ECUADOR
Galápagos Archipelago Cruise
17th to 26th August 2019 (10 days)

TAKE ME TO:

Tour Overview & Map . . . . . 2
Tour in Detail . . . . . . . . . . 3
Ship Schematics & Rooms . . 6
Questions & Answers . . . . . 7
Important Notes . . . . . . . . 8
Straddling the equator, some 600 miles west of mainland Ecuador lies perhaps the planet’s most fabled archipelago. Forever fascinating, this is one of Earth’s most active volcanic areas, and the beautiful volcanic formations, together with the matchless wildlife and natural history, make for an utterly unique destination. Perennially popular among birders for the island endemics and stunning seabirds, nearly all the birds are tame, allowing for outstanding photography. In places, one must be careful to avoid stepping on a Galápagos Sea Lion, a Marine Iguana or a Blue-footed Booby. The latter is perhaps the island’s most iconic bird, and seeing pairs of them bow and sway, whistling and honking, as they wave around their cobalt blue feet, is not something one forgets. Equally, the thrill of watching a pair of Waved Albatross performing their intricate dance moves is another of the Galápagos highlights, and our cruise is perfectly timed for this event. The snorkeling is a wonder as well, with swimmers at times encircled by sea lions, sea turtles, and even Galápagos Penguins on occasion. The islands are named after their endemic Galápagos Giant Tortoises (‘galapagos’ means tortoise in Spanish), and seeing these magnificent beasts striding about, or sighing deeply as they wallow in the mud, one feels transported to another time, or even another world.

Based aboard a very comfortable vessel serving excellent food and hosted by experienced local naturalists and crew, we’ll explore these ruggedly beautiful islands in comfort. From the bewildering array of Darwin’s finches (which had their namesake thoroughly confused, triggering his ideas on evolution), to the shrieking Red-billed Tropicbirds, to the curious and endearing sea lions, an experience here marks a personal evolution.

**DAY 1**
Arrival in Quito, Ecuador

**DAY 2**
Quito to Galápagos and board ship

**DAYS 3 TO 8**
Cruising the Galápagos Archipelago

**DAY 9**
Disembark on Santa Cruz

**DAY 10**
Santa Cruz to Quito and depart
**THE TOUR IN DETAIL**

**DAY 1 ARRIVAL IN QUITO, ECUADOR**

Guests arriving from their various points of origin will be greeted at the airport, and transferred to our hotel accommodations in Quito, where we will enjoy a welcome dinner in anticipation of our forthcoming adventure.

**DAY 2 QUITO TO GALÁPAGOS AND BOARD SHIP**

Today, we will catch our flight to Baltra, a small island with an airport just north of Santa Cruz, which is the main central island of the Galápagos Archipelago. On arrival, we will see our first Darwin finches, including the inquisitive Small and Medium Ground Finches, and Baltra is also one of the best areas to see land iguanas, so have your binoculars ready and your eyes open! At the Itabaca Channel, we will board our very comfortable vessel, the Nemo III, meet our crew, receive an orientation session, and then lunch. The plan of the afternoon depends on various factors, but we’ll surely do some birding at well-known nearby sites, such as Las Bachas or Isla Seymour Norte. Species that we can expect to see in the area include Brown Noddy and Galápagos Shearwater, various Darwin finches and perhaps our first Lava Heron!

**DAYS 3 TO 8 CRUISING THE GALÁPAGOS ARCHIPELAGO**

Over the last few years, cruise itineraries have been highly controlled by the Galápagos National Park authorities. Standard cruises are often very limited from a birding perspective. Our cruise has special permissions, allowing us to combine the key islands and sites for the optimal Galápagos birding itinerary. The order in which we visit the sites varies from one trip to the next, but during our cruise we shall take in the top sites, including these below.

