

GALAPAGOS ISLANDS



Geography

The Galapagos Islands lie 600 mi/970 km off the coast of Ecuador. Thirteen of the islands are larger than 6 sq mi/15 sq km, and the rest of the archipelago is made up of six smaller islands and more than 100 islets. The entire area (approximately 3,089 sq mi/8,000 sq km) straddles the equator, which passes directly through Isabela, the largest of the islands and representing more than half of the entire surface area of the islands combined.

Penguins and dolphins, sea lions and iguanas, tropical birds and giant tortoises—this bizarre collection of species comes together in a single destination on the equator. You can walk right up to most of them and look them in the eye. There aren't many places in the world where you can swim alongside a family of sea lions. The Galapagos Islands are one of those places, and so it's no surprise that these islands, 600 mi/970 km off the coast of Ecuador, are so special. Their remoteness from other landmasses and the absence of human settlements until the past century allowed their animal inhabitants to live with little fear of predators. As a result, the islands have an abundance of animals, birds and reptiles that are easily viewed, with or without binoculars.



Why Travel To The Galapagos Islands: The islands are best known as the home of giant tortoises that can weigh as much as 600 lb/272 kg and live 150 years. But you'll also see marine iguanas (they resemble small dragons and are the only seagoing lizards in the world), scarlet-breasted frigate birds; blue-footed, red-footed, masked and Nazca boobies; tiny penguins at home in the tropics; and giant, graceful albatrosses. About half of the species are endemic to the islands, found nowhere else on Earth.

When to Visit & Weather:

December-April, the ocean is more likely to be calm and warm enough for snorkeling. But the islands are a year-round destination, with peak visitor times coinciding with typical vacation schedules—mid-June to late August, December to mid-January and around Easter week. The hot season runs January-June, when warm, sunny weather (highs of 80-85 F/27-30 C) is interrupted by rain showers and occasional downpours.

It's drier but cooler July-December, with high temperatures generally staying in the 70s F/25 C. The seas are roughest August-October, but the effects of this really depend on the size of the boat. The islands are not a seasonal destination like Alaska or Antarctica, and there really isn't a bad time to go.

Potpourri

- The Galapagos Islands is the only place where penguins live north of the equator. This makes the species the only tropical penguin on Earth. The bird is also the world's second-smallest penguin.
- There were once up to 15 subspecies of giant tortoises on the islands. Only 10 of those species remain today.
- The only nonflying cormorant in the world lives in the Galapagos Islands. It evolved to hunt fish by diving from shore and eventually lost the use of its wings for flight.
- The life span of a Galapagos land tortoise may be as high as 150 years. Adult males can weigh 600-700 lbs/272-317 kg, and the females can weigh 300-400 lbs/136-181 kg.
- The archipelago was known as the Enchanted Islands because of the way in which the strong and shifting currents made navigation difficult. After he visited the islands, Herman Melville used this name as the title of a short story he wrote about the Galapagos.
- British Capt. James Colnett set up a post office barrel on Floreana in 1873. It was originally used by whalers, who dropped their letters into the barrel as they went out to sea; the mail was relayed by those heading home. Today this area is called Post Office Bay, and the barrel is often used by tourists.

Do's and Don'ts

- Do not wander about on your own—it is not allowed.
- Do listen to your guide for safety procedures.
- Do not take food or plants to the islands.
- Do pay attention to information from a guide who is very knowledgeable about the region. This will enrich your experience.
- Do not stray off the indicated paths or venture out on your own.
- Do pack plenty of camera memory cards—expect to take far more pictures than you would normally. Many travelers will use up half their stock in just their first couple of amazing encounters with the animals.
- Do not ever feed or touch the animals, no matter how friendly they may seem. It is critical that animals do not come to depend on humans or associate them with food or water, or as threats.

Touring the Islands:

About 75 vessels—from converted fishing boats with eight passengers to cruise ships carrying up to 100 passengers—are authorized to offer a variety of tours of the Galapagos Islands. Yacht or small-boat tours are usually more intimate, have more personal service and are able to reach sites on islands limited to a small number of people. But larger ships offer more amenities, are more stable in the water and travel faster, allowing you to visit more distant islands.

Tours also vary in length, from several days to two weeks or more. A minimum of seven days is highly recommended because you can see more and have time to appreciate your experience. (Most four-day/three-night itineraries include a day of air travel between the mainland and the boat, so you only get two full days on the islands.) Additionally, the islands are geologically different. This means that not only is each landscape unique, but in most cases the wildlife is also unique to each particular island. Examples include waved albatrosses, flightless cormorants, flamingos, land iguanas, giant tortoises and red-footed boobies.

Some tours are geared for bird-watchers or those who prefer to experience nature at a leisurely pace. Others target adventure travelers, offering more opportunities for hiking, kayaking, snorkeling and scuba diving. The Galapagos are just as spectacular underwater as above (especially for seeing large creatures such as hammerhead sharks, reef sharks, whales, dolphins and sea lions). But be aware that despite their position on the equator, the islands are surrounded by cool water (by tropical standards) and somewhat strong currents

Geostats:

Passport/Visa Requirements: All U.S. citizens must have a passport when traveling by air to or from Bermuda, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Mexico.

Population: 25,124.

Languages: Spanish.

Time Zone: 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-6 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

Voltage Requirements: 110 volts.