

VIRTUOSO

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V I E W P O I N T S





(SEALION) ANDREW PEACOCK/TANDEM STILLS + MOTION



SPOILER ALERT

A FATHER-DAUGHTER ADVENTURE ON THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS' FIRST SUPERYACHT.
(SHE'LL NEVER LOOK AT TRAVEL THE SAME WAY AGAIN.) BY JUSTIN PAUL

A Galápagos sea lion swims off Santa Cruz Island and exploring a lava flow on Santiago Island, with *Aqua Mare* in the distance.

LIFE FIRSTS CARRY a singular blend of anticipation tinged with anxiety. It's a feeling clearly written on my daughter's face as we straddle a Zodiac in choppy seas and peer down into a seemingly bottomless ocean. "Make sure to keep your fingers closed if a sea lion swims up to you," we're told.

It's a lot for a 12-year-old mind to process. The awkwardness of navigating a rocking skiff in fins. How to hold a snorkel in your mouth and breathe

through it for the first time. Deep water, cold currents, and trusting that the wetsuit will make it impossible to sink. And now: returning to the ship with ten digits. It's a lot for *me* to process for her. Yet after weeks of building excitement and a few last-minute assurances, she holds the mask in place with a slightly jittery hand, takes a chest-swelling breath, and plunges in.

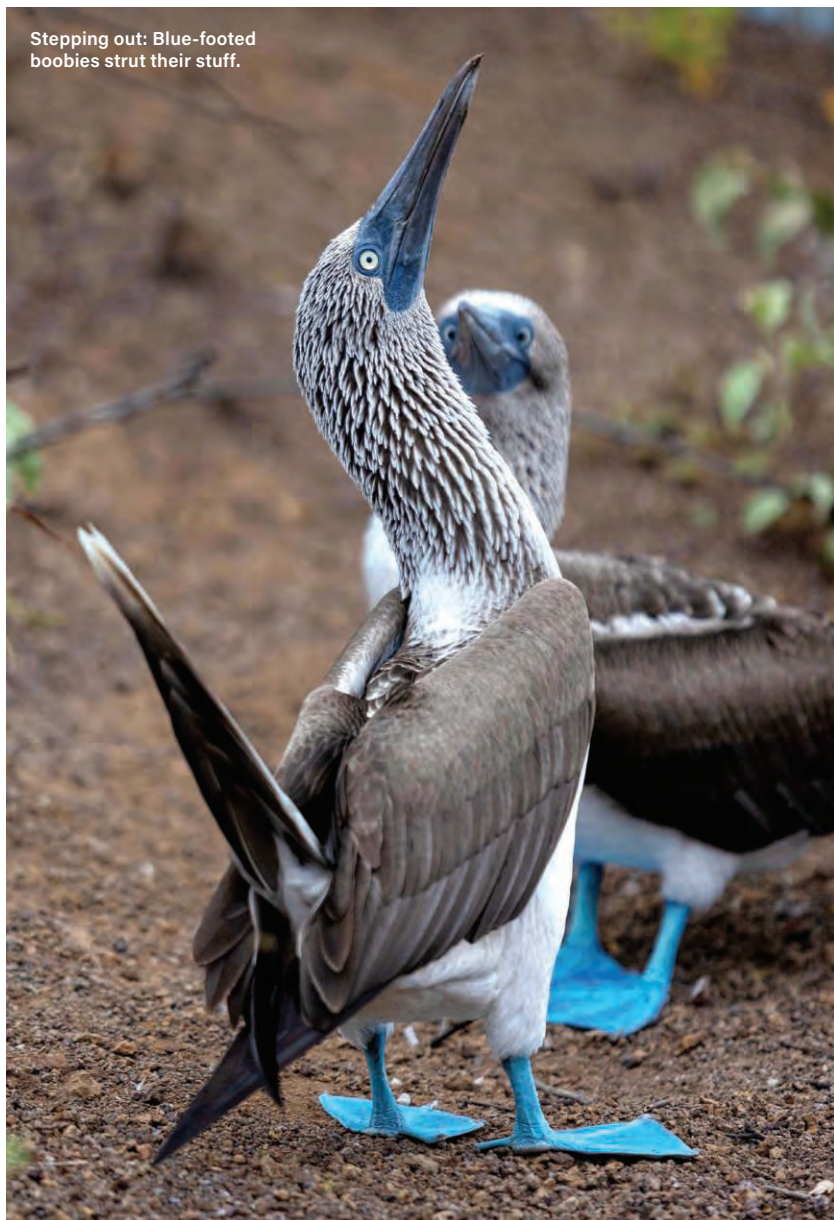
Some five minutes later, after we gaze down on parrotfish and a school of yellowtail surgeonfish, a small sea lion

