

# Journey to the Galapagos | Trip Report

## Jan. 15 - 23, 2023 | by Dan Donaldson



**With guide Dan Donaldson, local guides I-Love and Karina (in Galapagos), and 8 participants: Bill, Deborah, Ella, Gary, Glenn, Jean, Lorraine and Tracey**



Our January 2023 journey aboard the beautiful ship Origin, along the Southern Galapagos Islands Route was an incredible experience with perfect weather nearly the entire trip and amazing birding at every destination. Land birding was quintessential Galapagos birding with Waved Albatross, three species of Boobies, three species of Mockingbirds, six species of Galapagos Finches, American Flamingos, and many species of seabirds. Frigatebirds were a constant presence around ship and on land. Snorkeling was delightful with plenty of aquatic wildlife including terrific looks at sea turtles, marine iguanas, White-tipped Reef Sharks, Spotted Eagle-rays, and even Hammer-head Sharks, 30 species of reef fish and many experiences with Galapagos Penguins and Galapagos Sea Lions.

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## **Pre-Trip Jan. 14                      Antisanna Volcano | Andean Condor**

This pre-trip is arranged for the participants that have come in a day early. It's a wonderful day exploring the Andes Mountains, searching for Andean Condors, hummingbirds, seedeaters, and other high elevation specialists that we would never have a chance to see in the Galapagos. With our bagged breakfasts in hand, we meet our local guide Andrea at 7:00 a.m. for our early departure to Antisana. We're headed to explore the high paramo, unique grassland habitat found between 10,000 feet (tree line) and 16,000 feet (permanent snow line) occurring only in the Andes Mountain range. We boarded a comfortable bus and began our journey high into the Andes. We left in the rain, heading through the busy city of Quito with its over 2 million residents. Quito sits in a valley at over 9,000 feet bordered to the east and west by mountain ranges that rise to 15,000 feet. Our bus climbed through the outskirts of Quito, through small villages and mountain forests, climbing ever higher through the amazing agriculture fields on the mountain slopes. Potatoes and beans are the most prevalent crop here, and the forever green cattle pastures extend skyward on the steepest of slopes.

Our first birding stop was an early morning visit at a local restaurant, that we'll visit later for lunch, Tambo Condor, for a quick break and to check out the magnificent valley it overlooks. Here we quickly observed our first hummingbirds of the trip. Shining Sunbeams, Black-tailed Trainbearers, and Sparkling Violetears were patrolling feeders and Eared Doves picked at the earth below. In the fields around the restaurant, we observed several Great Thrush, Black Flowerpiercers and the occasional Andean Gull flyby. Scouring the high cliffs across the valley, we search the white-washed areas for Andean Condors. We think we may have some, so we leave to head down the road a bit to Mirador Isco, Reserva Chakana, where there's a large viewing platform that overlooks the meadow valley below and the towering cliffs across the valley. This was also the location where we got our first looks at the quest bird of this trip, the Andean Two were seen on cliffs in the distance here. We quickly boarded our bus to get to our next location for much better views. A short drive up the road brought us to Reserva Antisanilla-Mirador with a viewing platform overlooking a grassy meadow with views across the valley to the cliffs where condors nest and roost. We quickly scanned and found five condors on the cliffs, 2 adults, 3 juveniles. We also saw several more throughout the day. The meadows here are very productive for hummingbirds and seed eating birds. We had wonderful looks at a wide variety of small grassland birds and hummingbirds including Tyrian Metaltails, Great Sapphirewings, Giant Hummingbirds, Paramo Sedge Wrens, Yellow-breasted Brushfinches, and Plain-colored Seedeaters. Driving on higher into the



paramo, we made many stops along the roadway to scan the open grasslands and creek valleys. Driving the plains-like region we find Carunculated Caracaras flying and walking through grasslands. This drive that took us quite close to the Antisana Volcano, but the low cloud cover blocked most of our view, but we could manage to see the glacier ice near the base. Experiencing glaciers just miles from the equator is an interesting experience. Driving on we passed wet meadows and valleys and took stops to view more Andean Gulls, Ecuadorian Hillstars, both Stout-billed and Chestnut-winged Cinclodes, Plain-capped Ground, and Brown-backed Chat Tyrants, and had wonderful looks at Paramo Pipits performing their courtship flights and songs. It was here, while observing Andean Lapwings that we had a wonderful experience of having a flock of Andean Ibis fly in and flair out for a landing right in front of us. Fantastic Pictures!

