

Swimming with **SEA LIONS**

A visit to the rain forest and the Galápagos Islands proves that Ecuador offers some of the most unique travel experiences on earth.

Words & photos by Paul Partridge



The music of jazz guitarist Pat Metheny is playing over the Quito airport sound system. This is my first experience in Ecuador and I take it as a welcoming sign, as Pat is one of my all-time faves. “If this is your version of Musak, Ecuador, I like you already!”

3 DAYS OF WONDER



Our adventure begins with an early morning drive out of Quito. Highway becomes local road becomes dirt road becomes jungle path enroute to Mashpi Lodge. Mashpi is a unique hideaway deep in the cloud forest. Looking back, I'm still not sure if it was real or a mirage. You drive along, deeper and deeper into the wilderness, and then – suddenly, there it is, like some sort of lush Brigadoon.

Waiting for us is Santiago, our guide during our 3-day stay. Having the same guide is a treat, because he gets to know your group, your pace, your interests, etc., and then tailors the activities accordingly.

Santiago is a rainforest encyclopedia. He can spot, identify, name and wax poetic about any plant animal, insect, tree, fungus, bird, reptile, stream or river we encounter.

A call echoes through the forest. “What kind of bird is that?” I ask.

“Actually, it’s a frog,” says Santiago.

Ok, I may be from Jersey, but to be fair, that was no ‘ribbit’ or ‘croak.’ That frog could win the national bird calling contest.

Staying at Mashpi feels like living in a large, fancy tree house. Floor-to-ceiling windows in every room make you feel totally immersed in your surroundings. Right outside your window are 400 species of birds, trees, frogs, and endemic species found nowhere else in the world.



Day 1: The Incredible Glass Frog

A quick lunch and we're off into the forest, seeing rare birds, Toucans, tayras, a tarantula, a giant snail, and beautiful, exotic butterflies. We're told that the tayra is one of only three creatures on earth that thinks ahead, the other two being octopi and humans (females, mostly).

After sunset Santiago takes us on an unforgettable night walk using flashlights and headlamps. We're stalking the rare fluorescent glass frog. Within 10 minutes Santiago has found one. And there is much rejoicing. It's a great find, especially since glass frogs are the size of a thumbnail – and you can see right through them. Our maven also points out assorted spiders, crickets, bats, and a praying mantis.

A female praying mantis eats the male after mating – especially the head because they desire the brain protein. Santiago tells us about one jungle species where the male has evolved a 2nd brain in his chest. This way he can have sex and survive the beheading. I imagine this must confuse females on praying mantis dating sites. “Wait, didn't I just eat you last week?”

