



48 HOURS IN Quito, Ecuador

By Leslie Moore

Anyone travelling to the Galapagos Islands has to first make a stop in either Quito or Guayaquil. We chose to fly through Quito because it is also a world heritage site renowned for being the best-preserved and least altered historic center in Latin America.

WHERE TO STAY

CASA GANGOTENA

Luxury travel often gives one a choice. New or Old. Modern or Historic. Because of Quito's World Heritage designation, we wanted to be in the heart of the Old City and what better place to lay our heads than the newly-restored historic mansion overlooking Plaza San Francisco.

The historic Casa Gangotena is a conspicuous landmark in old town Quito, and on the day of our arrival, the gloomy rain clouds parted and the sun shone on the rain washed façade of the hotel. The Casa Gangotena sparkled as the staff welcomed us at the entrance.

The hotel is intimate, with only 31 rooms and suites, and has the feel of home with a splendid glassed in patio and a delightful courtyard garden for enjoying a light meal or good read. We recommend that you ask for a room with a view of the Plaza, and the hills, specular both day and night.

After a day of taking in the sights, enjoy Afternoon Tea, the local equivalent of the famed English "High Tea." Ecuador is a producer of high quality coffee and the coffees at the Afternoon Tea are some of the best in the country, with tea varieties and infusions made with fresh herbs picked directly from the hotels garden.

All in all, our stay was delightful, comfortable and fun. We left understanding why some have called the Casa Gangotena the finest hotel in South America.

WHERE TO EAT

ZAZU

Zazu is simply put, the best restaurant in the city. Founded by Jan Niedrau, of his restaurant he commented, "we strive to provide an Ecuadorean fine dining experience in a relaxed atmosphere." The restaurant is relaxed/modern with a clean contemporary feel; nothing belies the hard work that must have gone on behind the scenes of the first restaurant in South America to receive the 5 Star Diamond award and become the only Relais & Chateaux property in Ecuador.

The exceptional offerings, created from products sourced from local fishermen and other artisan suppliers and vegetables and fruit grown in their own organic farm, attract the well-heeled Ecuadorian and traveling foodies alike.

We surrendered ourselves and our stomachs to the capable culinary minds of Jan Niedrau and his chefs. They started us off with the Andean Garden salad, featuring lupin beans, hearts of palm, crispy quinoa, yellow pepper sauce and cilantro, then on to a black mussel ceviche that



was not only unique but one of the best ceviches in the world. Next, the ocean dishes, in our case a stone crab salad followed by Brujo, a local fish. And, as if that wasn't enough, which is really was, we forged on like good culinary soldiers, first with "Hornado of Suckling Pig", followed by herb crusted lamb chops with a mint jus. Does dessert count as one more dish? Three kinds of rich, decadent chocolates with mango sorbet. In case you were wondering, Zazu also boasts the largest wine cellar in Ecuador and Jan knows his wines.

If you can't make dinner at Zazu, be sure to try Jan's other restaurant. Z-food is set up to resemble a fish store with all the seafood displayed market style. The menu is small but the chef's create daily specials based on guest preference. Be sure to have one of the many ceviches, which are all prepared tableside.

WHAT TO DO

Founded in 1534 by the Spanish and built on the ruins of an Inca city, Quito is surrounded by the tropical and picturesque Panecillo hills and due to the topographical challenge of being perched on the slopes of the Pichincha Volcano, Quito is a checkerboard of small streets lined with colorful but simple one or two story stucco buildings. As with many historic cities, all streets lead to either a small or great community square, here you will find the architectural wonders that Quito is known for.

Two centuries of Spanish rule have resulted in a harmonious joining of European artistic traditions with the styles of the indigenous peoples, providing unique and inspiring architectural works in the form of citadel, churches and monasteries and the altarpieces, paintings and

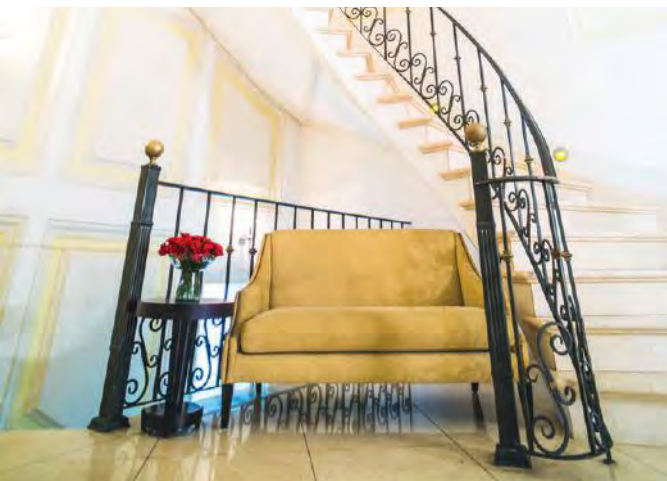
sculptures within.

Start with the Cathedral on La Plaza de Independencia, with its late Gothic arches, Moorish ceilings and Baroque main altar. The Cathedral is home to a wonderful collection of sculptures and paintings from the Escuela Quitena and also displays vestments from the 17th century to the present.