Our turnaround spot for the day was Laguna de Mica, a beautiful high-mountain lake that serves as a drinking water source for the city of Quito. This was our chance to spot some waterfowl on this trip and we sure did. A short hike down a footpath from the parking lot, where we found Plumbeous Sierra Finches, and allowed for better views of the lake. We had good looks at Andean Teal, Andean Duck, Yellow-billed Pintail, and Slate-colored Coot. Had one of several Black-chested Buzzard Eagle sightings and Variable Hawk perch on a nearby rock outcrop, which from, about 30 minutes later, Tawny Antpittas began calling and emerged for a quick sighting. On the drive back down from Laguna de Mica, for lunch, we were amazed to come across an Andean Fox trotting not far off the road. We returned to Tambo Condor Restaurant for a wonderful Ecuadorian lunch and to watch the hummingbirds. From the deck, we got wonderful views and photos of Giant Hummingbirds, and added a few new species for the day, Cinereous Conebills, Hooded Siskins, Black Vultures, and a mob of Black Flowerpiecers. We garnered 40 species on this first bonus day at Antisana with Ecuadorian Hillstars, Giant Hummingbirds, Black-winged Doves, and of course, Andean Condors as our standout birds of the day.

Bonus - Upon arrival in Ecuador we learned that our entire group had been upgraded to Ecoventura's Origin ship. A new and much larger ship, but with the same 20 passenger capacity. So we had a little luxury added to our Galapagos adventure.



**Sun., Jan 15**

## **Transfer to Galapagos | Pto Baquerizo | Kicker Rock**

We departed our hotel early in order to arrive at the airport at 7:00 am for our 2-hour flight to the Galapagos, with a quick stop in Guayaquil. With the roar of the engines, we're off on our adventure of a lifetime. As our plane descended and the Galapagos Island of San Cristobal came into view, we got our first glimpses of the island's incredible volcanic landscape. Once on the ground, we taxied through cacti and coastal scrub forest to the tarmac in front of the airport. The doors opened and the warm Pacific air rushed in. We deplaned on the tarmac, walking down the stairs across the tarmac to the airport. We got our official Galapagos stamp on our passports in customs, picked up our luggage and met our local guides as we exited the airport.

We were bussed the short way through Puerto Baquerizo Moreno to the marina where our pangas (dingies) were waiting for us. At the marina, we immediately began our Galapagos experience – the area was alive with wildlife. Frigatebirds were soaring on the breeze overhead and Blue-footed Boobies were diving for food in the turquoise waters of the bay. As we walked from the sidewalk onto the pier, we passed over a small tide pool filled with young Galapagos Sea Lions frolicking with each other or any item they can pick up and play with. The surrounding rocks were covered with brilliantly colored Sally Light Foot crabs that must mind their personal space between them and the seals lest they become a toy. With our binoculars and cameras already out, it took us 20 minutes to walk the hundred or so yards to the pangas with so much to stop and see. Galapagos Sea Lions are in charge here and many we up on the dock, sleeping on benches and along our walk to our pangas. We have our first experience loading onto a panga, something we'll be experts at soon enough. Once aboard, we motored off to the beautiful ship the Origin where the captain and crew were waiting our arrival. Here we were introduced to the crew, the boat and our activities for the rest of the day. We unpacked our luggage, settled in and had our first meal (lunch) on the sundeck.

We then motor to Kicker Rock, a large volcanic rock jutting out of the ocean a few miles offshore. We stay onboard the Origin, but this gave us our first experience with seabird colonies as Nazca Boobies could easily be seen on the cliffs and flying to and from the island. A rare treat was the arrival of a Peregrine Falcon, which our local guides have seen only one other time. We spend about 90 minutes here and then start our slow motor towards Punta Pit and Cerro Brujo, where we'll spend our day tomorrow. We have dinner on the move and



along with the upgrade of our ship, we had quite the upgrade for our dining experiences this trip. Our chefs are Relais & Chateaux trained and certified. Yes, we were spoiled and ate very well on this trip.

## **Mon. Jan 16                      San Cristobal | Punta Pit**

We opted to do a panga ride around Punta Pit and its many outcrop islands. We still had a great time as we were soon surrounded by Galapagos Shearwaters streaming in and out of their nesting colonies on the islands. On one of the small islands, we had a wonderful sighting of a Galapagos Short-eared Owl. These owls were not expected on our southern route for this trip, so finding this one was a real surprise. Perhaps it made it's way south to specifically visit this shearwater breeding colony in search of prey.

