

NATURAL SELECTION

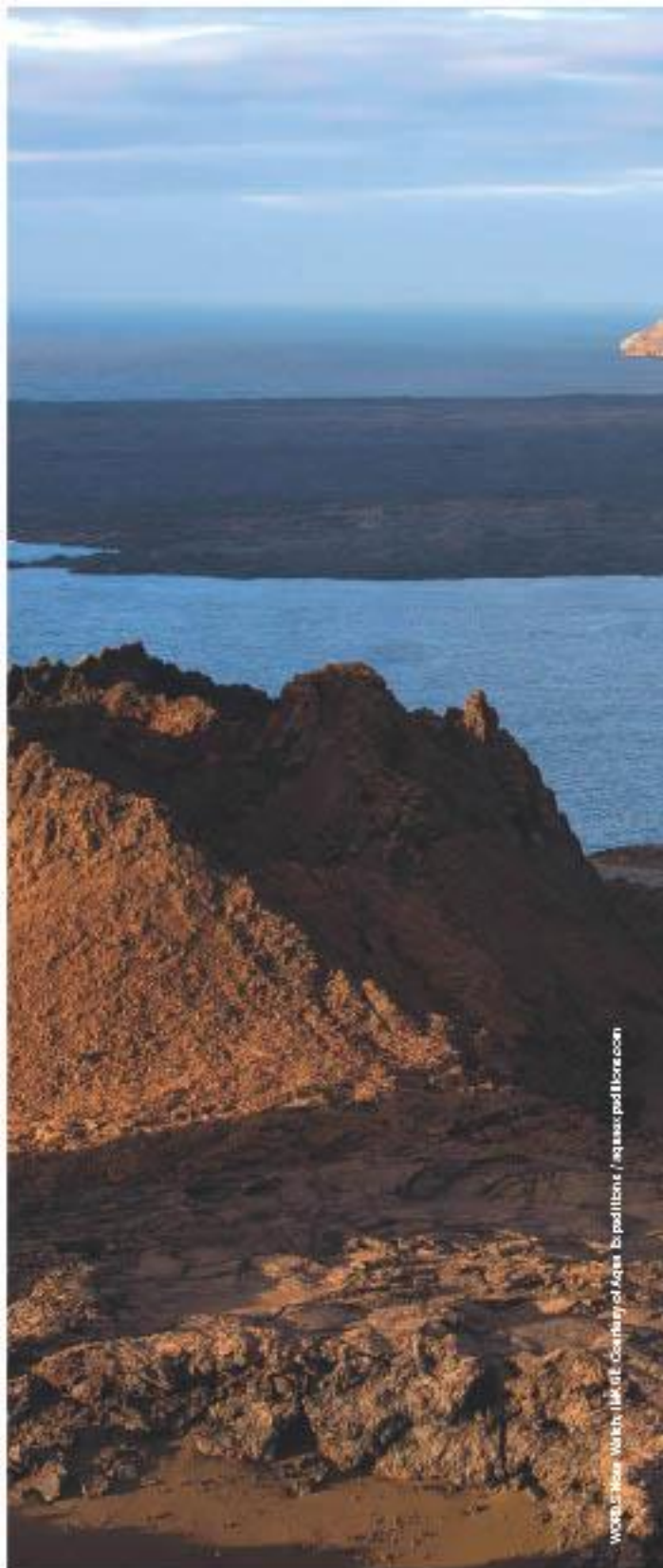
Follow in Darwin's footsteps on Aqua Mare, the first superyacht purpose-built for expeditions in the Galápagos Islands

Traveling in the Galápagos often feels like you've been dropped into a National Geographic nature documentary. Isolated in the Pacific Ocean, roughly 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, the volcanic archipelago has some of the highest levels of endemism on the planet. Thirteen major islands and their surrounding waters are UNESCO protected, giving rise to a diversity of wildlife that thrives with very little interference.

