

Enchanting Quietude

Galápagos Islands

in Pandemic Times

Text & photos by Brandi Mueller





Green sea turtle on rocky reef in the Galápagos Islands (above); Nazca booby with chick (center); Sunbathing marine lizard (top right); Sea lion frolicking underwater (previous page)

An enchanting and ecologically unique place, immortalized by Charles Darwin's seminal work on evolutionary biology in 1859, the Galápagos Islands hold a revered spot as one of the truly magical locations of the world. During pandemic times, when stillness and quiet replaced the cacophony of tourists, it seemed even more captivating. Brandi Mueller reports.

It was an hour before sunset, and I was snorkeling at Playa Punta Carola, a blinding white crescent of a beach with jet-black lava rocks marking both edges. Looking closely, some of the rocks moved, giving away that they were actually camouflaged marine lizards shifting or expelling salt from their noses with a loud puff.

At high tide, there were two surf breaks, but it was low tide during a global pandemic, and I was the only person in the water. Two families were on the beach when I entered the water, but it was hard to believe I was at one of the top places to see

in San Cristobal, Galápagos. It felt more like a private beach property.

Sea lions

With my underwater camera in hand, I swam out to the edge of the rocks, sticking my head up to check where I was going. Watching a wave break, I noticed in the white froth a black spot with whiskers—a sea lion body-surfing! I laughed, causing my mask

to flood, and kicked like mad to get to that spot. I wanted to surf with the sea lions.

Getting there, I waited, looking behind me at the incoming waves and underwater for the sea lion. I saw

a shadow coming in from the distance. Two sea lions jetted out of the blue, one coming right up to me and spinning full circle and then, as if realizing it was about to miss the wave, the sea lion took off, almost flying as it joined its friend, catching the wave and disappearing into the break.

Santa Cruz

Over on the island of Santa Cruz, I got up most mornings by six to go jogging to Tortuga Beach. Often rated as one of the best beaches in the world, I accessed it by a stone pathway that took about 30 minutes of walking.



A sea lion (above) and squads of pelicans (left) waited for scraps from local fishers as they cut up their catch on the dock.

ditional medicine, which has a lovely, musky smell and can be burned to ward off mosquitos. Even though I passed a group or two, it seemed eerily quiet.

Only wide enough for two people to pass, the trail cut through a thick landscape of arid opuntia, palo santo and matasarno trees.

I only saw a few other running enthusiasts until 8 a.m., when the tours began, with guides pausing to point out opuntia, a cactus known to most as prickly pear that grows here to heights double the size of humans, and palo santo, “holy wood,” used in tra-

ditional medicine, which has a lovely, musky smell and can be burned to ward off mosquitos. Even though I passed a group or two, it seemed eerily quiet. After arriving at the empty beach, I would jump into the crystal-blue water to cool off after dodging marine lizards roaming about, oblivious to my being there. On the sun-drenched, blindingly white sand beach, there was no one there but me.

Enchanting

In Spanish, it is called Las Islas Encantada—“The Enchanted

Islands”—and I can think of no better way to explain the Galápagos. Even walking through Puerto Ayora, the most populated town, there was wildlife wherever I looked.

Local fishers cut up their catch on the dock where a squad of pelicans patrolled, waiting for scraps. But it was an adorable sea lion pup, begging at the fishers’ feet like a puppy, that got most of it. More than once, I really did almost trip over a sea lion sleeping in the middle of a walkway, or a marine iguana spread over the entire length of a pathway. And do not even think about sitting on any of the numerous park benches; they were occupied by the sea lions.



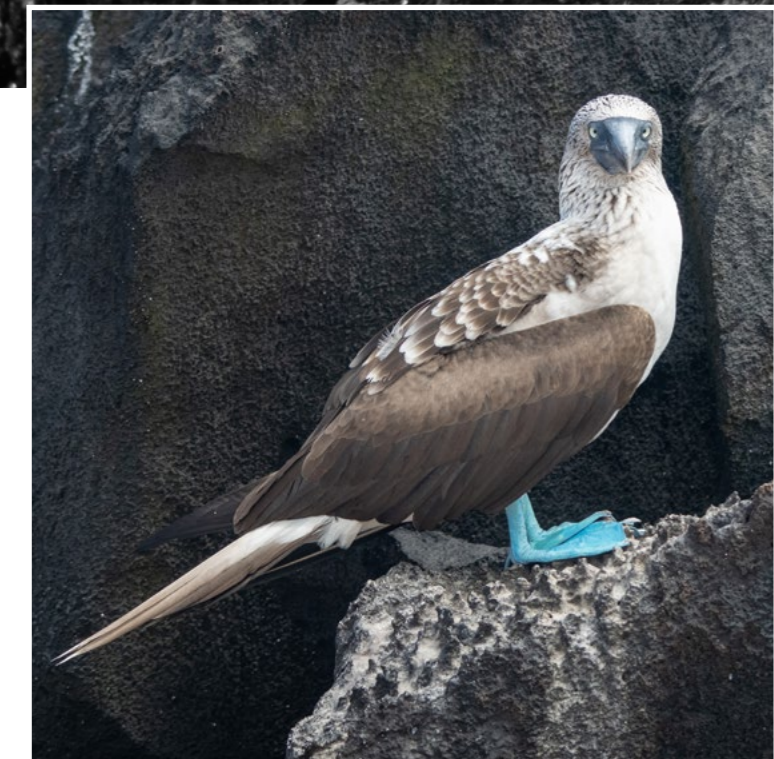
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Blue-footed booby (left); Hammerhead sharks (above); Male frigate bird puffing out its big red pouch to attract a female (top right); Yellow land iguana (right); Booby chick (bottom right)

North Seymour Island

Early one morning, I took a boat to North Seymour Island where it was frigate-bird mating season. The males puffed out their enormous red pouches to show off how pretty they were to the females. On the ground were bright yellow land iguanas displaying more vibrant color than normal, in hopes of finding a mate.

