

Travel to Ecuador in 2010

Part II: A cruise in the Galapagos Islands (10.1.2010 - 17.1.2010)

A travelogue by Hartmut Porzig



View from Bartholomé onto the island of Santiago with the Pinnacle Rock to the left and our sailing catamaran Nemo II in the middle ground to the right.

Preparing the trip and access to the islands

There are various possibilities for traveling to and within in the Galapagos Islands including booking a passage on a passenger cargo ship in Guayaquil. However, if time is one of your limiting factors, it is most convenient to take a plane from Quito or Guayaquil to Baltra Airport and then to join a cruise with one of the many licensed boats. If you do not want to buy a package tour from a European travel agency, you may book the boat of your choice from a local agency via the internet or directly in Quito (usually cheaper than in Guayaquil). In any case, choosing a boat on one's own can be tricky. The quality of the boats and their crews as well as the prices (from 600 to well over 2000 \$ a week p. P.) vary within wide limits. Therefore it is a good idea to decide first on the size and hence, on the number of people you want to meet on the ship (8-80), then on the type of boat (motor and/or sailing, catamaran or traditional) and on the amount of comfort you prefer. Usually it is an advantage if the agency that you contact for booking a place actually owns the boat rather than is merely procuring the places on somebody else's boat. All licensed boats must have a guide on board because it is illegal to move within the Galapagos National Park and to visit the isles without an official guide. The guides come in three educational levels. All have a basic training from the Darwin Research Centre but level 2 guides have obtained in addition some advanced training and level 3 guides usually have an academic degree in biology. Therefore try to find a boat that is accompanied by a level 2 or 3 guide. Only after all these options have been considered, you should decide on the price you are prepared to pay. After all, a cruise through the Galapagos Islands will often be a once-in-a lifetime adventure. It would be silly to spoil the occasion by a lousy, though perhaps cheap, service.

I had the good luck to find the perfect combination on the Nemo II sailing catamaran from Latin Tours (<http://www.galapagosinformation.com/joomla1/>) with a level 3 guide, but there are certainly many other good and not too expensive boats. On a small boat like the Nemo (12 passengers) it is of course important to meet a nice group. Unfortunately, this is unpredictable but I guess there is a higher probability to find good company in a medium prized boat with a level 2 or 3 guide than in either a very cheap or a very expensive vessel.

During a 7-day cruise it is impossible to visit all the accessible islands. Therefore, each boat has its individual schedule that one should try to find out prior to booking. Even though a visit to the interior of some of the larger islands might be rewarding, the time available for each island is usually too short to allow longer hikes.

The flight from Quito to Baltra (including a stopover at Guayaquil) took about three hours. After paying the obligatory entrance fee for the Galapagos National Park (100 \$ in 2010), Baltra receives its visitors rather prosaically. It is a rather unremarkable, hot, dry and dusty place that has little more to offer than an airport, a few souvenir shops and a harbour for the cruise boats. In front of the terminal I met the other members of my party for the cruise, an American couple with adult daughters and one son-in-law, two young women from Switzerland and another German who had grown up in Chile and hence, communicated in Spanish like a native. Two other guests had missed their plane and would be met later on one of the larger islands. We were altogether picked up by our guide, a very sympathetic and knowledgeable Ecuadorian, apparently with family links to the people that run Latin Tours and owned our boat. A short bus ride brought us to the little port equipped with a single pier for small boats and a shelter for waiting passengers. This latter building was completely occupied by strongly smelling sea lions lying lazily on and under each of the seats. Before long, passengers and luggage arrived safely via transfer boat on board the Nemo II, a well maintained modern sailing catamaran. It had ample space on deck and in a nicely acclimatized

sitting room but four out of the six double cabins were really small with barely enough space to stow our luggage away.



'Passengers' waiting in Baltra port. Our boat, the Nemo II, is the one in the far background

The cruise

Sta. Cruz



The Nemo II sets sails

For a first shore excursion we landed at Sta. Cruz, a few miles south of Baltra and one of the four islands with permanent human settlements. The volcano in the interior rises to almost 900 m and is densely overgrown with vegetation while the coast area remains rather arid. Visiting points and trails for tourists on this, like on all other islands, are strictly regulated and enforced by the guides to avoid harming the animals and their nesting areas. In view of the

ever increasing number of visitors these regulations probably remain the only hope to conserve this incredible refuge of an endemic fauna and flora.

