

# Journey to the Galápagos | Trip Report

February 25 – March 4, 2018 | Written by Dodie Logue

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Participants: Naturalist Journeys Guide Dodie Logue, expert local guides, and participants Anola, Ken, Jennie, Betsy, Mark, Terri, Donna, Mark, Margaret, Steve, Jane, Susan, Doug.

## Sat., Feb. 24 Pre-Cruise Extension to Antisana National Park & Reserve

Some of our group arrived the previous day and gathered together to do a bit of birding, both on the grounds of San José and Puembo Birding Gardens (PBG). Some of the early arrivals went into Quito to explore for a day; some relaxed, and some were to meet in Guayaquil en-route to the Galápagos. In the Puembo area, we had looks at Golden Grosbeak, Saffron Finch, Long-tailed Trainbearer, Hooded Siskin, and the ever-present Sparkling Violetear, just to name a few.



This morning we were up early and met our local guide, Iris, at our hotel over coffee. It was a day of mixed weather, the high altitude made for lots of changeability. During our drive, Great Thrush were common, as were Blue-and-white Swallow, especially near small towns.



One of our first stops was an overlook where there were some cliffs and a deep ravine — Andean Condor! There was a pair perched on far ledges; we watched them as they took off and flew a bit, only to land again on the cliffs.

Magnificent. We worked our way up the road, which crested at over 14,000 feet! There were so many birds: Black-winged Ground-Dove, Black Flowerpiercer, Cinereous Conebill, Stout-billed Cinclodes, even good looks at Tawny Antpitta. Close to the top, in view of the glacier, we saw Black-faced Ibis, Andean Gull, and numerous Carunculated Caracara.

Once by the lake the weather really took a turn; there was some rainy-sleet and it was quite chilly. But the lake — Laguna de la Mica — didn't disappoint and we got looks at Yellow-billed Pintail, Andean Teal, Andean Ruddy Duck, and Silvery Grebe.

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We were all pretty chilly and tired and hungry as we made our way back down, and stopped at Tambo Condor for lunch. The open fireplaces were welcome, as were the feeders. We had a very memorable traditional meal — I particularly liked the starting salad of broad beans, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and onions, with customary hot sauce — while watching Giant Hummingbird, Shining Sunbeam, Great Sapphirewing, as well as other amazing birds. The owner of Tambo Condor is involved with bird conservation, and it was a great place to spend time. After lunch we continued on our way down, stopping to bird here and there.



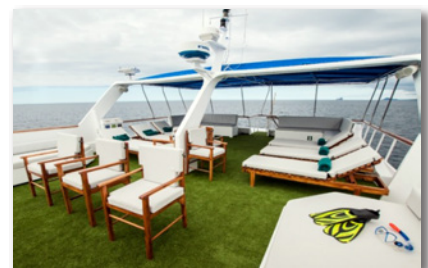
This night most of us met over dinner in the restaurant at San José, and anticipated the morning departure for the Galápagos!

## Sun., Feb. 25 Galápagos Flight | San Cristóbal

Today we had an early breakfast at our hotel and were headed to the airport before 7:00 AM. It was a relatively short drive, and at the airport we made our way to the special area for Galápagos flights, had our luggage screened, etc. Then it was to the waiting lounge — some of us bought chocolate or last minute needs here. The flight was on schedule, a quick hop to Guayaquil where we picked up a couple more of our group, then off for the two-hour flight across the Pacific to San Cristóbal Island. Pepe, one of our Galápagos guides, was waiting with a sign for the *Letty*, which would be our home for the next week. We also met Fredy who helped with the luggage, and soon we were off in a bus to the harbor. Both our guides for the week were natives to the Islands — Fredy from Santa Cruz and Pepe from San Cristóbal.



It was pouring rain when we arrived, so we had a wet panga ride out to the boat. Once on board, we got settled in our rooms, had the first of many delicious lunches, and a briefing about the week ahead. Then we were back on the pangas heading for the harbor again. Before loading the bus for the tortoise breeding facility in the highlands, we started seeing the incredible animal life — sea lions hanging out right on the docks and ramps and Darwin's finches landing for some crumbs. We had a 45-minute drive to Cerro Colorado Tortoise Reserve in the pouring rain. Established by the National Park in 2003, the Galapaguera is a man-made breeding program for tortoises and an



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information center for visitors. Visitors can both observe Giant Tortoises living in a semi-natural habitat, but also learn about their origin, evolution, and threats by introduced animals.

