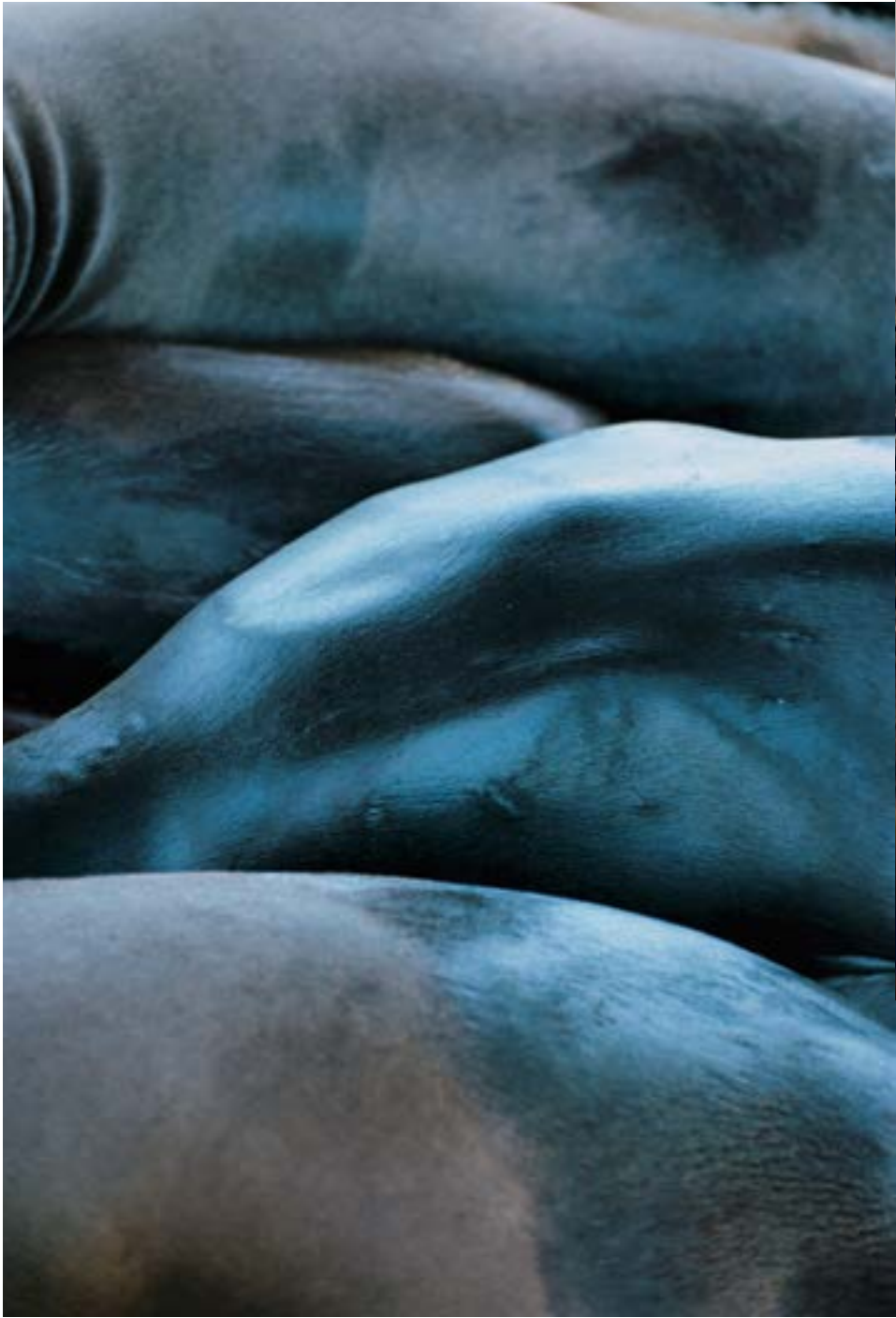


LANDS BEYOND

Exploring the otherworldly landscapes and creatures of the Galápagos becomes something even more heavenly aboard the islands' newest luxury craft.

STORY BY MARK JOHANSON





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I'm halfway to the arrivals hall at Baltra Island, my carry-on wheels clicking across the sun-bleached tarmac, when a hush settles over the crowd ahead; something mango-coloured and prehistoric is emerging beneath low scrub. A land iguana – squat and scaly, it's a case-study of evolution itself – ambles across the path, unhurried, unworried and unapologetic. Yes, he does see us waiting. No, he doesn't care. The message is we're on his turf now.

This is my first encounter with the famously fearless wildlife of the Galápagos, whose 13 volcanic islands (and more than 200 islets and outcrops) straddle the equator 972 kilometres west of mainland Ecuador, where my journey began in the capital, Quito. It was Charles Darwin who put this remote archipelago on the map in 1835 when he discovered this living laboratory of oddball creatures, leading to his landmark theory of natural selection.