The rocks along the shore were decoratively populated with red cliff crabs that occasionally started fighting with each other. Lazy black sea leguans collected heat on the rocks to get fit for their underwater feeding expeditions. Sea turtles were mating in the clear water of sandy coves and lots of sea birds were busy hunting and diving close to the shore while ghost crabs vanished in their sand wholes faster than one could get them into focus.



Red cliff crab

Back on the boat and after an excellent dinner that the cook produced in his well-equipped but tiny kitchen, the crew members (7 people) presented themselves and we had the first of the standard evening rituals concerning the program of the next day. On a board our guide had written down in detail the course of the ship, listing each individual landing and characteristic observations that were to be expected in each location. He then gave an extensive oral preview such that we could do some reading in preparation for the excursions. We all enjoyed these short lectures that made us feel like amateur naturalists rather than mere tourists.

Bartolomé

Early the next morning we arrived at Bartolomé, a small island on the east side of Santiago Island. Even though it is already 4-600'000 years old its steep rocky cones still look very much like a recently created lava desert. Between the various lava structures, a few pioneering plants like the endemic lava cactus and *Tiquilia* plants fight against the harsh environment. Some lizards and locusts were the only representatives of land animals. A wooden staircase led to the highest peak from where we had a breath-taking view over the black volcanic slopes to the Pinnacle Rock, a picturesque rock needle close to the shore and a few very green vegetation spots with mangroves contrasting the turquoise green clear waters of the surrounding sea. Unavoidably this view shows up in each and every book on the Galapagos Islands. In addition to the Nemo at least four other ships were anchoring close to the island including a large vessel of the National Geographic Society. Consequently, a rather lively traffic of American tourists moved up and down the stairway.



Program of January 11, 2010



View from Bartolomé to Santiago with Pinnacle Rock

Sombrero Chino

Also our next destination was a relatively small island. Due to its characteristic form it was called Sombrero Chino and could be easily detected from afar. Yet, it took at least an hour to cross the open sea in the company of whole groups of Pilot whales until we arrived at a cove protected from the strong wind. Prior to going ashore we had a chance to do some snorkelling along the steep lava rocks surrounding the island. I did not enjoy it at first because as a novice my technique was so poor that I always swallowed too much sea water and had difficulties to breathe regularly. But after a while I was so fascinated by what I could see that I almost forgot about my technical deficiencies. We swam along a cliff that merged into a bright sandy soil about 4-6 m below the surface of the sun-lit crystal clear water. Brightly coloured fishes of various kinds, solitary and in schools, did not seem to feel disturbed by my presence. Most of

them were busy to feed on algae growing on the lava rocks. A baby shark and big black starfishes complemented the beautiful picture.



Sea lion mother with suckling baby



Galapagos penguins

Later we visited the island and its extended sea lion nursery. Incredible numbers of baby sea lions slept together with their mothers or played on the shore while the sea lion bulls moved up and down in the shallow water to watch over their group of females barking impressively to frighten off competing males. Sea lion toddlers approached and sniffed at our feet which disappointingly failed to produce milk. On the path across the island we encountered Galapagos falcons and a variety of leguans. On the way back to our ship we visited a colony of Galapagos penguins enjoying the cold waters of the Humboldt current which reaches out to the Galapagos sea and supports this colony close to the equator. These birds are indeed miniature versions of arctic penguins, not much larger than ducks but with typical penguin manners and behaviour.

Isabela

During the following windy and rainy night we experienced a rather bumpy crossing to the island of Isabela. Fortunately our catamaran was not much impressed by the waves and nobody got sea-sick. The next morning we reached the small harbour of Puerto Villamil with clear weather.



Giant tortoise nursery in the Puerto Villamil breeding centre

Isabela is the largest of the Galapagos Islands. Sitting directly on the Galapagos volcanic hotspot it has 5 volcanos 3 of which are still active. The volcanos reach heights of up to 1700 m. The mountains are separated by barren lava fields and deep and rather impracticable valleys with dense vegetation. Formerly, each of the larger volcanos had its own characteristic population of giant tortoises.