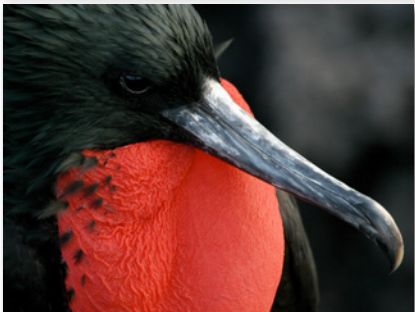
Once there we waited on the bus a bit to see if the rain might subside, but finally ventured out. We did see a few tortoises wandering about, and in the pens we saw youngsters of different ages. We also were extremely lucky to see an endemic San Cristóbal Mockingbird, as the rain never let up and the paths were becoming small rivers. We also saw a Medium Ground-Finch. It was a brief, but interesting visit and because of the continued rain, we were back on the bus headed to the harbor earlier than we would have liked. Once back by the docks, the rain did let up slightly, and we saw our first Marine Iguana and Lava Heron on the rocky shore!



Time for our fourth panga ride of the day — we were getting the routine down. Once back on board, we had another briefing, a welcome cocktail, and the first of our delicious meals onboard.

## Mon., Feb. 26 Genovesa

Last night was a long crossing over deep waters, and some of the group felt the consequences; but regardless, many of us were up early and watched from the top deck as the boat was just entering the caldera of Genovesa. There were Boobies crossing the water, and Sea Lions popping their heads up to see what was happening. We had the first day of what would become a welcome morning routine: Wake-up call at 7:00 AM, breakfast at 7:30, and first activity at 8:30. A very civil schedule. This morning we took a panga ride to a beautiful hike, at Prince Philip's steps, a rock stairway that started at the waterline and ascended up to the cliff face and then on the top flats where there was a very nice trail. There were Great Frigatebirds soaring, Galápagos Doves flying by, and Nazca and Red-footed Boobies literally all over. The day was nicely overcast, not too hot, and we thoroughly enjoyed sauntering along the trail, new and exciting things to see at each turn. There were Red-footed Boobies on nests in trees and plump Nazca Booby babies on the ground.



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At the end of our trail we came upon a plateau overlooking the ocean where there were many, many Storm-Petrels flying around. There were also quite a few, maybe a dozen, Short-eared Owls hunting them; some flying and some sitting on the rocks. They were a deep rich color, much darker than in the states. Some of us felt we could stay here for hours just watching the show unfold. But it was time for our next activity: snorkeling! We went back to the *Letty* to don our wetsuits, then went snorkeling along the edge of the cliffs. There was a steep drop off and we swam right along the edge, seeing both shallow-water colorful, smaller fish, and getting glimpses of some deep-water denizens, too — sharks and sea turtles. We were lucky to be here at this time of year when the water was warm enough to experience this. We were exhausted and hungry when we finally made it back to the boat around 1:00 PM. Lunch didn't



disappoint — fish soup and banana cake!



In the afternoon, we could choose to kayak or paddle board, again heading out along the cliffs to see the wildlife from a different perspective. The Red-billed Tropicbirds especially didn't disappoint!

Later we took the pangas to another area of shore where we had our first wet landing and a nice hike and beach snorkel. The wet landing went fine — we were getting to be pros! And we

saw some of the Genovesa finch specialties here, including Cactus Finch. After the walk, we snorkeled in a small lagoon, some saw rays and an assortment of fish. On land, Sea Lions were nursing and Ruddy Turnstone and Wandering Tattler were combing the rocky shore for food.

Back on boat after a very full day; we had our routine evening briefing about the next day's schedule, and dinner of sea bass or turkey. Some of us did our checklist from the past few days. Tonight was a long crossing and we were all soon in bed.



