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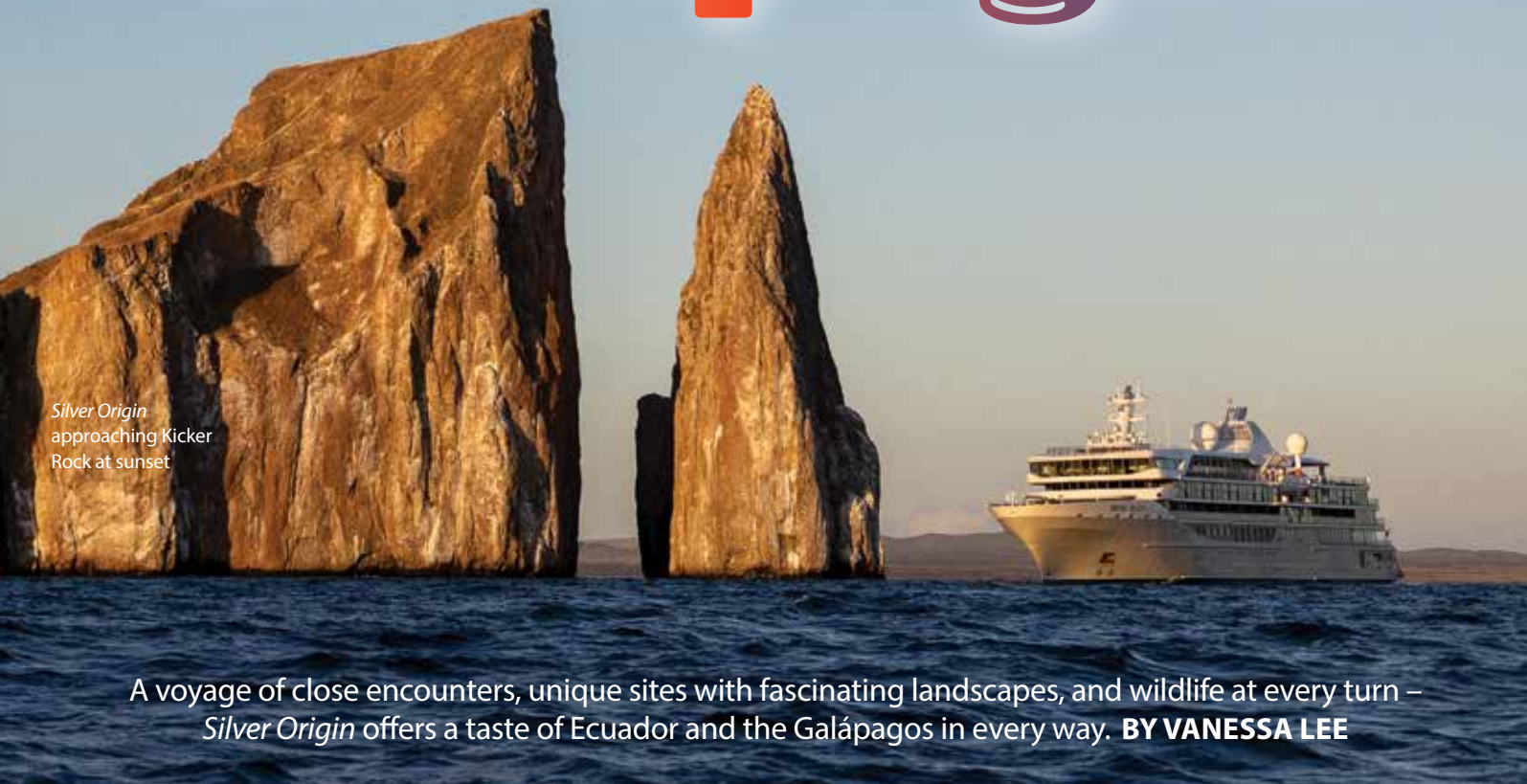
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DISPATCHES FROM THE Galápagos



Silver Origin approaching Kicker Rock at sunset

A voyage of close encounters, unique sites with fascinating landscapes, and wildlife at every turn – Silver Origin offers a taste of Ecuador and the Galápagos in every way. **BY VANESSA LEE**

AM HELD CAPTIVE by the beauty of the Galápagos Islands and the wildlife that inhabits them. It reminds me that one of the reasons to travel far and wide is to see and experience remarkable events, life-changing moments, and if one is truly lucky, the kind of stuff that gives you goosebumps. The memories we bring home can often be one of the most rewarding aspects of a trip. Having visited six continents and more than 100 countries, finally sailing in the Galápagos archipelago of 21 islands is a bucket-list experience that is one of my most memorable travel experiences ever.

So, here are my dispatches from the Galápagos Islands and our cruise on the small, luxurious, and impeccable Silver Origin, the first destination-specific ship built by Silversea Cruises carrying no more than 100 guests. We

are sailing the Western itinerary on a 7-day cruise and wish we had thought to cruise for 14 days and explore even more of these stunning isles.