Blue-footed boobies, several with eggs in their “nests”

(simply a spot on the rocky ground), called to one another. I kept to the designated path in hopes of not disturbing the animals, but that did not stop them from crossing mine.

Pandemic requirements

The islands, known best for Darwin’s theory of evolution and giant tortoises, continued mostly as if the pandemic was not happening, except

for the lack of tourists observing it. The few people who had ventured here, like me, had to undergo not one, but two, PCR Covid tests: one required entering Ecuador within ten days of arrival and another to enter the Galápagos within 96 hours.

Masks were required (and promoted by fun signs in the streets of sea lions masked-up). Social distancing was encouraged as well as the

spraying of disinfectant isopropyl alcohol onto your hands, luggage and entire body, constantly.

Wolf and Darwin islands

I spent a week scuba diving, visiting the northern remote islands of Wolf and Darwin to see schooling hammerhead sharks (just weeks before Darwin’s Arch crashed and became Darwin’s Pillars.) The most amazing part of being





Penguin swimming underwater (above); Seahorse on rocky reef (right)

there was that no one else was. The boat I was on usually took 16 passengers, and we were only six. Only once did we see other divers, and they were researchers tagging sharks.

We snorkeled with penguins, had sea lions spin circles around us and got into the middle of a pod of bottlenose dolphins. Even when we were not underwater, the magic of this place was all around us. There were dolphins leaping at the bow of our boat and mobula rays launching themselves out of the water like spaceships coming from the wrong direction.

Park fees and tourist limits

Decidedly one of the most unique and important places

on Earth, I kept wondering to myself how we would recover from the global pandemic and return to the dive travels so many of us love, but also protect these places. I heard gossip and whispers among guides and staff of park fees increasing; currently, foreigners pay US\$100 and a US\$20 transit visa fee. These are park fees that hopefully support park protection. Raising fees has been discussed for quite a few years, but perhaps post-pandemic may be a good time to implement the change.

I also found myself in more than one conversation with guides and Galápagos residents

discussing the idea of limiting the number of tourists allowed. I see this as a two-sided issue. I think limiting the number of people trampling foliage and disrupting the natural habitats of wildlife is obviously a way to

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The sea lions own the town.



Napping sea lions at San Cristobal (top left); Tern tries to steal a meal from a pelican (above); View of Isabela Island (right)



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better preserve the delicate and unique ecosystem. But limiting tourists will likely drive up prices, making it more of a place where only those with excess financial means can visit.

In my opinion, being able to experience this place, and others like it, is the best way to educate, inform and create a sense of responsibility in people. It is easier to make pro-environmental

changes in one's everyday life, making less of an impact, when you have seen the losses and what is at stake.

Environmental threats and recovery

The Galápagos faces threats of severe El Niño events, which in the past, have destroyed corals; trash washes up on beaches from three continents, due to the

currents that meet here; and illegal fishing continues to plague the area right outside the park. By making the Galápagos less accessible, an opportunity to inspire a love for this environment in the masses may also lead to its demise.

The tourists I met on half-filled tours and on empty beaches asked the same question I did, "Is the pandemic helping the wildlife?"

The one recurring consensus I heard from guides and islanders was that the bird populations seemed to be doing better. They were seeing more penguins, boobies and frigate birds. This is obviously purely observational anecdotes from people who have spent years here and not long-term scientific research, but I found that information encouraging. It also made me wonder

about how even low-impact observation by humans may be disturbing birds.

Española

Traipsing over rocks with the brutal sun still burning my heavily sun-screened shoulders on the island of Española, a few other visitors and I walked among Nazca boobies, many of which were juveniles that could not fly yet. One bird



Española marine lizard (left); Parrotfish (above); Nazca booby adult and baby (center); School of barberfish (top right); Sea lion bunk beds at the port (far right)

not seem to notice us. One bird walked up behind us and into the middle of our group before we even noticed.

But perhaps the constant streams of camera-toting tourists do change behavior, maybe causing mother birds to become nervous or leading to other negative consequences. I feel it must have some impact, even though it may not be apparent, as the birds go about their business on the cliffside overlooking one of the most amazing views I have ever seen.

Another perspective
To examine another side,

while the majority of tourism boats were sitting in the harbor with no passengers during the height of the pandemic, the expansive waters of the Galápagos National Park had fewer observers of bad behavior. Two summers ago, a fleet of over 300 Chinese fishing vessels was seen pillaging the seas just outside the border. Unfortunately, marine life does not see the lines we draw marking protected and unprotected areas.

It is my suspicion that the tourism boats just “being there” reduced the rule breakers that do damage when no one is watching. Huge expanses of

water are hard for anyone to patrol, particularly for countries that might struggle with finances, manpower and patrolling during a pandemic.

If it were not for other commitments, I would have stayed longer. I think one could stay for years and still not see all of the enchantments of the Galápagos Islands. Every season brings different flora and fauna to observe. I am glad the Galápagos got a little break from excessive tourism, and I hope as more people go back to traveling, it is in a manner that supports

this enchanted place and, indeed, all of the world’s unique environments. ■

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forgotten American WWII airplanes at the bottom of the Kwajalein Atoll lagoon, is available at Amazon.com. For more information, please visit: brandiunderwater.com.



was still sitting on an egg, and there was a featherless chick that looked as if it must have just hatched. The squawks of the ugliest-adorable white fluff balls drowned out our whispered conversations. They did