



EDUCATIONAL  
TOURS

# The Galápagos Islands



**Visiting the Galápagos Islands is an unforgettable, once in a lifetime experience that has a huge impact on younger and older minds alike.**

It inspires many to develop a greater sense of respect for the natural environment and a better understanding of the need for humanity to do a better job of fitting in sustainably.

The Galápagos experience is very unique, so travelling through the Islands is more enjoyable and fulfilling if the traveler a) understands the significance and uniqueness of the archipelago, and b) knows what challenges and opportunities to expect.

Please review this EF Tours Galápagos briefing for a clear understanding of expectations to ensure a positive physical and personal journey for every traveler—and to get excited about the upcoming adventure ahead!

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## Safety

### Climate, hydration, and hygiene

Travelers will often be walking on hot, solidified lava that has soaked up the sun's rays, making for quite a hot stroll. Travelers will also be on the Equator at sea level, which means average temperatures are high and constant hydration and sun protection are a must. However, the unique ocean currents mean that water temperatures can be very low, so while snorkeling can feel refreshing, travelers can also feel quite cold when sitting wet on a moving boat. The weather can often change quite quickly as well, and it is not uncommon to have calm, hot, and sunny mornings with chilly, rainy intervals and strong winds in the afternoon of the same day. In short, travelers will need to carry a variety of clothing in their backpack, with many layers that can be put on/stripped off depending on certain conditions.

Busy itineraries, changing weather conditions, and dehydration are a perfect recipe for stomach illness, so we ask that all travelers do their best to rest well at night and wash their hands thoroughly before all meals and snacks and after visiting the restroom. As travelers will see once they arrive in Ecuador, their EF Tour Director will be carrying a family-sized hand sanitizer dispenser that will be made available throughout the entire tour.

### Drinking water

Travelers' best bet for guaranteeing a safe source of drinking water during their stay on the Galápagos Islands is to purchase sealed bottled water. EF requires that water from a sealed bottled source is provided at lunches and dinners. In some hotels and restaurants, there is filtered water on tap in tanks, but it can never be guaranteed that these sources are 100% germ-free—it is always safer to opt for sealed bottles. To minimize their environmental impact, however, it is strongly recommended for travelers to purchase the largest possible bottles when available, which can then be distributed between several travelers' reusable drinking bottles. Out of respect for this unique corner of the world, it is also strongly recommended that travelers carry the plastic waste they generate on the Islands back to the mainland for disposal. Reusable drinking bottles should be cleaned from time to time throughout the tour to keep them hygienic and as germ-free as possible.

### Boat travel

To get between the Islands, groups will use privately chartered speed boat ferry services. These boats are about 30 feet long and have limited capacity (around 20 people), so groups might be split up between multiple boats depending upon their size. Each traveler will be provided with a life vest for the journey and must be seated in a designated area while the boat is moving.

Again, groups might need to split up in a way that does not necessarily fit with everyone's preferences, but everyone will reunite in 2.5–3 hours. The ride can be very bumpy, so it is highly recommended that travelers bring motion sickness tablets and plenty of drinking water. The onboard motors are loud, and during the journey there is not much to do other than relax, meditate, and watch the big blue sea if you are seated by a window. If travelers brought some music with them, they should make sure to prepare an ocean trip-themed playlist the night before each boat ride.

### Swimming and snorkeling

Swimming is only allowed during supervised activities. We ask all travelers to listen carefully to the safety briefings before these activities and follow all the instructions given by local guides and their EF Tour Director.

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## General information

### One of the most amazing places on this planet

The Galápagos Islands are a UNESCO world heritage site largely due to their geographical location at the confluence of three ocean currents, making it one of the richest marine ecosystems in the world. Ongoing seismic and volcanic activity reflect the processes that formed the Islands. These processes, together with the extreme isolation of the Islands, have led to the development of unique plant and animal life, such as swimming iguanas, flightless cormorants, giant tortoises, huge cacti trees, and many different subspecies of finches and mockingbirds—all of which inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection following his visit in 1835. The archipelago and its immense marine reserve are known as a showcase of evolution, often referred to as a living museum.

This is a dream destination for people around the world who are passionate about wildlife, biology, and adventure. Not everyone gets to make that dream come true, so travelers are very fortunate to have this opportunity. Where groups will be visiting is strictly controlled by carefully planned tourist itineraries limiting visitation in certain areas. Around 35,000 people live on the Islands and approximately 200,000 travelers visit each year. Even Ecuadorians from the mainland cannot just move to the Islands—immigration is carefully controlled by the National Park Authorities to limit the impact of humans on the National Park.