Back on board we motored through lunch, passing through several large flocks (hundreds) of Wilson's Phalaropes resting and feeding out in open water, and returned to San Cristobal Island, Puerto Moreano for our first land excursion. Once on the island, we boarded a bus to tortoise farm/rescue center for the San Cristobal Tortoise. Arriving at the the center we were immediately greeted by Medium Ground Finches, very cooperative San Cristobal Mockingbirds. Few people realize that it was the endemic mockingbirds, and not the finches, that provided the spark for Darwin to contemplate the transmutation of isolated species.

The center specializes in the captive breeding and raising of their endemic San Cristobal Giant Tortoise, which are released into the wilderness areas of the islands. Their work, along with the national park has increased the population of the tortoises from just a few hundred to over 6000 today. After touring and birding the center grounds, we return for another fantastic dinner aboard the Origin, have our daily debrief with our guides I-Love and Karina, and do our bird list for the day.



**Tues., Jan. 17**

## **Espanola Island**

Last night while we were sleeping, we motored south to Espanola Island. We woke to beautiful sunshine and flat calm seas. After enjoying a fantastic breakfast served on the sun deck, we board our pangas and head to Punta Suarez for our morning adventure exploring the beaches and breeding bird cliffs of the island. It's a dry landing and after making our way on shore we are immediately greeted by the infamous Galapagos Marine Iguanas, Galapagos Sea Lions and the island endemic Espanola Mockingbird. We pick our steps carefully as iguanas are strewn about the trail and stairs as we make our way down to the beach. We got to the beach just in time to see a large green sea turtle returning from laying eggs, making her way across the beach and back into the surf. The breeding birds on the Espanola were fantastic and we were very fortunate to find the last breeding pair of Waved Albatross with a very large and Dodo like chick just off the trail. Blue-footed and Nazca Boobies are breeding here too, along with Swallow-tailed Gulls. We were able to view and photograph chicks of all these species as well as some spectacular Blue-footed Bobbies making coordinated plunges for fish time and time again. We also had our first encounters with the very large Galapagos Hawk here on Espanola.

In the afternoon we had an optional kayaking and paddle boarding session at Gardners Inlet where we had a wonderful experience paddling along the shoreline surrounded by Galapagos Shearwaters, Brown Noddies, and boobies flying to and from their nesting locations. Later in the afternoon we our first snorkeling session of the trip at Gardner Bay. It being our first session it was a shallow walk-off-the-beach session where we all had a chance to familiarize ourselves with the equipment and rules for our snorkeling sessions this week. We were very fortunate to have I-Love as a guide as he is a master dive instructor and quickly made everybody very comfortable in the water. As with all of our snorkeling sessions, we were greeted with snacks and hot chocolate when we returned.

We have some time here for late afternoon beach exploration on our own, beach snorkeling, swimming in the incredible turquoise waters along with Galapagos Sea Lions or the Green Sea Turtles that are staging here waiting for darkness before coming ashore. The late evening light is amazing, and the photographers of the group had no shortage of birds as they were now much more active in the cooler evening temperatures. Galapagos Flycatchers, Galapagos Mockingbirds, Yellow Warblers, Small Ground Finches, Sanderlings, Galapagos Hawks hunting lava lizards, and Striated Herons (lava Heron) we all active around the beach. Of course we had another fantastic dinner while anchored in Gardner Bay and then motored into the sunset toward to Floreana Island.



## Wed., Jan. 18                      Floreana Island

It was a wet landing this morning on Floreana Island where we spent the morning exploring the beaches and the coastal and arid forest zones of Punta Cormorant. We first hiked from the landing beach, along the mangrove up and over a forested ridge that revealed a small, protected beach on the other side. We hear and see many Yellow Warblers, small ground finches, a new Darwin Finch here this morning – Woodpecker Finch. Their distinctive “chenk-chenk” call alerting us to their presence. We observed and photographed them feeding for quite a while but didn’t get to see them using a stick or cactus thorn as a tool.

Arriving at the beach we could see that sea turtles were obviously here last evening as we could see many disturbed areas in the dunes with plenty of turtle tracks up and down the beach. Wandering Tattlers were active here and seemed to always prefer to hunt in the jagged lava rocks in the surf. Ruddy Turnstones actively hunted for insects and other food items up on the organic debris line on the beach. We turn back over the ridge line and head to a large inland salt pond that is known for American Flamingos. Their brilliant pink plumage is not hard to see in this arid habitat and we find 4 individuals immediately first from a distance, but the trail we’re walking takes us closer where we can also see White-cheeked Pintails and Semipalmated Plovers and Least Sandpiper also feeding nearby. Our sunny and hot excursion has us ready for lunch so we head back to the beach and board our pangas and return to the Origin.

