

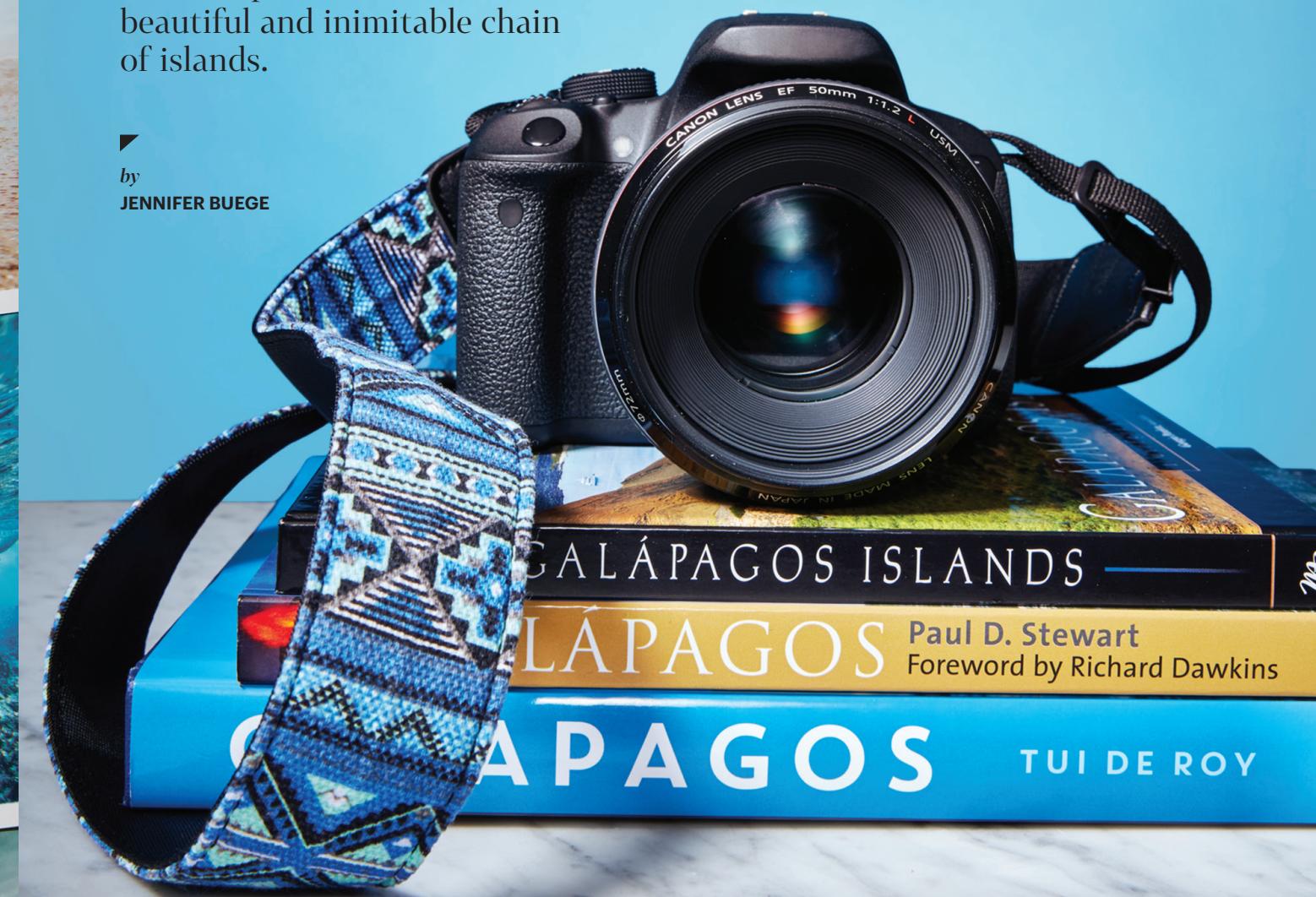


PICTURE-PERFECT GALÁPAGOS

Spending a week swimming with sea lions, walking among blue-footed boobies and snapping photos side by side with the pros in Ecuador's beautiful and inimitable chain of islands.



by
JENNIFER BUEGE



Still life by
BEN GOLDSTEIN

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
A pair of blue-footed boobies; Stopping to photograph a giant tortoise; A baby Nazca booby; Using an action camera to capture the plentiful sea life; Marine iguanas on the beach at Gardner Bay, Española Island.

