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## Sailing the Galapagos: The Best of the Best

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There's no better way to see the [Galapagos Islands](#) and its magnificent wildlife than sailing around this spectacular archipelago on an intimate and luxurious yacht. Beyoncé and Jay-Z couldn't do any better.

Looking for a truly memorable adventure that would engage not just my husband and me but also our 7-year-old son, we set off on a week-long tour with [Ecoventura](#), which offers stunning, environmentally-friendly tours around the islands.



Our first stop, though, was the five-star [Hotel Oro Verde](#) in [Guayaquil, Ecuador](#), where we rested for a couple of nights after two long flights from Los Angeles and Miami. The service was exquisite, the staff delightful, and we enjoyed many delicious meals (including a super-fun family fondue) and a couple nights of energizing sleep before setting off for our final exotic destination.

If you really want to see the Galapagos, a small ship expedition is the best. There were only 20 passengers on board, which meant we could form real connections and truly share the experience. Our Ecoventura trip was packed full of perfect camera-ready moments, leaving us wide-eyed and in awe of the spectacular wildlife we were able to get extraordinarily close to every day. We kayaked, hiked, and snorkeled, and some of our more adventurous international passengers even swam off the boat.



Our tour was organized divinely; we were educated and entertained and enjoyed the exemplary company of our captain, crew, and guides in perfect luxury and comfort. Our cabins were plush, and the food and service was first class. It really was the best of the best!

The Galapagos archipelago is located about 600 miles from Ecuador. It's made of up of 127 islands, islets, and volcanic rocks, of which only four are inhabited with a population totaling just 25,000. After the bustle of LA, it was absolute heaven. The Galapagos was declared a National Park in 1959 and was made famous as the location that inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection following his visit in 1835. This is home to many exotic animals, such as the land iguana, the giant tortoise, flamingos, pilot whales, sea lions, rays, and finches. We were immediately struck by [San Cristobal's](#) natural beauty upon arrival in the Galapagos.



Whipping across the deep blue ocean in our Zodiac speedboat toward our beautiful yacht, the Flamingo, we were warmly welcomed by the captain and served delicious fresh fruit cocktails. As we watched the sunset that night from the upper deck, huddling under blankets, we knew we were in for a memorable week.

Over seven action-packed days we had the most intimate connections with nature. The Galapagos is home to a plethora of animals you only ever see on the National Geographic channel but who all live in safety here. They are protected and trusting, which means you can find yourself swimming next to a penguin one minute (as I did) or sitting on volcanic rock surrounded by sea lions and a blanket of land iguanas and crabs (as my son did) the next.



Some of our favorite moments included meeting the giant, time-worn Galapagos tortoises in the highlands and experiencing the thrill of a pilot whale frolicking, literally in front of our noses, as we bobbed along on the speedboat. Our guides, Remy and Carlos, made sure we were aware of what we could and couldn't do around the animals. Every day as we toured the islands we saw something different. The bird life was also incredible (make sure everyone you travel with has a camera and binoculars); we saw the Flightless Cormorant, the Blue-footed Booby, albatrosses, and a variety of finches, all very close up. One bird even landed on one of the other passenger's camera lenses as she was taking a photo!



Ecoventura offers small groups of adventurers up close and personal exploration of nature on its three first-class yachts. Ours, the Flamingo, was 83-feet of fabulous craftsmanship, and we quickly settled into our spacious family-friendly triple cabin, which was beautifully decorated with teak interiors, shiny brass fittings, and a porthole window that our son loved. Elsewhere on the yacht there was a fully stocked bar, a conference room, a 24-hour coffee and tea station, and a relaxing lounge featuring a giant screen television, where the children would watch movies after our day's adventure. We enjoyed the quiet observation decks, which were equipped with loungers and blankets and were always the perfect place to watch the abundant wildlife or the sun go down.

Aside from the little details, such as the biodegradable soap in the restrooms, this company is keen to keep the environment as clean and carbon neutral as possible. Remaining true to its eco-philosophy, in 2006 Ecoventura became the first carbon-neutral operation in the Galapagos (its four-stroke engines are 70 percent quieter than two-stroke engines and emit virtually no fumes), and the same year, the company joined forces with the World Wildlife Fund to establish the [Galapagos Marine Biodiversity Fund](#) (GMBF). In 2008, it won the Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Best in a Marine Environment award, and in 2009 it was awarded with the *Condé Nast Traveler's* 3rd Annual World Savers Award in the category of Best Overall Cruise Line. That same year, the company also received *Travel + Leisure's* Global Vision Award for Green Cruising.



I didn't expect the cuisine on board the Flamingo to be so spectacular, but Ecoventura offers locally sourced, healthy, and gourmet-style menus created by chef Francisco Ventimilla, the director of the gastronomy school in Guayaquil. We would start the day with a feast of a breakfast buffet (they had everything from tropical fruits and granola to eggs Benedict and pancakes) and were served snacks after every activity. Fresh fish was always a highlight—the hand-rolled sushi was to die for—but we also loved the langostino in garlic, pistachio-encrusted mahi mahi, and tender grilled octopus. Ecuadorian and Mexican specialties were featured on the menu, which also boasted fresh pasta and Jamaican jerk chicken. We particularly enjoyed the traditional Ecuadorian potato soup. Our son also had a ball; he sat with the other children and would serve himself at the buffet and was also excited to see what snacks Steward Luis would have waiting for us after our daily activities.



I never felt guilty enjoying the delicious food because we were so active during the day. We went on several guided walks, and there were never more than 10 of us to one guide. We also hiked or sailed around the beaches, lava fields, and the mangrove estuaries. It was extraordinary and also the best way to see the wildlife. After a walk we'd usually take a dip in the ocean or go snorkeling and splash around the colorful coral reef to cool down. Some of our party went scuba diving. Wet suits are available, as are scuba suits and fins, but we brought our own fins and masks, which I'd recommend.

Ecoventura also provides its passengers with kayaks, so we explored the quiet coves and shores. The water is clear and calm, and after a brief tutorial we were easily able to steer the kayak. But for sheer thrills, the Zodiac speedboat was our favorite, and our captains even let our son take the rudder one day, which of course he loved.

Overall, it was the best Galapagos choice possible!