In the afternoon we deep water snorkel along the cliffs of Corona del Diablo (Devil’s Crown), a sunken volcanic crater that has just the points of the crown sticking up in a large circle that we snorkel through. We’re dropped off just outside the crown and let the current take us into the crater. We’re in deep water and immediately see a squadron of Spotted Eagle-Rays that we swim with as long as we could. Below us we spotted a group of 6 Hammer-head sharks that didn’t stay long, presumably heading to deeper water. The fish are much larger here. Species we say earlier that were only inches long in the shallows, are now 1 foot or more long. Everything was just bigger here as species tend to move to deeper waters as they grow. Our pangas were waiting for us on the other side of the formation. This was a site we didn’t want to leave, but swimming in the deep currents is work and we were ready for a break. We returned to the Origin for a well-deserved snack and some downtime on the sun deck. Our late afternoon excursion had us back on Floreana to visit the famous Post Office Barrel, that whalers would use to get mail to and from Europe. It’s a system that still works today but for park visitors that



can leave post cards in the barrel for future visitors to sort through and hand deliver them back in their home towns.

We had a surprise marriage proposal by two wonderful Brits that were on the cruise with us. The crew set up Champaign picnic spot for them high on a cliff overlooking the mangrove cove we toured by Panga. The accepted proposal was the beginning of an incredible evening on board with live music, dancing and celebration. It was an amazing evening.

## **Thurs., Jan. 19                      Santa Cruz Island | Puerto Ayora | Lava Tunnel | Giant Tortoise Ranch | Darwin Station Headquarters.**

This morning we awoke anchored off Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island. After breakfast we were on our pangas headed to Puerto Ayora where we boarded busses to take us up into the high mountain forest areas to visit Rancho Primicias, A Galapagos Tortoise Reserve. Our first stop was at Los Gemelos (The Twins) where two very large lava tube collapses have formed two very large craters that extend down vertically for a couple hundred feet. Now covered by mature Scalesia Forest the area is a great birding spot as well. The Scalesia Forest is a cool and damp habit that has largely Giant Daisy trees covered with dripping mosses. During our short one-hour hike around the twins and nearby forest trails we observed several of Darwins Finches including Green Warbler Finch, Woodpecker Finch, Small Tree Finch Common Cactus Finch, and Small and Medium Ground Finches.

Back on board our bus, we head to Rancho Primicias, previously a cattle farm that has now been converted to a private Galapagos Tortoise Reserve. Here we see hundreds of wild tortoises that use this property to feed and rest during their seasonal migration from the lowlands in the cooler seasons to the highlands in the warmer seasons. The watering holes here provide resting and cooling spots for the tortoises but also attract Common Gallinules which nested here recently and there were many young gallinules running around the ranch. Spotted Sandpiper, Smooth Billed Ani (introduced), and Cattle Egrets, that are just as happy to follow Giant Tortoises around instead of cattle. After our walk around the grounds we spent some time in the cantina and gift shop before we boarded our bus again to walk through the nearby Lava Tunnel. This very large lava tunnel runs from the top of the island to the ocean 3000 feet below. The section we were in is lighted and the short walk was comfortable and informative. Exiting the tunnel we are at a well-known location of a nesting pair of Barn Owls. We located them in the expected spot, a small cattle shed, where we peeked in for views and photographs. We board our bus, ready for lunch after our active morning. Galapagos Rail – on our way down the road from the



reserve we were amazed to have a Galapagos Rail appear in the road in front of the bus. While not the rarest bird, it is perhaps one of the most elusive birds in the Galapagos. We were thrilled to have it walking around for 30 seconds or so.

After lunch on the Origin, we were back in our pangas heading back to Puerto Ayora to visit the Charles Darwin Station and Galapagos National Park Headquarters. Here we learned about the breeding program here for all the various subspecies of Galapagos Tortoises and the conservation programs to reintroduce them to their original habitats. While there's still much work to do, the success stories of reestablishing native wild breeding populations on some of the islands where these giants were extirpated was heartwarming. The rest of the afternoon we were on our own to explore the town of Puerto Ayora. It's a larger town with plenty of shops, cantinas, and restaurants. The birding is good here too, especially around the marina and local beaches. We meet up in the marina and board our pangas to get back to the Origin for dinner.

