

# THE MAGIC OF THE GALAPAGOS AND THE AMAZONIAN RAINFOREST

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By Mona Keith

Our adventure started with a short flight from Quito in the heart of Ecuador, to the small town of Coco, along the Napo river. The Napo is one of the main tributaries to the mighty Amazon River. Then a 2 ½ hour journey in a large motorized canoe along the Napo took us deep into the rainforest. A beautiful walk along a trail alive with birds, bugs and butterflies brought us to our final leg; a quiet paddle across lake Pilchicocha to the enchanting Sacha Lodge.

The next few days were filled with birds, monkeys, butterflies, heat and humidity. Sacha Lodge offers various ways to view the local wildlife. One highlight started as a slow paddle along a narrow, meandering channel through the jungle. Suddenly overhead a large troop of Capuchin monkeys surged noisily through the canopy. They were breaking off twigs and leaves and bouncing on branches trying to intimidate us with their size and ferocity. As soon as they moved past a large troop of Squirrel monkeys filled the branches. Not as concerned with us as the Capuchins, they went about their business impressing us with their athletic leaps through the foliage.

Sacha's 90 foot observation tower offers a panoramic view at canopy level. A view not often available to our ground dwelling species and an excellent opportunity to view and ID many bird species. In the top branches of the Kapok tree around which the tower is built was a huge tarantula quietly resting in its nest.

The night walks revealed wildlife invisible to us during the day. Huge Smokey Jungle Frogs, large spiders clinging to their webs, even a quick glimpse of a kinkajou.

The lodge itself was beautiful. The staff looked after us well and the food was superb and plentiful.

Leaving the continent we flew 1000km west over the Pacific Ocean where we sighted the Galapagos Islands. Seven days aboard the 90 foot luxury cruiser, the Reina Silvia, brought us spectacular scenery and unique wildlife. Our crew of 8 looked after us well and the food was outstanding!

Our land visits were overwhelming. Wildlife abounded and having evolved with no land based predators most had little fear of our close approach. Photography was all consuming as the subjects were abundant and cooperative. Marine Iguanas lounged in piles on the rocks, sea lions squabbled for the best resting positions on the beaches and frigate birds soared effortlessly overhead. Blue-footed Boobies displayed their incredibly blue feet during their courtship dance and the Nazca and Red-footed Boobies attended to their chicks as the heat of the day increased.

An afternoon snorkel in the turquoise water was an exciting way to cool down and experience another realm of the Galapagos. We swam with huge schools of fish, sea turtles and white-tipped sharks. Some even had a quick glimpse of a Hammerhead! Playful sea lions would torpedo passed and if lucky a quick flash of a rocketing Galapagos penguin would thrill us.

A visit to the Charles Darwin Research Station taught us how unique and fragile the ecosystem is here, and the devastating effects man has had. From pillaging tortoises for fresh meat on their long ocean voyages, to introducing goats, cats, rats, donkeys and

invasive plants, all have had a detrimental effect on the native wildlife. Many of the species here exist nowhere else on our planet. To lose them would be a sad legacy for mankind. Fortunately, efforts are being made to eliminate the unwanted feral animals and plants and reestablish the natural ecosystem.

The Galapagos Islands are a spectacular destination for a unique wildlife adventure. Our time spent there was absorbing and thought provoking. Pondering the volcanic birth of these islands to the colonization and evolution of the wildlife over millions of years. All of which intrigued Charles Darwin and helped fuel his theory of Natural Selection. The Galapagos Islands are indeed a magical place and worthy of respect and protection for both the wildlife and the visitors lucky enough to explore them.