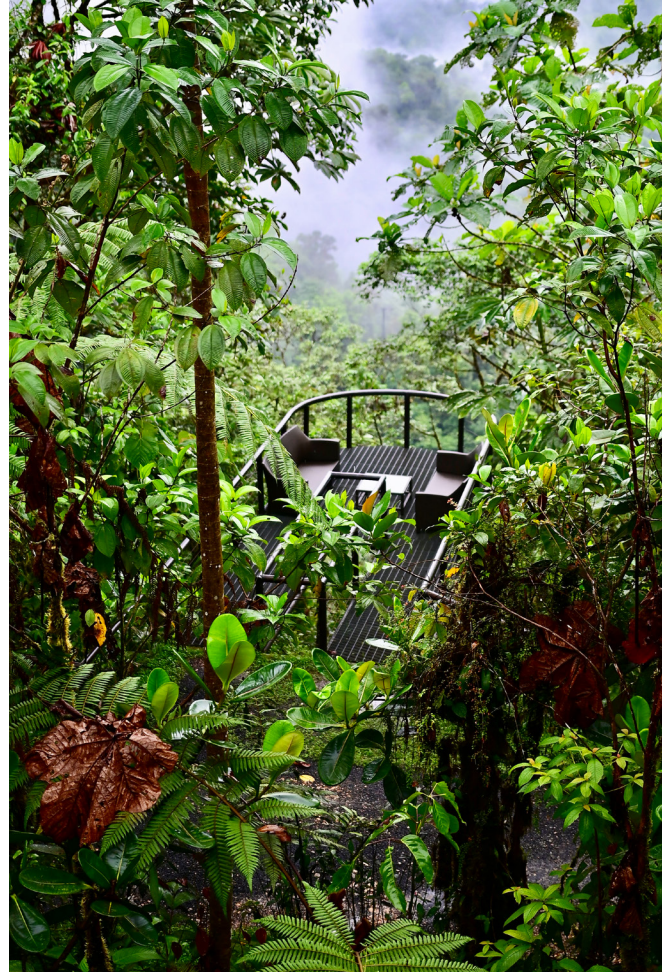
Day 2: Swimming in a Waterfall

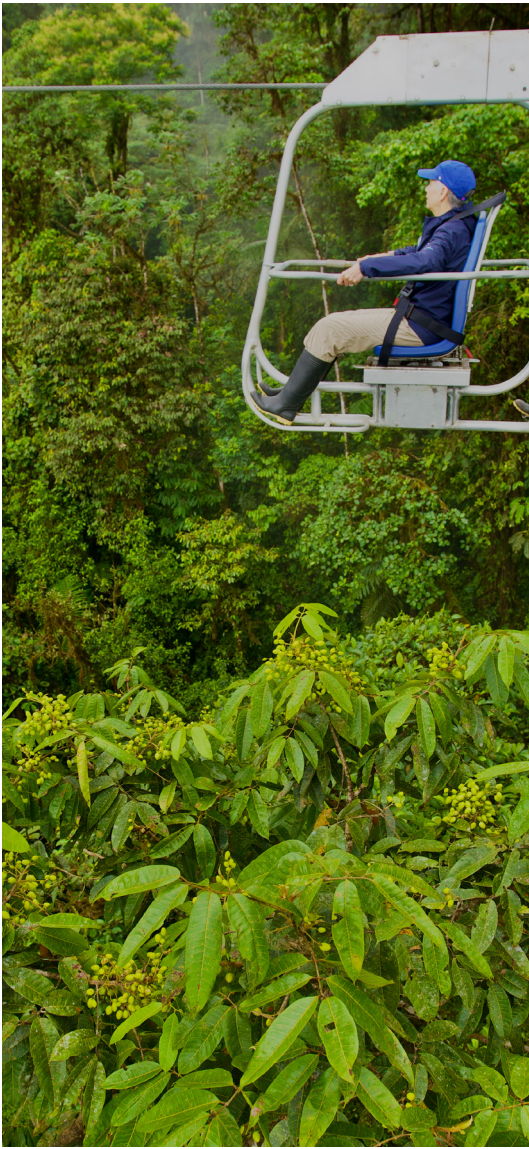
The trail drops steeply from the lodge to the Laguna River below. At times we walk alongside the river, other times in it (rubber boots are provided by the lodge). Down and down we go. Our reward is Magnolia Waterfall, and we're invited to swim in its pool. This is one of those pinch-yourself moments. The staggering beauty and serenity leave a mark.

Eventually we have to hike back. Note to self: walking down is easier than walking up. As we huff and puff, Santiago mentions that there's a lunar eclipse tonight. It feels like we're hiking up to it to see it in person.

Mashpi is home to over 30 species of hummingbirds, and in the afternoon we're entertained by a dozen different varieties. They're so quick and so tiny, you don't see them as first, but you can hear them buzz by your ear.

One surprise is the quality of the meals. One doesn't expect to eat so well in the middle of the rainforest. Every entree and appetizer is meticulously prepared. And the natural fruit juice concoctions alone are worth the trip (you had me at passion fruit lemonade).





Day 3: A Birdseye View of the Forest

The highlight of the morning is a ride on the SkyBike. SkyBike is your average, everyday bicycle built for two – if you happen to grow up a member of the Flying Wallendas. The SkyBike sits on a tight rope high above the jungle canopy. The front person enjoys the view; the back person is the engine. Once you reach the other side, switch positions and pedal back.

At home I won't even go on a step ladder, I'm so terrified of heights. Somehow, this seems doable, even for me. As we paddle over the treetops, my adrenaline is flowing and I'm shouting, "Isn't this amazing?" My wife wants to know, "Who are you and what have you done with my husband?"

Mashpi offers a second way to float in the clouds called the DragonFly. This is a one-hour ride in an open-air gondola that holds four persons. No pedaling required.

In the afternoon, a transfer returns us to Quito and to pass the time I decide to give out some awards.

Best Insect Name: Jesus Spider (because he walks on water).

Amazing Flower Fact: There are 4,000 different varieties of orchids in Mashpi Reserve.

Most Interesting Tree: Walking Palm. Its roots grow above ground and serve as "legs." When the tree doesn't get enough sunlight, it grows new roots in the direction of the sun and moves in that direction. Walking palms can supposedly move up to 20 meters in one year. I found this hard to believe until I saw a walking palm wearing a Fitbit.

CRUISING THE GALAPAGOS

Day 1: Salvador Dalí on Mars

A sunrise flight brings us to Baltra Island and the waiting cruise ship La Pinta. With only 24 total cabins, La Pinta is the perfect size – big enough to have all the amenities you need/want and small enough to provide lots of personal attention. The cabins are larger than typical cruises.