Then visit El Sagrario, the original main chapel of the Cathedral. From there, don't miss La Compani De Jesus Church, built from 1605 to 1765, with its façade that can be described as lacework on stone. But it's the inside that will amaze, with columns that are a copy of those by Bernini in the Vatican. From the vaulted ceiling and walls with Moorish ornamentation to the arches and the main altar, everything is covered with gold leaf, making this one of the most, if not the most, ornate churches in Latin America.

Finish with the San Francisco Church and Plaza, the oldest church in Quito, built in 1536-1580, and the biggest religious architectonic complex in America covering 8670 acres.

If you have time, you can visit some of the many notable points of interest such as the Presidential Palace, Centro Cultural Metropolitan and the Museo Numismatico where you can stop in and see how many Ecuadorian coins it took to make up \$15.00 US in 1999. Quito is a quaint walkable city with great restaurants and friendly locals. 48 hours is never enough.



GALAPAGOS ISLAND

LESLIE MOORE



Like many, you have probably thought of one day visiting the Galapagos Islands, where Charles Darwin visited in 1835. This living lab of evolution was ground zero for his theory of natural selection and evolution and the foundation of his book *On The Origin of Species*.

Restrictions on tourism, natural disasters, and stories of endemic species threatened by the introduction of non-native species had me worried that perhaps I was 20 years too late to experience the Galapagos I had read so much about as a girl. So it was with mild trepidation that we embarked on our journey to one of the most unusual places on earth.

THE INTEGRITY

Ships vary in size from 16 to over 100 passengers, and from 5 to 3 star but a live-aboard is the only way to truly experience the Galapagos Islands.

We chose the intimate luxury of the Integrity, a 141-foot yacht that carries a maximum of 16 passengers. Touring on a smaller yacht gives you the ability to visit more remote locations, but the real advantage is more access to your naturalist, without whom your trip to this environmental mecca would be just another nature walk. Strike up a conversation, enjoy scientific discussions and listen to the endless stories, anecdotes and tall tales of the Galapagos Islands.

From the moment we stepped on board we knew that we would enjoy our Galapagos experience in modern comfort. Staterooms were spacious and air-conditioned and it's many and varied common areas allowed us to gather to review the wonders experienced that day or retreat and relax on one of the decks, in the hot tub or at the bar.

Locally sourced vegetables, fish, chicken and even beef from the owner's ranch, all cooked to order with Ecuadorian flair, are the foundation of every meal served in the Integrity's elegant dining room. On BBQ night we relaxed on the upper deck and enjoyed traditional Ceviche with popcorn garnish with a grilled Ecuadorian feast under a carbon paper sky, star pricked with stories relayed by the constellations of the equatorial night.

The Integrity's crew of 10, hidden from view until needed, kept us well fed and wonderfully entertained on our educational tour of one of the most rare and unusual places on earth.

THE ISLANDS – EACH A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

GIANT TORTOISES – SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

After landing on Baltra Island, a former WWII U.S. Army airport, and before we were taken to the Integrity, we visited a rustic farm located on the migratory path of the famous Galapagos Giant Tortoises. Instead of green fields dotted with fleecy white sheep, the scene was surreal with slow moving colossal tortoises on long legs roaming silently through the strange endemic *Scaevola* trees with their flowing beards of moss. The smaller, younger tortoise were shy and maintained a distance or were quick to retreat into their protective shell, but the larger ones went on with their ceaseless grazing as we walked among them, only looking up if we moved too quickly or

wandered too close. As I sat on the grass watching a very large tortoise pulling up mouthfuls of tough elephant grass as he passed, I was reminded of how the tortoise, with its efficient model of carrying its house on its back, had survived from the Jurassic period. For the briefest moment, I felt transported to another time.



SEA LIONS AND MARINE IGUANAS - ESPANOLA ISLAND

A 6:00 am wake up call came very early on our first day on the Integrity, but the view from the upper deck of the first glimmer of dawn over a sprawling ocean took the sting out of it. As we did every morning, we started the day with fresh Ecuadorian coffee, a healthy breakfast and then out to the pangas, the zodiacs that ran us from ship to shore.

Espanola Island is probably the oldest island in the cluster of volcanic hills rising from the vast Pacific Ocean. In Gardner Bay, we landed on a beautiful soft sand beach crowded with a sunbaked colony of fat lazy Galapagos Sea Lions. Freshly fed tiny babies, lay napping on the sand waiting for their mothers return or, if a little older, frolicked in the waves with their young colony mates. Almost anywhere in the Galapagos where you find sea lions, you will have the chance to swim with the juveniles. With Labrador Retriever-like energy and exuberance, they playfully entice you into somersaulting with them in the waves, gaze directly into your eyes as their curiosity draws them in or impishly tug on your fins as you swim.

For the afternoon excursion at Punta Suarez, we hiked up the jagged cliffs and watched the many seabirds fishing in bright blue waters so clear that we could see their prey just below the surface.