It's after dinner, and the only nightcap we need is to sail under an inky, warm, brilliantly starry night through the archipelago. We have come to the small stargazing deck in the company of one of our Expedition Leaders to do precisely that – to star gaze, and it's incredible. Up ahead is a rare sight – an active volcano on Isabela Island spews hot red lava up and onto its flanks. As we draw closer to this magnificent sight, everything around us seems darker than dark. And then we look up and see something even rarer – as we gently, almost imperceptibly cross the Equator. I gaze at the firmament and see the Southern Cross in the southern hemisphere, and literally at the same

time, I look northward and see a more familiar sky – the North Star and Orion. For me, this is undoubtedly a once-in-a-lifetime moment – a volcano and both hemispheres – I can hardly wait for the rest of our week to unfold if this is the way it begins.

And then, it's all about the land animals and sea creatures, of which there are plenty. Our joy is palpable as we engage with this wondrous array of wildlife and anticipate each new dawn and the surprises we will find. There are several activities on our daily schedule, depending on where we are sailing. We may choose to kayak, hike, or enjoy a snorkel from the beach or one in deep water from a Zodiac. Many of these islands offer a unique experience of flora and fauna as well as geography. As we immerse ourselves in our 7-day voyage, we begin to understand why this magical place

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SILVERSEA (PENGUINS, LUCIA GRIGGI); ZODIAC AND CRAB; RICHARD SIDBY



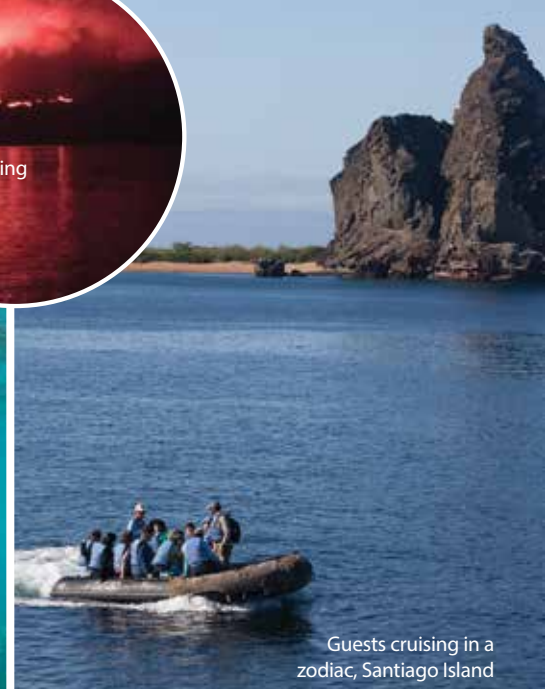
Galápagos Flamingo



Snorkeling with penguins in Punta Espinoza, in Fernandina Island



Volcano erupting



Guests cruising in a zodiac, Santiago Island



Guests and a sea lion



Galápagos Giant Tortoise



Pelican on lava rocks



Sally Lightfoot Crab in Española Island



Blue-footed Boobies

became so important to Darwin – just as it should be to the world now.

Our aptly-named ship, the *Silver Origin*, is designed to perfection, with an outward sensibility, offering remarkable views, whether from the outside decks, the Explorer Lounge, Observation Lounge, and Library or our gorgeous suite and Horizon Balcony. We love getting to and from our Zodiac at the Marina, which leads into the cleverly-designed and informative Basecamp. We gather here to enjoy a hot drink after a swim or snorkel, check in with the accommodating staff about various things, and watch the fantastic videos of below and above-water sights on the large screen. We also browse the tremendous collection of items and memorabilia on display from the Royal Geographical Society, which has a partnership with Silversea. These are from Darwin’s voyage here 150 years ago and are fascinating.

OUR HIGHLIGHTS ARE snorkeling, swimming, and frolicking with inquisitive and fearless sea lions – it’s more than magical as they swim up to and around you, beneath you, and gaze at you with their big brown eyes. They also happen to be just about everywhere you go – lazing and snoozing on any available surface. We even found one sleeping in the lobby of our hotel one morning – no extra charge!

We were always on the lookout for the tiny tropical Galápagos penguins, the rarest in the world, that inhabit this land – whether ashore, zipping by in the water, or even the amorous pair we interrupted on a rock. Our terrific Expedition guides tell us so much about the wildlife on every island and rocky outcrop and that these penguins are the only ones living in the Northern Hemisphere and are endemic to this land. We learn more than we can ever take in from our Ecuadorian guides, and their company and knowledge enhance our experience. We also anticipate our nightly pre-dinner cocktails in the Explorer Lounge, where we are treated to a film or a lecture about our

