

Glorious Galápagos

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A trip that every experienced SCUBA diver should put on their bucket list is the Galápagos Islands, Ecuador. I've had the pleasure of SCUBA diving all over the world, and nothing compares to diving there for big sea life! However, there is always a risk when you return to a place that was a trip of a lifetime. This was my second trip to the Galápagos Islands; my first was in 2009.

I left Tallahassee, Florida on Christmas day 2014 to meet up with a group of fellow SCUBA divers in Quito, Ecuador. One thing I love about Ecuador is that there are so many wonderful things to see and do in addition to SCUBA diving. I arrived three days earlier than the liveaboard departure to join a group and do some land touring. We returned to Ciudad Mitad del Mundo, went hiking, and visited a butterfly farm and a chocolate factory in Mindo. A highlight was touring the Bomberos de Quito, an impressive fire and rescue operation center; the tour was thanks to my dive buddy Susan who is a fire rescue instructor. I also loved watching all the hummingbirds (even if we do have them in Florida) and enjoying the native flora and fauna. From there we travelled to Isla San Cristóbal, the easternmost island in the Galápagos archipelago, for a day before boarding. We visited a tortoise breeding station and walked around the peaceful, beautiful town to see resident sea lions lounging on park benches. The Galápagos Islands, located approximately 620 miles (998km) from the mainland, are primarily lava formations and include cactus forests and lush highlands. Ecuador only licenses a handful of vessels for dive charters, and at the time of my excursion, two had recently lost their licenses bringing the total to just three.

Because my last experience was so positive, I again booked my liveaboard diving with [Explorer Ventures](#) (EV), and I joined a group called [SingleDivers.com](#) that helps pair buddyless divers with divers of similar abilities. I first met my dive buddy Susan on a Maldives trip two years ago where we were the only two who never missed a dive. We are both addicted to diving and have excellent air consumption, so we make great dive buddies. Galápagos National Park Service veteran Macaron briefed our group and said that from his experience, nobody would make every single dive; Susan and I laughed because we knew he would be wrong. Our second guide on the journey was Liandro, also a park service employee, who is a fantastic guide. We had 16 divers on board; half went with one guide and half with the other on our two pangas, and the guides traded groups daily so we experienced diving with each.

It was my first time on the Humboldt Explorer, a 111.5' (34m) vessel. The crew was exceptional, and I appreciated the positive changes EV had made from my last trip including with regard to food. This time, there were plenty of fresh fruits, vegetables, and protein alternatives for vegetarians. Our check dive was also significantly better. Instead of a murky canal, we enjoyed SCUBA diving with many playful sea lions in San Cristóbal. Water temperatures were much warmer with ranges from 72-79°F (22-26°C).

Day two took us to Punta Carrion, Santa Cruz, where we had two nice dives with white tipped reef sharks, turtles, nudibranchs, and mobula. Visibility was 30-40' (9-12m) at best, but the afternoon land tour on North Seymour Island was wonderful. We saw many sea lions as well as blue-footed boobies, frigates, and marine iguana. A special site was watching male and female blue-footed boobies in a mating dance.

After an 18-hour boat ride, day three was spent enjoying four dives at Isla Wolf with excellent (100' / 30m) visibility. We didn't see much sea life on our first dive at Shark Bay, but our second dive at Landslide was great with several hammerheads and Galápagos sharks. At times we fought ripping currents to get to all the action, but it was worth it. On dives three and four of the day, we saw hundreds of hammerhead sharks as well as spotted eagle rays! We brought in the new year anchored near Isla Wolf (with so much diving, just a few of us stayed awake as the clock turned to midnight) then had a morning dive with hundreds of bottlenose dolphins on new year's day before heading to my favorite Isla Darwin. Both Darwin and Wolf are uninhabited, protected islands; the only visitors are SCUBA divers.

