

## 4. GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

The Galápagos Islands are an archipelago of volcanic islands situated around 1000km (621mi) to the west of Ecuador's mainland but still belongs to the country of Ecuador. It is distinguished between major and minor islands which form a National Park and biological marine reserve. The main features of the Galapagos Islands are:

- \* Biodiversity with endemic species of flora and fauna
- \* Animals not fearing humans
- \* The Charles Darwin Research Station that is a key factor in conservation of the Galápagos Islands and not least the giant tortoises
- \* Beautiful beaches on all of the islands
- \* Only 4 of the islands are inhabited

Santa Cruz and San Cristobal are the main islands which are inhabited. Also inhabited are the islands Isabela and Floreana. Furthermore the islands Española, Santa Fe, Fernandina, Santiago, Bartolomé, Rabida, North Seymour, South Plazas, Los Lobos, Genovesa and some smaller ones belong to the Galapagos Islands.

### SANTA CRUZ ISLAND



**Santa Cruz Island** is located in the middle of the archipelago and has an area of 98.555 hectares. Puerto Ayora with 15.000 inhabitants is the largest human settlement on the islands; the dozy and tended town encircles the bay. Apart from the highland with volcanic craters, lava tunnels and huge tortoises, there are beautiful beaches and bays with sea lions, marine turtles and seabirds.

### ISABELA ISLAND

**Isabela** is the biggest island of the archipelago and occupies about 60% of all the land area of Galápagos. It was formed by the volcanoes Cerro Azul, Sierra Negra (Santo Tomas), Alcedo, Ecuador, Darwin and Wolf. Sierra Negra volcano last erupted in October 2005 and with about 10km (6,2mi) in diameter it is the world's second largest volcanic crater. Isabela is the third-most populated island. The island has several unique animals, including the worlds' only surviving population of mangrove finch, and giant tortoises that have been isolated long enough on their respective volcanoes to evolve into distinct subspecies.



## SAN CRISTOBAL ISLAND



**San Cristóbal** is one of the few islands that have permanent settlements. At the south end of the island there is the sleepy capital of the province Galápagos, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. Already at the dock you are greeted by the loud calling of sea lions. If you look closely you can see sally light foot crabs, marine iguanas, frigate birds and the endemic Chatham mocking bird not far from town.

## FLOREANA ISLAND

**Floreana Island** was formed by now-extinct volcanic activity and is old enough for several endemic species to have evolved here, such as the Charles mockingbird, Floreana lava lizard, Floreana snake and a subspecies of giant tortoises.

Floreana's human history is particularly interesting: early settlers left a legacy of scandal, murder and intrigue. Today, only a few human inhabitants still eke out a living in the hills and the tiny settlement of Puerto Velasco Ibarra.



## ESPAÑOLA ISLAND



**Española Island** is located in the extreme southeast of the archipelago and is considered, along with Santa Fe, one of the oldest islands, at approximately four million years. On Española Island you can see the Waved Albatrosses (from March to January, almost the entire world population breeds on the island) and the mating dances of blue-footed boobies. The island is undergoing constant transformation and is slowly becoming a rocky, barren land with little or no vegetation. But this does give large bays, with sand and soft shingle which attracts a healthy number of Galápagos Sea Lions. Two spots are especially popular with visitors: Bahía Gardner, which has a lovely beach; and Punta Suárez, of interest because of

its varied bird-life. This island has its own species of animals, such as the Espanola Mockingbird, which has a longer and more curved beak than the one on the central islands; the Española lava lizard; the Marine Iguana of the subspecies *venustissimus*, which has red markings on its back; among others. Here there are also swallow-tailed Gulls and other tropical birds.

## SANTA FE ISLAND

**Santa Fe Island**, also called Barrington Island after admiral Samuel Barrington, is a small island of 24km<sup>2</sup> which lies in the centre of the Galápagos archipelago, to the south east of Santa Cruz Island. Geologically it is one of the oldest, since volcanic rocks of an age of about million years have been found. The vegetation of the island is characterized by brush, palo santo trees and stands of a large variety of the prickly pear cactus *Opuntia echios*. Among animals, Santa Fe is home to one endemic species and one endemic subspecies: the Barrington Land Iguana (*Conolophus pallidus*) and the Santa Fe Rice Rat (*Aegialomys galapagoensis bauri*). The visitor site is a wet landing located in Barrington Bay on the north eastern side of the island. Large numbers of sea lions are found on the beaches in the bay, occasionally hindering peregrination to the two trails leading from the beach.



