

Winter Issue 2015

affair caviar

CUSTOM ISSUE 2016: EXOTIC TRAVEL

Adventure in the GALÁPAGOS

SPLENDORS OF
ST. BARTS

TRAVEL GEAR

CHAMPAGNES | SPECTACULAR GIFTING | LUXURY HIDEAWAYS

CAVIAR PRESENTOIRS | UNCORKING HOLIDAY WINES | GLAMOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

Galápagos Islands

ANCIENT LANDSCAPE, MODERN TRAVEL

The remarkable landscape and rare inhabitants of the Galápagos Islands gives visitors a unique view of Darwin's mysterious fascinating world. Caviar Affair contributor Melissa Daimler takes an awe-inspiring insiders journey with INCA to the heart of the centuries-old natural world.



Swimming with the herbivorous, slow growing majestic Giant Turtles is an extraordinary experience.

IT STARTED WHEN A FRIEND REMARKED THAT THE STRANGEST CREATURE HE HAD EVER SEEN WAS THE MARINE IGUANA FOUND ON THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS. IN TRUTH, HE DIDN'T SAY 'STRANGE.' His actual words were, "The marine iguana is hands-down the creepiest, crawliest, craziest creature you will ever see in your life." As unlikely as it may sound, it was that remark that set the wheels in motion. I had to go see this lizard, along with the rest of the Galapagos, for myself.

Choosing a time for my trip was easy enough. The Galapagos Islands are so close to the equator there is no such thing as a season –meaning any time of year is the perfect time to go. My next move was to contact the highly recommended travel operator, INCA, and book a cruise on the Integrity.

INCA was one of the first adventures companies to specialize in ecotourism—before it became a 'thing'. They have been conducting "adventures with a conscience" since 1976. They offer so many perks it makes one wonder why anyone would choose another operator to explore the Galapagos. Arriving visitors stay at least one night on Ecuador's Santa Cruz Island prior to boarding the yacht to allow you chance to enjoy uninterrupted cruising to the outer islands without having to make a mid-trip return to the main island. Another reason I went with INCA is that their tours are limited to just 16 fellow travelers.

In addition, there is the promise of exploring the islands with one of the world's foremost Galapagos experts: Richard Polatty. Born in Atlanta, educated at Vanderbilt and Emory Universities, Polatty moved to Ecuador twenty-six years ago, leading tours to the islands since 1985. He has taught astronomy classes for the Galápagos National Park Naturalists Course. He also serves as a patrol pilot with Galápagos National Park Service. There was no way I was going to miss out on touring with, and learning from, such a highly regarded Galapagos authority.

So off I went.

DAY 1

"Welcome to Ecuador!," said Estevan, our INCA guide who greeted us at the airport and took us to the Hilton Colon Quito. En route to the hotel, Estevan told us a little about the area. Things like, "Quito is the highest capital in the world." "Ecuador has three primary climates: rain forest, the coastal areas, and the Andes Mountains," and, he said with a big smile, "This is the best time to visit the Galapagos. It's migration time." OK, so maybe there is a season, of sorts.

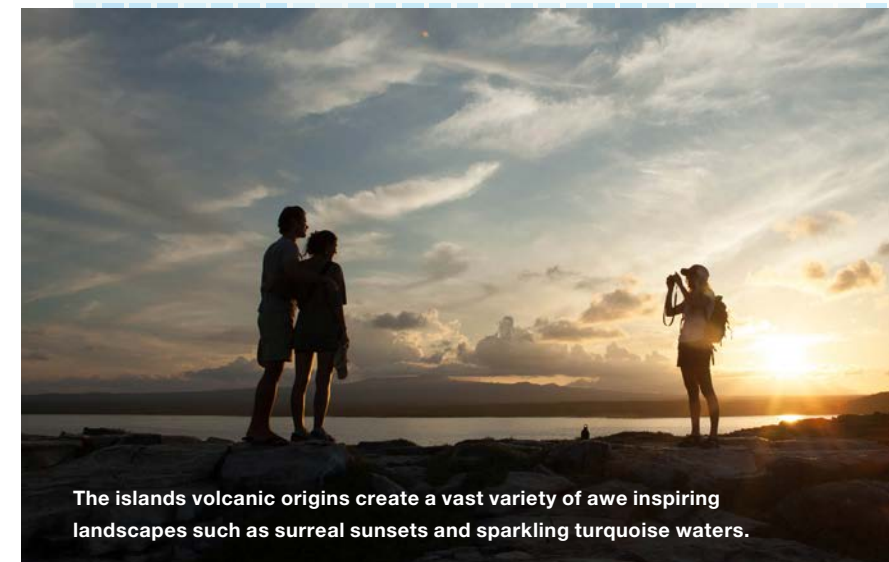
I was exhausted from the trip but not too tired to check my Twitter account one more time before going to sleep. A friend tweeted that I needed to read "The Beak of the Finch" by Jonathan Weiner, a science journalist who won the 1995 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. I downloaded a copy off Amazon and went to sleep knowing a full day itinerary was in store for us the next day.



