't there. Far lusher than Isabela, the fertile volcanic soils are ideal for growing coffee and sugarcane. Stopping at El Trapiche, an agritourism destination, it's hard not to be smitten by the charm of farmer Adriano Cabrera. He demonstrated how donkey power, elbow grease, and ingenuity are employed to produce everything from coffee to moonshine. Picking up a few bags of coffee beans allowed me to recount this exceptional experience with my morning cup of joe long after returning home.

While the Galápagos is a protected ecological wonder, it is not entirely immune from destructive practices, as we learned during a snorkeling trip around Santa Fe Island. En route, our eagle-eyed captain spotted something bobbing in the water and quickly realized it was a sea turtle entangled in an illegal dragnet. The crew promptly sprang into action, and in a whirl of activity that had all of our hearts pumping, gingerly freed the traumatized turtle who swiftly swam away.

The boat captain (yet another Sebastian), whose family once fished these waters for a living, estimated that the turtle might have spent months in this precarious position based on the net's condition. "Because of guests like those from Classic Journeys who want to really experience the wildlife in these waters, the octopus I used to catch and sell to a restaurant is now my business partner," he explained. "I can take people to snorkel to his hidden places, and he reveals himself to us."

Following the afternoon's excitement, we enjoyed a barbeque lunch on the boat, taking time to wade into the azure waters and onto dry land to ogle a species of iguana unique to this island. Reflecting on the adrenaline-packed day, which came at the end of our trip, Piegza said, "I have the best job in the world, creating trips of a lifetime, and Classic Journeys has the wherewithal to make that statement more than just a tagline." 

For more information about Classic Journeys, visit classicjourneys.com.