## FERNANDINA



**Fernandina** is the third largest, the youngest and westernmost island in the Galápagos. Many eruptions have been recorded since 1813, making this island most likely to have volcanic eruption and witnessing them. Due to its recent volcanic activity, the island does not present much plant life and has a mostly rocky surface. Visitors to Fernandina Island will be taken to see only the outskirts of the crater for safety reasons. Punta Espinoza is a narrow stretch of land where hundreds of marine iguanas gather in large groups on black lava rocks. The famous Flightless Cormorant inhabits this island, as well as Galápagos penguins, pelicans, rice rats and sea lions. Mangrove forests also abound on the island. Fernandina is considered the most pristine of the Galápagos Islands and has had no species of mammals introduced, which sets it apart from most of the other islands in the archipelago.

## SANTIAGO

**Santiago** is the fourth largest island in the archipelago and has several great visitor sites. One of the best sites is Puerto Egas, south of James Bay and west side of Santiago. There is a long lava shoreline where eroded rock formations house an excellent variety of wildlife. Marine iguanas bask in the sun feeding on exposed algae. The tide pools contain many Sally Lightfoot crabs, which attract other types of hunters. Following the trail further seals are found. Puerto Egas is not only a good spot for taking pictures but also perfect for snorkelling and seeing many species of tropical fish.



## BARTOLOME ISLAND



**Bartolome** has a stair case to its summit from where one can obtain a great view of both bays and towards Santiago. This island is famous for its Pinnacle Rock, where sea lions and penguins can be seen. While on the southern side, there are nesting sea turtles (in season). The beach is great for swimming and snorkelling, close the shore you might see white-tipped reef sharks.

## RABIDA ISLAND

**Rabida Island** is also known as Jervis and lies 5km (3mi) south of Santiago. Due to a high percentage of oxidized iron in the composition of the lava, the island has a reddish pigmentation. This is one of the best places to see pelicans nesting while sea lions haul out. Near the beach, there is a salt-water lagoon where flamingos and white-checked pintail ducks can be seen, although during the 1900's the flamingos have not been seen lately. There is a trail that will take you up to a volcanic peek covered with palo santo trees, from where the red colour of the beach and volcanic formations can be appreciated. At the end of this trail there is an excellent snorkelling spot.



## NORTH SEYMOUR



Located slightly to the north of Baltra, **North Seymour** is a low, flat island, formed as a result of submarine lava formation uplift. It is covered with low, bushy vegetation, which contains the largest colony of magnificent frigate birds in the Galápagos. There is also a large population of blue-footed boobies that perform an amusing courtship dance. When nesting conditions are right; the boobies spread their wings, lift up their blue feet in slow motion while they whistle or honk. This goofy stride is one of the highlights of this island.

## SOUTH PLAZAS

One of a pair of small uplifted islands a short distance from the east coast of Santa Cruz, **South Plaza** has a unique Sesuvium and Opuntia cactuses landscape which provides some of the most interesting wildlife observation available in Galápagos. Land iguanas are easily seen from the trail, frequently under the shade of a cactus; waiting for a juicy fruit to fall. Swallow-tailed gulls, along with various other sea birds use the rising air to glide effortlessly over the escarpment. The protected rocky seashore is prime habitat for a large colony of noisy sea lions.



## LOS LOBOS



One hour northeast of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno is **Isla Lobos**. This small island is separated from the main island by a narrow stretch of rough waters. There is a trail where lava lizards are often seen. Upon its rocky shores, blue-footed boobies nest (in season), while sea lions rest and play. About two hours northeast of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno is another small rocky island called Leon Dormido or sleeping lion due to its resemblance. Leon Dormido is also called Kicker Rock.

## GENOVESA

The outlying **Genovesa Island** is situated in the north eastern part of the archipelago and the only island north of the Equator that tourists are allowed to visit. It's a small, relatively flat island and the rim of a sunken crater that forms Darwin Bay, a natural harbour 2,5km (1,5mi) wide. It is the best place on the whole archipelago to observe a colony of red-footed boobies and the great frigate birds. It is also home to sea lions as well as fur seals.