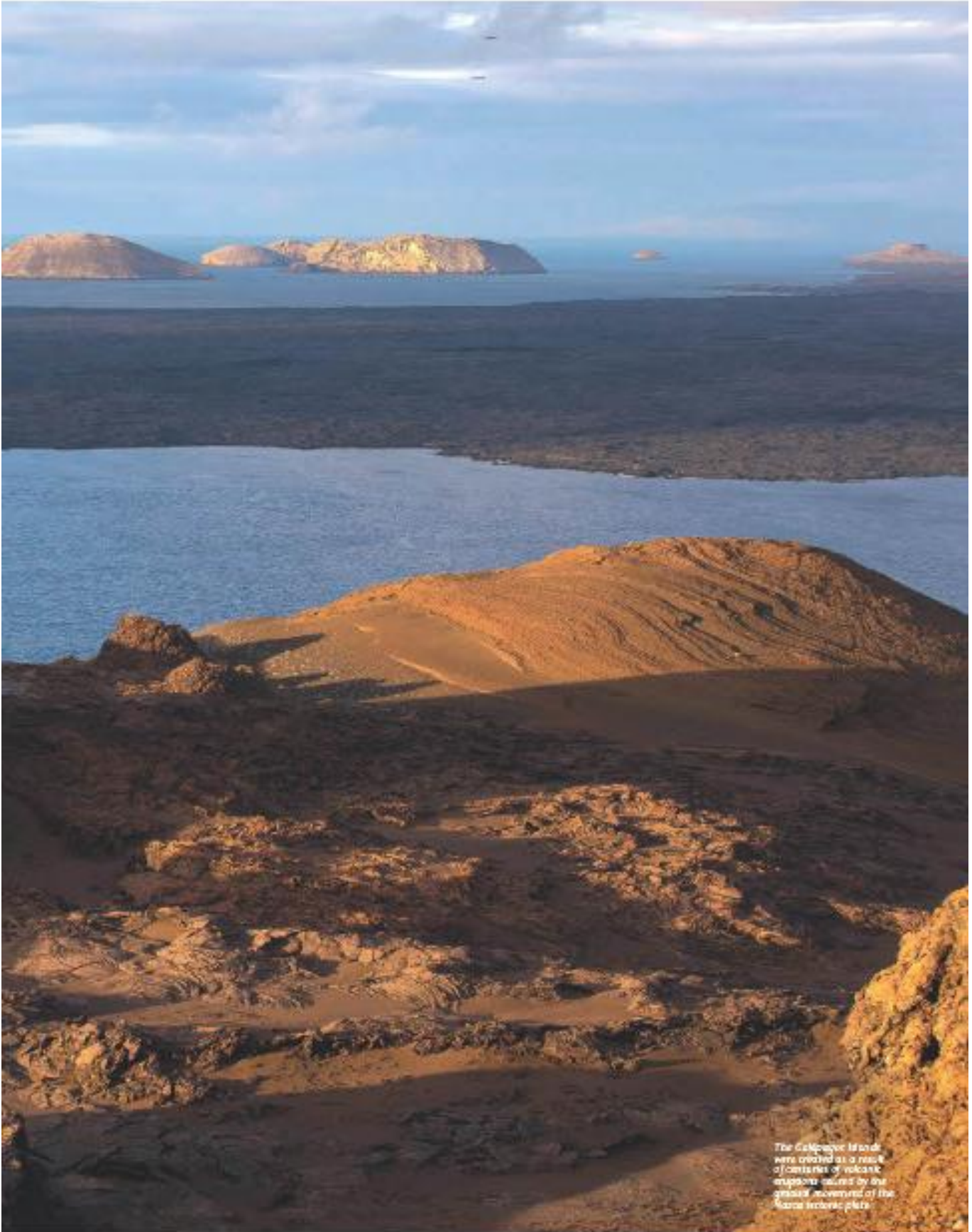
"Thanks to such strong conservation efforts, animals in the Galápagos don't fear humans," said Daniela Iglesias, one of Aqua Mare's crew of knowledgeable naturalist guides. "As a result, it's one of the few places on Earth where you can have up-close encounters with wildlife."

So close, in fact, you can hear the slurp of a nursing seal lion pup, see the serrated teeth of a marine iguana as it scrapes algae from an underwater rock, and float alongside a giant manta ray as it flaps its 10-foot wings with the grace of a ballerina. "Since competition for food is low and there aren't too many natural predators, there's a real sense of harmony among the wildlife here," Iglesias added. Unless of course, you're witnessing survival of the fittest at play as a Galápagos hawk circles above just-born oystercatcher chicks in pursuit of its next meal or a flightless cormorant torpedoing through the sea's surface to snap up a salemá fish from a glinting silver school.