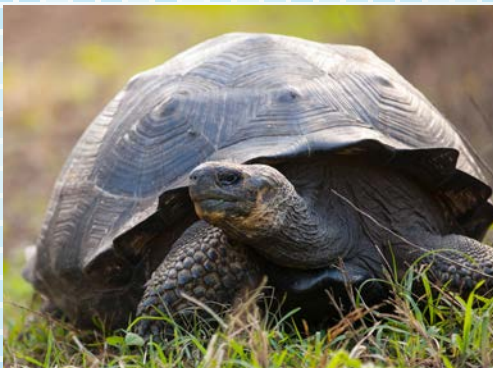
Kicker Rock, a monolithic rock formation, is the remains of a volcanic cone that has been eroded by the sea



INCA's luxury 141 foot yacht, Integrity, is fully customized to carry its adventurers through the Darwin's Islands in comfort, safety and style.



The islands volcanic origins create a vast variety of awe inspiring landscapes such as surreal sunsets and sparkling turquoise waters.



Above: The brilliant pink hued long limbed Galapagos Flamingo has excellent hearing but little to no sense of smell; Right Top: The lava cactus—the smallest of the cacti species that inhabit the Galapagos, has short cylindrical stems that grow in dense clusters; Above Right: There are 15 distinct species of giant tortoises on the Galapagos, stemming from years of isolation and competition.

DAY 2 BALTRA AND SANTA CRUZ

After a delicious and quick breakfast of passion fruit and strong Ecuadorian coffee at the hotel, it was off to the airport with Estevan who got us to our gate and saw us off.

The Galapagos Islands are six hundred miles off the coast of Ecuador, which is about the distance between San Francisco and Portland, Oregon. Out over the Pacific you get a clear sense of how remote the islands really are.

We landed in Baltra, known as the most eco-friendly airport in the world with it holding a Gold LEED designation. We were met by our guide for the next two days, Matthias, who gave us a tour of Baltra. During the 15-minute ride to the Canal de Itabaca, we saw countless candelabra cactus and the graceful Palo Verde tree. In the distance were the celebrated Daphne Major and Daphne Minor islands where Peter and Rosemary Grant did their research on the finches documented in my newly-read book “Beak of the Finches.”

We crossed blue water to Isla Santa Cruz via a 20-minute ferry ride where boarded our private tour bus for the trip into the highlands.

Heading from the arid zone to the highlands I was amazed at how dramatic a change there was in the vegetation. As we wound our way upward the endemic pepper, pea, tomato, cotton, club mosses. There was also the scalesia, a native giant daisy tree similar to a sunflower that grows from 50 to 65 feet (15 to 20 meters) high, growing in abundance. Along the way, we encountered the many kinds of finches

Darwin wrote about so many years ago and listened to the male finches sing their mating call. If the female likes the sound of the call, they will mate. If the female hears a sound that only could come from a deformed beak, the female will pass. On that same trip I spotted my first land tortoise just walking down the middle of the road. I am told that he was about 14 years old—a teenager. Figures that at that age, they would be the ones engaging in risky activity.

After a morning spent touring, we checked into The Galapagos Safari Camp Hotel. Katherine, the manager, met us with a cold mango drink then served us a tasty and good-looking lunch of tuna, potatoes, vegetables, fried bread, focaccia, and coffee ice cream (yum). Our afternoon was spent on the beach where we observed flamingos, plentiful ghost crab, and my first glimpse of those infamous marine iguanas. Called by Darwin the “imps of darkness” these large lizards have adapted themselves to be one of the few creatures that is as comfortable in the ocean as they are on land.

I think my friend may have overstated the marine iguana’s bizarreness. To my eyes they were fascinating, not freakish. Caked in salt and sand, wearing white “wigs” on their heads made from the saltwater they constantly sneeze up and out of their stubby noses, these were lizards of character; not at all creepy.

