

travel



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IT'S A NATURAL SELECTION

The nation of Ecuador and its renowned Galapagos Islands are genuine treasures

By Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

Arriving in Ecuador's capital, nicknamed "Light of the Americas," one quickly thinks of altitude. At 9,350 feet above sea level, Quito is the second-highest capital in the world — No. 1 is La Paz, Bolivia — and negotiating Quito's hilly streets is a constant reminder.

That first evening strolling in search of sustenance, my husband, Casey, and I discovered that Ecuador's soccer team was playing Argentina in the World Cup qualifiers. Settling in at Plaza Foch's Q Restaurant in the hip Mariscal district, we ordered shrimp tapas and Pilsners.

Ecuador was slated to lose; instead, Ecuador whipped Argentina 2-0, and the Mariscal morphed into euphoric pandemonium, as only South American soccer can cause. An excellent way to celebrate a milestone anniversary.

The next morning, after hiring driver Romero and his yellow taxi for a half-day, we drove to the Teleférico, a sky-tram along Pichincha Volcano's rim, and were lifted up to Cruz Loma, an elevation of 12,300 feet. The glorious morning provided breathtaking aerial views, plus trails to walk, horses to hire and a chapel to visit.

We drove on to the charming hamlet of Pichincha and La Mitad del Mundo (the middle of the world),

the most visited spot in Ecuador. It is the site of a museum and a tower said to mark the exact location of the equator, from which the country takes its name. Here the centrifugal force and altitude are responsible for a 0.5 percent weight decrease from the poles. This alone made me contemplate moving there. Instead we enjoyed lunch.

Arriving at Quito's historical center, Romero deposited us at Plaza Grande, perhaps the most exquisite in South America. Following our map's four-hour walking tour — which, because we kept stopping, took six — we started at La Compania de Jesus, a

church that took 160 years to build and whose nave is decorated with copious amounts of gold. We meandered through lovely gardens at the Church and Convent of St. Francis and viewed the church's dark religious art, then continued up Avenue Flores to the Basilica del Voto Nacional, which bears a strong resemblance to Notre Dame. When it started drizzling, we ducked into Vista Hermosa Cafe. Enjoying its panoramic view of Old Town, we happily dined on tasty roast pork and fried plantains.

After two great, urban days and nights in Quito, it was time to channel my inner eco-tourist.

Please see CRUISE, G1



A swallow-tailed gull on Genovese Island with Silversea's Galapagos in the background.



PHOTOS BY JULIE KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

A sea lion makes himself comfortable on San Cristobal island, one of the Galapagos' four inhabited islands. At right, in Quito's Old Town, the colorful Calle Pasaje de Espejo reflects Quito's European architectural heritage.



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		Autumn in Hokkaido & Tohoku	Oct 10
		Burgundy & Provence (Avalon)	Oct 23
		Kyushu & Okinawa	Nov 9

CRUISE

Continued from G1

The Galapagos Archipelago

Accidentally discovered in 1535 when Panama's first bishop, Tomas de Berlanga, wandered off course sailing from Panama to Peru, the islands were named after the giant Galapagos tortoises found here. In a report to Spain's King Charles V, Berlanga noted that the islands' birds, now known as boobies, are "so silly that they didn't know how to flee."

In 1832 Ecuador claimed the Galapagos, and for about 100 years the islands served as penal colonies, the last closing in 1959 when the islands were declared a national park. UNESCO named it a World Heritage Site in 1978.

Charles Darwin's life's work is so inextricably intertwined with the Galapagos that many believe he spent his life here. However, Darwin spent only five weeks in the islands in 1835 aboard a British naval vessel, the HMS Beagle, collecting 1,500 specimens and making notes that provided the basis for his theory of evolution. In 1859, on its first day in print, Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" sold out.

Baltra Island

Flying into Baltra's compact airport, we arrived 10 minutes later at the water-front. Like a Hollywood set, on the tender station were two enormous supine sea lions and an iguana substantially larger than my 17-pound pooch.

Hopping into boats and donning life vests that would become part of our "uniform" that week, we boarded the Silversea Galapagos. Although it's the largest expedition ship traversing the islands, it's intimate, with only 100 passengers and a delightful all-Ecuadorian crew. This is not a cruise of formal clothes and Broadway-style entertainment. However, in vintage Silversea style, the suites were spacious, boasting granite bathrooms, incredibly comfortable bedding and sitting area, flat-screen television, charging station, writing desk and well-stocked mini-bar. The service, cuisine and wines were excellent, as were the knowledgeable naturalists who guided us through the islands on the all-included excursions. The ship has two restaurants, two bars, fitness center, Jacuzzi, small spa, salon and a library. Alfredo, a talented, ever-smiling musician, kept us humming and often spontaneously dancing.

Genovesa Island

Tiny Genovesa lies north of the equator. After a 7:30 a.m. tendering, we hiked up Prince Phillips Steps on the bay's east side. The steep path brought us up 75 feet, with a welcoming committee of several red-footed boobies, whose name originated from "pajaro bobo," Spanish for clumsy bird. As we hiked along, they flaunted their elaborate courtship display — akin to dancing the Watusi with a brassy squawk. Also present were dozens of red-chested frigates, swallow-tailed gulls with beautiful orange-rimmed eyes, Nazca boobies and warbler finches, all in a barren, otherworldly landscape.

