

THE ELITE CLUB

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Galapagos Islands

Snorkelling in Ecuador's Galapagos Islands is like diving into your television to find yourself in your very own Finding Nemo-inspired watery world.

In fact, the entire Galapagos Islands' experience is a surrealistic adventure that can be found nowhere else in nature. The Sally Lightfoot crabs look like a punch-drunk Picasso tried out paint-by-number on their backs. The marine iguanas are piled hundreds deep on the black lava rocks and have a definite sci-fi twist to their wise old faces. And when you first see the blue-footed boobies, it won't be the weird turquoise feet that take your breath away but that you can practically kiss them, and they won't flee.

Ditto on the flee factor for those aforementioned marine iguanas, the 150-year-old tortoises, the flopping and rolling sea lions, or the seagoing turtles. Even sharing a moment with two penguins on a rocky outcropping no bigger than a sofa cushion, the theme is the same – they are oblivious to your existence. They don't fly, waddle, swim, or walk away. How cool is it to be standing on a path when an albatross with a 9-foot wingspan lands directly in front of you and greets his lifelong mate with a bizarre bobble-headed mating dance?

Book your place on board these floating hotels, where naturalist guides take you ashore to walk

through bizarre lava fields that look like a dozer has broken up a massive parking lot. Hike up dusty trails and magnesium sand mountains to see what inspired Darwin to shake up the entire scientific world. Swim with the tortugas and flashy fish, and then return back to your yacht home in your panga (boat) to shed your snorkel gear and grab a hot empanada from the platter held by one of the smiling staff. After a very large day, you can tuck into your ship-shape bunk and be rocked to sleep by the rolling waves surrounding this very strange archipelago, 1,000 kilometres off Ecuador's coast.

Ecoventura is one of the first operators in the Galapagos to receive the SmartVoyager award in recognition of their efforts to offer visitors a chance to visit these wild islands with minimal environmental impact. Working with The CarbonNeutral Company, Ecoventura measures its carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions, reducing them where possible and then neutralizing or offsetting the remaining unavoidable emissions. The Rainforest Alliance officially recognizes its efforts at sustainable tourism. And now, Ecoventura has partnered with the World Wildlife Fund to combine efforts at environmental education and marine conservation. www.ecoventura.com

–colleen friesen