**GENOVESA ISLAND:** This small and remote horse-shoe shaped island lies in the far north-east of the archipelago. It is a shield volcano of which the caldera walls have collapsed, forming a spectacular bay named after Darwin, the ‘Great Darwin Bay’. The surrounding cliffs are literally packed with seabirds, and the island is therefore also known as ‘Bird Island’. Landing here, we will enjoy the nesting colonies of Great Frigatebirds and Red-footed Boobies, seldom encountered elsewhere in the islands, and Nazca Boobies and Swallow-tailed Gulls also nest here and shall be at close range. The two island endemics, Genovesa Ground Finch and Genovesa Cactus Finch, are the main targets, as both have been recently split as separate species. The Large Ground Finch, with its massive beak, is also fairly common on the island, so we need to make sure to study the different finches carefully. Lava Gull, the rarest gull in the world with perhaps less than 1,000 total, is another sought-after target that nests in small numbers in the mangroves on Genovesa. If access is permitted, we’ll hopefully have the option to climb up to a large colony of Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels. Thousands of them nest in burrows and crevices on a large lava plateau, and dense clouds of storm petrels can be seen during the day. At this colony, the golden ‘Galápagos’ Short-eared Owl has adapted to specialise in catching storm petrels. When carefully scanning the lava cracks and gullies, a couple of them are usually found. This taxon is darker in plumage compared with the mainland Short-eared Owl, and some consider it a separate species.
SAN CRISTÓBAL ISLAND: This is the easternmost and geologically oldest island of the archipelago. The endemic and endangered San Cristóbal Mockingbird is our principal target here, and fortunately the species is usually not too difficult to find at lower and mid elevations. We will also be seeking the endemic ssp. of Grey Warbler-Finch; while we have good chances for Dark-billed Cuckoo. If the schedule allows, we may venture into the highlands and visit El Junco lagoon. This crater lake is a result of an extinct volcano, rather than a lagoon in the typical sense - and it is the only freshwater spring in all the Galápagos Islands! The fresh water frequently attracts Magnificent Frigatebirds that come in to drink.

Other waterbirds that we might expect to see here include the endemic subspecies of White-cheeked Pintail, Common Gallinule and possibly some migrant waders. Darwin finches that we will be looking for in the highlands include Small Tree Finch and Woodpecker Finch. The latter is famous for its ability to use a tool while foraging, and is therefore often nicknamed ‘carpenter finch’. Tools include cactus spines or short twigs that they actively use to pry grubs out of tree branches. The bird may adjust its tool to make it more manageable, and often carries it from branch to branch for reuse. The species is usually easy to recognise by its distinct movements, which are reminiscent of those of a nuthatch. At mid elevations, we’ll also be looking for the parrot-bill shaped Vegetarian Finch. The rare Galápagos Rail has been reported from the highlands of San Cristóbal, but we will need a lot of luck to find it here.

ESPAÑOLA ISLAND: This small, low-lying island in the south-east is probably best known for its colony of Waved Albatross, the only member of the family Diomedeidae that breeds in the tropics. Unfortunately, the species is currently classified as Critically Endangered, and almost the entire world population nests on this island. No doubt, the albatross will be the star attraction; but there are also other important species that occur on the island. The ubiquitous Española Mockingbird is the largest of the endemic mockingbirds, is the least timid, and will probably greet us as we disembark at Punta Suarez. From here, we will hike through a spectacular colony of seabirds, and apart from Waved Albatrosses, we can expect to see Nazca and Blue-footed Boobies, Red-billed Tropicbird and Swallow-tailed Gulls, all a few feet away. Española Cactus Finch is another island endemic that is often observed foraging amongst the nesting seabirds. Grey Warbler-Finch is fairly common in the dry scrub and Galápagos Dove also prefers this arid habitat. Furthermore, the island is a great site for close encounters with Galápagos Hawk.

FLOREANA ISLAND: The island holds two key endemics which are both Critically Endangered. One of them is the Medium Tree Finch, which is restricted to the highlands of Floreana. We’ll drive up to a site named Asilo de la Paz, where we will specifically look for this target. If time allows, we will also pay a visit to the tortoise reserve, generally a good site for various tree finches and Galápagos Flycatcher. The other endemic is the extremely rare Floreana Mockingbird. The species used to inhabit the main island of Floreana, but after Darwin’s visit it soon became extinct. Now it survives on two small satellite rocks only. In order to see it, we need special permission to circumnavigate Champion Islet in the hope to see a few birds of this tiny surviving population.

ISABELA ISLAND: This is by far the largest, but also one of the youngest islands of the archipelago. Consequently,
it is also one of the most volcanically active places on earth, with no less than five active volcanoes: Alcedo, Cerro Azul, Darwin, Sierra Negra and Wolf. Depending on our schedule, we may drive up to the Sierra Negra Volcano, one of the most impressive volcanoes in the archipelago. Here we can hike up to the caldera, one of the largest of all of the Galápagos volcanoes (c. 10km wide). The caldera is our best chance at finding the rare and erratic Galápagos Martin, a species that is chiefly found in the highlands of Isabela. The grasslands and dense thickets are good habitats for the elusive Galápagos Rail, a species locally known as ‘pachay’. This much sought-after endemic is rather secretive by nature, but on occasion may approach very closely. The Scalesia forest patches along the trail are good for several interesting species, including Woodpecker Finch, Green Warbler-Finch, Small Tree Finch and Galápagos Flycatcher. Darwin’s Flycatcher (a recent split of the mainland Vermilion Flycatcher), is another target here. On the way back to Puerto Villamil, we may visit a small pond north of town to look for American Flamingo and possibly some migrant waders. The arid zone outside the town holds some prickly-pear cacti, where we will look for Common Cactus Finch and Galápagos Mockingbird. We may also visit the nearby Humedales, located west of town. Here, there is a lovely boardwalk that goes through mangroves and brackish tidal lagoons. It is a good area to search for several species of Darwin finches, Mangrove Warbler and waterbirds such as White-cheeked Pintails and Black-necked Stilt. (Unfortunately, there are no confirmed records of Mangrove Finch, yet!).

