

NATURE LOVERS LOOK NO FURTHER

Associate editor **Rachelle Mackintosh** explores Ecuador's Galapagos Islands

Photography by @faunographic

Climbing the 378 stairs to the top of Bartolome Island hasn't taken long, but in my excitement to reach the top I didn't warm up or pace myself, and now my quads are shouting obscenities. The view's left the rest of me speechless though... the gunmetal lava fields of neighbouring Santiago Island stretch to the horizon; between us, Pinnacle Rock, a sharp peak formed by an underwater volcano beside a golden beach; and all around, the shiny Pacific. Yep, the Galapagos Islands roll out the visual drama.



Being a nature nerd, this 20-island archipelago has long been at the top of my gotta-go list. After all, its unique biodiversity and ongoing volcanic action inspired Charles Darwin's famous theory of evolution.

Roughly 1000km off Ecuador's west coast, the islands have featured in countless documentaries - actually, did you see that crazy viral video of an iguana outrunning a whole stack of snakes on a beach? That was filmed on Fernandina, in the western part of the archipelago. Apart from death-defying reptiles, wildlife nerds can get up close to famous locals like giant tortoises, blue-footed boobies, magnificent frigatebirds and sea lions - and since the animals have no fear of humans, the selfie opportunities are on tap. And, surprisingly, so are the opportunities to crack a sweat. During my recent cruise with Aurora Expeditions' Isabela II, I spent each day exploring with hiking, snorkelling and kayaking in the central and southern islands. Here, three sweat-friendly must-do's:

Walk with wildlings

For a fairly flat but nonetheless challenging hike, head to Punta Suarez on Espanola, the southernmost island. Here, a 3km loop will test your balance as you navigate your way over ankle-twisty boulders and dodge everything from newborn sea lions to Rastafarian-coloured marine iguanas. You might also need to step aside for a waved albatross or two: Espanola is the world's only breeding ground of this critically endangered seabird, with up to 30,000 of them mating there between April and December. The trail gets you right into the thick of the colony where you can see them do their mating 'dance' for each other (FYI they couple up for life = squeeze). On the southern side of the trail, you'll find yourself on a cliff top overlooking not only the ocean, but also a lava fissure that creates an epic natural blowhole, spurting water up to 30m high when the tide's just right.

Pop a paddle

Another fun way to crack a sweat, Galapagos style, is to get out on a kayak and explore Santa Fe's coastline. The island's north-east side is home to Barrington Bay, where there are gentle currents and plenty of critters to spy on, both on the shore and in the water. Keep an eye out for creamy-coloured land iguanas, Galapagos hawks, sea turtles who pop their heads out of the water, and even whitetip reef sharks. FYI Aurora's kayaks seat two people but in such gentle conditions it's no drama to take one out solo - and there are several opportunities to do just that throughout the nine-day trip.

Suit up & snorkel

The islands sit at the confluence of several major ocean currents - warmer ones from the north, cooler ones from the south and also the Humboldt, which hits the archipelago direct from Antarctica. As a result, the marine flora and

fauna have adapted to the unique conditions and 20 per cent of the sea creatures are endemic to the area (ie, found nowhere else on the planet). If you're lucky you'll see the Galapagos penguin, snake eel, yellowtail damselfish and the incredibly pretty blue-banded goby, as well as hammerheads and spotted eagle rays. You can deep-sea or beach snorkel all over the archipelago, but don't miss opportunities to do it at Santa Fe, North Seymour, around Pinnacle Rock, Espanola, Punta Pitt and Champion Rock, where the sea lions go out of their way to check you out (and, if they feel you deserve it, give you a good telling off). **WH**



PARADISE FOUND

GONE SNOOZIN'

MACINTOSH WAS A GUEST OF AURORA EXPEDITIONS. WWW.AURORAEXPEDITIONS.COM.AU. PHOTOGRAPHY BY RACHELLE MACINTOSH @FAUNOGRAPHIC

Now you go!

To get there, I flew from Sydney to Santiago (Chile), then to Guayaquil (Ecuador), where I met the Aurora Expeditions group. We then flew to the islands and drove to Puerto Ayora, where we boarded our cruise. For info, hit up www.auroraexpeditions.com.au.