It was golden hour in the Galápagos, and my boyfriend, Ian, and I were exploring the town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristóbal island, cameras in hand. It was the first outing of our one-week photography adventure, and we were roaming the waterfront with a handful of *National Geographic* pros to practice shooting the port's animal inhabitants in the falling dusk. The bright red, orange and sky blue Sally lightfoot crabs made a striking contrast against the black rocks lining the shore, and we spent most of our time trying to capture the perfect shot: crab on rock, water splashing up in the background. Sea lions posed for us, letting out loud, contented grunts as they lazed on the dock and the fishermen's boats they had taken over. Frigatebirds and pelicans dove into the shallow waters, hoping to catch dinner.

With our own dinner calling, we packed up our gear and piled into the Zodiac to return to the ship that would be our home for the week. As we pulled away from the dock, I nervously noted that clouds were gathering. Our driver turned to us and suggested we cover our camera bags. "It might rain," he said. My heart caught in my throat.

Flashback 20 years earlier, almost to the day. While visiting a friend in Quito, Ecuador, I had decided to take some time to explore the Galápagos Islands, the detour a gift to myself for surviving law school. After meeting the other passengers, I settled into my room on the small ship, anticipating the trip of a lifetime. Then the rain came. And came—showing no sign of letting up. "El Niño," the captain said. His English was about as good as my one-year-in-college Spanish, but I gathered that he was concerned.

And soon more bad news arrived: We would not be setting sail—not that day, not that week. "Problems with the ship," the captain said. Filled with disappointment, I went to work arranging a flight back to Quito. Not wanting my trip to be a total loss, however, I first trekked through the mud to the Charles Darwin Research Station for the only wildlife sighting I would have: two giant tortoises getting it on. (They obviously weren't deterred by the rain.)

So it made sense when, almost two decades later, I felt a sense of impend-

ing doom upon hearing the Zodiac driver's words. I watched the clouds intently as we crossed the bay, wishing them away. And luck was on our side. By the time we reached the ship, the sun had come out to welcome us.

This time around, I was traveling aboard a vessel of much less questionable quality: the *National Geographic Endeavour II*, a recently renovated, top-of-the-line cruiser that looked like it could bulldoze through any storm. While the en suite rooms were spacious, it was the common areas where we'd be spending most of our time: reading about wildlife in the sunlit, book-filled library; relaxing, cocktail in hand, during lectures in the comfy lounge and bar; having our posthiking kinks worked out in the spa; overindulging in the dining room; watching the sharks and sea lions play hide-and-seek from the top deck.

I had been drawn to this specific trip for a reason: It was geared to photographers. Not only would we be accompanied by professionals who shoot for *National Geographic*, we'd learn from them and have them critique our work. For me and Ian—avid amateur photographers and wildlife fanatics—it was the perfect match.



PHOTO TIP

Get down and (possibly) dirty: Lie on the ground, get in the water, do whatever you can to shoot at eye level or below to show off your subject in a unique way.



traveling solo. We soon earned the nickname “the youngsters,” as we were some of the only guests who hadn’t yet retired. But this was an active group, world travelers who would spend meals comparing trips and offering recommendations for where to go next. And they were interesting: One guy had worked on the Hubble Space Telescope, another was an actor with a role on *House of Cards*. We listened raptly as a woman from Michigan described breaking gender barriers on the assembly floor of one of Detroit’s Big Three automakers. The next night, another woman recounted her time helping to develop the U-2 spy plane.

Most of us were there for the

same reasons: to immerse ourselves in a changing landscape before it changed too much, learn more about this unique part of the world and see wildlife that can’t be found anywhere else. Of the islands’ approximately

2,400 native terrestrial species, more than half of them—including the marine iguana, waved albatross, large painted locust and Galápagos fur seal—are endemic, meaning that they exist only in that area.