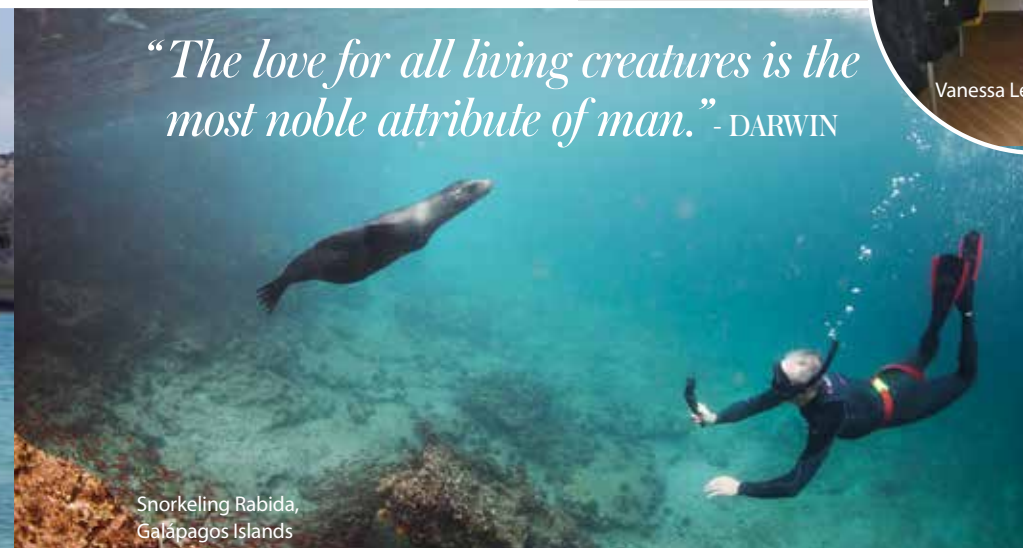
upcoming port of call – it’s a feast of information.

During the week, we enjoy five snorkeling excursions, replete in our gear supplied by Silversea. This includes a snorkel and mask, which guests may take home, flippers and a wetsuit for buoyancy, plus a small mandatory lifejacket. Remember to bring water shoes. You set out in a Zodiac from Base Camp and the Marina with a driver, and an Expedition Leader who ensures our safety and takes us to the best snorkeling spots to see more of these fascinating creatures. We float above sea turtles and snorkel into massive schools of multi-colored fish while watching lazy, white-

Galápagos tortoises on Santa Cruz, some of whom have been alive longer than many of us. Then, on Fernandina, at Punta Espinoza, we take a guided hike, treading carefully not to interrupt (or step upon) marine iguanas digging nests in the sand to lay their eggs. We see flightless cormorants, Darwin’s finches, and the wonderfully named Sally Lightfoot Crabs. Another day we take a Zodiac into the mangroves and spot a squadron of golden-colored stingrays as we cruise gently in the calm water - and then our guide takes us for a close-up of two sea lions basking on a branch in a mangrove tree, well above the water line.



Guests kayaking



“The love for all living creatures is the most noble attribute of man.” - DARWIN

Snorkeling Rabida, Galápagos Islands

tipped sharks meandering below us. And then up pops another sea lion – they are everywhere, as are the blue-footed boobies.

Each day brings new opportunities to immerse and be amazed. If we’re not snorkeling, we might enjoy a hike, a Zodiac excursion, or a kayak. And each day, the ship usually visits two islands and sails at lunchtime as we gather at The Grill on Deck 7 for a tasty al fresco lunch, often including seafood. It’s a convivial, happy crowd, and we engage with each other and the lovely staff who serve us. We are casual, relaxed, and mesmerized by our experiences, sharing stories of all we have seen.

We snap pics of the iconic and massive

We watch a flock of blue-footed boobies dive-bombing a school of fish – a rare site, apparently – and then, on another day, we see flamingoes taking flight.

The purpose-built *Silver Origin* is about finding authenticity while making sustainability a key and forefront issue. The crew onboard includes charming and kind Ecuadorians who provide great service, and the impeccable and vast knowledge that the eight to ten Expedition Leaders have makes the cruise even more unforgettable. They know the National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary that is the Galápagos Archipelago so well, and their focus is to ensure all guests have the most incredible time.

Whether kayaking, spending time in the water, hiking on land or stargazing on deck, the experience is above anything you imagine.

The *Silver Origin* is beautiful and suits the region in which she sails. Everything is easy and charming, and the staff is fabulous. We wear casual clothes and are relaxed yet receive impeccable service. We enjoy fine dining at The Restaurant on Deck 4 for dinner with an extensive menu. And the onboard cuisine makes the most of local produce and the freshest seafood, guided by the culinary talent of Chef Carlo Bermudez and his team, with fifty-five percent of the



Observation Lounge, *Silver Origin*



Vanessa Lee



Basecamp, *Silver Origin*



Explorer Lounge Outside Deck, *Silver Origin*

food sourced in Ecuador. The Restaurant and the popular Grill can accommodate all guests at lunch or dinner.

Inspired by nature with soothing views of the islands at every turn, the ship offers 51 very comfortable suites for 100 guests and an enriching all-inclusive lifestyle at sea with all gratuities, Wi-Fi, fine wines, and premium liquor included in the cruise fare. The attentive ministrations of a suite butler make one feel very special – as is typical on a Silversea cruise. ■

If you also want to sail in these islands, reach out to your Expedia Cruises™ Vacation Consultant.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SILVERSEA (SNORKELING, LUCIA GRIGG)