blows past in a flash, whips a 180 for a second look, then cruises by so close its whiskers brush Blixia's forearm before returning for more. On the third pass it barrel-rolls and slows a few feet away. A small hand reaches out toward that big-eyed face – how could you not? – and I tug the elbow back. "That was *amaazing*," she says, surfacing after it slips off as quickly as it appeared. If only every intro to snorkeling went this way.

Roughly 600 miles off Ecuador's west coast, the Galápagos rise from the Pacific, imposing and unexpected volcanic lumps of basalt – mariner lore held that they appeared and disappeared from the depths on the whims of a local witch. We've come to explore them on a weeklong cruise aboard Aqua Expeditions' newly refurbished 16-passenger *Aqua Mare*, anchored just around a point from our snorkeling site off Floreana Island. Having already made waves with its stylish cruises on the Peruvian Amazon, the Mekong, and in the Spice Islands and Raja Ampat, the company recently launched Galápagos itineraries packed with active days amid nature and the comforts and staff-to-guest ratio of a superyacht. For my daughter and me, it's a journey worth playing hooky from school.

"*Aqua Mare* was my first experience in the Galápagos, and the yacht and the astonishing variety of reptiles, fish, birds, and other wildlife surpassed all my expectations," says Virtuoso travel agency CEO Letty Chomer of Mexico City, who traveled there last October. From the walnut-paneled suites complete with rain showers and a surprising amount of storage – including the 861-square-foot Owner's Suite spanning the width of the yacht – to the plush wraparound sofa in the Panoramic lounge and the sundeck's Jacuzzi and daybeds, the ship and its staff made an impression. "This is *the* Galápagos cruise for discerning adventurers and young luxury travelers with a love of outdoor activities, wildlife, and the ocean," she says.

I admit, in the run-up I had questions about eight days in the islands. Would it get repetitive? Would it be too science-y



Family

for Blixa? What if she was the only kid, given the time of year? (She is.) Would she feel sidelined during excursions or tire of ceviche, poke bowls, grilled lobster, and the chef's perhaps more adult-friendly Peruvian Nikkei cuisine?

Credit Aqua's naturalist, Yvonne Mórtoła, for keeping our whole group (spanning six decades) engaged and entertained. After 39 years of guiding everyone from backpackers to Bill Clinton and most of the private yachts through the Galápagos, Aqua's head guide brings the islands to life through lived experience and a deep knowledge and curiosity that stays on the fun side of academia. And the science *is* cool – like how prickly pear cacti, typically squat species elsewhere in the world, here grew trunks to keep their paddles out of reach of giant tortoises, who in turn grew longer necks and front legs to better reach up for a snack: an evolutionary race of the slowest species. Or how the swallow-tailed gulls we come

across couldn't compete as day fishers, so they turned nocturnal and grew enlarged eyes for night vision. (Of course, the tender driver teaching Blixa to take the wheel and zip along the coast, and pasta on request, doesn't hurt.)

DAYS FILL WITH A MIX of kayaking and paddleboarding, hikes, snorkeling, and Zodiac outings. On one of the latter, we pull up to a basalt outcrop with marine iguanas packed claw-to-tail lazing in the sun, languidly craning their necks to send streams of salt through the air like leather-skinned hayseeds with cheeks full of Beech-Nut. Nearby, flightless cormorants dry their outstretched wings. Then suddenly, penguins – two, and another four, diving and surfacing. Our driver raises his hands to his mouth and lets out a stream of calls. Soon, a raft of two dozen circle our Zodiac almost within arm's reach, cocking their heads side to side like puppies trying

to decipher what this penguin master has to say.

