



# Galapagos: The Enchanted Isles

## November and December 2007

### Tour Report

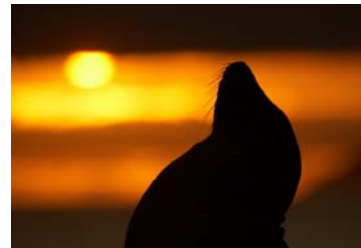
In November and December 2007 Peter Smart, Wild Arena's photographic guide and tour leader, accompanied a group on our *Galapagos: The Enchanted Isles* tour.

We began our tour with a short stay at the Bellavista Cloud Forest reserve on mainland Ecuador. This offered a fantastic start to the trip with several walks in the forest with the experienced local guides, and opportunities to view and photograph a wide range of birds, insects and plants. The many species of hummingbirds were most people's favourites, and also offered the biggest challenge to keep the bird in the frame and have a sufficiently high shutter speed to make some attempt at freezing the wing movement!



After an overnight stay in Quito, we then flew to the Galapagos and caught tantalising glimpses of the islands before landing on Baltra. For this trip, our group of 13 were travelling on the appropriately named *Beagle* along with our professional naturalist guide who proved invaluable and always keen to meet the needs of the photographers. We also met the crew who superbly looked after all our needs during our time on board, including ample quantities of excellent food!

We began our exploration of the islands on nearby North Seymour which gave us our first sight of the amazing Blue-footed Boobies and we witnessed their famous courting behaviour and even mating. As the sun began to set, we were given a hard choice between photographing a male Magnificent Frigatebird with inflated scarlet throat pouch bathed in warm light or Galapagos Sea Lions silhouetted against the sunset a little further back along the path ... the gallery will show which some of us opted for!



On the following day South Plazas provided some amazing encounters with many Galapagos Land Iguanas - photographing them from a very low angle giving them a fearsome prehistoric aspect - as well as a great range of birds, including several species of Darwin finches and some graceful flypasts by Red-billed Tropicbirds. In the afternoon a landing on Santa Fe providing some incredible close-up observations of Galapagos Hawks as well as our first views of the incredibly confiding Galapagos Mockingbird.

Punta Suarez and Gardener Bay on Espanola filled the next day. We were treated to what was, for many, the highlight of the trip. We were fortunate to observe a Waved Albatross chick being fed by a parent close to the path and, if this was not enough, a pair of adults were performing their amazing courtship display close by. As we finally had to leave another adult made elegant flypasts along the cliffs.



A walk along Gardener Beach in the evening was punctuated by sleeping sea-lions everywhere, while the male "beach-master" kept a noisy watch off-shore. There were many Sea Lion pups but it was the one covered in white sand and playing with a stick that captured many hearts.



A full day on Santa Cruz - which could be described as the commercial hub of the islands (it has shops!) - allowed us to visit the Charles Darwin Research Station which is primarily carrying our research and repopulation of the Galapagos Giant Tortoise. We had a chance to learn about the work, see Lonesome George (sadly, the last of his sub-species) and then visited the Highlands to observe and photograph these amazing creatures in the wild.

Floreana provided an amazing opportunity to watch Pacific Green Turtles mating just off shore and the lagoon at Punta Cormorant hosted the beautiful Greater Flamingo and range of other bird species.

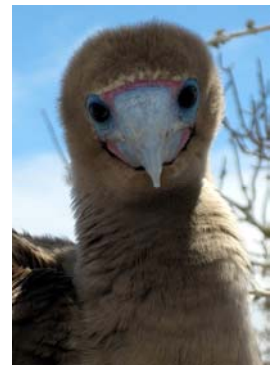
The weather on the following morning did not bode well for the day. A mist and strong rain enveloped Santiago as we landed at Puerto Egas, but this was quite rightly viewed as a challenge to the photographers! We observed our first Galapagos Fur Seals as well as many Marine Iguanas along the coast. The ornithologists were kept busy by a variety of shorebirds which proved tricky to identify as we went along ... but a good identification book and studying the enlarged images back on board allowed them all to be named. The sun came out and as The Beagle sailed on to Bartolome we were surrounded by many Bottle-nosed Dolphins which was a good omen for what was to come!



On most days we had the opportunity for snorkelling between landings and marvelled at the wonderful range of species below the water. However, on this afternoon, as well as the fish we were treated to fantastic close encounters with White-tip Reef Shark, a less close encounter (thankfully!) with a Sting Ray and turtles which rose from the ocean floor to greet us and swim around us. I had been getting to grips with my first experience of using a camera while snorkelling (kindly provided by Camera Underwater) and this session gave me plenty of

opportunity to practice ... but I still have a lot to learn! The amazing day was rounded off with our first close encounters with Galapagos Penguin.

Our final full day was spent on the remote Genovesa, visited by very few of the ships that tour the islands. This is home to the largest colony of the tree-nesting Red-footed Boobies in the Galapagos. A large range of other bird species could also be approached and photographed and, as the sun began to set, the whole island was bathed in a warm glow and it was a struggle to put down our cameras as the time came to leave!



On the final morning, after sailing overnight, we arrived back at Santa Cruz and had the chance to cruise around the mangrove-fringed lagoon of Black Turtle Cove where we saw Pacific Green Turtles, White-tip Reef Sharks, Spotted Eagle and Golden Rays in the shallow waters.



Throughout this brief report I have tried to highlight some of the special moments of the trip but this has proved difficult as the whole experience was incredible. Sailing around these remote waters and having the opportunity to observe and photograph a wide variety of species at such close range was a genuine privilege. Learning of the geological history of the islands from our knowledgeable guide added greatly to this experience and made me realise we were, quite remarkably, bearing witness to evolution!

I am so looking forward to returning to *Galapagos: The Enchanted Isles* and having the opportunity to introduce another group to this remarkable place.

An album showing a selection of photographic highlights from the tour may be viewed at:

[http://www.petersmartwildlifephotography.co.uk/wa/tour\\_gallery/ga2007ap/](http://www.petersmartwildlifephotography.co.uk/wa/tour_gallery/ga2007ap/)



The *Overview* folder contains a selection of images to show the wide range of animals, birds and landscapes that were seen during the tour. *The Islands* folder contains an expanded day-by-day gallery of extensive photographic opportunities that were available on each island, the Cloud Forest and in Quito.



All photographs were taken by Peter Smart using a range of Canon cameras and lenses. As several of the species encountered can be approached quite closely, many of the images - even including some flight shots - were taken with a 17-40 F4L lens and even an Ixus 75 compact camera. The Ixus 75, together with a Canon underwater housing (kindly provided by [www.CamerasUnderwater.co.uk](http://www.CamerasUnderwater.co.uk)), were used for the underwater photography.

At the time of writing this report, only one place remains for our return in November 2008 tour, nearly one year away. We are using a different ship for this trip which will result in us following a slightly different itinerary - we visit many of the same islands but also several new ones. Our policy of only using small ships (no more than 14 people) which we book exclusively gives us the opportunity to be flexible with our itinerary wherever possible and ensure we are on the islands at the best time for photography. It also results in the trips booking up very quickly and there is already a considerable number of people eagerly awaiting details of our 2009 tour so they can book their journey to *Galapagos: The Enchanted Isles*.



*Peter Smart, January 2008*

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