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## Tues., Feb. 27 Santa Cruz | Las Bachas

This morning we awoke in a cove near the fuel station. Elliot's Storm-Petrel were fluttering right by the boat and we had our first Brown Noddy and Blue-footed Booby. Unfortunately we didn't make the fueling line up, so instead we headed to Las Bachas beach. Here we had a nice beach walk where we had good views of Lava Heron, Small and Medium Ground-Finch, Whimbrel, Marine Iguanas, and Lava Lizards. There was a brackish lagoon that had a pair of White-cheeked Pintail, some Least Sandpiper, and a very friendly Galápagos Mockingbird.



After our walk we headed back to the lovely white beach to snorkel and we saw a female Green Sea Turtle was coming down the sandy slope, presumably after laying eggs. Some of us got to see her enter the water, where we saw another pair mating. A bit further on we saw a mother and chick American Oystercatcher. Snorkeling along the shore was enjoyed by some, even swimming with turtles! The others in our group just enjoyed the cooling refreshment of wading into the water.



Next it was back on the boat to refuel and have lunch. After dining we disembarked again, at Cerro Dragon. Our boatmen did a good job of getting us all safely on land! Here, during our hike, we saw many colorful Land Iguanas eating fresh new sprouts. They looked both fierce and gentle at the same time. Many Galápagos Flycatchers were along the trail, often very friendly. There was a pair of Flamingos in a lagoon, lucky as they were not present at our last stop. Also along the way we saw a Common Cactus-Finch.



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The dragon volcano and the cactus and the heat in the stark landscape made for an otherworldly feeling. Once back on board we immediately pulled anchor, since tonight was our longest crossing over to the very west side and the youngest of the islands, Fernandina. We had our evening briefing and dinner, then to bed after another full day.

## Wed., Feb. 28 Fernandina | Isabella

We were still traveling when some of us got on deck in the morning to watch the sunrise. It was after breakfast when we finally anchored. Before heading out we spotted some Flightless Cormorants in the water and a couple of Hammerhead Sharks swam by.

After breakfast we took the pangas to the shores of Fernandina to see Marine Iguanas. We were not disappointed as there were many of them: in the water, under the shrubs, piled up on the dark lava rocks, digging holes in the sand to lay their eggs, spread-eagle on the sand to absorb heat. They are incredibly non-frightened of humans and just did their thing as we walked around them. The Sea Lions were playful in the small tide pools and there were a few shorebirds and cormorants on the rocks. Here we saw our first Galápagos Hawk in some of the taller trees.



This is the youngest island, and there is a lot of dark and barren lava; we saw some lovely outcroppings of Lava cactus.

After this hike we got our wetsuits on for some snorkeling. It was a wonderful experience, swimming along with Pacific Green Turtles and Sea Lions swimming right by. We were able to see Marine Iguanas munching peacefully on the algae under water and saw a colorful variety of fish and even stingrays. Then it was back on

board for lunch and a three-hour boat trip to Urbina Bay on Isabella, the largest of the islands.

We had a break before heading out in our pangas again for a hot and wet landing on a small sandy beach. Once ashore we started seeing and hearing many, many finches flying back and forth, on the path in front of us. We identified them as a mixture of Small and Medium Ground-Finches. Just down

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the trail we saw a tortoise in the wild! A female making her way along the trail, tasting bits of things along the way. At one point we got a bit close and she hissed her disapproval. There were yellow flowers, hibiscus family, and mimosa family. A bit further along the trail we came to a small clearing (thanks to the feral goats) where there were two male Land Iguanas grazing. It was here that it started to rain — and not just a sprinkle! We all got soaked, but it was so warm it didn't matter. We saw a close Galápagos Hawk in a tree and some Yellow Warblers.



On our way back we again met the female tortoise; she continued unconcernedly along the trail right past us. Some had planned for a cooling dip back at the beach, but since we were all soaked and cooled already, we loaded the pangas and made it back to the *Letty*.



The two pangas were hoisted up and the *Letty* started moving to our next location, Elizabeth Bay, on the southwest side of Isabella. We had another delicious dinner and some were out on deck to look at stars and the moon. We dropped anchor and this night would not be moving.