FERNANDINA ISLAND: Punta Espinosa is the key site for Flightless Cormorant. This iconic Galápagos endemic is the largest species of cormorant in the world, and unique in having lost its ability to fly. Typically, a few of these massive cormorants are observed standing on the shore, and allow close approach. They often stand amongst Marine Iguanas, spreading their tiny wings, which all looks rather silly. At this site, the iguanas or so-called ‘dragons’ are abundant and very large. It is also a good place to find Galápagos Hawk that preys on the young iguanas. The endangered Galápagos Penguin is the only penguin species that reaches the northern hemisphere. The species shares its nesting grounds with the cormorants, and they are also frequently seen at this site. One has to carefully scan along the rocky shore for Galápagos Penguins, as they can be tricky to spot when foraging in the water. The nearby Tagus Cove and Elizabeth Bay on Isabela are good places to look for penguins as well; and if we get lucky, we might even get to swim with them.

This was an excellent tour. I would have no hesitation being on another trip with Dušan Brinkhuizen, as he is an outstanding guide. It was all very well organised. Many thanks to all involved in organising the trip - MB 2018
**DAY 9  DISEMBARK ON SANTA CRUZ**

Today, we’ll disembark our Galápagos cruise and transfer to a hotel on Santa Cruz Island. Santa Cruz holds plenty of interesting birds, and we’ll most likely visit a private reserve that protects Galápagos Giant Tortoises. Here, we will search for species such as Vegetarian Finch and if we are very lucky, a Paint-billed Crake. The Scalesia forest, at a site named Los Gemelos, gives us a good chance of finding Large Tree Finch, Green Warbler-Finch and Woodpecker Finch, amongst others. If time permits (and in case we missed it on Isabela), we will continue our search for Galápagos Rail at Media Luna. In Puerto Ayora, we might also have some spare time to visit the town and any of the local souvenir shops.

**DAY 10  SANTA CRUZ TO QUITO AND DEPART**

Today, we depart from Baltra Airport on a flight back to Quito, where the tour will conclude.

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**SHIP SCHEMATICS AND ROOMS**

**THE NEMO III**

Our vessel, the Nemo III is a large Trans-oceanic multi-hull yacht used for cruising and charters. This large motor sail catamaran was built to house a maximum of 14 guests in 7 cabins. Visits to the various islands are made by Zodiac inflatable boats. Landings are both ‘wet’ and ‘dry’. Wet landings require you to disembark from the Zodiac near to shore, often in water approximately knee deep. Dry landings are made at docks or against rocky outcrops requiring a decent sense of balance to step off the Zodiac and onto sometimes slippery surfaces.

It is critical for your tour satisfaction, and more importantly your safety, that you are able to handle embarking and disembarking from the Zodiac. If you are unsteady on your feet or have any balance issues, then please do not register for this tour.
Why do you think this is such a good time to go to the Galápagos?

August is a great time for the Galápagos for a couple of reasons. Primary among them is that the incredible Waved Albatross, so graceful in the air at sea, is now seen at the breeding colony on land. Watching them walk around the lava rocks, taking off at the edge of the cliffs and, best of all, seeing them engage in their courtship displays, is astonishing. So often the case with seabirds, in which a strong pair bond is critical, courtship is highly ritualised and practiced often. There is a lot invested in courtship, for each parent, as they need to know their partner is in it for the long haul. Successful pairs may raise chicks together for many years, each one taking close to a year from taking a territory to fledging, and some have lived over 50 years of age. Incredible birds, they cover thousands of miles a year, and they look pretty sharp doing it. Also, August is good for migrants in the Galápagos. Sometimes at sea you can find rare seabirds during this time, or big flocks of phalaropes (Red and Red-necked) numbering in the hundreds. There is a lot to see during this time of the year, and the birds are just the start of it.