## Galapagos Year-Round - A Calendar of Main Events

<b>January</b>	<p>Beginning of the rainy season. Land birds start nesting, generally after the first rain. On Española the adult male marine iguanas become brightly coloured.</p> <p>The green sea turtle arrives to the beaches of Gal ápagos to lay their eggs.</p> <p>Land iguanas begin reproductive cycles on Isabela.</p> <p>Both water and air temperatures rise and stay warm until June.</p>
<b>February</b>	<p>On Floreana flamingos start nesting. Bahamas pintails start their breeding season. Masked boobies on Española are at the end of their nesting season.</p> <p>Marine Iguanas nest on Santa Cruz.</p> <p>The highest water temperature reaches 25°C (77°F). This temp. remains until April.</p> <p>Very few penguins are sighted in Bartholomew.</p> <p>The nesting season of the Gal ápagos dove reaches its peak.</p>
<b>March</b>	<p>Marine iguanas nest on Fernandina.</p> <p>The rainy season reaches the highest precipitation. Sporadic tropical rains, intense sun and hot climate. Air temperature can reach up to 30 °C (86°F).</p> <p>March 21, the beginning of the summer equinox signals the arrival of the waved albatross to Española.</p>
<b>April</b>	<p>Massive arrival of waved albatross to Española. Their courtship starts.</p> <p>End of hatching season of the giant tortoises. The eggs of the green sea turtles begin to hatch. Land iguanas hatch on Isabela.</p>
<b>May</b>	<p>North Seymour´s blue footed boobies begin their courtship.</p> <p>Sea turtles are still hatching on Gardner Bay, Punta Cormorant and Puerto Egas.</p> <p>Most of the marine iguanas eggs hatch from nests on Santa Cruz.</p> <p>Palo Santo trees begin to shed their foliage.</p> <p>Albatross on Española start laying their eggs.</p> <p>Band rumped storm petrels begin their first nesting period.</p>
<b>June</b>	<p>Beginning of the garua season.</p> <p>Giant tortoises on Santa Cruz migrate from the highlands to the lowlands in search of suitable nesting places. Beginning of the nesting season of giant tortoises.</p>
<b>July</b>	<p>Sea bird communities are very active, especially the blue footed boobies on Española. Flightless cormorant court and nest on Fernandina.</p> <p>It is possible to find oyster catchers nesting on Puerto Egas.</p> <p>Lava lizards initiate mating rituals until November.</p> <p>Whales are more likely to be observed, especially off the Western coast of Isabela.</p>
<b>August</b>	<p>The Galapagos hawks court on Española and Santiago.</p> <p>Mask boobies and swallow-tailed gulls nest on Genovesa.</p> <p>The temperature of the ocean descends to 18°C (64°F), which obviously varies according to the geographic zones among the islands.</p> <p>Migrant shore birds start to arrive, and stay on the islands until March.</p> <p>Giant tortoises return to the highlands of Santa Cruz.</p>
<b>September</b>	<p>Peak of the cold (garua) season. The air temp. reaches its lowers (19°C) (66°F).</p> <p>Penguins demonstrate remarkable activity on Bartholome until December.</p> <p>Sea lions are very active, especially in the western and central areas of the Archipelago. Most species of marine birds remain active at their nesting sites.</p>
<b>October</b>	<p>Lava herons nest until March. The Galapagos fur seals begin their mating period.</p> <p>Boobies raise their chicks on Española. Giant tortoises still lay their eggs.</p>
<b>November</b>	<p>Sea lion pups are born.</p> <p>Sea lions are sexually active on the Eastern part of the Archipelago.</p> <p>Breeding season of brown noddies.</p> <p>Band-rumped storm petrels begin their second nesting period.</p>
<b>December</b>	<p>Hatching of the giant tortoise's eggs begins and lasts until April.</p> <p>Green sea turtles display their mating behaviour.</p> <p>The rainy season begins; all of the plants of the dry zone produce leaves. Gal ápagos"turns green". The first young albatross fledge.</p>
<p><i>Note: Some of the events may differ or not occur due to weather changes mainly affected by the ocean currents.</i></p>	

## 4.2 Galapagos Cruises

The traditional and classical way of travelling by small cruise ships is still the most popular one. Passengers get to know the Galápagos Islands in a hassle-free way avoiding populated towns, packing and unpacking at different hotels and time-consuming transportation between the islands. Furthermore Galápagos cruises offer the opportunity to visit islands which are farther away and rather impossible to reach in any other mode. Therefore passengers get to know more islands in little time and experience a more diverse flora and fauna.