

Another free guide from the experts at



The Ultimate Galapagos Cruise Planning Guide

No one can stand in these solitudes unmoved.

(Charles Darwin)



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Land or ship based?

Whether you should choose a land-based trip or a ship-based trip for your visit to the Galapagos Islands will depend on your budget, your need for personal space and your susceptibility to sea sickness (and the answer to that is contrary to what you would expect).

Land-based trips tend to be lower in cost and they offer more space as you will be able to walk around the lodge's property or nearby town rather than being confined to a ship.

However, land-based trips can still make you feel miserable... See, they tend to stay in one or two lodges. From those lodges you then visit other islands. This is done by small boat during the day. And during the day the winds tend to be stronger than at night, so seas are rougher. Day-time transfers also eat up valuable sightseeing time (transfers between islands can be as long as 3 hours each way).

On ship-based itineraries you sail at night, when you are sleeping, from island to island, leaving the entire day to look around each island. And since open-ocean crossings are done while you are sleeping, you have less of a chance of getting seasick. To further reduce your chances of getting seasick, travel on a larger vessel (see next page). And while at times your cabin may feel a little confined, there is lots of public space on board and plenty of time is spent exploring the islands away from the ship.

land-based trips:

- ✓ lower in cost
- ✓ more personal space
- ✓ less time to look around
- ✓ more seasickness

ship-based trips:

- ✓ pricier
- ✓ more time in each island to explore
- ✓ less seasickness

What size boat should I choose?

In Galapagos three different size ships operate. Small (8-20 passengers), Medium (up to 50 passengers) and Large (up to 100 passengers, the maximum allowed by law). In general, the larger the ship, the more stability, which means less chance of sea sickness. Beyond that, each size has its pros and cons.

Small ships

The advantages of small ships is that the captain gets more flexibility. He can choose to extend a snorkelling trip depending on the passengers age, ability and interests. Or, if a whale or a pod of dolphins is close to the ship, the captain can more easily manoeuvre the vessel closer to the animals. And with fewer passengers you are not competing for photography space. It is also much easier to connect with both crew and passengers. Smaller ships give you the feel that you are on an expedition rather than a cruise. Smaller boats tend to have smaller cabins and less public space, however, there are some very comfortable choices in this size.

Medium ships

Medium ships will have more public space, more people to mingle with, more amenities (library, fitness room) and gear (underwater cameras). But with more passengers on board you do lose some of the intimacy and flexibility of smaller ships.

Larger ships

Amenities of larger ships compare to those on a cruise ship, albeit on a smaller scale. Multiple dining options, a multitude of public spaces are the rigour. As there are more people on board you may feel crowded and you lose the intimacy of smaller ships. On the other hand, you do get more guides, each with their own specialty, so you have the chance to learn more. But, as groups do get split up, there is less time to explore different areas of each landing site, as landing times are strictly scheduled. On larger ships you have less of a chance to get seasick.



When to go

There is never a bad time to go on an adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands. It all depends on what animals you would like to see and what you would like to do.

December through May - rainy season - great for land animals, swimming & snorkelling

- ✓ water and air are warmer
- ✓ daily drizzle for a short period of time
- ✓ also the sunniest time of year
- ✓ great for swimming and snorkelling
- ✓ not as many fish
- ✓ breeding season for land birds (watch unusual mating rituals)
- ✓ sea turtles nest on the beach
- ✓ March through May land tortoises come down from the highlands in search of a mate
- ✓ sea lions mate (males fight it out for the females)
- ✓ March and April see newborn sea lion pups
- ✓ February, March, and April flowers bloom and the islands are awash in colours
- ✓ sea is calmer, so there is little chance of getting seasick.

June through November - dry season - fish & birds abound, great diving

- ✓ cool water (bring a wet suit)
- ✓ cool weather
- ✓ water rich in nutrients and plankton, which attracts fish and birds
- ✓ often cloudy but rarely rainy
- ✓ windy - seas can be rougher (especially July & August)
- ✓ best time for diving
- ✓ Albatrosses on Española from April to December
- ✓ Penguins are more common
- ✓ Blue-footed boobies mate (beautiful mating ritual)

School Holidays

During the school holidays - from mid-June through early September and from mid-December through mid-January - you need to book far ahead of time. And while the number of visitors to each island is strictly controlled, during school holidays you are less likely to get a sense of solitude and isolation.

Broken down by month, this is what you can expect to see on your adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands

January

- ➔ Land birds, such as finches and warblers, start nesting, generally after the first rain.
- ➔ On Española adult male marine iguanas become brightly colored.