Marine iguanas waiting for something

The tortoises on Isabela were not endangered – as on the other islands – by sailors eager to capture them as living supplies for fresh meat but by feral domestic animals that had escaped from farms in the southern part of the island. The number of pigs, donkeys and, in particular,

goats had increased to a degree that the intense competition for pasture did not leave room for the endogenous land animals. In the nineties of the last century more than 100'000 goats and many thousands of donkeys and pigs roamed the island. In a well-planned hunting effort lasting from 2002 to 2006 these animals were eliminated from the northern part of Isabela and from Santiago another island with similar problems. In the tortoise breeding station of Villamil, the Darwin Foundation is now actively involved in amplifying the population of the different species of giant tortoises. These efforts have already succeeded in re-establishing some of the species in the wild within their original breeding area. We paid quite an extensive visit to the breeding station admiring giant tortoises in all sizes between baby and adult. One old giant tortoise that belonged to the basic inventory of the station and was long accustomed to humans had a strange preference for being caressed on the ventral side of its neck. Touching its skin made it to extend its neck in slow motion to a considerable length retracting it at a similarly low speed when the caressing stopped. In the nature reserve adjacent to the station many endemic plants and trees offered shelter for various kinds of Darwin finches. To the naïve tourist like me the different species were difficult to discriminate except, if the guide pointed out their individual characteristics. Close by a beautiful large and completely empty sandy beach invited long promenades among leguans on isolated rocks, wading birds searching for clams and crabs and ghost crabs that upon the slightest disturbance vanished lightning fast into their mouse hole-sized hiding places in the sand.



Street sign in Puerto Villamil

In the afternoon we visited another small island (Las Tintoreras) with a mangrove thicket allegedly harbouring a resting place for sharks. Instead of sharks in need of rest we only met with innumerable rather big leguans that looked like pieces of lava and sea birds that tended to move out of the picture as soon as I was ready for a snapshot. Back on the ship we were greeted by an elderly Polish couple, the missing complement of our group, who had reached Isabela by a small local plane after an incredible odyssey of non-functional flight connections on their way from Europe to South America.



*Whimbrel
(Regenbrachvogel) at
the coast of Isabela*

Floreana

After another rather windy night the morning found us securely anchored in front of the Kormoran Bay of the island of Floreana. The bay is named after a ship that had run ashore here. Although flightless cormorants are a specialty of the Galapagos fauna, they are not encountered in Floreana but only on the west coast of Isabela that we did not visit.



*Flamingo lagoon on
Floreana*

A short way from our landing site on the sandy beach we reached an inland lagoon surrounding a small island and harbouring a large colony of flamingos, feeding in the flat water or breeding in nest sites on the island. A species of endemic ducks, kept company with their more decorative colleagues. The place was surrounded with various kinds of endemic shrubs which now after the first rains with fresh foliage and flowers enlivened the normally rather barren coastal area. After crossing a small rocky isthmus we arrived at a second sandy beach, a sanctuary for sea turtles. Many of the animals seemed to drift lazily in the flat water

until they decided to crawl ashore and to look for a suitable nesting site in the sand above the flood level. Their migration left characteristic traces like from a truck wheel all over the beach. The sharp eyes of our guide also detected sting rays half buried in the sandy floor of the beach not far from the water line.



Sea Turtle, just landed



Typical tourists (we!) taking pictures of sea turtles.

Back on the ship we started another snorkelling expedition along a steep rocky coast where an incredible variety of fishes were busy feeding on vegetation growing on the stones. It felt like swimming in the middle of an aquarium. Later we visited the famous Post Office Bay, probably the best known place on Floreana. For centuries sailors crossing the Pacific had deposited mail in the mailbox close to the beach hoping that other sailors on their way home would pick up the mail coincident with their destination and deliver it to family and friends. Nowadays tourists keep the mailbox functioning depositing cards and messages and sifting through the mail to collect and to forward those cards that have addresses close to their home. Of course, I left a picture card and was highly surprised when it arrived shortly after my return and ahead of all the cards that I had entrusted the official Ecuadorian mail service.



Juan Carlos, our guide, explains the Floreana mail service system

Yet, the fate of the Post Office Bay is only one of the exotic episodes in the history of Floreana. In the late twenties of the last century the then uninhabited island saw the advent of some Germans on the search for an alternative life style in a place that may have looked in their dreams like a south sea paradise. First a medical doctor from Berlin and his lover arrived. For fear of dental problems in their self-chosen isolation he had replaced his teeth with a steel bit. Three years later they were first joined by another couple with their little son and finally by a dubious lady with three lovers who wanted to build a luxury hotel for rich Americans. This meant definitely the end of the 'Paradise'. The living together of these people became a tragicomic story full of intrigue, conflict and maybe even murder. The events have been described in several books, one of which was authored by Margaret Wittmer, the last surviving member of the original settlers who died aged 96 in 2000. Her descendants still own a small guesthouse on Floreana.