The Galápagos has a storied history of tourists, from early pirates and whalers looking for fortune to self-imposed exiles seeking a different life to prisoners doing time in local penal colonies. And then there’s the

most well-known visitor of all, Charles Darwin, who spent five weeks in 1835 exploring four of the islands and taking notes on the flora and fauna—a trip that would anchor his 1859 book, *The Origin of the Species*.

As the first travelers arrived, so did the first invasive species. To date, approximately 27 vertebrate species (ducks, goats, pigs and more), 812 plant species and 499 alien insects have been introduced to the islands. And since the 1970s, tourism numbers have rapidly increased—a boon for the economy but not necessarily for the flora and fauna that call the islands home. The Galápagos National Park Service and the Charles Darwin Foundation—with support from the Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic Fund—have been working together to combat these problems, launching sev-

eral successful programs to eradicate the unwanted species and instituting a quarantine system. In addition, in 2012 the park service started strictly regulating cruise ship itineraries to spread out visitors (and their impact) among the islands, while also implementing rules governing how tourists could interact with the animals and the land.

Of the 20 larger islands within the Galápagos archipelago, we were going to visit six of them, which would give us a good feel for the variety of landscapes and diversity of wildlife.

That night, we fell asleep to the gentle rocking of the waves as the ship pulled up anchor and set sail for Española. When we peeked out the window of our room the next morning, the island was waiting for us, bathed in sunshine. Ready for adventure, we grabbed our cameras and headed to

the Zodiac boats that would take us to Gardner Bay.

A white sand beach lined the volcanic coastline, providing a sunny snoozing spot for a pair of sea lions. Nearby, a lone albatross sought shade in the bushes. Although we were only a few feet away, the animals didn’t even seem to notice us.

We snapped photo after photo, moving to switch vantage points, the sea lions doing nothing but groggily rolling over and falling back to sleep. A fellow traveler noticed a set of large, bleached bones farther down the beach—a whale skeleton, one of the naturalists said.

Back on the ship, we were fitted

for snorkeling gear—each person got a wetsuit, fins, a mask and a snorkel to use for the entire week—before hopping into the Zodiacs and being whisked out to sea. Within minutes of dropping backward over the side of the

boat and into the almost bath-temperature water, I was surrounded by sea lions frolicking and diving and swooping around me. I pushed “record” on my video camera and just watched them play, zigzagging through schools of colorful fish that rippled as the sea creatures swam through their ranks. Sun-

light filtered down into the depths, creating a haze through which a slightly out-of-focus underwater world appeared.



PHOTO TIP

Avoid getting so wrapped up in crafting close-ups that you forget to take at least one establishing shot of the broader landscape. It will help tell the story later.



PHOTO TIP

When shooting wildlife, focus on the eyes. A photo of a bird with sharp eyes but softer-focus feathers draws the viewer in; a bird with out-of-focus eyes usually just looks blurry.



The otherworldly view from Bartolomé Island.

JENNIFER BUEGEL

Before I knew it, it was time to return to the *Endeavour II*, where we spent the hottest part of the day out of the sun, eating lunch and learning about the oceanography and geology of the Galápagos from the ship's underwater specialist.

Just before dusk, cameras in tow, a group of us made a dry landing on Punta Suarez, Española's westernmost tip. The peninsula was alive with life. As we walked along the trail, we came upon multicolored marine iguanas, bright orange lava lizards, the famous Darwin finches and regal-looking albatross sitting on eggs in the calf-high grasses. But the highlight was spying a booby, a Nazca with chicks. This variety doesn't sport spectacularly colored feet but is remarkable for its bright white feathers, orange beaks and black-tipped wings. The baby birds look like little cotton puffs, with giant, fluffy bodies—total Instagram bait.

The boobies' almost solid white coloring gave the pros a prime moment to teach about exposure—how to adjust when photographing something that's primarily all white or all black—and positioning ourselves to make the most of the available light. Meanwhile, the naturalists gave us a glimpse into the dark side of these adorable birds. Nazca boobies typically lay two eggs. Instead of reveling in sibling love, however, the firstborn will eat as much food as possible to increase its strength and then kick the younger, weaker bird out of the nest, leaving it to starve or become prey, in a practice that's charmingly called "obligatory sibling murdering."

