





His khaki shirt soaked with the sea, one of our guides backflips off the back of a bobbing inflatable. Children cheer. On the beach, retirees lather sun cream onto impatient grandchildren, shooing flies and shaking off towels. A father from Sydney's inner west piggybacks his daughter into the surf, urgently dancing away from the scaldingly hot sand. Punta Pitt, on the Galapagos island of San Cristobal, could be any Aussie beach except for two things: absolutely no litter and, basking among the human interlopers, a colony of sea lions.

Wildlife is everywhere and shows virtually no fear of men, women or even kids. A large reason for that (besides being almost 1000 kilometres from the South American coast) is the Ecuadorian government's decision half a century ago to turn 97 per cent of the islands into the country's first national park, after the archipelago had enjoyed stints as a World War II US naval base and, in the case of Isabela Island, as a post-war penal colony.

The *Homo sapiens* population of 25,000 squeezes (comfortably) into the remaining 3 per cent and visiting bipeds may enter the national park areas only in the company of a guide, but it doesn't feel overregulated (important on a holiday). I've usually chafed at guided tours but the fragility of this world and the friendliness of the guides make it surprisingly easy to accept. The almost complete absence of any man-made structure also means you're in no danger of forgetting you are in one of the world's greatest natural phenomena.

Besides the guides, Lindblad Expeditions provide a squad of professional photographers, thanks to the Swedish company's alliance with *National Geographic*. On board the Endeavour and ashore, the pros patiently pass on tips such as how to capture that magic sea lion shot and pointers on how sensibly to manage the hundreds of photos we come back with.

In days to come, we'll almost trip over charcoal marine iguanas basking and sneezing on volcanic black rock, paddle around sea

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ABOVE: Like most of the creatures of the Galapagos Islands, the sea turtles are not shy. BELOW: blue-footed boobies at Puerto Egas, Santiago Island.



turtles feeding on fish eggs, and file past the islands' iconic colossuses, the dinosaur-like lumbering giant tortoises. With the animals so close, you'll quickly move from "I hope I can get a shot of a blue-footed booby" to "now I want a shot of a booby in its nest with chicks, and without a twig in front of its chest".

Snorkellers are also spoiled, so an underwater camera is essential. Galapagos penguins glide as if in flight, weaving among us with an elegance and speed that belies their cute clumsiness on the shore. And

everywhere there are fish, from vividly striped surgeonfish, colourful parrot fish and enormous silver schools moving as one through the warm equatorial blue.

At a beach off Isabela, I was able to duck-dive down from the throng of flippers to the seabed a few metres below for a serene moment of camaraderie with four huge sea turtles resting on the floor. Snorkelling here is such an unforgettable experience that I wonder if I could ever again snorkel anywhere else. And to think spotting

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