George Armistead is chief network officer at Rockjumper and focused on partnerships, promotion and managing the Rockjumper Bird Conservation Fund. A birder since the age of 9 years old, he has a long history of connecting people with nature through ecotourism and expedition travel. A professional wildlife guide with 20 years of experience, George has led trips to all seven continents. From 2012 to August of 2016, he developed, managed and marketed events for the American Birding Association, served on the ABA’s Recording Standards and Ethics Committee, and was an instructor at ABA young birder camps.
Why the Nemo III?
The Nemo III is one sweet sailing vessel. A modern and comfortable catamaran, it cuts across the water as well as any charter in the Galápagos. On top of that, the crew can’t be beat and the meals are quite something to behold as well. Delicious food, and many snacks offered between bouts of birding, swimming and snorkelling. Also, the Nemo III crew understand what birders want, which really helps when it comes to approaching areas that are good for whales or birds.

What are some of the things you would most look forward to on this tour?
Obviously the birds are incredible. The finches are fun, and present some very real identification challenges, but the seabirds steal the show. I challenge anyone not to be entertained by a Blue-footed Booby, or to watch the magnificent, graceful Swallow-tailed Gulls and not be drawn in to them. Swallow-tailed Gulls are all over, and they are stunning in their actions, shape, and plumage. Not your ordinary "seagull"! Also, the rarest gull in the world, the Lava Gull, is endemic to the islands. And there are the everyday critters…. The sea lions are endlessly entertaining, whether playing in the water or sleeping on the back of the boat, and the striking Sally Lightfoot Crabs and Marine Iguanas punctuate nearly every outing. Occasionally, there are magnificent whale sightings too.

Why travel with Rockjumper?
We have ironed out the perfect birding itinerary, and yet this trip is well-balanced for anyone that appreciates nature. We visit a couple of spots that few others see, seeing more birds in the process, but this trip is also superb for more laid-back or casual birders. The way our trip is set up is great for couples, including those who aren’t necessarily all about birds. This trip racks up the endemics while unfolding at a pace perfect for the general nature enthusiast too. We designed it such that we have a chance to see virtually all the special birds and for those who wish to experience the islands. The end result is a trip that really is the ultimate Galápagos experience.

**IMPORTANT NOTES**

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:**
Tour dates, prices, single supplement rates, approximate flight costs (where applicable) and spaces available for this tour are displayed on our website. Please see under PLEASE NOTE.

The tour fee includes:
• All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 10;
• Bottled drinking water;
• All lodgings;
• Ground transportation (including boat transfers);
• Snorkelling equipment;
• Extra activities mentioned in the itinerary;
• Some national park and other reserve entrance fees (except those mentioned below); and
• All guiding services (including tips for local guides and services)

The tour fee does not include:
• Visa fees;
• ANY flights;
• Any drinks;
• Galápagos National Park Transit Fee (US$20.00 per person). Payable at the Galápagos National Park Counter at Quito International Airport;
• Galápagos National Park Entrance Fees (US$100.00 per person). Payable at the airline counter at Quito International Airport;
• Special gratuities; and
• Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature

**Single Supplement:** The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights, although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

a) Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is, however, fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing (usually 4 months before the tour.) The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates, which are also quoted in the respective fixed currency.

b) Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration a small party supplement will have to be charged.

c) Furthermore, these costs are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.

d) Lastly, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary and / or the designated Rockjumper leader/s at short or no notice due to unforeseen circumstances; please be aware that we will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.

**Please also note:**

- In some areas, it may be very hot and exposed. We will thus make good use of the early mornings and will have early starts to avoid, as far as possible, birding in the middle of the day. You must be prepared with drinking water and suitable sun protection at all times.
- Walking on most islands is generally easy, but on a few we will be hiking over ground strewn with boulders, sharp rocks and lava.
- It is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 18 kg (40 lb) for check in luggage and 5 kg (+-11 lb) for hand luggage. The airlines impose a heavy tariff on any excess baggage.
- These tours do not require a high level of fitness, but participants should be in good general health. If you have any physical limitations, please notify us in advance of departure.
- Accommodation throughout the trip is of a very good standard. While cabins are considered spacious, this must be considered in relation to other comparatively sized vessels.

**Tipping:** As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If, therefore, you feel that he/they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them.

**ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE DETAILS:**

This tour does not include ANY airfares. The Galápagos tour will begin in Quito on day 1, and as this is scheduled as an arrival day, you are free to arrive at any time. The tour will conclude after breakfast on the morning of day 10 with an internal flight back to Quito International Airport.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

**FLIGHTS:**

Mariscal Sucre International Airport, Quito (IATA: UIO), Quito is the major port of entry into Ecuador for this tour. Please DO NOT book any flights until you have consulted the Rockjumper office for confirmation on the status of the tour.