Within hours we're into our first island expedition – exploring South Plaza Island. Being a group of 10, we have our own Zodiac boat a la Jacques Cousteau (although the locals prefer the name panga boat). Approaching the island I'm expecting to see exotic wildlife, and I'm not disappointed. Sea lions, iguanas, fiery-red crabs, sea turtles, albatross – they're all here in abundance. But what I'm not prepared for is the strange landscape they inhabit:

A cross between an Arizona desert, a Dali painting, and the surface of Mars – stunning . . . spectacular . . . otherworldly. Seeing the Galapagos in person vs. in books is like seeing Bruce Springsteen in concert vs. listening to his albums.

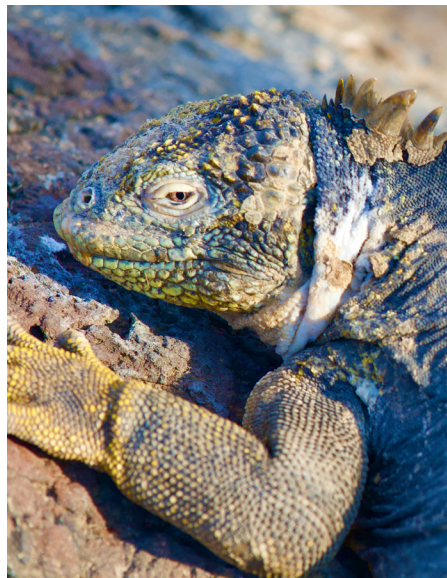
Day 2: “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!”

I suspected it yesterday but now I’m convinced: there’s some sort of inter-galactic transformation that happens in the panga ride from La Pinta to the island. Because once again, we’ve landed on another planet. This one is called Santa Fe Island. It looks nothing like South Plaza Island – or anything else on earth. More like something created by Dr. Seuss.

We’re greeted by a welcoming committee of sea lions and Santa Fe iguanas. Like my wife’s Italian aunts, these iguanas never leave their neighborhood throughout their life.

After the hike, it’s time for snorkeling. We’re swimming alongside so many fish and sea turtles that it makes breathing difficult. Not because our snorkels don’t work, but because we’re stopping to laugh out loud at the sheer spectacle of the show.

Shrieks of, “Did you see that?!” echo across the bay.



Day 3: Swimming with Sea Lions



The La Pinta guides are impressive in their knowledge of and respect for the Galapagos ecosystem. They’re happy to share as much information as we can absorb. The crew, likewise, is first-rate. They take care of everything from our wetsuits to our favorite cocktails. And throw in thoughtful touches such as a book to help identify Galapagos fauna, and surprise us by twisting towels into clever animal sculptures when we return to our cabin after an island expedition.

Today our guide Dries takes us for a rigorous morning hike on the eastern tip of San Cristobal Island. We’re negotiating boulders and climbing up cliffs. The effort is worth it. San Cristobal evokes Utah, Nevada and Colorado crossed with Catalina Island. Around each corner is a more spectacular view.

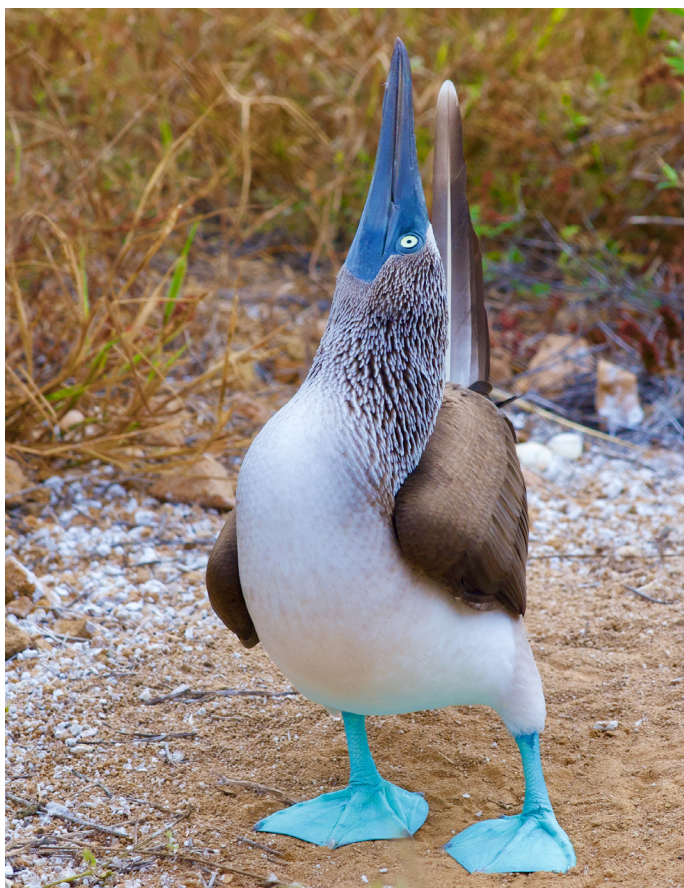
After the hike we paddle kayaks for a bit, then go for a swim. What starts off as a cooling dip turns into frolicking fun with sea lions. Curious and puppy-like, they seem as fascinated with us as we are with them. Their favorite trick is to swim right up to your face and peel away at the last second. As Lynne is snorkeling, two sea lions swim alongside and a third one jumps clear over her as if performing in a Sea World show. I stick my mask in the water for a better view. The jumping one comes at me so fast that I leap up, startled. He glides over and sticks his head above the water. Wait – is he laughing at me? Then he playfully nibbles my leg as if to say, “Hey, don’t worry – I’m just having fun.” I’ve swum with dolphins before, but nothing matches this experience.