Espagnola

During the following night we arrived at the island of Espanola but we could disembark only late on the next morning because the visitors from 4 or 5 visiting ships had to be kept apart a little. We arrived at a nice beach populated by lots of interesting birds like the Galapagos oyster catcher which was busy to catch not oysters but crabs at the waterline.



*American Oyster Catcher on
Espagnola*

The famous Galapagos mocking bird inspected our deposit of clothes trying to open everything that was closed while Darwin ground finches were active in the surrounding shrubs. In the afternoon we followed a rather extended loop road leading through the breeding area of various kinds of seabirds. Blue footed boobies had their nesting sites right beside our path, Nasca boobies were busy feeding fluffy chicks and even some banded albatrosses had remained on the island. Normally, the albatrosses leave with their young by the end of December, but if the young have not yet reached adult size they use to stay on somewhat longer. With all the big and beautiful seabirds the Galapagos doves with red feet and blue eye rings, cactus finches, leguans and sea lions had almost difficulties to catch our attention.

Back on the ship we were visited by brown pelicans settling without fear on the rear parts of the ship. Close to our anchoring place pelicans and boobies demonstrated their artful fishing technique. They first fly relatively high above the water until they suddenly hit the water surface almost in a right angle with incredible speed and dive to catch their prey. Apparently this technique needs considerable skill to avoid hurts upon touching the water. Inexperienced young sometimes die in the attempt.



Male Española sea iguana



Sea lion and Galapagos mocking bird

Santa Fé

During the night we had reached the small Island of Santa Fé, a relatively flat hump of lava rocks. It's characterized by impressive groups of two to ten m high tree opuntiae, a cactus species the fruits of which are beloved by beautifully coloured land leguans and cactus finches alike. The land leguans were somewhat less lazy than their sea-going relatives and moved really fast as soon as they perceived the sound of a dropping cactus fruit. The recent rains had induced the dry shrubs (*Scaevola*, *Cordia* species) and the bottom dwelling creeping plants to foliate fresh leaves such that a green veil seemed to cover the rather barren coastal area. It provided cover for the many different finches and mocking birds. On the beach full of female sea lions many wailing babies searched for their mothers.



Tree Opuntia on Sta Fé



Santa Fé land iguana

Santa Cruz

In the afternoon we used a fresh wind to translocate under full sails towards Puerto Ayora the largest settlement of the island of Sta.Cruz. It is situated on its south coast and since 1964 is home of the Darwin Research Station and since 1968 of the National Park administration. The Darwin Station has been built and is run by the International Darwin Foundation which

collected funds and accumulated expertise for the protection of the Galapagos islands already at a time when Ecuador was not yet prepared and capable to manage such a tremendously complicated conservation project. The Station is surrounded by a large park with lots of visitors moving around but the visitor's centre itself remained surprisingly unattractive.



Giant tortoise at Darwin station

Nevertheless, various species of giant tortoises that have been rescued from some of the smaller islands could be observed. They are bred here in an attempt to build up individual populations that could be reintroduced into their original habitat after the former threats to their survival (like goats, rats, pigs and hungry sailors) have been eliminated. The station was also the home of 'Lonely George', a more than 100 year old tortoise and the last of his kind from the island of Santa Cruz. It was still alive at the time we visited the station but has died in June 2012, the time of writing this account. Most of the buildings are devoted to research and to teaching naturalist guides and hence, by definition are not designed as tourist attractions.



Expert customers at the fish market of Puerto Ayora

As a town Puerto Ayora is very touristic, full of souvenir shops and restaurants but not really ugly. I was most impressed by the small fish market where freshly caught tuna and other fishes were sold right next to the fishing boats attentively observed by a pelican and a tame sea lion standing amidst the customers and waiting for some surplus fish finding its way into their throats.

Plaza Sur

With the next morning came our last full day among the islands with a visit to the small island of Plaza Sur off the east coast of Sta. Cruz. It forms a rather flat lava plateau like an oblique slab with a vegetation of tree opuntias and Galapagos Sesuvia. The latter, a bottom covering succulent shows a brilliant red colour during the dry season that changes into green in the rainy season. At the time of our visit (mid-January) the colour change was in full swing. The island is home to a large population of yellow land leguans that reach about 1 m in length and show impressive dorsal crests. On the steep cliffs of the south coast lots of sea birds, in particular split tail sea gulls and tropic birds, were nesting.