Despite the grizzly tale of feathery fratricide, it was hard to find the surviving fledglings anything but cute. Back on the ship, I scrolled through my photos, marking the ones with the most potential and giggling over a shot of a bent-over, preening baby Nazca booby, a seemingly headless bundle of fluff atop two spindly legs.

Each time we en-

The next day was devoted to Floreana, an island marked by extinct volcanic cones dotting its surface. Bright pink flamingos became our models on an early morning hike to a pond, balancing on one leg, switching

to two, then dipping their long necks into the water, their reflections providing us with the epitome of a Photography 101 moment. We also spotted a group of delicate-looking black-necked stilt birds and gorgeous blue-footed boobies, their feet just as brilliant as I had expected.

The parade of wildlife continued later that morning with a Zodiac tour along the shore, where we caught a glimpse of a Floreana mockingbird, one of the four varieties found in the Galápagos and one that's unique to that island. Another ride later in the day brought us lens to face with—squeee!—penguins. We had been told that there were only small colonies of the flightless birds in the areas we'd be visiting, so a sighting wasn't guaranteed, which made their appearance all that more exciting. We watched them waddle along the rocks, stopping occasionally to preen, until they found the ideal spot from which to launch themselves into the water.

I thought it would be difficult to beat that experience, but a few days later, while we were deep-water snorkeling near the island of Bartolomé, a tiny bundle of black and white zipped past me. Then another one. Then a third. It was hard to imagine that these sleek creatures gracefully speeding through the water were the same animals that we had seen tottering awkwardly across the rocks. The penguins spun and dove and whirled through the water, playfully mingling with some passing sea lions.

PHOTO TIP
It's good to put your camera down once in a while—no matter what shots you'll miss. If you don't stop and observe occasionally, you risk missing out on the bigger experience.



PHOTO TIP

Holding a smartphone in a sea of DSLRs? Don't be intimidated—your agility may help you score a gone-in-a-flash shot. As my dad says, "The best camera is the one you have with you."



THIS PAGE: JAN FELTON; OPPOSITE PAGE: JENNIFER BUEGE

tered the water, a new world unfolded before us. In addition to the penguins, our trio of snorkeling outings that day brought us up close with several new species of fish, white-tipped reef sharks and a dozen or so stingrays hovering in the depths, one on top of the other like layered crepes.

On land, our sightings—and photo count—continued to grow as well. In the Santa Cruz highlands one afternoon, we donned tall boots and trekked across the fields in search of giant tortoises. These slow-moving creatures were content to while away the day snacking on ripe guavas—although one big fellow became quite taken with *Nat Geo* photographer Massimo Bassano's camera and lazily stalked him, extending its neck to try and grab this new treat. After days spent trying to capture images of birds flitting from tree to tree and lizards skittering along the ground, it was nice to have a subject that wasn't in a hurry.

On the other side of the island, we were startled when one of its most colorful residents, the Galápagos land iguana, darted out of the underbrush onto the path in front of us. He paused to bask in the sun, letting us admire his beauty—bright yellow scales tinged with a fiery streak of orange, sharp claws, a ridge of spikes across his back—before soldiering off into the vegetation on the other side.

That night, we settled into the lounge for a slideshow of trip photos that all the passengers had been en-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The author gets up close to a waved albatross; Sea lions laze in the sun on Española Island; Finding the best vantage point to photograph sea lions in Darwin Bay.

spots along the romantic spectrum: females being courted, a couple building a nest, several duos mating and one that seemed to be in the middle of a fairly contentious dispute. On the sand, a sea lion mother nursed a pup who eventually—exhausted—fell asleep midfeeding. I was so engrossed in watching them that I failed to notice what was attracting the attention of the rest of the group behind me. In the shallow water, a pair of sea lions were cavorting and, eager to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Ian had waded into the bay up to his chest and was shooting away while the animals capered around him. I quickly adjusted my settings so that I could capture the moment. A few snaps in, I put down my camera and just watched. For while a picture may be worth a thousand words, I knew that this memory would be worth even more. ▶