



Jenny Geal, one of Audley's Galapagos Islands specialists, recounts a cruise she took in the archipelago.

I arrived in the Galapagos blinking in the equatorial sunshine and handed over my passport for the colourful stamp which announced that I was in the famous archipelago. Mine was a three-night cruise aboard the luxury motor vessel the Beluga, and while I would have loved to stay longer, and advise those who can to do so, I certainly had the opportunity to immerse myself fully in Galapagos life.

I was welcomed aboard in time for the first of many plentiful, fresh and delicious meals, and had the chance to meet the fifteen other passengers and settle into my cabin before making the first excursion that afternoon. Having sailed the short distance to North Seymour Island during lunch, we donned our life jackets and were helped into the pangas, a routine that we would quickly become familiar with. For two absorbing hours, we tiptoed and whispered our way around the island on the narrow trails, picking our way past the unabashed animals, and marvelling at the peculiar sky-pointing dance of the blue footed boobies, the extraordinary inflated red pouch of the great frigate bird, and the incredible camouflage of the land iguanas. Sylvia, our guide, drew our attention to eggs waiting to hatch, named plants, animals



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and birds, and pointed out sea lions basking with their pups on the rocks below us.

We sailed south overnight to Espanola, which was conspicuously greener than North Seymour, due to the fact that it is located furthest south

and isn't shaded by another island. One of my favourite things about the Galapagos was the fact that each volcanic outcrop we visited was astonishingly different from the last, even housing species endemic to that particular island, and revealing dramatically varying landscapes from one side to another. After a gentle wake up call and a hearty breakfast (long time since dinner), we were back in the pangas and this time made a wet, rather than a dry, landing, paddling through the shallow waters to shore.

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Espanola boasts beautiful sandy beaches, dotted with sunbathing sea lions, and as we splashed ashore, we sent marine iguanas, lava lizards and even Galapagos penguins scurrying and diving for shelter. Here we saw Nazca boobies, Galapagos doves, and lingered at the albatross colony. Espanola is the only island on which the waved albatross, the largest bird in the Galapagos, can be found, as it returns here between April and December every year to breed after six months spent on the wing. Following lunch and siesta, most of the party were soon collecting masks and flippers and setting off for the afternoon's optional snorkelling trip. This truly is a memorable highlight for anybody who enjoys swimming – it needn't be at all strenuous, and even a leisurely float around the panga opens up to you the most breathtaking world, for this is where the Galapagos Islands really come alive. I swam through shoals of vivid fish of all shapes and sizes, spotted several rays, watched turtles dip and weave their way below me, and had to keep surfacing to laugh at the playful antics of the sea lions as they swooped amongst us.

Day three took us to neighbouring Floreana, where our morning excursion led us to the 'green' beach, so-called because of the odd effect of crystals in the sand, and on to the flamingo lagoon. Floreana too has beautiful stretches of pristine, deserted coastline, but also



has a fascinating human story, for this island was once inhabited by a handful of Europeans, whose struggle to survive in the wilderness and to live harmoniously with each other led to mysterious disappearances and deaths of all but a couple. Believe what you will, but the story is gripping and you must ask your guide about it while you explore the nooks and crannies which feature in the folklore.

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That afternoon we visited the western side of the island and historic Post Office Bay. Here a wooden barrel erected in 1793 was used as a post box by passing ships and whalers, and

tradition now dictates that if you leave an unstamped postcard or letter here, it will eventually be personally delivered by anybody living locally who picks it up. Evening saw us enjoying cocktails on the sundeck with the crew and group, many of whom were staying on for the full week's cruise, and we all made use of the crystal clear air to stargaze and keep our eyes peeled for whales and dolphins around the boat.

My departure from the Beluga the next morning was a very reluctant one although I was soon consoled by a visit to the highlands of the principal inhabited island of Santa Cruz. Here our group explored the lava pit craters and the Giant Tortoise farm, where the majestic reptiles roam freely and allow you to crouch alongside them for photographs. Later, as I flew back to the mainland, I reflected that the Galapagos Islands are truly a unique destination and one that I would recommend to anyone.



Travel File

There are a large number of boats operating in the Galapagos of varying style and quality. Audley's specialists can help you choose the right boat, and select the most appropriate itinerary. Galapagos cruises using a good quality boat (we only use tourist class and above) start from £2,200 per person. To discuss the many options, and for a copy of our brochure devoted to the Galapagos, please call Jenny, Rhian or Matthew on 01869 276 210.