The next two days were spent enjoying eight dives near Darwin Arch. I had told everyone that we were going to see a whale shark on our first dive at Isla Darwin, but not many people shared my optimism since the water temperature was too warm at 79°F (26°C). Visibility had also dropped to 40-50' (12-15m) and currents were much stronger. Liandro's group was first to see the whale shark, and both groups were elated to spend time with the gentle giant that was about 35' (11m) long! We had two more sightings of whale sharks. I fell in love with whale sharks, which are filter feeders, on my first trip to the Galápagos. The first dive I ever saw a whale shark was dive #800, and the first whale shark we saw on this trip was dive #1900. Currents were very strong and we saw many spotted eagle rays, turtles, hammerhead sharks, and Galápagos sharks. Diving was as phenomenal as my last trip, and we also were able to experience a rare night dive with lots of cool sea life including eel, rays, turtles, and puffers!

Day six took us back to Isla Wolf for three dives. Our first dive at Shark Bay had ripping currents due to a storm, and visibility had also dropped to about half. Still, the first dive was epic including interacting with playful sea lions in the beginning of the dive, seeing lots of sharks, rays, and turtles, then having powerful interactions with a pod of curious dolphins at the end of the dive! Dive two was again spent with hundreds of spotted eagle rays at Landslide. Dive three was extraordinary at Secret Cave. We saw turtles, eel, a white tipped reef shark, and much more as we made our way through lava tubes and interesting formations. Sea lions came to play with us in the cave, and it was incredibly beautiful and fun!

After a 24-hour boat ride that was rough at times, we arrived at Cousin's Rock for our final day of diving, day seven. There was a lot of spectacular macro life on our first dive including nudibranchs. We also saw our first octopus of the trip. The final dive was a wonderful way to end an incredible week of diving. We interacted with playful sea lions in the beginning of the dive then saw three manta rays at the end of the dive. We all

marveled at the glorious week of diving we enjoyed, and we shared photos and video. The crew made a professional video as well, and most of us bought the video because it was so thorough in capturing the week of phenomenal SCUBA diving.

On the last day with the big group, we disembarked in Puerto Ayora, Isla Santa Cruz, where everyone had phone and Internet service for the first time all week. We went to Reserva El Chato, one of my favorite refuges for tortoises. The downside of group travel is that you must leave a wonderful location before you are ready; I almost missed the bus as I was having such a great time observing a 100-year-old tortoise! When approaching a tortoise, do so very slowly and respectfully; maintain your distance and don't make noise. I saw others who would approach tortoises, and the tortoises retracted their heads. When I approached slowly then patiently observed, they became very comfortable with me and often actually walked closer to me knowing that I was not a threat. It was a magical experience that I highly recommend.

The rest of the group returned to the Humboldt Explorer for their return to San Cristóbal, but my dive buddy and I stayed on Isla Santa Cruz a few extra days. The plan was to SCUBA dive there as well, but a storm caused conditions to decline, and we were sufficiently satiated with phenomenal diving. Thanks to [Jennifer with EV](#), we stayed in the quaint Hotel Pelican Bay within walking distance of the town and other attractions. We visited the Charles Darwin Research Station and watched local fishermen entertain crowds by feeding their scraps to pelicans and sea lions. A highlight was hiking to Galápagos Beach at Tortuga Bay where we saw many marine iguanas as well as baby hammerhead sharks swimming near the shoreline. The island as a whole is much more touristy than I prefer, but getting away from the crowds and dining at kiosks instead of restaurants on the main street provided a more authentic experience.

It was a long journey by taxi, ferry, bus, and plane to Baltra and then back to the mainland where we did some additional sightseeing in Quito on the final day of vacation. In summary, the glorious Galápagos Islands, Ecuador provides a phenomenal experience both on land and in the sea. You must be an experienced SCUBA diver since the currents can be very strong. Diving is unique not just because of the sea life but also because you often have to fight strong currents to get to the action, then you hug a rock or use a reef hook to stay in place while you watch the amazing sea life swim by you. I have visited 88 countries, many to dive, and Galápagos is one of the rare places I wouldn't hesitate to return to again and again. Sometimes the trip of a lifetime is worth repeating!

Check out video of the trip at <https://youtube.com/user/GabrielleConsulting> (search the playlist for "Galapagos") or see additional images at <http://scubawithgabrielle.com>.