

A&K Galapagos: AT LAST

Our trip started in Quito, the capitol of Ecuador set high in the Andes. We flew a fine Ecuadorian airline, Aerogal, to Baltra, the airport for the Galapagos. Surprisingly to us, we had to go through customs in Baltra even though the Galapagos are part of Ecuador. The first thing the customs agent said was “At last” with a broad smile. Apparently many passengers when they arrive make that exclamation.

After claiming our bags, which had been checked as a group in Quito, we took a five-minute bus trip to the dock. Then we boarded our panga, the Ecuadorian word for zodiac, for another short ride to our ship, the *Eclipse*. The only time the *Eclipse* ever docks is for her once a year dry-dock. I assume all the other 92 water craft in the Galapagos are the same.

Our luggage was taken separately to the ship and was very quickly placed in our cabins.

The ship wasn't pretty approaching her—not as attractive as several others that were docked nearby. Once onboard, we realized how attractive and comfortable she was.

Ours was one of the more reasonable cabins and it turned out to be the same size as most of the other cabins with the exception of the suites. Our cabin had port holes while the more expensive ones had windows; ours was on a lower deck and the others were higher. We had expected limited storage space but it was perfectly adequate for what we had. Again, unlike what we had been warned, our bags did fit under our beds.

From our first meal, all of which were served buffet style, we realized that the staff was going to be very attentive. We were forty passengers instead of the usual forty eight but I don't think it would have made much difference.

The cabins are cleaned three times daily but partly this is because of the fact that no paper is to be put down the toilet. At night we often went back to the cabin after dinner to find that our cabin steward, whom we almost never saw, had arranged a surprise which he had fashioned from towels, perhaps sun glasses left on the dresser, and other miscellaneous items. The item might be a monkey hanging from the light or a penguin standing on the bed.

We were not supposed to leave any wet laundry in our bathrooms, which were indeed tight but adequate. Instead we were to give our laundry to the steward and we were promised that it would be back to us in 48 hours. We soon found it came back in one day—and sometimes in half a day. I have never spent so much on laundry on one trip.

Normally there is one naturalist for every twelve passengers but we had one for every ten. After a briefing, the naturalists took us on our first excursion. Excursions were either wet landings, where we waded from the panga to shore; dry landings, where we were

deposited on volcanic rocks (no piers); or snorkeling trips in the deep water from the pangas. We always put on a life jacket, which I found easier to put over my backpack, when embarking on the panga, and then leaving it behind when we landed. Our first adventure started with a wet landing.

The next day we started our sightseeing in earnest. Our wake up call (a gentle musical Zen-like wake up) was 6:45am, our breakfast at 7:00am and our departure at 7:30am. There is no way I can get going that fast so I set my alarm for 6:15am and went and retrieved a cappuccino from the coffee machine to get me going. We had a wet landing and after hiking for several hours, had a chance to snorkel from the beach. At that time of year (December), the water is a bit cool so we all wore wet suits, which I thought I would never get myself into.

Back to the ship, where ice tea and chocolate strawberries awaited us and tied us over until lunch. Then in the afternoon we had the opportunity to take a really challenging hike—up 365 wood steps—to the top of Santiago Island's central volcano. This was after our first dry landing. I made it and felt exultant.

It wasn't until the next day that I decided to borrow one of the many walking sticks they have on the ship—some for shorter passengers and some for taller. Two of my colleagues also used them so we formed a formidable trio.

Each island, each stop, each landing gave us a different experience. We saw different fauna and flora on the islands. The blue-footed boobies, certainly one of the most famous of the Galapagos' residents, the frigate bird and the sea lions turned out to be my favorites. I had never seen the boobies and frigate birds before but sea lions I can visit any time I want. They reside a ten-minute walk from my home at San Francisco's Pier 39 and I don't find them at all interesting. At Pier 39 they seem to be all huge sea lions lying around lazily together. In the Galapagos we would see them singly or in small clusters on the beaches; the most appealing were the mothers nursing their babies. We would also encounter them individually when snorkeling.

One excursion that required no effort on our behalf was to see the mangroves. We stayed in our pangas, but the driver and guide paddled us silently through these lovely areas. Our reward was to see tree sea lions and sea turtles in the clear water.

Our departure morning we were able to visit the Charles Darwin Research Station on Santa Cruz Island. Here we were introduced to the famous giant tortoises. From there it was back to Quito and to our stay at the charming La Mirage Hotel and Spa, near Otavalo, the town famous for its Saturday market.

This trip is unlike any other any where. I'm just glad I took it while I was in good enough shape to do everything.

Martha Nell Beatty and Alana Crow, December 2008