In the afternoon we’re back in the panga for a coastal expedition of Cerro Brujo. Then some r&r on Cerro Brujo’s gorgeous white coral beach. I hear one travel advisor – a very experienced world traveler – say this is the prettiest beach she’s ever seen. Difficult to disagree.

As La Pinta sets sail for Isla Espanola, it’s happy hour on deck. Look off the stern. There’s an orca whale breaching. Look west and there’s a jaw-dropping sunset over Sleeping Lion Rock. The sunset has 3 acts: Wow!... Glory be!!... and, Are you kidding me!!! as the colors intensify and burst across the sky like fireworks.



Day 4: The Blue-Footed Booby Dance



Today we explore Punta Suarez on Espanola, the southernmost of the Galapagos Islands. Its flat, lava/boulder terrain is home to many bird colonies and iguana – including the Christmas Iguana, named for its green and red coloring. So far we’ve seen mockingbirds, frigatebirds, albatrosses, red-billed Tropicbirds, three kinds of boobies (red-footed, blue-footed and Nazca), the Galapagos hawk, doves, gulls, and of course, the legendary finches of Darwin fame. A blue-footed booby calling all the single boobies with a left-foot-in, left-foot-out hokey pokey mating dance gives us quite a chuckle. Albatrosses doing beak-fencing is also a giggle.

Fatima, our guide, leads us to a cliff on the southern side of the island. “Wait for it!” she says. We watch in anticipation as a large wave rolls in. A loud whoosh, then a geyser of water blasts through a lava blowhole, spraying water 70 feet into the air.

More great snorkeling in the afternoon, and another chance to swim with happy-go-lucky sea lions. Schools of fish are everywhere, including yellow-tailed surgeon fish, king angelfish, sergeant majors, parrotfish, and sea turtles.

Day 5: Giant Tortoise

Last stop is the Charles Darwin Research Station, where we visit the captive rearing program for giant tortoises. This is a crowd favorite. We're lucky in that it's a cloudy day because the Tortuga are active (on sunny days they seek shade and the cover of rocks). Some of these tortoises are over 80 years old.

As we're marveling over these incredible creatures, a Mark Twain quote comes to mind. "I've had a lot of worries in my life," he said, "most of which never happened." The tortoise is the captain of the all-chill team, and on our next stop we hope to emulate him.



RELAXING IN FINCH BAY



We're 9 days into our Ecuador adventure and the latest the alarm has gone off is 6:30 am. Every day has been a go-go whirlwind with a full schedule. Finch Bay Hotel is a welcome antidote, a vacation from our vacation.

There's a wonderful laid-back vibe to the place. Even the lava gulls and blue herons hang by the pool. There's nothing extravagant or show-offy about it. Rooms are unadorned and comfortable. There's a nice spa, yoga room and workout gym, but it's the location and the setting that make it special. Guests are here to unwind and unplug, and for that it's paradise.

Finch Bay has its own beach, but we also swim at Tortuga Bay and the Las Grietas lagoon. Tortuga Bay has three gorgeous, pristine, white-sand beaches, along with marine iguanas and sea turtles. Las Grietas is near the hotel, within a national park. Steep cliffs frame a quiet lagoon where there's snorkeling and swimming.

I'm so glad my bucket list has brought me to Ecuador (which I've renamed Ecu-adore). I had high expectations going in. But turns out my expectations weren't high enough.