From our afternoon at the beach we headed back to the hotel for happy hour where a vodka martini on the veranda was calling my name.



PHOTO: ©JOHN MARTIN

Sea lion pups relax on the soft white beach of Gardner Bay, located on the north coast of Espanola Island. After the age of five, female sea lions have one baby a year



THIS PAGE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: Marine iguanas are the worlds only marine lizards; Gardner Bay's sea lions are a friendly and playful bunch—their whiskers tickle and they sniff your knees to see who you are; The Galapagos Giant Tortoises can grow up to five feet tall, making them the largest tortoises in the world. The typical age is 40 or 50 years old and they reach up to 500 pounds. **OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:** The Integrity's light-filled salon is a the social hub of the yacht—perfect for reading, listening to naturalist's lectures and viewing the day's images on the large media screen; a Panga ride among the cliffs of Cerro Brujo, home of Kicker Rock and an expansive sandy beach; every stateroom on the Integrity has large picture windows, entertainment center and private en-suite facilities such as a full size shower and vanity.

After a beautiful dinner I headed to my “room” – which was actually a tent modeled after ones you would find on a safari in Botswana. I hesitate to call these tents because they are not what you see in a REI catalog. Each tent had its own full bath, spacious bed, dresser, chair, and a nice veranda with views that were unmistakably Ecuadorian. Climbing into bed at the end of the day with visions of marine iguanas dancing in my head, I slid between the good-quality sheets only to feel a hot water bottle under the sheets with me—a nice touch at the end of a day. This is good quality ‘glamping.’

DAY 3 SANTA CRUZ

Before setting out to explore Santa Cruz, I grabbed breakfast from the buffet, then set out to find the island’s most famous inhabitants, the Galapagos Turtle.

We found our tortoises cooling off in mud holes at the Charles Darwin Research Station. We threw on our rubber boots and walked through the mud to get a closer look at several 100 year-old tortoises.. As the tortoises dined on grasses, we were told that these tortoises have evolved based on their environment. There are ones with low-dome shells who eat the vegetation on the ground on certain islands. There are others with the high arch shells can reach the leaves in the trees on other islands. This is natural selection at its most vivid.

A little later we grabbed lunch at a local farm where we were welcomed with an appetizer of warm plantains in a tasty sauce with yet another rum and mango drink as we sat on the open porch looking over the trees.

Once lunch was over it was time to board the Integrity where we were greeted by Richard Polatty, our guide for the next week. He assigned us our rooms and encouraged us to go explore the “bustling” town of Puerto Ayora on Academy Bay before departure while also ‘warning’ us that this was going to be the last time we would see civilization for a week.

In the late afternoon we settled into our berths. Happy hour was at 7pm and began with an orientation including a polite, but firm, reminder that everything we wanted to see is on the trails; don’t go off the trails. Once all the vital travel information and safety drill was completed, Richard briefed us on what we would see tomorrow, including what to wear and what to expect. A welcome drink of rum and mango was served (I was beginning to like this ritual) and then a chicken dinner that didn’t taste like we were in the Galapagos! At some point in the night, after I had dozed off, the Integrity weighed anchor and we were on our way.

DAY 4 ESPANOLA ISLAND (HOOD)

A wake-up call from Richard came over the loudspeaker at 6:00 AM. “Good Morning,” he said, “today will be a wet landing on a soft beach. Breakfast will be served at 6:30.” After

OUR DAILY ROUTINE



PHOTOS THIS PAGE: TOP: ©WESTON WALKER; LOWER LEFT: ©JOHN MARTIN; LOWER RIGHT: ©INCA

Each of our days at sea were carefully structured to maximize our time exploring and allowing us enough time to rest and reflect on all that we were learning.

The days began at 6:30am with a healthy breakfast including fresh fruit, a selection of cereals and breads, eggs made to order, fresh-squeezed juice, and coffee or tea. During breakfast Richard explained the morning’s outing.

Around 7:15am we would take a short panga ride to the shore where we would set out on glorious walks along the beaches, exploring tide pools, lava flows, rocks, and

dirt trails. Along the way there was always ample time to bird watch, take pictures, learn about our surroundings, and simply listen to nature.

At 10:30am we would return to the yacht for a mid-morning break before jumping into the water at 11:00ish to snorkel. Water temperature in Galápagos is tropics-style warm so jumping into the ocean was always a pleasant experience.

