

Nature's Bounty

Whether it's big-fish encounters in Wolf and Darwin or the world's greatest surface intervals, a week in the Galapagos might be the best dive trip you'll ever take **» WORDS BY DAVID ESPINOSA**

It's the middle of summer on the equator, but hypothermia is about to set in. Two dives at Isabela Island's Vicente Roca — where the water dropped to 58 degrees F — will do that to a diver in a 5 mm wet-suit. Although I'm unsure whether I'm shivering from the cold or the excitement. I should head inside for a hot shower, but I won't for fear of what I'll miss.

Petrels are dive-bombing a fishing boat anchored a few yards away from our live-aboard, *Galapagos Sky*. It's such a primal, prehistoric spectacle — thousands of birds in the sky, turtles all around and sea lions skipping off the bow — that I'd hardly blink an eye if a pterodactyl buzzed overhead. That would almost surprise me *less* than what we've seen in the past five days.

I've been diving for nearly 25 years, and it's been a while since I experienced this many "firsts" in a single trip: mola mola, red-lipped batfish, a tiger shark, silky sharks, massive schools of hammerheads and more. This list *doesn't* include the whale shark, sea lions and mantas.

"For me, Galapagos is an area unlike any other I've dived," says our celebrity chaperone, Peter Hughes. "What makes it so special is the volume of life, and that everything — birds, turtles, sharks — has no fear of man." This bay in western Isabela is the exclamation to prove his point.

On our final dive of the day, I saw mola mola and red-lipped batfish. Afterward, we jumped in the tender for even better encounters. A flightless

Clockwise, from right: Sightings of mola mola and penguins aren't rare at Punta Vicente Roca; a Galapagos sea lion basks in the fading light on Isabela Island; hammerheads at Darwin Island; *Galapagos Sky*.



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NEED TO KNOW

- » **When to Go** June through December is whale-shark season. December through May is better known for mantas and hammerheads.
- » **Dive Conditions** In summer, water temps are warmer — high 60s to mid-70s — in Wolf and Darwin as well as on the eastern edges of the islands. The lone diving day on the west coast of Isabela can see water temps drop to the high 50s. Yes, currents are strong; bring gloves.
- » **Operator** With room for 16 passengers in eight cabins, *Galapagos Sky* (galapagosky.com) is one of the most luxurious and comfortable boats in the world. A sheltered rear second deck and spacious top deck (with hammocks!) mean you've got plenty of space to spread out too.
- » **Price Tag** A seven-night cruise on *Galapagos Sky*, including three dives per day, starts at \$4,795 for a deluxe cabin in the summer; in winter, the price is \$5,195.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: MICHELE WESTMORLAND; JOSEPH TEPPER; DAVID ESPINOSA; OPPOSITE: ERIC CHENG

cormorant attacked my camera. A pair of terns battled to the death under a cliff full of blue-footed boobies. A sea lion chased a marine iguana; a penguin chased a sea lion. Beers in hand, we experienced the world's greatest cocktail hour — an extreme wildlife show on Animal Planet, except we were living it.

DIVE SITES OF THE GALAPAGOS

While most divers rush to book a trip for the winter, it turns out summer might be even better. For starters, the weather's nicer: Flat-calm seas, warmer water temps and sunny skies mean you can enjoy three dives a day in comfort. During both summer and winter, though, you're guaranteed sharks — whether it's whale sharks or walls of hammerheads, these islands are some of the sharkiest on the planet.

"Divers love the Galapagos because everybody loves sharks," says Hughes, a veteran of several trips on *Galapagos Sky*. His words are prescient, for we catch the shark-seeing bug with whitetips and silkies on our very first dives at Cousins Rock. It was about to get a whole lot better.

Our next three days are spent at Wolf and Darwin, two islands in the archipelago's far north. If we needed a reason why live-aboards spend three days here, we get it immediately. At our first Wolf sites like Landslide and Shark Bay, we have close encounters with bulky Galapagos sharks and silkies, and brief glimpses of the hammerhead walls. But it is on the last dive at the Caves where we have our best encounters, with friendly eagle rays, whitetips that swim in close, and Galapagos sharks that flare their fins as they circle around us.

Five dives aren't enough at arguably the world's most famous site, Darwin's Arch, off Darwin Island. Our first dive starts in a little amphitheater at 70 feet, where we're treated to turtles, enormous tuna and sharks. It isn't the wall of sharks I'd dreamed of, but it certainly is the most I've ever seen in one place, on one dive — silky sharks skirting the reef edge, large Galapagos sharks and hammerheads.

Though it isn't the whale-shark season, we get lucky at Darwin's Arch. My buddy and I come upon a 22-foot male

Clockwise, from right: Chocolate-chip sea stars cling to a rock on Isabela; eagle rays fly in formation at Wolf Island's Landslide; a brown booby says hello.



that sneaks in behind the dive group and swims past us. As I reconcile myself to that single encounter, it returns for seconds, powering past us and off into the blue.

On subsequent dives we run into immense schools of jacks and barracuda, a resident dolphin, more hammerheads than we can count, and a tiger shark during a long safety stop in the shallow channel between the two islands.

There's plenty more to the Galapagos than sharks, of course, including mola mola and red-lipped batfish, and sea lions at every turn. The final diving day, at eastern Isabela's Cape Marshall, holds surprises for us too. Maybe it was the

warmer water — a practically bathtub-like temperature of 74 degrees after 58 degrees the day before — or that the first dive was marred by blooms of jellyfish that choked the water that makes this last dive so special. Whatever the reason, we enjoy giant Pacific mantas, golden cownose rays, whitetip sharks and colorful schools of striped salemas.

It would've been the best dive of our lives, if only every other dive to that point hadn't also been the best dive of our lives.

For detailed daily trip reports — with each day's video highlights — from this expedition in Galapagos, visit scubadiving.com.

5 REASONS TO DIVE THE GALAPAGOS



1 DEVIL IN THE DETAILS Warm towels and hot chocolate on the dive deck after every dive. Turn-down service. You might never realize the

Galapagos battles Cocos for top spot in the Big Fish category of *Scuba Diving's* Top 100 awards every year.

3 LAND BEFORE TIME A visit to Santa Cruz to see giant Galapagos tortoises is like taking a trip back in time.



little things the crew's doing, but you *will* miss it.

2 SHARKS Whale sharks during the winter months, hammerheads, Galapagos and silky sharks year-round. (Tiger sharks if you're lucky.) There's a reason

4 BIG FISH Mantas at Cape Marshall, eagle rays at Cousins Rock, mola mola at Punta Vicente Roca. And did I mention all the sharks?



5 SURFACE INTERVALS In the Galapagos, surface intervals are almost as fun as the diving. Marine iguanas and sea lions basking on the rocks, dolphins riding the boat wake, masked boobies camped out on the bow — there's never a dull moment.

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FROM TOP: ROB WALLS/ALAMY; DAVID ESPINOSA; CARLOS MINGUELL; OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: DAVID ESPINOSA; BRANDON COLE; GOOS VAN DER HEIDE