Kayaking in the Galapagos - Travel - New York Times

The Galápagos

Sunset on San Cristóbal Island, with Kicker Rock on the horizon.

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WE nudge the kayaks through the waves off a remote cove in the Galápagos when a pair of mating sea turtles bob to the surface, drifting close enough to reveal gray tongues hanging languidly from green knuckle-like heads. Just a few hours ago, an eight-foot-long shark ducked beneath the bow in a fizz of purple bubbles. And a few hours before that, curious sea lions popped up next to my paddle strokes to flash such sweet faces that I almost jumped in to play. Almost.

It can be tough deciding which wildlife encounters are worthy of pause after only a few days in the Galápagos - those South American islands of evolution cauterized by sun and magma. Nearly any tour that cruises this isolated yet popular chain, 600 miles west of Ecuador, comes packaged with extreme closeups of washer-size tortoises, swimming lizards and crabs the color of rainbows. But this is not one of those tours.

It's late November, and Peter Grubb, a sunburned rafting guide from Idaho, is leading a small group of guides, naturalists and reporters on a weeklong "exploratory" sea kayaking trip - a test run that commercial outfitters often organize to fine-tune a new itinerary. It's a new adventure for all: No one, including Mr. Grubb, has done what we're doing.

When Mr. Grubb's Galápagos sea kayaking trips open to the public for the first time in February, a dozen adventurous...
clients at a time will experience these islands and wildlife in an enticing new way: by paddling to deserted beaches and camping overnight in sand that bears few five-toe footprints.

Trips to the Galápagos archipelago - nearly all of which is a national park - typically unfold aboard one of about 80 commercial yachts that ply the waters here. From 4 to 100 passengers at a time are whisked around on tightly choreographed schedules between islands. While convenient and comfortable, wildlife encounters are often limited, since passengers must sleep on the boats and disembark only at strictly controlled wildlife viewing sites for short periods.

Unlike yacht-based trips that may offer some kayaking, Mr. Grubb's excursion is all about melding into the sea and letting the landscape slide by under blue-footed-booby skies. Come evening, paddlers run the kayaks into the sand, pitch tents on the beach and wait for birds to scream in the dawn. The combination is spectacular. Not only do paddlers have the thrill of being among the first tourists to camp in these locations, but along the way, they also nuzzle bow to beak with so much kooky wildlife that stumbling upon sea turtles in the act becomes, well, normal.

"It's such a different experience from being on a yacht," said Julian Smith, author of the Moon Handbooks guide to Ecuador, who has made three trips to the islands since 1997. He said kayaking at your own pace and camping on the scene was like visiting Versailles and being able to "play on the beds or put on the armor."

Not everyone thinks that's best for an island chain already showing warts from relatively recent human interaction. Tourism is big business in the Galápagos, pouring at least $100 million into the Ecuadorian economy each year, and drawing increasing numbers of workers from the mainland, according to Micki Stewart, an economist at the University of California, Davis, who is studying the islands.

By some estimates, the tourist town of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island has nearly doubled in population to 15,000 people in about five years. In 1973, 14 years after the creation of the Galápagos National Park, officials estimated that 12,000 people a year could tour the Galápagos with little impact. About 109,000 visited in 2004, but authorities had already increased the allowed capacity to 150,000 tourists a year, said Ramiro Tomalá, a naturalist with the park.

It might not be long before they reach that number. In April, Discovery World Cruises plans to dock a ship with 500 passengers off San Cristóbal Island. That's five times the capacity of the largest ship currently allowed to operate in the archipelago. About 97 percent of the land is protected by the park, but less than 1 percent of that land is open to tourists. (Most of the land not in the park is urban. About 28,000 people live on the islands.)

Companies seek ways to maximize what areas they can use by offering new activities like sport fishing, mountain biking and surfing. Dr. Graham Watkins, executive director of the Charles Darwin Foundation, a research and conservation group in the Galápagos, recently released a statement saying new ways to bring tourists to the islands are a "cause for concern."

Mr. Grubb, who also runs white-water rafting trips in Ecuador with his Quito-based partner, Juan Rodríguez, insists his kayaking and camping trips have little to no impact. For this test trip, he brought along a small portable toilet with storage bags for waste. He set no fires, placed tents away from wildlife nesting sites and packed out all trash, often more than we produced. He hires local guides and consumes relatively little of the 5.7 million gallons
of fuel shipped to the Galápagos each year: A small motorboat followed us, within sight but out of earshot, for safety and to carry supplies.

As the demand for tourism increases, Mr. Grubb said that his kayaking trips would provide an environmentally friendly way to visit a place that could use some cleaning up. Some beaches "are getting trashed from fishermen who camp on them already," he said. "We've offered to improve those sites."

THE eight-day itinerary offered through ROW International, a division of Mr. Grubb's company, River Odysseys West, samples six of the chain's 18 or so islands and islets (the number varies according to whether somebody considers a big rock a small island) and includes a mix of hiking, snorkeling and well-earned rests at an inn.