At noon, the friendly crew delivered a hearty, sit-down lunch. The midday meal is the most important meal of the Ecuadorian day. The multi-course affair always started with a salad or a traditional soup, followed by a hot entrée and dessert.

After lunch was the midday siesta. Being the

consummate guide, Richard used this time to deliver a talk on the island’s climate, oceanography, formation of volcanic islands, human history of the islands, plate tectonics, species found on the Galápagos Islands, and Darwin’s theory of evolution.

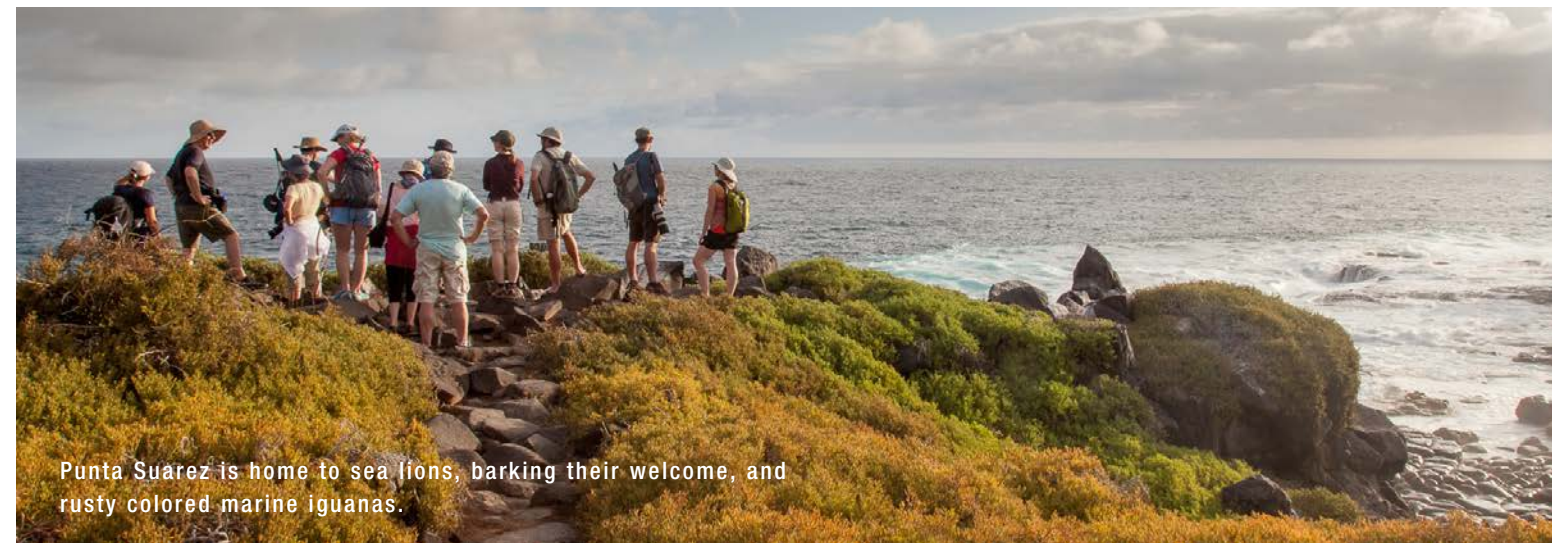
Around 3:00pm we would set off on our second shore visit where we would do more exploring until 6:00pm when, by law, all visitors must be off the islands. While leaving each island was never anything I wanted to do there was the pay-off of being back on the yacht in time to take in one after another amazing sunset from the top deck with a cocktail in hand.†

PHOTOS THIS PAGE: TOP & CENTER: ©WESTON WALKER; BOTTOM: ©INCA



At 19 inches tall, the black-headed Galapagos Penguin is the world's 2nd smallest penguin and the only penguin that lives north of the equator in the wild.

INCA
International Nature &
Cultural Adventures
1311 63rd Street,
Emeryville, CA 94608
+1 (510) 420-1550
info@inca1.com



Punta Suarez is home to sea lions, barking their welcome, and rusty-colored marine iguanas.

a couple cups of strong coffee and a cold breakfast of granola, Ecuadorian watermelon, passion fruits and pineapple, we headed to the beaches of Espanola (or Hood) Island.