"These species arrived here millions of years ago on natural rafts and became like castaways," says my naturalist guide, Francisco Andino, who meets me at the airport. "Only those who adapted to the conditions were able to survive." Darwin wrote effusively of these islands but he wasn't always kind about the inhabitants. He declared the land iguanas to "have a singularly stupid appearance". The marine iguanas (the world's only seafaring lizards) were "imps of darkness". Only one of the 19 endemic reptiles was spared his scorn: the giant tortoise, which can weigh 250 kilograms and far outlive humans.

Andino takes me by boat then minibus to the cloud-hugging highlands of neighbouring Santa Cruz Island, where I come face-to-face with some of these tortoises as we watch them lumber through a dense forest of the endemic scalesia or giant daisy trees. Again, it's as if these creatures are unaware that wild animals elsewhere generally avoid my species at all costs.



By nightfall, it's clear that this otherworldliness will become a running theme of my five-day voyage on *Hermes*, a slick new mega catamaran launched in May by Galápagos cruise operator Via Natura (vianatura.com). When I finally settle in onboard, there are half a dozen blacktip sharks lurking beneath its stern.

Built and designed in mainland Ecuador, the boat is one of the plushiest additions to the islands' circuit, with all the amenities of a larger ship in a more intimate format. Hosting just 20 passengers, its staff-to-guest ratio is nearly one-to-one and there's a library, gym and spa with hammam. At 35 square metres, the palatial (by boat standards) suites include a king-sized bed, walk-in closet and spa bath beneath a window that instantly turns translucent with a switch. I also have a butler, the affable Angel, who brings breakfast to my balcony with theatrical precision.

Hermes is, in a word, lovely. I wish I had more time onboard to relax. Instead I find myself using the boat as a comfortable base from which to plot grand adventures into that universe beyond my floor-to-ceiling window. One morning, I land on the brick-red beach of Rábida Island to discover bright-pink flamingos in the salt pond just beyond. At Bartolomé Island, I watch the acrobatic leaping of mobula rays, whose diamond-shaped bodies launch out of the water "like flipping pancakes", as Canadian guest Andrew describes it. "Incredible creatures," agrees Helen, a retiree from Melbourne.

Each island has its own unique cast of characters and cartoonish appearance, as if Mother Nature outsourced the archipelago to Dr Seuss. Many are arid and rocky, with tropical dry forests of palo santo perfuming the trails. Others have tall volcanic cones with dense woodlands or strange lowland cactuses with tall, tree-like trunks.



Protecting this singular ecosystem while also showing it off to the world can be a delicate balancing act. Some 97 per cent of the Galápagos is national park and the entry fee recently doubled to US\$200 as a measure to manage visitor numbers. Boats plying these waters must follow strictly controlled schedules. This ensures that the roughly 300,000 annual visitors rarely cross paths – and gives the wildlife respite from the spotlight. “These efforts to maintain a low disturbance with the species have made it so that they don’t fear us,” says Andino, who was raised on Santa Cruz and comes from a family of naturalists. “As a guide and a local, I feel I have a responsibility to show visitors how humans and nature can coexist.”

Each night, he takes us through the following day’s activities (hiking, kayaking, photography tours) while delivering brief biology lessons – all accompanied by canapés and bubbles. Every return to the boat from an

excursion warrants some sort of welcome drink, be it a hot tea after a chilly rainstorm or a happy-hour mojito. Guests ditch their adventure gear for dresses, linen trousers and blazers for the four-course wine-paired dinners, which include locally sourced shrimp or lobster grilled on the roof deck and served with a tropical sangria.

The weather delivers perennially pleasant temperatures between 23°C and 26°C so most days I squeeze into a light wetsuit, strap on a snorkel and plunge into the Pacific to search for colourful locals such as Galápagos garden eels. At Bartolomé Island, I glide with green sea turtles and playful Galápagos penguins and at Santa Fe Island, a three-metre Galápagos shark lets me tag along as it scopes out sea lions. Popping up to the surface, I spot fire-engine-red Sally Lightfoot crabs tiptoeing across the slick black shore. The water is a refreshing 25°C but it’s hard to resist a warm-up session





afterwards in the hammam, watching through foggy glass as waves curve over the horizon and scattered clouds decorate the sky.

At Punta Pitt, on San Cristóbal Island, I hear the guttural cackle of blue-footed boobies flying overhead and hike right past these Galápagos icons as they roost alongside a walking trail. Rather than fly away in fear, the marble-eyed birds demand that I skirt around them instead. Four days into my trip, I've grown accustomed to this new dynamic.

Just a few hours later, as our final dinner segues into goodbye cocktails, two Galápagos sea lions wiggle aboard. They've come, we all agree, to join our celebration. While we keep a respectful distance, they roll around the aft deck, batting their eyes and clearly feeling just as welcome on our luxury boat as we do. It's a fleeting juxtaposition of wild animals and refined decor – the kind of scene that only seems possible in a place like this. ✨