Later that morning our trusty boat transported us to Darwin Bay to snorkel. With parrotfish aplenty, hundreds of surgeonfish and entire families of sea lions, it was an underwater habitat approximating Jacques Cousteau's sweetest dream.

After a delicious lunch of enormous grilled prawns and Chardonnay on the ship's deck, we returned to Darwin Bay for a hike. We saw several lava gulls, many red-footed booby colonies, short-eared owls and more sea lions. Later we drank

IF YOU GO...

Galapagos cruise

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Quito evening tour, round-trip air between Quito and the Galapagos, and all airport transfers. Contact: 888-978-4070, silversea.com.

>> **The best way:** A Honolulu-to-Quito round trip on Delta, American or United starts at \$1,149.

>> **Telephones:** The telephone code for Ecuador is 593, the code for Quito is 2 and the code for the Galapagos is 5.

>> **Getting around:** Taxis in Quito are plentiful and inexpensive, but there are no fare meters to speak of, so the fee must be negotiated in advance. If you are not a Spanish speaker, it's best to use a hotel taxi.

>> **Currency:** The official currency of Ecuador is the U.S. dollar, though Ecuador uses its own coins. Best to carry small bill denominations.

>> **Where to stay in Quito:** JW Marriott, Av. Orellana 1172 y Av. Amazonas. Quito. Contact: 888 236-2427, marriott.com. Full-service modern hotel with pool located a short walk from the Mariscal area.

>> **Where to eat in Quito:** Q Restaurant, Mariscal Foch e612 y Reina Victoria, phone: 2 255-7840, quitoq.com. Trendy bar and restaurant with excellent tapas in the heart of Mariscal area. Flat-screen TV for sports and live music most nights. Mama Clorinda, Reina Victoria 1144 y Calama (esquina), phone: 2 254-4362, mamaclorinda.com. Traditional home-cooked Ecuadorian food in Mariscal area. Vista Hermosa Restaurant, Mejia 453, fifth floor, phone: 2 295-1401, vistahermosa.ec. Traditional Ecuadorian food in eclectically furnished restaurant with lovely terrace and panoramic views of Old Town and the Basílica. Live music Thursday through Saturday evenings.

>> **To learn more:** ecuador.travel/en/tips



JULIE KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

A red-footed booby with its signature colorful beak on Genovesa Island.



STAR-ADVERTISER

dropped my oar in their midst. Fortunately for them, they are equipped with cranial air sacs that allowed falling oars to bounce off.

I retrieved the oar, and we continued the voyage, seeing several "split-tail" frigates known as pirates that resemble small aircraft. Because these frigates can't get wet, they are obliged to steal the spoils of others. Hundreds of bulging-eyed red crabs traversed the craggy rocks while dozens of marine iguanas — some up to 20 pounds — lurked. I felt like we were gliding among minidinosuars.

After all that excitement, more was in store when we tendered to Red Beach and came upon a young sea lion that recently had half of his tail severed, probably by a white-tipped shark. Darwin's survival of the fittest brought up close and personal ended any delusions I harbored of snorkeling there. Fearless Casey joined several others in the water while the saner among us took a long beach walk spotting mockingbirds, pelicans, finches and many full-tailed sea lions.

San Cristobal Island

One of the Galapagos' four inhabited islands, San Cristobal has perhaps more sea lions in its main town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno than residents, who number about 7,000. The sea lions make themselves right at home, wherever they see fit.

On the island's northeasternmost edge, we hiked around Punta Pitt. Here there were all species of boobies nesting, frigates, lava lizards and, of course, more sea lions.

Espanola Island

We signed up again for kayaking, this time on Espanola's Gardner Bay. We were surrounded by Galapagos sea turtles, pelicans and

sea lions, and most of the hour had been smooth when the weather abruptly shifted. As we veered closer to shore, another couple in a kayak miscalculated the increasing waves and quickly capsized. In perhaps three seconds our watchful boat driver was there, and in they climbed. A great story to tell their grandkids, it got more and more embellished as we returned to the ship.

Following another delicious lunch, I went to the gym, had a great massage and thought seriously about reading. Instead, I napped.

That evening was Latin Night. Dancing rumba and cha-cha, we were taught several new steps by some of the ship's multitalented crew.

Santa Cruz Island

Santa Cruz has the largest population, with about 20,000 residents. Its main

town of Puerto Ayora is home to the Charles Darwin Foundation, whose flagship program is giant tortoise restoration.

At the Manzanillo Reserve, hundreds of dome-shaped tortoises live in lush, Eden-like surroundings. They don't hear or see well and have no vocal cords, so their stock in trade is sensory vibration. Taking a step closer to these huge creatures causes them to retreat into their shells.

Our last excursion on this magnificent voyage of discovery was an exploration walk on the Plaza Island Trail, where we happened on a sea lion giving birth. She picked up her pup by the neck like a dog, washed it off in the water and placed it for feeding.

I was left thinking about Darwin's brilliance and his monumental contribution to

science following his Galapagos discoveries. Had Darwin been present for the joyous occasion of this sea lion's birth, he might have reveled in witnessing natural selection at its finest hour.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer and legal columnist based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty: The Clarity of Hindsight."

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