## Thurs., Mar. 1 Isabella

This morning we had a beautiful sunrise from the top deck! After our breakfast and morning time, we loaded the pangas and headed out to see Galápagos Penguin — up to 100 of them! We had fantastic looks and our guides were very happy to see the population up this year; there were quite a few juveniles. The warming trend of our climate is not helping them in general. We spent quite a bit of time watching them swim, dive, mate, and generally look cute.

We also had close Blue-footed Boobies sunning on the rocks. Next we took the pangas into a mangrove area

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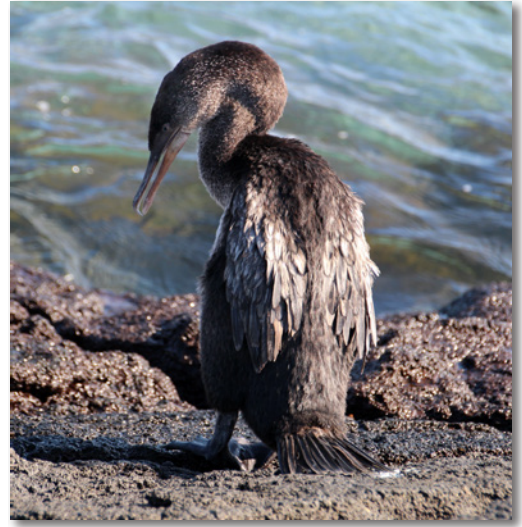
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where we cut the engines and just paddled. It was enjoyable to be in silence. We saw both Lava and Striated Heron, Sea Turtles, Mockingbirds, Yellow Warblers, a few Ground-Finches flying across the water. What a lovely morning.

Back to the *Letty*, which was soon on the move up to Tagus Cove. We had some time to relax on the deck, and had lunch. Most of us went out for an afternoon snorkel along the rocky shore of Tagus Cove. This was a fabulous place to swim — we saw many Sea Turtles, Sea Lions, a variety of Starfish, Rays, and a few of the group saw Penguins ... underwater!

After our swim, we had a hike overlooking Darwin lake, a “dead” saltwater lake. It was beautiful but unable to support much life. Late afternoon we had another panga ride, where we enjoyed good views of Cormorants, a few Marine Iguanas, and Penguins on shore.



Back onboard for a lovely sunset and full moon. We had our briefing for the next day and a scrumptious dinner.



## **Fri., Mar. 2 Santiago | Rabida**

This morning we woke up in Tagus Cove and after breakfast headed to shore at Puerto Egas its black sand beach. Here we took a long, slow walk and got to really explore tide pools and shoreline at a slow pace, which we all enjoyed.

We saw the area where salt had been mined in the past. And Ken found some kind of mouse lower mandible — very interesting! There were many Small Ground-Finches, Mockingbird, an Oystercatcher, some Least

Sandpipers, and many Yellow Warblers. Also a few Marine Iguanas, many crabs, both Sally Lightfoot and Ghost. The walk was quite hot and most of us enjoyed a snorkel on the beach afterwards. I heard reports of sightings of Eel, Stingray, many colorful fish, and White-tipped Reef Shark.



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We were back on board for lunch as the boat moved to Rabida island — red lava beach, very hot! A short panga ride brought us ashore and we took a walk to an overlook; some saw a Common Cactus-Finch, as well as the usual Small Ground-Finch and Galápagos Mockingbird.

Some of the group snorkeled along the beach, some chose to walk and explore a bit. The underwater viewing here was brilliant — the colorful fish really contrasted against the red lava rock. Tonight we had our briefing and dinner, and some of us did the checklist.

## **Sat. Mar. 3 Santa Cruz | Puerto Ayora | Academy Bay**

Today we awoke in Puerto Ayora off Santa Cruz Island, population 20,000 — the largest and busiest city in the Galápagos. After our morning routine we headed out to the highlands, our first destination being the scalesia forest. Scalesia are the taller trees on the island, and funnily are related to sunflowers. We drove for a while and the landscape got more and more populated with trees as we went up. Our first stop was at Los Gemelos, “twin” craters, an area in the woods where we saw Small and Large Tree-Finches, as well as Green Warbler-Finch. After walking the woods for a bit, we loaded back into the bus and headed to Pozo el Chato Tortoise farm. Here the West Santa Cruz Giant Tortoise lives and breeds. There were many tortoises grazing on grass and in water. It was a treat to see them wandering about naturally and unconcernedly. After walking a bit in the heat we went to the refreshment place for lemongrass tea or Galápagos coffee — delicious!