Morning walks bring flamingos and baby stingrays flopping in the surf. Kayaking delivers sea turtle after sea turtle, as well as a cavern where we paddle into almost total darkness – and quickly turn back when a bull sea lion bellows somewhere within like a hungry troll. And though I'm not a birder, there's no denying the thrill of a blue-footed-booby feeding frenzy (a fairly rare sight). Dozens climb to a height, pause, then beeline as a group toward the sardine ball below, gracefully tucking their wings back at the last second to plunge into the water at up to 65 mph with no splash and Olympic-diver-worthy rips. At night after dinner, the phones come out and Star Walk apps open to scan constellations and map Space Station flyovers.

Perhaps the most refreshing discovery is that yachting the Galápagos is really what you make of it: Do you want

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Family

to nerd out on Latin names of species and subspecies (Yvonne's got you!), or just be able to tell the difference between Nazca and blue-footed boobies, or, hey, what's this bone on the beach from? (She's got *you* too!) Maybe you want to go for a hike in a landscape unlike any other while surrounded by wildlife found nowhere else, stroll a sandspit and sit a few feet away from inquisitive sea lion pups and their moms, or simply lay back on *Aqua Mare's* top deck at sunset, watching great frigatebirds ride the bow wave above and wondering, How is it possible that they can glide through the skies for up to two months at a stretch?

On the trip's last snorkel, our group catches up with a school of hundreds of yellowtail mullet and spies reef sharks and rays, but by this point, it's me who has to pick my head up to see where my partner has ventured off to. More than once I scan the surface for a few seconds, without a daughter in sight. She'll dive down to trail a turtle or for a closer look at a parrotfish chomping on coral, surface and clear her snorkel in one blast, and wave excitedly before turning mask back to water – not a finger short.

Natural Selections

STAY Most flights to the islands require a night's layover in Quito. The capital's prime perch: 31-room **Casa Gangotena**, a restored mansion fronting San Francisco Plaza in the heart of the UNESCO-listed Old Town. *Doubles from \$583, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

Set on a nearly 1,500-foot-high extinct volcano on Santa Cruz Island, all-inclusive **Pikaia Lodge** offers four- to eight-day land-based Galápagos adventures with excursions to nearby islands via its 145-foot yacht. *Four-day trips from \$4,650 per person, including all meals, daily guided activities, and two 50-minute massages.*

GO **Aqua Expeditions'** four-deck *Aqua Mare* sails seven-night itineraries through the Galápagos. Suites range from 170 square feet to the 861-square-foot Owner's Suite. Between excursions, passengers gather in the lounge, in the top deck's Jacuzzi, and around Deck 3's oval dining table. Securing Yvonne Mórtoła, one of the archipelago's most experienced guides, was a get for Aqua and its guests. *Weekly departures through 2024; from \$10,000, including all meals and activities. Private charters from \$207,000 for up to 16 passengers, including all meals and activities, an open bar, and five hours of massages per day.*

Explore Quito and the Galápagos on **Avalon Waterways'** eight-day trip to Ecuador. After guided sightseeing in the capital, travelers head to the islands for a four-night cruise aboard the 16-passenger *Treasure of Galápagos* catamaran. *Departures: Multiple dates through November 20, 2024; from \$5,891, including all meals and activities.*

Silversea Cruises' 13-night voyages include 27 calls in the Galápagos. The 100-passenger *Silver Origin* was built specifically to cruise the islands and sails with a fleet of eight Zodiacs with the option of roughly two to five excursions a day. *Departures: Multiple dates through November 30, 2024; from \$16,900, including all meals and activities.*

The 48-passenger *La Pinta* serves as home base during **UnCruise Adventures'** Galápagos expeditions. Seven-night itineraries start with a pre-sailing stay in Guayaquil before spending six days cruising the western islands, with daily snorkeling and excursions by skiffs, kayaks, and a glass-bottomed boat. *Departures: Multiple dates, November 9, 2023, through December 19, 2024; from \$9,595, including round-trip airfare from Guayaquil and all meals and activities.* 📍

