

Fodor's Choice Galápagos Islands



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For many, Ecuador is the Galápagos, some 70 islands 600 miles (960 kilometers) off the coast. Roughly 160,000 annual visitors step onto its dazzling shores and are confronted by giant sun-bathing tortoises, darting lava lizards, and swooping frigates. Charles Darwin formulated his theory of evolution here, and on your visit you can ponder nature's mysteries, too.

NEED TO KNOW

Permits and fees: You must carry a transit control card (*tarjeta de control de tránsito*, or TCT) issued by the Instituto Nacional Galápagos (INGALA) to enter the islands. If your tour operator doesn't arrange one, go to INGALA's TCT Web site (www.tct.ingala.gov.ec) and register your name, passport number, and flight details.

Present a printout of the confirmation page and \$10 at INGALA's airport counter in Quito or Guayaquil. You'll be issued the card; show it at check-in and when you enter and depart the Galápagos.

On entry to the islands, all foreigners must pay \$100 cash (to fund conservation efforts) in U.S. dollars. The bills must be no larger than twenties and without markings or tears.

Among the 13 principal islands, Santa Cruz and San Cristóbal are the most developed, each with a population of a few thousand year-round residents. Santa Cruz has more visitor amenities. You can visit the archipelago's four populated islands on a limited basis without guides, but you must hire a guide licensed through the Galápagos National Park Service to see uninhabited islands.

The best months to visit are May, June, November, and December. Book your own airfare (ensuring your passport will be valid for six months after entry), and prearrange a one- to two-week package that includes boat rides and guided visits. A cruise of 10 days or more is needed to reach remote northern islands or to climb Isabela Island's Volcán Sierra Negra, which has the world's second largest volcanic crater (6 miles [10 kilometers] in diameter). For landlubbers, a one-island visit is doable. You can also negotiate day jaunts with local boat owners upon arrival, but their vessels tend to be small and wobbly.

EXPLORING

Overlooking Academy Bay on the southern shore of Isla Santa Cruz is the town of Puerto Ayora, with hotels, restaurants, shops, and even a few clubs. The main road east from here leads to the expansive grounds of the Charles Darwin Research Station, dedicated to conserving the fragile ecosystem. The visitor center has exhibits on geology, ecology, and weather patterns. Self-guided trails run to the station's giant tortoise pens.

Bahía Tortuga (Turtle Bay), 2 miles (3 kilometers) southwest of Puerto Ayora, has a long, white-sand

beach where marine iguanas sometimes strut at water's edge. Marine turtles drag their bulky shells up onto the beach to lay their eggs between November and February; baby turtles hatch in June and July.

Near the village of Bellavista you can walk through underground lava tubes. The mile-long tunnels were created when flowing lava cooled more quickly on the surface than below, forming a crust that enclosed a labyrinth. Other island highlights are Los Gemelos (The Twins) sinkholes and the National Park Tortoise Reserve.

The largest town on Isla San Cristóbal, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, is much less tourist oriented than Puerto Ayora. An interpretation center northeast of town has exhibits on conservation and human and natural history. Winding paths lead from here to Playa Punta Carola (about 35 minutes), a favorite of surfers; Mann Beach, where you can swim; and Frigate Bird Hill, where both great and magnificent frigates—two species of black seabird famed for their courtship displays—nest.

El Progreso is a small village about 5 miles (8 kilometers) east of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno at the end of one of the island's few roads (buses connect the two towns twice daily). From here you can rent a four-wheel-drive vehicle and explore the shores of Laguna el Junco, one of the archipelago's few permanent freshwater lakes, 6 miles (10 kilometers) east.

At Punta Pitt you'll find masked, blue-footed, and red-footed boobies nesting together. There are also frigate birds, storm petrels, and swallow-tailed gulls. Get here by motor launch from Puerto Moreno.

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