It was a great morning and now we headed back to the *Letty* for lunch. We had an early briefing about the rest of our schedule and then we took the pangas into town. We could now explore the Darwin Center, shop, etc. And have some time on our own.

The Darwin Center was great! We saw a new bird, Vegetarian Finch, and also saw Common Cactus-Finch. There were many tortoise in captivity and Lonesome George was on display. We learned that Galápagos means “saddle” in Spanish. Then we were on our own for shopping, gelato, or just wandering the small town. There were Lava Gulls and Sea Lions by the fish market hoping for some scraps. Once back on the boat, we had our parting cocktail and a wonderful meal. Anola opted for dinner at Angermeyer restaurant and joined us back on the *Letty* for desert.



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## Sun., Mar. 4 San Cristóbal | Isla Lobo | Departures



This morning we were up and out on the pangas before breakfast to Isla Lobo, which is a very small island. We had our last viewings of Blue-footed Boobies, both Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds puffing up their red balloons, and there were Sea Lions playing all around our boat.

It was a beautiful last morning on the water. We boarded the *Letty* again for breakfast and final packing. Our last panga ride brought us to shore where we went straight to the airport to get our boarding passes. We now had a wait of a couple

of hours, and some took the opportunity to walk the town a bit and do some last-minute shopping in the town of San Cristóbal.

We all had flights back to our respective places; those going on to the Mindo extension went to Puembo Birding Garden for dinner and overnight; some got left in Guayaquil, some in Quito, and some waited at the airport for their red-eye flight home. We said our goodbyes — it had been a magical week with compatible folks; we made an email list for everyone to have for future contacts. Thank you all for being part of this great adventure!

## Mon., Mar. 5 – Thurs., Mar. 8 Mindo Extension: Birding the West Andean Slope

An intrepid group of six people and two guides met the morning of March 5 at Puembo Birding Garden and headed out for four days of unforgettable birding. I won't be going into daily details, but will do some highlights:

The Mindo area is where two biologically diverse ecoregions converge: the Choco lowlands and the tropical Andes. We experienced some cloudforest and some drier forests, many rivers, and deep valleys. We stayed at Sachatamia Lodge where we ate most of our meals, as well. The lodge caters to birders and had amazing grounds and feeding stations; there was always something to see and we could barely tear ourselves away to eat. We had overall good weather, with a bit of drizzle most days in the afternoon.

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Some of the places visited were the high altitude (nearly 11,000 feet) Yanacocha Reserve, the Tandayampa Valley, Alambi Cloud Forest Reserve, Angel Paz Reserve, and the town of Mindo and surrounds. We were lucky to be able to purchase amazing locally-grown organic chocolate bars from the owner of Mashpi Chocolate Artesanal who was also a bird guide.



Some of the highlights were 31 species of hummingbirds, five seen antpitta, (plus three that were heard only), Cloud-forest Pygmy-Owl, a Torrent Duck pair, Andean Cock-of-the-rock, many, many colorful tanagers including Grass-green and Black-chinned Mountain-Tanager, Golden-headed Quetzal, Squirrel Cuckoo, Masked Trogon, Toucan Barbet, numerous flycatchers, Green-and-black Fruiteater and Scaled Fruiteater, Red-crested Cotinga, White-capped Dipper, toucans and toucanets, Black Solitaire, and more.

We did and saw so much in such a short period of time, I think we were all a bit blurry in the evenings.

The last day we left our lodge after lunch and birded a bit on our way back to Quito. We made it to Puembo Birding Garden close to 6:00 PM, said our goodbyes to Iris, took a short bird walk, got cleaned up, and enjoyed our last meal together. Mercedes joined us for desert, which was a treat — she is quite amazing!



Jorge took us back to the airport at 9:00 PM and we all went our separate ways for our red-eye flights home. It was a truly fun four days with a group of passionate nature lovers.

Thank you all for joining Naturalist Journeys on this trip!

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