- green sea turtles arrive to lay their eggs.
- Marine Iguanas and Land Iguanas mating
- Hatching of giant tortoises eggs
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- Lava herons nest
- Hatching of giant tortoise eggs
- Good time to see mockingbird and finch mating rituals.
- Hawks feast on young marine iguanas on Fernandina.
- Waved albatross leave Española

February

- White-cheeked pintails start breeding
- Penguins migrate from Bartolomé Island to cooler waters off Isabela and Fernandina Islands
- nesting season of Galapagos dove peaks
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Green Sea turtles nesting
- Marine Iguanas and Land Iguanas nesting
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- Tortoises laying eggs
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Lava herons nest
- Hatching of giant tortoise eggs
- Flamingos begin nesting.
- Penguins head away from central islands to the cooler waters of Isabela and Fernandina.
- Pintail Ducks begin breeding season.

March

- Sporadic tropical rains, intense sun and hot
- Great Frigate birds mating season starts on Genovesa
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Green Sea turtles nesting
- Marine Iguanas and Land Iguanas nesting
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- Tortoises laying eggs
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)

- Hatching of giant tortoise eggs
- Penguins common on Isabela and Fernandina.
- Most migratory shore birds gone by the end of the month.
- Sometimes, hawk chicks are visible in nests.

April

- Massive arrival of waved albatross on Española; courtship starts
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Green sea turtles nesting
- Marine Iguanas and Land Iguanas nesting
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- Great Frigate birds mating and nesting on Genovesa (Tower) Island
- Tortoises laying eggs
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Blue-footed Boobies are in mating season, giving visitors the change to see them do their fancy dance.
- Frigatebird pouches visible on Genovesa.

May

- Sea turtles still hatching on Gardner Bay (Santiago), Punta Cormorant (Floreana) and Puerto Egas (Santiago).
- Palo Santo trees begin to shed foliage.
- Band-rumped storm petrels begin first nesting period.
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Green Sea turtles nesting season is ending
- Marine Iguanas and Land Iguanas nesting
- Waved albatross begin laying eggs; the breeding grounds are on Española however when out of breeding season can be found throughout the region
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- Great Frigate birds mating and nesting on Genovesa (Tower) Island
- Tortoises laying eggs (in the wild)
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Start of Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- Blue-footed boobies courtship

June

- Giant tortoises on Santa Cruz migrate from highlands to lowlands
- Whale sharks in the northwestern islands toward the end of the month
- Humpback whales can be seen
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)

- Waved albatross nesting (Española)
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- Many migrating birds visit Galapagos.
- Short-eared Owls on Genovesa begin nesting season.

July

- Sea bird communities very active
- Nesting season for American oystercatchers
- Lava lizards mating rituals until November.
- Whale sightings, especially off the Western coast of Isabela
- Blue-footed boobies begin nesting
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- Start of Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- Flightless Cormorants court and nest on Fernandina.
- American Oystercatchers nest on Santiago.
- Booby and Frigatebird eggs begin hatching.
- Good time to see migratory birds.
- Waved albatross on Española

August

- Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- Swallow-tailed gulls nest on Genovesa.
- Migrant shore birds arrive and stay until March.
- Lava lizards mating rituals
- Giant tortoises return to the highlands of Santa Cruz.
- Galápagos fur seal breeding starts middle of the month
- Blue-footed boobies nesting
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Waved albatross on Española
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- California sea lions breeding
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Frigatebird and Booby eggs still hatching on North Seymour.
- Migratory shorebirds common.
- Galapagos Hawks begin courtship.

- Galapagos Penguins start moving away from Isabela and Fernandina into central islands like Bartholomew.
- Swallow-tailed gulls nesting on Genovesa.
- A good month to see Red-Footed Boobies on Genovesa

September

- Galapagos Penguins begin mating in central islands.
- Most sea birds nesting, making this a good time to see them.
- Sea lions very active, especially in western and central islands.
- Good month to see baby sea lions.
- Most marine birds remain active at nesting sites
- Lava lizards mating rituals
- Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- Galápagos fur seal breeding season
- Blue-footed boobies nesting
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- California sea lions breeding
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Waved albatross on Española

October

- Lava herons nest until March.
- Tortoises (in Santa Cruz Island only) lay eggs in the wild
- Lava lizards mating rituals
- Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- Galápagos fur seal breeding season
- Blue-footed Booby chicks common at many sites.
- Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- California sea lions breeding
- Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- Waved albatross on Española

November

- Band-rumped storm petrels begin second nesting period.
- Whale sharks in the far northwest
- Lava herons nest
- Green sea turtle mating season starts
- Snorkeling with baby sea lions
- Lava lizards mating rituals

- ➔ Galapagos Sea Lion breeding season
- ➔ Galápagos fur seal breeding ends middle of the month
- ➔ Blue-footed boobies nesting
- ➔ Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- ➔ Waved albatross on Española
- ➔ Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- ➔ California sea lions breeding
- ➔ Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- ➔ Brown Noddy breeding season.