Land iguana on Plaza Sur



Pair of swallow-tailed gulls in Plaza Sur

North Seymour

Later after two hours under full sails we reached the equally small island of North Seymour situated north of the airport island Baltra and famous for its breeding colonies of frigate birds and of blue footed boobies. Both species display extraordinary courtship behaviour. Pairs of blue footed boobies perform an elaborate dance prior to pairing and nesting while male frigate birds try to impress their mates with a huge vermillion-coloured air-filled throat poach. Mid-January was not the ideal point in time to observe the courtship behaviour of both species. It was a little bit too late for the boobies and a little bit too early for the frigate birds. But of course there are always late comers and early starters such that we could observe at least some of the displays. The boobies do not build artful nests but simply use small depressions on the bare rock to place their eggs and breed but the frigate birds build nests on the top of shrubs because they would have difficulties to start flying from the bottom. They are extremely good and acrobatic flyers but unadapt to walk on a flat surface. In a way I was somewhat surprised that the boobies nested so close to frigate birds, their worst enemies, on this small island. Frigate birds, the ‘pirates of the air’ acquire a good part of their food by robbing the catch of other sea birds, in particular the boobies, while these latter are flying back to their young.



Blue-footed booby with egg



Pair of frigate birds with juvenile and nestling

Our group was not the only one to visit North Seymour on that day. We were anchoring close to another small ship and, in addition, a really big one from the National Geographic Society with at least 80-120 people on board kept a little more distance from the coast. So many simultaneous visitors brought the small island with its single trail path to the limits of its capacity (and probably also to the limits that its animal population could tolerate). It seemed like a night mare to imagine what would happen if big cruise ships would be allowed into the Galapagos National Park.

North Santa Cruz

Early the next morning, as our last adventure, we used our ship's boat to explore some large mangrove lagoons that form part of the north coast of Sta. Cruz. The beautifully quiet lagoon with its labyrinth of twisty inlets was a preferred mating place for green sea turtles but also harboured some rays and sharks. While the boat was drifting quietly many pairs of turtles showed up around us. Apparently the mating procedure is not without risk for the females because with the heavy males on their backs they sometimes have difficulties to emerge from the water for breathing and are in danger of drowning.



In the mangrove lagoon



Emerging sea turtle

Shortly after our return to the ship we arrived at the port of Baltra. All members of our group took the same flight back to Quito except our well informed, well organized and personally very nice guide who went to his family in Guayaquil for a free week after two weeks of 'service'. By contrast, the crew of the Nemo II had only a few hours to prepare the ship for the next group of guests.



Part of the Nemo II crew

After an affectionate farewell to my nice travel companions I was looking forward to a free day and some shopping in Quito. Once again I stayed in the Alcalá, the hostel where I had spent my first day in Ecuador. In the afternoon I walked to the centre of the old colonial town through a large public park which on this Sunday was full of people. All kinds of comedians, clowns and street theatre groups tried to attract the attention of the visitors. When I tried to take a picture of one of the performers he singled me out immediately to poke fun on me as the prototypical tourist - though in a friendly manner. Also on the Plaza de Independencia in the centre of the old town comedians were entertaining people with funny presentations and hoping for donations. While I was watching somebody managed to pick the mobile phone out from the pocket of my trousers but fortunately left my wallet untouched. On the following day I had a chance to witness a great parade in front of the government palace with soldiers on horseback and on feet in historical costumes, military bands, gun salutes and lots of school children waving little flags. Even President Correa presented himself waving on a balcony but without addressing the modestly enthusiastic crowd with a speech.

Later I visited many of the churches and monasteries that form an important part of the old town. Some have repeatedly suffered destructions from earth quakes others are still richly endowed, even overloaded, with works of art. Characteristic and attractive features are the beautiful inner courtyards (patios), quiet oases in the hectic town. In almost all of the sacral buildings an admission fee is charged and photographing inside the buildings is not tolerated.

Unfortunately, Quito proved not to be the ideal place for buying Ecuadorian handicrafts, certainly much less so than the Indian market in Otavalo. None of the fashionable shops cared to sell local products at all. However, a bazaar-like handicraft market called 'Mercado Artisanal' is located outside the historic centre in the Mariscal quarter. Here, many indigenous people, mainly women, from other parts of the country sold their products at modest prices. Hence, there was no need to return home empty-handed.



*Church and
monastery San
Francisco in Quito*



*Otavalo women on
the Mercado
Artisanal in Quito*

The end