Below the cliffs, waves crashed milky white on the black rock where red and black marine iguanas foraged for fresh green sea algae. The world's only marine lizard, the largest can be found at a depth of 25 feet feeding contentedly on plentiful seaweed and rich algae. These distinctive reptiles have evolved blunt noses for grazing on flat rock surfaces, flattened tails to assist with swimming and long claws to help them cling to rocks in the wild sea.

As we wound our way back to the beach, we were treated to a very rare sight; the first Waved Albatross of the season had landed to nest. These spectacular flyers with massive wingspans of 7 – 8 feet are awkward waddlers on land, moving over the stony ground with a strange comical, rolling gate reminiscent of a cartoon character.

RED-FOOTED, BLUE-FOOTED AND NAZCA BOOBIES - SAN CRISTOBAL ISLAND

The next morning we found ourselves on a small beach where the steep path lead up to the only breeding ground in the islands where you find all three varieties of the iconic Boobie nesting together; Red-footed, Blue-footed and Nazca. It is an unfamiliar and long-awaited treat to be allowed into the “living room” of the birds of the Galapagos who are truly unconcerned with our presence. I felt like the producer of a TV documentary, observing unforgettable natural events such as mother Boobies building their nests, tenderly rolling their eggs to stabilize the temperature, and feeding newly hatched chicks in nests built right on the path.

GALAPAGOS LAND IGUANAS - SANTA FE ISLAND

We landed on a white sand beach popular with playful sea lion kindergarteners and walked up a dry, dusty path through a grove



of giant prickly pear cactus, some as tall as 16 feet. Only slowly did we realize that camouflaged on the pale earth below each cactus tree waited large land iguanas with skin like bleached dusty burlap. The iguanas and the prickly pear have evolved together, the iguanas growing fat and large and lethargic because of the abundance of prickly pear, the prickly pear evolving into a tree so as not to be devoured whole by the iguana. Playing out in the evolutionary aftermath is a strange waiting game. The iguanas lie in the shade of the giant Opuntia cactus until a succulent prickly pear pad falls from the tree, starting a feeding frenzy, giant iguana style. These reptiles look carved from stone until they are forced to spring into action to defend their food. With a ridge of spines raised on their backs, they posture over their food like mad dogs. It is hard to eat and defend your food at the same time so a very strange reptilian dance follows as hungry, lumbering lizards move in to steal what they can.

SEA LION BACHELOR PAD - SOUTH PLAZA ISLAND

The smells and sounds of the sea lion “bachelor pad” is an assault on the senses but the story is fascinating. Every sea lion colony is comprised of a harem of females and their young and one powerful, dominant male who’s job it is to protect the colony and father babies. The dominant male must also defend his colony from marauding males who want to take over his harem. Defending his colony is serious business leaving little time to eat because there is no shortage of bachelors; so many that some may never procreate. When the dominant male becomes too weak and tired from fighting and mating, he will be dethroned and driven off by the next king of the colony. The beaten male then swims off to join the other lone males in the bachelor pad, where he recuperates to fight again. In this way, only the strongest healthiest males reproduce by natural selection.

GREAT FRIGATE BIRDS - GENOVESA ISLAND

Genovesa Island, with it’s thick red mangrove jungle, is home to Yellow Warblers, Yellow Crowned Night Herons, Swallow Tailed Gulls and Red-footed Boobies, but the strangest of all are the Frigate birds with their vibrantly colorful mating rituals. The male Frigate, iridescent black feathers puffed out, spreads his wings, tilts his head back and breaths life into the scarlet red pouch on his chest. Pouch extended, he clacks his beak or makes gobbling sounds to attract one of the females soaring overhead. The females are interested in nesting real estate so the better the location, the more chances of attracting a mate. A female may land, look around, decide she can do better and fly away. If she returns twig in beak, she has decided to stay and build her nest.

AMAZING LAVA FLOWS - SANTIAGO ISLAND

Santiago Island is the storyteller of the violent volcanic history of this region. In Sullivan Bay we started our walk on a “recent” lava flow; “recent” being the second half of the 19th century. The hardened lava rock flows, swoops and swirls under your feet as if you are walking on expressionist art. The equatorial heat radiating off the black rock leaves the air thick and hot like molten glass. Emptiness and hostility define this area, but even here we see life; colorful lava lizards skitter across the barren landscape and the first pilgrim plants cling to the porous black rock with spidery vines. As we walked up the lava flow path between Mars-like red rock hills, we have walked our way back in time. It is hard to believe that each of the bountiful islands of the Galapagos

had as desolate and harsh a start as the one under our feet.

LOOKING BACK

In the Galapagos, you get closer to nature than possibly anywhere else in the world, but in the end this is a story of an island world that poked out of the sea 600 miles from the nearest continent and was populated by plants and animals that miraculously found their way here and survived. It is the story of science, where on each island, through natural selection, the plants and animals evolved differently depending on the characteristics of that particular island. Like a Russian doll broken open and scattered by the tides, each species is similar but slightly different in size, color and behavior. It is the picture book of the evolution of life.