December

- ➔ Hatching of giant tortoise eggs begins - lasts until April.
- ➔ Green sea turtles mate
- ➔ Lava herons nest
- ➔ Blue-footed boobies nesting
- ➔ Red-footed boobies and masked boobies breeding and nesting (year-round)
- ➔ Magnificent and Great Frigate birds nesting (year-round on North Seymour Only)
- ➔ Marine Iguanas and Land Iguanas begin mating
- ➔ California sea lions breeding
- ➔ Flightless Cormorants, Penguins and Greater Flamingoes breeding and nesting (year-round, depending on food supply)
- ➔ Waved albatross on Española - young albatrosses fledge



How long to go for

My recommendation is to spend as much time as you can on your adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands. Operators often add one night on either end in Quito and two days are used up for travel back and forth to the islands. So what may look like a 10-day adventure cruise in the Galapagos means you only spend six full days on the ship.

Having said that, many people will be looking to combine Galapagos with Machu Picchu on a two-week vacation, in which case your Galapagos cruise will more likely be 4-5 days.



Key Experiences

Getting close to nature

Walk the trails in the Galapagos and come up close to nesting birds, iguanas, tortoises and sea lions. Colourful crabs and majestic albatrosses, blue and red-footed boobies and stately flamingoes are but some of the animals you will see.

Swimming with sea lions and turtles

While snorkelling in the Galapagos it is not uncommon to come eye to eye (or should we say nose to nose) with sea lions and turtles. They are as curious as you are about them! Santa Fe and Isabela offer some of the best opportunities to swim with sea lions.

Watching whales

There is nothing more awesome than seeing a whale breach the waters of the Pacific, raise up in to the air, then explode back into the water. 20+ Species inhabit these waters. You can see them yearround, but July through November are the best months. Whales are more common in the western part of the island group, particularly between Isabela and Fernandina.

I wanna iguana

With the islands so hot and dry, reptiles are the predominant type of animals in Galapagos. Marine iguanas, the world's only sea-going lizzard, can be seen almost anywhere. There are three species of land iguanas. One can be found on Fernandina, Isabela, Santa Cruz, Seymour, and South Plaza, one on Wolf Volcano on Isabela Island and one only on Santa Fe.

Who doesn't love boobies

Blue-footed boobies are the most iconic bird in Galapagos and large yearround colonies can be found on Seymour and Hood. Nazca boobies, the island's largest can be found on Genovesa from May through January and on Hood from September to May. The Red-footed booby, while most numerous, is least frequently seen as it lives on the outerlying islands like Genovesa.

Punta Pitt is the only place in Galapagos where you can see all three boobie species nest together.

Trail a tortoise

Giant tortoises can weigh up to 500 pounds and there are 11 distinct species in the Galapagos. They are most easily seen in the Tortoise Reserve in the Santa Cruz Highlands and at the Charles Darwin Research Station on the same island. Wild populations are most likely encountered on San Cristóbal, Santa Cruz, and around Alcedo Volcano on Isabella.

Sinister birds

Hanging in the sky like sinister kites, frigatebirds harrass gulls and terns into dropping their catch. North Seymour offers the best opportunity to see magnificent frigatebird, while Great frigatebirds are more often seen on the outlying islands such as Genovesa. San Cristóbal is an island where you can see both species.

Albatross, get your albatross!

The waved albatross can spend years out at sea without touching land. With a wingspan of up to 8 feet, these magnificent birds are a sight to behold. The entire world population of some 12,000 pairs nests on Espanola. Adults lay their eggs from mid-April to late June. October is the busiest month for the spectacular courtship ritual. Colonies are at their most active once the chicks have hatched (through December). January through March the birds are out at sea.

Penguins? Here?

The cool Humboldt current, which flows up from Antarctica, allows the world's most northerly penguin, the Galapagos penguin, to thrive here. They breed on the western part of Isabela and Fernandina and are often seen on Bartolomé and sometimes on Floreana and James. If you can, snorkel with them, just don't try to keep up!



Species by island

If you want to get the most out of your adventure cruise to the Galapagos Islands, it pays to do some planning. Ask yourself what you would like to see - birds, mammals, reptiles, marine animals, flora or landscapes. Or perhaps a little of each?