Each destination in the Galápagos brings travelers face to face with an abundance of species living, feeding and breeding in their natural habitat. "The thrills never stop on our seven and 14-day itineraries to the east and west islands," said Francesco Galli Zugaro, Founder and CEO of Aqua Expeditions and Owner of Aqua Mare. Clocking in at 164 feet from bow to stern, the CRN-built ship's agile size and stabilizers allow it to comfortably cover more



Words: Steve Wirth | Photos: Courtesy of Aqua Expeditions / aquaexpeditions.com



The Galapagos Islands were created as a result of collisions of volcanic eruptions caused by the gradual movement of the Nazca tectonic plate.



Left: Each island offers a unique landscape from mountainous terrain scattered with shield volcanoes and lava fields to white-sand beaches with clear waters teeming with marine life.

Below: A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Galápagos is the largest marine biosphere reserve in the world, with over 20% of its aquatic species found nowhere else on Earth.



EMBRAER TIP

Arrive at the Galápagos from Quito, Ecuador aboard your Phenom 100EV with four passengers—boasting unparalleled performance and turboprop-grade efficiency.



ground than larger vessels, while fewer people and a high staff-to-guest ratio mean more time for excursions and bespoke pampering. Two military-grade rib tenders, each manned by a naturalist guide, captain and deckhand, take a maximum of eight travelers on three activities per day, including morning nature walks, daily snorkel adventures, kayak and stand-up paddle expeditions, mountain hikes, and safari-style boat rides.

"During the dry season from June to November, Pacific undercurrents like the Humboldt and Cromwell bring a wealth of nutrients, so there's more feeding activity in the water," noted Iglesias. Colder waters can also result in greater visibility, bringing the nonstop parade of marine life into clearer focus. Scene-stealers include two-hundred-pound sea turtles chomping on leafy algae from the sea bed, Galápagos penguins darting after sardines like ballistic missiles, and a raft of acrobatic sea lions somersaulting an arm's length away. Guests have access to an extensive selection of top-quality snorkel gear, from full-length wetsuits (a rarity on most vessels) to diving hoods and neoprene boots to stay warm underwater.

On land, the biodiversity is no less impressive. Great frigate birds perform show-stopping mating rituals with ballooning red chests and boisterous song and dance. Flocks of blue-footed boobies feed a new generation of fluffy chicks. Waved albatrosses clack beaks in an elaborate courtship dance. Darwin's finches warble from palo santo trees. And quarter-ton tortoises lounge like placid retirees in the equatorial sun.



EXPLORING THE MAINLAND

Tap outfitter Metropolitan Touring Ecuador to pair an at-sea itinerary with an immersive mainland adventure. Spend a long weekend in Quito at Casa Gangobena, wandering the city's historic colonial streets, gold-leaf cathedrals and tasting the world's best chocolate before heading to Mashpi Lodge in the cloud forest. Nature adventures include sky biking through the forest canopy, waterfall hikes and wildlife viewing within the 7,000-acre reserve. metropolitano-touring.com

With such a staggering array of wildlife sightings, there's plenty of fodder for stimulating conversation over gourmet meals prepared by highly trained chefs or lounging in the plush living room with a full bar. Custom interiors are brought to life by Designer François Zuretti whose use of polished woods, creamy palette and sumptuous fabrics channel an Italian Riviera vibe. The luxe stylings extend to well-appointed guest rooms featuring walnut veneer furnishings, comfy beds and sit-down showers. The 861-square-foot Owner's Suite on the main deck is the room to book for its port and starboard views, hydrotherapy shower and in-room bar, or reserve the lower-deck spa suite equipped with a two-person soaking tub and sauna. A top deck is outfitted with a hot tub, sun loungers and stargazing seats that bring passengers together for post-snorkel dips, sunset cocktails and impromptu dance parties in the moonlight.

Whether traveling by private charter or with other guests, the intimate size of Aqua Mare makes bonding inevitable—bringing loved ones closer together and turning a group of strangers who, after sharing a week of once-in-a-lifetime adventures, become fast friends. ←



Above (left): The brown pelican is just one of the many species of endemic birds that call the Galápagos home

Above (right): Over on land, Aqua Mare guests embark on three wildlife excursions per day led by naturalist guides

Left: Setting a new standard for boutique luxury ocean expeditions, the seven-room Aqua Mare boasts the largest Owner's Suite in the Galápagos