

# Lost World: Galapagos Islands

By Melody Wren

I didn't realize how many preconceived notions I had about the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador. When I booked my trip, I was looking forward to seeing animals, sea life and a few birds in their natural habitat but I wasn't prepared for the vast numbers of sea lions, marine iguanas as well as the great variety of spectacular birds.

Traveling by ship is the best way to see the magnificent Galapagos Islands and the smaller the ship, the better. Our itinerary for the seven night journey took us first to Genovesa in the north, then east to Fernandina, a relatively young island half a million years old. We then worked westward through successively older islands back to San Cristobal, crossing the equator four times.

The Galapagos Islands sit right atop the equator: an archipelago of volcanic peaks spread across 50,000 square miles from stark Fernandina to relatively fertile Santa Cruz and



Jeff Wren posing with a sea lion



Jeff and Melody Wren snorkeling with penguin on rock

San Cristóbal. They are separated from the mainland of South America by 600 miles of very deep water and lie at the confluence of marine currents from the Antarctic, equatorial Pacific and South American coast. The hot and cold water temperatures give rise to a wild diversity of habitats and creatures adapted to them.

## Any month is good to visit but

October is particularly special because of all the newborns and hatchlings we saw. We snorkeled with penguins, white tipped sharks, sea turtles and sea lions, and came face to face with the giant tortoises which are the signature animals of the islands. We stepped into a veritable maternity ward with dozens of sea lions nursing their newborns. Ambling along the shoreline of Santiago, we came across fur sea lions, a species that was once on the verge of extinction. The many animals and exotic birds took my breath away time and time again, and reduced me to tears on more than one occasion. We hiked along ancient lava tunnels and felt like explorers going back to the beginning of time.

I knew there would be birds on each island but was not prepared for the volume, diversity and implausible beauty. One day, we crossed the equator towards Genovesa, a volcanic caldera that is home to many bird species and saw red-footed boobies with their scarlet webbed feet, Nasca boobies, Galapagos mocking birds

with their piercing eyes, four species of Darwin Finches and the elusive short eared owl as it hunted over an open lava field. As we entered a forest of cactus and mangroves where great frigate birds were nesting, the males inflated their striking red throat pouches to attract females as they flew overhead.

## Snorkeling was a focal point and

I was soon enraptured by the colorful inhabitants of the crystal clear water: angel fish, parrot fish, yellow tailed graits, surgeonfish, sea urchins, white tipped reef sharks, sting rays and chocolate-chip star fish (yes, that is their name). Jumping off the Zodiac into the deep, crystal clear water for the first time to snorkel, I expected balmy bath-like water but I yelled like a sea lion once I hit the ice-cold water even though I had a wet suit on. Currents from the Antarctic explained not only the delightfully tiny Galapagos penguins but also were the reason many in our group were wearing two wetsuits at once.

As Santiago Dunn, President of Ecoventura says, "Galapagos is the type of place where nature and simplicity rule and less is often more." We saw signs reminding us "Be prepared to leave only your footprints and only take away photographs and memories." We have many of both.

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*Melody Wren is a freelance writer because she believes that work and fun should not be mutually exclusive. For more travel stories, visit [www.melodywren.com](http://www.melodywren.com).*