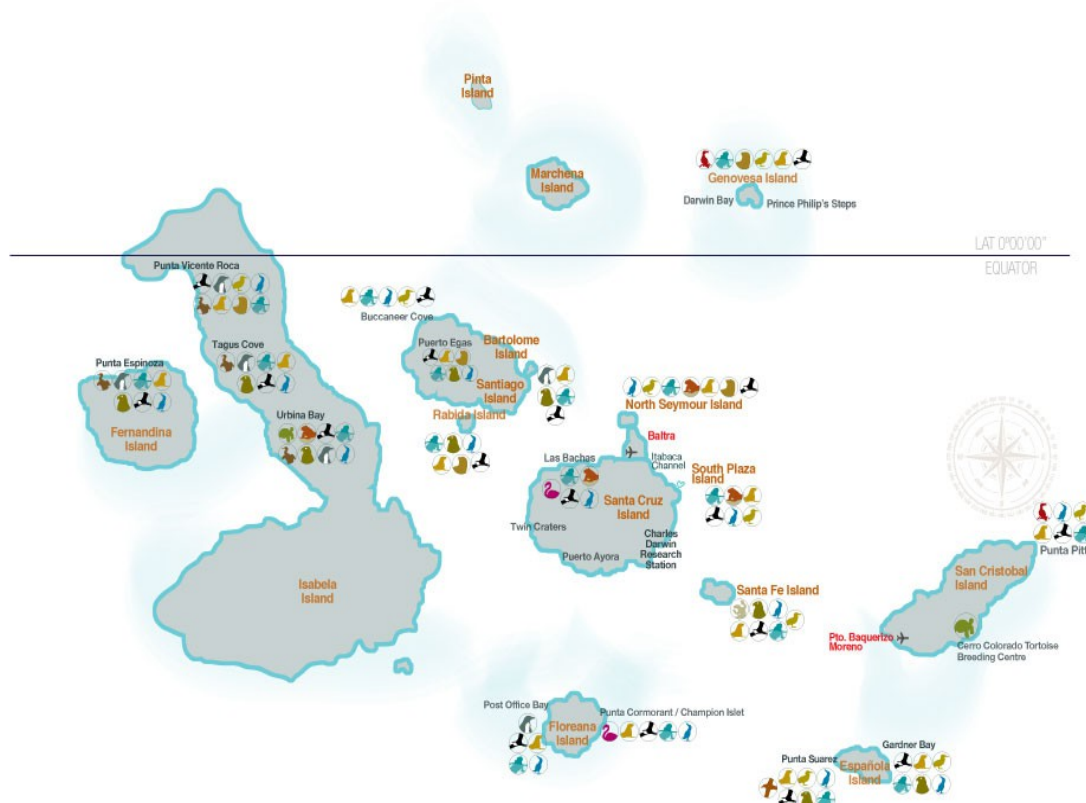
Rábida (Jervis) and Santiago (James) offer the best snorkeling in the islands.

Santiago and Isabela are the most rich in species while other species are endemic to only certain islands. For example, the Waved Albatross can only be found on Española, whereas the Red-footed Boobie can only be found on Genovesa and San Cristóbal. In contrast, Marine Iguanas, the two species of Frigate birds and the Nazca and Blue-footed Boobie can be found on every island.

If you are hoping to see a particular species, please consult the chart below. This chart shows only the main species and, with most islands having multiple landing sites, not every species can be found at each landing site.

	Marine Iguana	Land Iguana	Santa Fe Land Iguana	Red Footed Booby	Blue Footed Booby	Nazca Booby	Giant Tortoise	Galapagos Fur Seal	Galapagos Sea Lion	Magnificent Frigate	Great Frigate	Waved Albatross	Galapagos Hawk	Flightless Cormorant	American Flamingo	Galapagos Penguin
Santa Cruz	1	1			1	1	1		1	1	1				1	
North Seymour	1	1			1	1		1	1	1	1					
Santiago (James)	1	1			1	1		1	1	1	1		1		1	1
Rábida (Jervis)	1				1	1		1	1	1	1		1		1	
Genovesa	1			1	1	1		1	1	1	1					
Isabela	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	1	1
Fernandina	1				1	1			1	1	1		1	1		1
Floreana	1				1	1	1		1	1	1				1	1
Española	1				1	1			1	1	1	1	1			
San Cristóbal	1			1	1	1	1		1	1	1					
Santa Fe	1		1		1	1	1		1	1	1					
Plazas Sur	1	1			1	1			1	1	1					
Mosquera	1				1	1		1	1	1	1					
Daphne Mayor	1				1	1			1	1	1					

Map of Galapagos picturing the main 15 species and their occurrence.
(Map courtesy of Metropolitan Tours)



Island descriptions

Here is what you can see on each island during your adventure cruise in the Galapagos Islands.