## **Fri., Jan. 20                      Sombrero Chino | Bartolome'**

This morning we woke up anchored just offshore of Santiago Island to brilliant sunlight and amazing clear waters. We're at Sombrero Chino (China Hat), a small island that's in the shape of, you guessed it. Only about a half mile from the larger island of Santiago. This morning we alternated between kayaking and going out in a glass bottom panga to view the extensive coral and rock formations here. Kayaking was nothing short of amazing. We paddled the shoreline, making a large loop along the cliffs of Sombrero Chino, then traversed the inlet channel, the paddle back to the Origin along the lava cliffs of Santiago Island. As soon as we made it to the shores of Sombrero Island we passed by a large cave that was the site of a very large Galapagos Shearwaters and Brown Noddies. We had hundreds of them flying just over our heads as they flew to and from the breeding cave. Next was Penguins!!! Just a short paddle down the shoreline we had our first experience with Galapagos Penguins and these curious birds swam right up within feet of our kayaks and paddle boards. They would even answer our imitation calls. It was such an amazing moment; you couldn't help but get choked up a little bit.

Then it was back on board the Origin to change into our wetsuits. We returned to the same areas we paddled to take in the incredible snorkeling in the area. This was our best snorkeling day by far, the water was warm and crystal clear. We again found our Galapagos Penguin friends and even had a chance to watch them feed.





Lion with its mother. The afterbirth was nearby and that's what the Frigatebirds were interested in. It was an amazing experience watching the mother care for the newborn and gently pull it down closer to the water.

Continuing around the island, we spotted a Peregrine Falcon that made several low hunting passes before heading out over the water. The opposite side of the island is elevated high above the Pacific and has stunning cliffs that are used by many species of seabirds. The winds of the day seemed to push the birds close to us as they maneuvered for landing on the cliffs, giving us perfect viewing and photographing positions. Swallow-tailed Gulls were constantly flying in front of us and the Galapagos Shearwaters chose a precarious route to their nests by flying inland and slowly working their way back, just 3 feet off the ground, to land at their nest sites high on the edge of the Cliffs. We were thrilled to find a Red-billed Tropicbird nesting in a cavity right in the trail, the female holding tight on her eggs as we carefully stepped by. Blue-footed Boobies are nesting here too, and we get some of our best photos of them in the brilliant sunshine. Woodpecker Finches are here in good numbers as well, and we watch them plunge their faces into the Opuntia Flowers's, emerging with their black faces completely covered in pollen. It's easy to see how important they are for the Opuntias for pollination. Carpenter Bees play a role as well, but the finches are certainly doing their part.

We return to the Origin for lunch and motor north to North Seymour Island. 30 or so Frigatebirds surround the Origin and ride the uplift as we make our way, like they've done so many times this week. Arriving at North Seymour, we walk through a large Frigatebird colony. Both Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds are nesting here at various stages of production. Some are still displaying with their large gular sack inflated, while others have fully grown chicks in the nests and nearby shrubs. Here we finally get to see the diagnostic metallic sheens of the black feathers of the two species, Magnificent with purple sheen on their head and backs, and Greater with green hues in the sunshine.

We walk out from the low coastal forest breeding grounds out onto brilliant white sand beaches complete with many Galapagos Sea Lions basking in the sun. The sun is low in the sky, but still bright and intense. We stay at this beach as long as possible, our shadows growing longer in the sand behind us. Sea Lions pose for stunning



photographs and we manage a couple group shots with them. Knowing this is our last night in the Galapagos, we soak this moment in as long as possible, get our last photos of gulls and Frigatebirds, and slowly make our way back to the panga launch, just as the sun is setting behind the Pacific. We return to the Origin for Dinner and our last briefing session with our guides and crew. We toast champagne to the experience of a lifetime. One that 99.9% of people in the world will never know. We complete our bird list for the trip, exchange contact information with crew and other guests that are now friends. We return to our rooms, pack and organize a bit for mornings and turn in for the evening.

**Sun., Jan. 22**

## **Explore San Cristobal | Depart for Quito**

It's a busy morning aboard the Origin, we're packed before breakfast and the crew is busy restocking the Origin for the next tour that starts this afternoon. Our luggage is already ashore by the time we're done eating. We board our pangas and head to San Cristobal to spend a couple hours in town, picking up last minute souvenirs before heading to the airport. The flight back to Quito was uneventful and we land in Quito as scheduled. Some of us are staying at the airport and heading home, while about half the group is just starting their next adventure on our trip extension to the beautiful rainforest region of Mindo Ecuador, adding hundreds of new birds to their trip list.

*Photos by Dan Donaldson*