Go greener in Galapagos

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**GALAPAGOS ISLANDS,** Ecuador — If you add up the landmass of the 16 islands, islets and rocky outcrops that make up the Galapagos Islands you get something less than half the size of the state of New Jersey.

As Charles Darwin discovered, this group of islands located 1,000 km off the coast of Ecuador is home to species of birds, reptiles and marine mammals found nowhere else on earth. It’s a remote, pristine, wildlife-filled world and that’s why more than 200,000 people visit the Galapagos Islands each year. But as numbers grow, so does the environmental impact of tourism and the need for regulation. Some hotels and passenger ship operators aren’t waiting — they’re offering eco-minded visitors new ways, small and large, to minimize the environmental impact of their trip right now.

Unlike most of the 83 boats allowed to operate in the Galapagos, the 26-passenger M/Y Origin — which was launched last year — was designed and built to exceed existing environ-

**Mother Nature’s themepark a fragile wonderland**

mental regulations. This was achieved through new ship building technology but without sacrificing passenger comfort. In fact, Origin looks more like a boutique hotel than a passenger ship.

Santiago Dunn, executive vp of Ecoventura, which owns and operates the Origin, says the first dry deck he approached about building the ship denied his ambitious ideas could be accomplished. He finally found one willing to construct a hull and bow design that makes the Origin more than 40% faster and more than 60% more fuel efficient than similarly sized ships. Every toilet on board is a French design that macerates waste so the resulting “black water” can be treated more efficiently. Origin’s grey water is also treated.
and high capacity holding tanks can retain the treated water until the ship reaches an appropriate dumping spot far from the islands. Trash left behind by tourists has also been an issue.

Plastic bags have already been banned and while Galapagos authorities debate possible restrictions on plastic straws, the recently opened Goldeneroy Hotel & Spa on San Cristobal Island has imposed its own ban, using only paper straws in its bar and restaurant. These cost the owner three times as much as their plastic equivalents but they don’t end up in the stomachs of birds and marine mammals.

**Invasive species**

“The most potentially urgent and damaging environmental threat to the Galapagos could be the introduction of invasive species,” warns Hugo Arns, Ecuador program director for the World Wildlife Fund. This is why aircraft cabins are sprayed before landing in the Galapagos and why visitors have to sign a new legally binding affidavit stating whether they are bringing in biological products or camping gear, or have been around animals on the mainland.

Matt Karanis, executive director of the International Galapagos Tour Operators Association, says there are already hundreds of invasive species in the islands including a type of fly that is killing the strangler figs, and blackberry vines that strangle endemic forests.

“There is a huge fear that mosquitoes carrying dengue fever are going to hitch a ride to the islands,” Karanis warns. “The birdlife of the Galapagos have no immunity to this sort of thing.” It’s not just humans that bring invasive species to the islands. Farmers on the islands can’t grow enough food to feed the number of locals and tourists so tons of supplies are shipped to the Galapagos every year. Lindblad Expeditions operates the 90-passenger National Geographic Endeavour and the 48-passenger National Geographic Explorer and once imported all the food needed to feed thousands of people on those ships every year. In 2005, after a year and a half of development, Lindblad initiated the Operation to Prevent Unwanted Species (OPUS). Now, instead of bringing in unsushed and unsupervised produce, the company pre-washes and pre-picks dozens of types of fruits and vegetables by hand, as well as all its drinking and washing water, and uses specially treated containers to supply water and sewage on board.

**Luxury tents**

Accommodation will be in luxury tents instead of traditional structures to limit the impact of heavy building equipment. Electric vehicles will be used as transportation around the property and 10 power-generating stationary exercise bikes will be available for guests who want to help power the batteries in exchange for food and drink vouchers, and other incentives.

**Nautical excursions**

The Galapagos Islands are home to a unique species of marine iguanas — the only sea-going iguanas in the world. A sea lion, islet, reef, and a dock near a passenger ship visiting the islands.

**Travel deals for land and sea**

Travel experts Carol Sobíl and Andrea Sachs highlight deals around the globe.

- **Princess Cruises** is offering shipboard credits of $150 to $600 (all prices in US dollars) per cabin on select cruises departing summer through spring 2018. Credit varies by stateroom category and trip length. For example, book an interior cabin on a six- to nine-night cruise and receive a $50 credit; a balcony cabin on a cruise of at least 13 nights earns $800. Also, receive a balcony orhigher cabin and receive free specialty dining privileges, a value of about $350 per person per dinner. Book by Feb. 28. Info: 800-774-6237, princess.com/celebrate.
- **St. George’s Caye Resort in Belize is offering 20% off stays in a private hathched cabana between Jan. 26 and Feb. 11.** Five nights in an overwater sunset cabana, including three meals a day, costs $1,057 per couple, with tax. The regular price is $2,225. Rate includes unlimited use of kayaks, sailboats, stand up paddleboards and snorkel gear. Four-night minimum required. Use promo code WP-Winter. Booking info: reservations@gooddiving. com. General info: stgeorgeescayresort.com.
- **Book by Jan. 30 and save $300 on a camper with Peace Vans Rentals.** The Seattle-based itinerary rents Vanagons and Eurovan Volkswagen vehicles, which comfortably fit four travellers and come with kitchens — ideal for exploring the Pacific Northwest. Prices vary depending on vehicle and season. For example, a mid-May adventure in an Ohmancehpob, a 1987 Volkswagen Vanagon, costs $1,542 for six nights, including discounted tax and insurance fee. Six-night minimum required. Info: 206-447-7393, peacevansrentals.com.
- **Spend a week in Thailand for $1,599 per person double with Pacific Delight Tours.** The trip includes round-trip airfare from New York to Bangkok, with return from Chiang Mai. Four nights at The Hotel Bangkok Sukhumvit 20; flight from Bangkok to Chiang Mai; three nights at Jangtaewa Hotel Chiang Mai; seven breakfasts and one lunch; two tour ports transfers and taxes. Depart Feb. 12, March 12 or April 9. Priced separately, trip costs about $2,748. Info: 800-223-7237, pacificdelighttours.com. Note: Some deals sell out. **Use available vouchers.**

— The Washington Post

**NEED TO KNOW Galapagos Islands**

- For information on travel to and around the Galapagos Islands, visit the Ecuador environment ministry website at galapagospark.org, or the independent Galapagos Conservancy site at galapagos.org.
- For details of sailings aboard MV Origin, see origingalapagos.com.
- For more on the Golden Ocean Hotel & Spa, see goldenhotel.com.
- For Lindblad National Geographic tours, see expeditions.com/destinations/galapagos.

Tourists take pictures at Wat Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai, a popular stop on tours of Thailand.

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