Baltra Island is where most visitors arrive. It is a dry island, with vegetation to match. Boobies and frigate birds can be seen here.

Bartolomé is the most photographed island on any cruise in the Galapagos Islands. There is an incredible viewpoint and a beach with good snorkeling and swimming. Birds common here are Galapagos Penguins, herons, and Galapagos Hawks.

Española is one of the most isolated islands in Galapagos. Wildlife is varied and there are a large number of endemic species, including the Española Mockingbird, the Española Lava Lizard, and the Waved Albatross. It is one of the most popular islands in the Galapagos.

Fernandina, with its large land iguana population, is the most pristine of the Galapagos volcanoes and another highlight of any Galapagos cruise. The waters surrounding Fernandina and western Isabela are the richest waters in the archipelago, providing great habitat for Flightless Cormorants and Galapagos Penguins.

Floreana is the site of the first “post office”, established in 1793. The island offers a flamingo lagoon, where you can also see Pintail ducks, stilts, Large-billed Flycatchers, and several species of finch shorebirds. Green Sea Turtles nest here and rays glide through the shallow waters. The highlands are of interest for plantlovers and for historical reasons. Inside Devil's crown, an eroded crater, snorkelers find an underwater oasis of coral reefs along with playful sea lions, King Angel Fish, Balloon Fish, Tiger Snake Eels, rays, sharks and sea turtles. There are also plenty of boobies, pelicans, and frigatebirds.

Isabela has lots of new lava fields and the island's rich fauna is beyond compare. Wild tortoises abound and the waters along the west coast are a rich feeding ground for fish, whales, dolphins, and birds. Whale watching, with up to 16 species, is excellent here.

Genovesa has an abundance of birdlife, including frigatebirds, Nazca and Red-footed Boobies (the latter in large numbers), Swallow-tailed Gulls, storm petrels, Red-billed Tropicbirds, finches, and mockingbirds.

North Seymour has plenty of land iguanas as well as large numbers of blue-footed boobies, swallow-tailed gulls and frigatebirds.

Pinta is home to unique bird, reptile, and plant species. Swallow-tailed Gulls, marine iguanas, Galapagos Hawks and fur seals are but some of the species found here.

South Plaza is famous for its extraordinary flora and marine and land iguanas are abundant. Plenty of birds nest in the cliffs around the island.

Rábida has several volcanic craters with a distinctive red color. Brown Pelicans can be seen up close nesting behind the beach, while Blue-footed and Nazca Boobies visit the cliffs. Flamingos can sometimes be seen in the lagoon, alongside Pintail Ducks and Common Stilts. There is short trail, along which you can observe birds such as finches, Galapagos Doves, Yellow Warblers, and mockingbirds. Swimming and snorkeling are very good on Rábida.

San Cristóbal has an interpretation centre, a sea lion rookery and a colony with both species of Frigate Birds. Snorkelling is particularly good at many of the sites on and around the island, as are sightings of coastal and migratory birds.

Punta Pitt is the only place in Galapagos where you can see all three boobie species nest together, along with two species of frigatebirds. Views of the sea lions from the top of the cliff as well as the eroded peaks of the island are magnificent.

Kicker Rock is the most dramatic snorkelling and dive site here, with vertical cliffs rising almost 150 metres straight out of the sea. Small vessels can pass through a narrow channel in the rock and while in the water you may see Manta Rays, sea turtles, and sharks.

On **Santa Cruz** you can experience magma chambers and lava tunnels. The town of Puerto Ayora is the main tourism hub and has plenty of good restaurants. The Charles Darwin Research Station has exhibits on climate, geography, the evolution of flora and fauna as well as conservation programs. Santa Cruz has wonderful beaches as well as all the various life zones present in the archipelago - almost every land bird present in the islands can be found here. The island also offers excellent opportunities for viewing wild tortoises.

Santa Fe is home to large numbers of sea lions. There are two trails, one short loop and one up a steep cliff, providing possible sightings of the endemic Santa Fe Land Iguana.

Finally, James Bay on **Santiago** offers one of the best opportunities for visitors to see the Galapagos fur seal and there are several walking trails here. On the opposite side of the island, Sullivan Bay sees you walk across a recent lava flow. Chinese Hat off the coast of Santiago is a beautiful snorkelling site with sharks, sea lions, penguins and rays.