Approaching Espanola Island in our panga, we were greeted by a male sea lion as he waved his flipper. There were about twenty such sea lions sitting with the beach master (the male lion who watches over the colony). Lots of picture taking, pup spotting, and interaction with the sea lions (one came right up to our shoes) left us all surprised by how fearless they were. Richard explained that the fearless gene can be passed down and that these sea lions had not had any natural predators to worry about for several generations. As if mingling amid the sea lion colony wasn't stirring enough, we observed countless blue-footed boobies, brown pelicans, sally light foot crabs, Galapagos land iguanas, lava lizards (you can tell the females from the males by their red color), Galapagos hawks, and the endemic Waved Albatross.

That day we had a fun time snorkeling with the sea lions as they playfully tugged on our line from the kayak. We also saw butterfly fish and lots of beautiful underwater plants. Richard filmed all of this on his GoPro and gave us the outstanding videos on a stick at the end of the trip.

After the morning hike I soaked in the on-board hot tub, drank a cold cerveza, took my lunch with the rest of the guests then set off for the afternoon hike. The highlight that day was seeing the waved albatross (a bird unique to Espanola) perform their mating dance which includes several complex steps and moves and tapping of each other's beaks. People come from all over the world to see this dance, as it's the only island where these birds can be found.

DAY 5 SAN CRISTOBAL ISLAND (CHATHAM)

San Cristobal Island is the easternmost island and one of the oldest of the chain. This was the island Darwin first rowed ashore in 1835. Darwin was 22 when he boarded the Beagle to

be the unpaid gentleman's companion to the captain. Unfortunately for Darwin, he spent most of his time at sea violently sick. His five weeks in the Galapagos were spent regaining his health after being seasick for so long, collecting specimens, and making the observations that would lead to "The Origin of Species."

We, like Darwin, landed and disembarked on Punta Pitt, a small beach with sea lions once again to greet us, along with red-footed, blue-footed, and the Nazca boobies, nesting within a few feet of each other.

That afternoon's snorkeling was along Kicker Rock, a 500m vertical tuff cone. We swam with sea turtles, Galapagos sharks, and sea lions, including a bull who was not at all excited by having to share his territory with us.

DAY 6 SANTA FE AND SOUTH PLAZA ISLANDS

The wildlife highlights of the day came during the afternoon hike when it seemed like all of nature came out to see us. There were numerous land iguanas munching on Opuntia blossoms and leaves sitting next to prickly pear cactus trees that have evolved to become taller so that they wouldn't be eaten. Since iguanas can't reach them, they stake out a tree and patiently wait for their next meal when a part of the cactus falls to the ground.

Above us, there were yellowtail mullets flaunting some of the most vibrant yellow feathers I've seen. Richard told us about "kiting"—a form of flying that the birds do to maneuver in the challenging air currents.

We also saw the bachelor colony of sea lions who climb the steep cliff in about a minute to spend nights away from the larger (and louder!) bulls.

Back on the boat, Richard gave us a lecture on the world's changing climate, including the impact of past El Niños and other weather patterns, specifically a Garua pattern (when cold water mixes with warm air and creates a mist). I'm familiar



ABOVE LEFT: The Nazca boobie species—known as masked boobie— have a wingspan of five feet and nest on the ground. They lay two eggs a few days apart, only the strongest booby of the hatched eggs survives, shoving the weaker chick out of the nest. A young Nazca Booby on Darwin Beach. Nazca Boobies are the only species with a set breeding cycle and breed in large colonies. ABOVE CENTER: There are six species of boobies in the world. Three of them are found in the Galapagos. ABOVE RIGHT: The smallest of the booby species, the red-footed Booby, photographed at Punta Suarez, is the only species to make twig nests—up to four feet high. The largest colony (140,000 pairs) is found in the Tower Islands in the Galapagos.

with this in San Francisco. Cold water is better as it creates more nutrients for the wildlife, yet during El Niños, the water becomes warmer (while I was in the Galapagos, the water was 10 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than in non El Niño years).

I appreciate the knowledge that Richard has not only about the Galapagos, but the environment, the history, and the science all mixed with a little humor along the way. He is the consummate guide who was very personable and my experience was richer because of the rich contextual information that he added.

Evening happy hour started with a glass of wine sitting in the salon reading Darwin’s autobiography. I ordered one more for dinner, (why not?) that the bartender made sure to deliver it to the table. The crew’s service and the attention to detail on the boat, was well above my expectations.

