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# Travel



PHOTO COURTESY DANIELA WISNIEWSKI GALAPAGOS CONSERVANCY

## SEAL OF APPROVAL

Surround yourself with friendly wildlife in the largely uninhabited Galapagos Islands.

PAGE 114

# ANIMAL PLANET

Interact with the friendly fauna in the Galapagos

BY BECCA HENSLEY

**S**omewhere in the **Galapagos Islands**, an ancient archipelago 600 miles from the shore of **Ecuador** in the **Pacific Ocean**, it seems like there's a portal to another world. I've just entered it, and I feel like a mermaid cavorting in a cartoon sea.

Part of a Lindblad National Geographic expedition to these remote, undeveloped islands, I embark on a deep-water snorkeling adventure to otherworldly **Guy Fawkes Islets**. With a small group of adventurers and a park ranger, I flutter alongside a soaring wall of jagged black lava in crystalline water so deep it mimics the sky. Brilliant fish of every hue flit around me while an astonishingly large shark lumbers past.

Suddenly, there's something else in the water. It flashes by at high velocity, like a hummingbird in motion. I pause, awestruck. Did I imagine that? Then it comes back with alacrity. It circles me, swoops between my legs, stops right at my face mask and begins to peck—as if knocking on my door for attention. I've just met my first Galapagos penguin.

For the next few minutes, I become a Disney princess without a crown. I'm in my own movie, and I'm swimming with a playful creature who won't stop engaging me. My fellow snorkelers join the fun—and this tuxedo-wearing penguin can't decide which one of us he likes best. Friendly and fearless, he's like most of the endemic wildlife found

## Insider Tips

Cruises are the best way to experience the Galapagos, as the islands are scattered over many miles of sea, and most are uninhabited. Check out your options at [expeditions.com](http://expeditions.com).

Be sure to try Ecuador's special brand of citrus-infused, tomato-laced ceviche and its doughy yucca bread.



FROM TOP:  
A giant Galapagos tortoise takes a stroll; a cruise ship sails along the coast

in the Galapagos, unafraid to meet strangers because large predators rarely have been part of the paradigm here. When he departs, we return to our speedboat, squealing with glee and saying, in what will become a mantra for this trip, that we are "changed forever."

Charles Darwin might have first uttered this phrase when he cruised through the Galapagos in 1835 on the HMS *Beagle*. These 19 far-flung volcanic islands and cays, combined with the unique species that inhabit them, inspired his theory of natural selection, which prompted his revolutionary tome *The Origin of Species*.

But he wasn't the only one to be transformed by the magical Galapagos. Aboard the *Endeavor*, an intimate vessel staffed with sci-



entists, naturalists and photo experts, we are amazed by everything we do and see. Between daily hikes, kayaking jaunts, snorkels, dives and glass-bottom boat rides, we never stop marveling at what the days bring.

At various islands, we find flocks of blue-footed boobies feeding their young, cobalt-beaked, red-footed boobies festooning

Continued on page 116

LANDSCAPE PHOTO COURTESY DANA KAASIK  
GALAPAGOS CONSERVANCY. TORTOISE PHOTO  
FROM SHUTTERSTOCK



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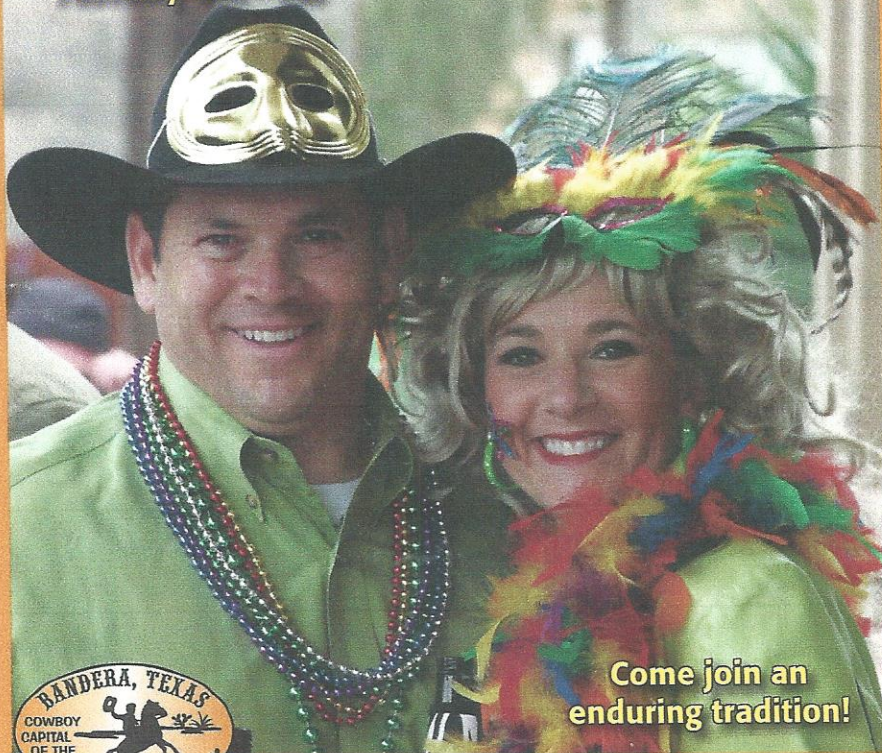
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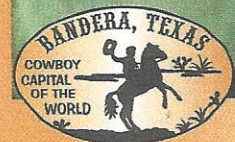
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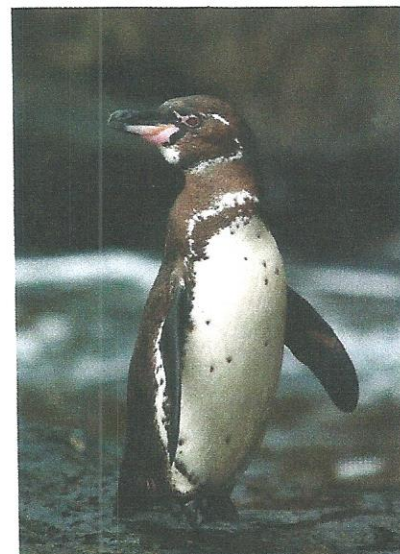
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**TRAVEL  
FAR**



**A Galapagos penguin surveys the land**

Continued from page 114

the bushes like holiday lights and snow-white albatrosses engrossing in their seductive mating tango. At the beach, we watch baby sea lions roll in the surf. Above us, red-breasted male frigate birds glide through the sky. More than once, while we swim, sea lions pop up next to us in the waves, inviting us to join their antics. Indifferent iguanas stare quizzically at our boots as we pass, while slow-moving tortoises evoke the wisdom of their 150 years. At times, the haunting landscape, which ranges from barren to rocky to cacti-covered to verdant, upstages the animals with its beauty.

Lindblad Expeditions brought the first inquisitive travelers to the Galapagos decades ago, offering a hands-on but eco-conscious foray into the field. Joining forces in 2004 with the National Geographic Society, they continue to provide true explorations, trips that attract a perpetually curious and learning-obsessed clientele. Though comfortable and superbly outfitted, they aren't glamorous vessels, but they do have amenities such as a sauna, gym, pool and a well-stocked bar. Profoundly, the company succeeds at its true mission—to offer nature's spectacle while promoting global conservation. The family-like ambiance, though, ensures bonds between humans, too. Between the animals, the people and the terrain here, the mantra resonates: My life is changed forever. **AM**

PHOTO FROM SHUTTERSTOCK.