After a two-hour flight from Quito to Baltra Island, the trip started with two days of kayaking off Baltra's west coast and camping outside the park at Salinas Beach, a strip of fine sand churned by sea turtle tracks. Nearby, the tour's clients can expect to snorkel with sea lions off Mosquera Islet and hike among nesting frigate birds on Seymour Island, both an hour's paddle north.

On Day 3, the group took a small twin-engine plane west to Isabela, a seahorse-shaped island of lava, guava trees and a village with sandy streets and 2,000 people. Nearby, visitors can snorkel with sharks, sea turtles and even penguins, or journey inland to hike five miles along the steaming rim of Sierra Negra, a 4,888-foot-high volcano that last erupted in October.

After two nights at Casa Marita, a funky Mediterranean-style inn, the trip concluded on San Cristóbal Island, a 30-minute flight east. There, guests hopped back into kayaks for a 10-mile paddle along dozens of untrammeled beaches to camp for two nights at Puerto Grande, a cove behind the looming mass of 1,500-foot-high Cerro Brujo. Kicker Rock, a 300-foot-high monolith west of the campsite, is one of the archipelago's more impressive snorkeling areas. Scores of Galápagos sharks, spotted eagle rays and yellowtail surgeonfish filter through a deep channel cut into the rock's volcanic tuff.

Mr. Grubb, 48, and Mr. Rodriguez, 39, worked on and off for about 10 years to organize this itinerary. The trick has been to find camping sites in a park that's largely off-limits to tourists. So far park authorities have denied permission to camp anywhere except at Puerto Grande on San Cristóbal.

At first glance, Puerto Grande is stunning, a cuticle of fine sand in a lagoon framed by black lava rocks lapped by warm green waters. But fishermen have legally used the beach for years to strip and repaint their boats. A short walk inland uncovered scraps of plastic, panties and a disturbing mound of toilet paper.

To open other beaches for camping, Mr. Rodriguez approached the Ecuadorean Air Force, which operates passenger flights to the Galápagos and controls some beaches on Baltra surrounded by the national park. Maj. Fernando Teran gave Mr. Rodriguez a permit to camp at Salinas Beach, a half-mile sliver of pinkish sand frequented by nesting sea turtles, at no cost. "Why not?" the major said. "The water is clean, the animals are friendly. It's beautiful."

Though the campsites are spectacular, as a whole the Galápagos are not particularly beautiful, at least not in the way tropical islands often are. There are few palms among uninterrupted stands of haggard salt scrub plants. Some beaches have azure waters and baby-powder sand, but most shorelines are rocky and lapped by dark waves cold enough to warrant a wet suit. "We fancied even that the bushes smelt unpleasantly," Charles Darwin wrote during the voyage of the Beagle, the trip in 1835 that sparked his theory on evolution.

It is the diversity of animals - penguins and flamingos, for example - and their bizarre mutations that bring people here today. After countless generations of not needing to fly, some cormorants can't; the four-eyed blenny fish can crawl on land; iguanas sneeze salt. Most creatures are freakishly unafraid of people because humans haven't been around to hurt them until relatively recently, said Mr. Tomalá, the naturalist. Whatever the reason, the interaction with wildlife is extraordinary. We snorkel with sea lions that nibble on our
flippers while others play tug-of-war with a small section of cord. Frigate birds, iguanas, giant tortoises and even a short-eared owl all sit patiently for their portraits.

But it is the slow pace of gliding inches over the water in a kayak that makes this Galápagos experience special. While kayakers can't disembark anywhere they please, the boats are maneuverable enough to ride tidal surges through caves and to cruise rocky shorelines that motorized craft cannot. The hull of a kayak hissing through the water often attracts curious animals, especially near-sighted sea lions that swim out for a closer look.

Some kayakers, like me, may never wish to leave Salinas. During a meal of ravioli and a malbec wine taken slouched in the sand, I watched blue-footed boobies and brown pelicans with eight-foot-wingspans dive-bomb a school of sardines 20 feet away. To my right, sea turtle tracks ran like tank tread through the warm sand. One came up to lay eggs in the light of a full moon.

"I can't see this trip getting wildly popular because it takes a special kind of client - who doesn't mind sleeping on the ground or going without a shower for a few days," Mr. Grubb said.

Out to sea, as if to make a point, dolphins jump through a lemon sunset, its reflection flickering across the waves.

If You Go

Rivers Odysseys West (800-451-6034, www.rowinternational.com), which also offers traditional cruises and a trekking program in the Galápagos, has seven kayaking and camping trips scheduled for 2006, with departure dates on Feb. 17, March 17 and 24, April 7, Nov. 17 and Dec. 22 and 29. Each trip is 11 days, with eight of them in the Galápagos. The price depends on how many sign up: for a group of six to eight it is $2,790 a person; for 9 to 12 the price drops to $2,390. Fees include all meals, guides and equipment, but do not include air fare to Quito (round trip from $667 from La Guardia Airport on Continental), flights to and from the Galápagos ($392), interisland flights ($180) and a $100 park fee.

TIM NEVILLE frequently writes for Outside, Men's Journal and the Escapes section of The Times.

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