DAY 7 GENOVESA ISLAND (TOWER)

As we crossed the equator about midnight, Richard jokingly told us that we would feel a “bump.”

In the morning we instead felt a wet landing on a broken corral beach in Darwin Bay.

Genovesa Island is the island of birds. Red-footed boobies were abundant. Juveniles greeted us on the beach while the older ones were tree-nesting along with the Frigate birds (known as a kleptoparasitic because it survives by stealing food from other birds), mockingbirds, Swallow-tailed Gulls, and countless finches. It was feeding time for the many chicks who appeared to be

perpetually hungry. They appeared to be as happy eating a lizard as anything else their parents brought them.

A panga ride around the island, we saw the red-billed tropic bird land in their “condos in the rock” as we called them. The holes that the crater formed are perfect caves for the tropical birds to nest. Many of them took off from their nest and seeing them launch was an experience (as they can only take off by diving off the cliffs).

A quick pitstop on the boat and we were off to the Prince Phillip’s Steps, otherwise known as the “Stairway to Seabird Heaven”. We walked through massive colonies of red-footed and Nazca boobies and saw a lava ridge on which we caught a glimpse of the rare short-eared owl. These owls prey on storm petrels, smaller birds that, if you don’t look for them, can be missed completely. More of that unique evolved camouflage!

We came back to champagne and hors d’oeuvres on the upstairs deck, had grilled tuna for dinner and a short tour on the bridge with the captain. With the boat’s depth and course checked, all was on track.

DAY 8 SANTIAGO AND BARTOLOME ISLANDS

This was the day we finally saw the most recognized landmark in the Galapagos, Pinnacle Rock. This iconic landmark juts straight out of Bartolome’s northern bay. One of the most entertaining experiences of the trip was snorkeling with the Galapagos Penguins.

DAY 9 RABIDA (JERVIS) & SOMBRERO CHINO ISLANDS

It’s not every day you sip your morning coffee while watching flamingos perform their mating rituals. But that’s what we did that morning. There, in a lagoon formed in the basin of a crater, where the saline level is higher and shrimp (flamingo cuisine) thrive, we watched the courtship dance being performed.

Our last trek of the trip was on Sombrero China Island, so named because it looks like a Chinese hat. We took in the turquoise waters as we landed on the white, sand beach for a short trail walk to visit our sea lion friends one more time. We saw some of the youngest pups we’ve seen on the trip. They were playing with each other and posing for pictures. The Galapagos Hawk came out to give us a farewell.

That night the sky was clear and seemingly infinite so Richard gave us one more astronomy lesson.

We’re Still Evolving

Naturally, the dominant theme of many of Richard’s lesson on nature was evolution. Animals and plants shape one another, he explained. The natural environment shapes them both. Our group was no exception. The thirteen of us came from Northern and Southern California, New Jersey, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. Aboard the ship Integrity, each of us adapted to our environment and created “new forms” of relationships, just like the animals, plants and birds of Galapagos.

We became fast friends with some of us already figuring out how we can meet up in Antarctica for the next INCA trip with Richard. I felt fortunate to have a quality group of people with whom I could share this experience.

I also appreciated that our yacht is the most environmentally conscious yacht in the Galapagos, earning the Galapagos Quality Gold Seal for its practices, including on-board treatment of all wastewater. I understand now why Integrity is known as the most luxurious yacht in the islands..

DAY 10

This was it. That day we returned to Quito. So many days away from intense human activity had definitely changed my perspective.

DAY 11

The flight home. The trip was over. I was looking forward to comparing notes with my friend back home and letting him know that, yes, the marine iguana is one of the most bizarre creatures on earth and adding that it, like all the many other species of animals, plants, birds reptiles and fish that I saw on the Galapagos, are as precious and majestic as the place they call home. I left with a deeper appreciation for life in general and a stronger commitment projecting the diverse Galapagos Islands for centuries to come. After all, we participated in the special privilege to see, smell, and feel the texture of how this whole evolution thing plays out. ☸



THIS PAGE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: The brightly colored and tiny Sally Lightfoot crab is said to be named after a Caribbean dancer for its ability to run in all four directions, climb up vertical slopes, and agility in jumping from rock to rock; Intrepid travelers exploring the magical, ancient beauty of Darwin's Galapagos Islands; Blue-footed boobies at Elizabeth Bay. The word "booby" is derived from "bobo," the Spanish word for clown—a reference to the species colorful and unique mannerisms.