### **Flights and island regulations**

Flights to and from the Islands take place on a small jet (about 200 passengers), and the flights themselves take around 3 hours, as the Islands are about 700 miles from the mainland. At the airport, EF will pay a special tax on behalf of the group giving travelers access to the Islands, and upon arrival, travelers will receive their National Parks ticket (also covered by EF). These tickets are EF's collective contribution to the management of the National Park. Each traveler will be allowed to take one piece of checked luggage weighing up to 44 pounds and one piece of hand luggage weighing up to 22 pounds, but it is highly recommended that travelers do their best to limit themselves to one carry-on, as they will be responsible for bringing their luggage with them around the Islands, including to/from boat ferry transfers. Each traveler will have to fill out a declaration form citing what they are bringing on and off the Islands, and upon departure and arrival travelers' luggage will be inspected to make sure that nothing represents a threat to the fragile local ecosystems (e.g., via invasive species). EF requires that all travelers do not try to depart with any fresh foods, seeds, or plants, and that all clothes and footwear are free of dirt. Plastic bags are also forbidden to be brought onto the Islands.

### **Local guides**

Upon arrival, groups will be met by Galápagos residents and local naturalists, our licensed guides. Just as the EF Tour Director will have a license to guide groups on mainland Ecuador, these local guides will have a special license giving them the exclusive responsibility to guide visitors around the archipelago. Once groups arrive on the Islands, the EF Tour Director will take more of a backseat role by assisting the local guides as required, taking care of behind-the-scenes logistics, and making sure that the tour's safety and quality meet EF standards. Laws dictate that our groups be accompanied by licensed GNPD guides to visit any of the protected areas, and they will be with our group most of the time while on the Islands.

### **Group size**

A National Parks rule limits group sizes to 16 people when exploring the Islands, so most of our groups will be divided between the local guides. We will not necessarily be able to create groups according to family ties, friendships, or even by school. Every attempt will be made to fulfill desired preferences, but it is important for groups to be flexible and accept that these measures are taken to protect the wildlife and obey local law. There will be no extra guides than necessary on tour, so travelers will have to fill these smaller groups as much as possible—even 17 people in one group could lead to a penalty from the local authorities and hold up the entire tour.

### **Hiking**

Due to the delicate Galápagos ecosystem, roads and vehicles are ONLY found on the Islands in the archipelago that are inhabited, but this infrastructure is limited. Walking trails are the best way to experience most of the wildlife—it is recommended that travelers wear comfortable, closed-toe shoes. National Park rules prohibit anyone from walking anywhere outside of the marked trails. In protected areas, groups will be asked to only leave footprints and only take pictures. Nothing from the natural environment can be taken from the Galápagos Islands, including shells, flowers, and volcanic rocks.

### **Money**

It is highly recommended that travelers bring cash broken into smaller bills—\$100, \$50, and \$20 bills are rare and hard to break while on the Galápagos Islands. There are only a few ATMs that are accessible throughout the Islands, so travelers should ensure to take out all the cash they think they will need while still on the mainland of Ecuador.

### **Eating and shopping**

While the inhabited Islands have ports which receive merchandise, their distance from the mainland means that importing is expensive, therefore there are fewer options for souvenir shops and restaurants, and prices are generally higher. However, meals on an EF Tour are all included and there are plenty of fun souvenirs in the different island towns. All travelers need to ensure that they do not purchase anything that is made from black coral, native wood or vegetation, lava rock, shells, or animal parts, as this is illegal, and the items will be confiscated upon the return flight back to the mainland.

### **Animals**

Travelers can never give any food to any animal while on the Islands—the circle of life in the Galápagos is delicately balanced and interfering could cause imbalance and damage the animals' health. Travelers should always keep a distance of at least six feet from all animals, never crowd around them, and never treat them as photo props. Photo opportunities are amazing and abundant while on the Islands, but under no condition should a traveler's behavior as a photographer affect any animal's freedom to exercise its normal behavior.

### **Phones and internet**

If travelers plan to use their personal cell phone on tour, they should contact their wireless provider to see what fees they may incur for calling, texting, or using data abroad. Wi-Fi may not be available at all hotels while on the Galápagos Islands, and is often unreliable when available, even on the road. Travelers should plan to be without Wi-Fi for a few days at a time and should consider buying a phone plan for more consistent and reliable connectivity.

### **Hotels**

Hotels on the Galápagos Islands are all 3-star accommodations, but it is important to know that these hotels tend to be more rustic than their counterparts on mainland Ecuador. They are mostly small, family-owned organizations with limited to no Wi-Fi access, which proves to be true across the entirety of the Islands.

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## **For Group Leaders only**

### **Safety and logistics**

Even though local guides will take the lead for excursions and activities while on the Galápagos Islands, it is important to remember that the EF Tour Director is the go-to person if there are any issues affecting the wellbeing of the group that need to be addressed. They will remain in contact with their EF colleagues back on the mainland and in the United States. It is also important that GLs take a leadership role when cooperation and collaboration is asked of all travelers, especially when it comes to ensuring that everyone follows safety protocols. It is important that the GL, EF Tour Director, and local guides all play a role in the safety of the travelers and lead by example—the EF Tour Director will especially appreciate GL support when it comes to wearing life vests, helping enforce swimming bans on certain beaches due to dangerous currents, and dividing groups