

South America Direct — Ecuador

Sail the Galapagos on a barquentine that once belonged to E.F. Hutton or on a yacht that Onassis gave to Ranier and Grace as a wedding present, explore the mysteries of the highlands, goof off on surfer beaches

MARK ZUSSMAN

Numerous Galapagos Island tour operators are marking the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th since the publication of *The Origin of Species* this year with special thematic voyages. (The Galapagos-Darwin connection? Not 100% sure? Check Wikipedia.) But, Darwin bicentennial or no Darwin bicentennial, Galapagos tourism has just kept on growing since it was first offered on an organized basis in the 1960s. (See the story on page 37 for an account of one recent sailing.) Visitors to the Galapagos report high levels of satisfaction, ranging up even into the stratospheric "Most amazing trip I've ever taken in my life" category, and it might be thought, therefore, that a travel agent can't go far wrong in packing clients off in this direction, whatever the specific arrangements.

Unfortunately, this is not exactly the case. Out in the Galapagos, the options, along numerous axes, are dizzyingly more varied than, say, in the similarly water-borne, though much more nearly standardized, Nile cruise neck of the woods — so in fact it is possible to make a fairly devastating mistake. Best, therefore, to understand how the Galapagos adventure works.

First of all, the vessels. Though folks with lots of time and lots of money can sail to the Galapagos all the way from Guayaquil (or, for that matter, from Fort Lauderdale), the Galapagos archipelago sits an approximate 600 miles off the Ecuadoran coast. Virtually all visitors, therefore, fly in. (The lapsed time Quito-Galapagos, on TAME or Aerogal, all but invariably arranged by a tour operator, is two and a half hours. From Guayaquil, the seacoast stop along the way, it's an hour less.) Vessels are boarded at one of the two Galapagos islands with airfields.

But which, for any particular client, is the right vessel among the 80 or 90 or so certified by authorities to operate in these waters?

Mythic Hulls

The *S/V Mandalay*, for instance, is a 236-foot-long three-masted barquentine with over 20,000 square feet of canvas sail and accommodations for as many as 70 passengers. It



The Grace – in Ecuadoran waters.

was commissioned in 1923 by the American financier Edward F. Hutton whose express purpose was to own "the finest private yacht in all the world." Angermeyer Cruises, whose exclusive agent is Andando Tours, planned to begin offering it this year, but compliance issues are now going to slow down the on-line date to 2010. Worth waiting for? Yes. But, for numerous reasons, ranging from price tag to the sturdiness of a voyager's sea legs, the *Mandalay* may not be for everyone, even when it does embark on its maiden Galapagos sailing. The *Mandalay* is a niche product.

Consider, also, in the luxury niche-market department, but now with motor rather than sails, the 16-passenger *M/Y Grace*, just being put into service by Quasar Expeditions at our press time. The *Grace* was built in 1928, it was conscripted by the British Navy during WWII, it saw battle at Dunkirk, it captured a German E boat and in 1951 it was acquired by Aristotle Onassis who renamed it *Arion* and gave it as a wedding gift to Prince Rainer and Princess Grace of Monaco, who honeymooned on it. For the *Grace*'s November 7, 2009 departure, adventurer and BBC personality Paul Rose will be aboard to talk Darwin, oceans, climate change and more.

The *Galapagos Explorer II*, built in Italy in 1990, is a luxury cruise ship, the same kind of vessel that can be seen plying

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Mediterranean and Caribbean waters. It is owned and operated by Canodros S.A., and in addition to 50 extremely comfortable suites for 100 passengers, it boasts a swimming pool, a boutique, a library, a restaurant and several bars, a conference room, a tea station, medical assistance, and more. There are other cruise ships of nearly the same size operating in the Galapagos. There are sailing yachts of various sizes and shapes, motorized yachts of various sizes and shapes, there are catamarans. The motor sail boat Sulidae, built in 1901, carries a maximum of 12 passengers, and it looks like, and is meant to look like, a pirate vessel.

Making the Choice

Some travelers, depending on their previous experience on water, their gameness or their timorousness, their dreams, their fantasies, or some other criterion, will needless to say have their hearts set on exploring the Galapagos on one kind of vessel, among the many available, rather than another. But consider what one observer of Galapagos tourism has said to me, and don't discount it simply because her company owns and operates one of the cruise ships: "Many people think it's romantic to go out on a small sailing yacht. The consumer magazines in particular have been making the yachts sound awfully glamorous. But out here in the Galapagos you're on the high seas. There's a lot of current. The larger vessels are a lot more comfortable. In most instances the food is better. And you'll find a lot more people to interact with."

Yet another issue for travelers will be price and still another, time. Prices for an eight day/seven night package can cost as much as \$5,000/PAX or less than \$2,000. For voyagers with less time, those for example who want to get on to Machu Picchu in Peru, a four day/three night package can cost well into the thousands or as little as \$750. Looking for an operator who knows how to keep small children happy? Familiarize yourself with the Young Pirates program available on Metropolitan Touring's M/V Santa Cruz, Yacht Isabela II and Yacht La Pinta.

Since most of the tour operators with expertise in the Galapagos offer many vessels, not just their own, the important thing is less to find some single "best" tour operator than to find the right vessel, and it's job of the tour operator to help seekers find the right vessel. Also, bear in mind that the Galapagos experience is not, as many people think, merely about unusual fauna. The fauna are unusual all right; hence, Darwin's excitement. But the Galapagos experience is also about exquisite tropical sailing in crystalline seas and, for those who want it, diving and snorkeling. It is not for nothing that, through a large swathe of history, these dots of land used to be called the Enchanted Islands.

Andando Tours, www.andandotours.com;

Canodros S.A., www.canodros.com;

Quasar Expeditions, www.quasarex.com



MantaRaya lodge.

Mountain Ecuador

Did you know that Quito, the Ecuadoran capital, was the first city in the world to be declared a World Heritage cultural site by UNESCO? That was in 1978, and the occasion for the honor was a gorgeously preserved colonial-style center — the most extensive of its kind on the South American continent. Many travelers rush through Quito on their way to the Galapagos. A mistake, even if not yet a crime. Try, for example, Metropolitan Touring's newly minted full-day Quito Cultural Heritage Tour, daily except Sunday and Monday, or something similar offered by one of the other tour operators. Slow your clients down even more and send them off to Cuenca, the country's third-largest city and another UNESCO World Heritage site — with yet another stunningly preserved colonial architectural core.

One more newly minted Ecuadoran travel option is Metropolitan's three day/two night Step Back in Time tour, with departures from Quito daily except for Thursday, to the southern highlands Province of Loja. Excursionists will hang out with members of the indigenous Saraguro community, learn something of their way of life and their unique cosmic vision. They'll test the medicinal plants that help account for the remarkable longevity of the residents of the remote subtropical Valley of Vilcabamba. They'll visit the Podocarpus National Park with its Andean lakes and waterfalls, its virgin forests, its rich biodiversity.

Metropolitan Touring, www.metropolitan-touring.com

The Hotel in the Park

Suppose you have clients who are headed for Ecuador but, for one reason or another, are indifferent to the Galapagos experience — or don't have time. About halfway down the Ecuadoran coast from the Colombian border on the north to the Peruvian border on the south, there's a town called Puerto López and adjacent to the town there is a national park called Machalilla and inside the park there's a 15-room hotel called MantaRaya, and this may be just as much paradise as anyone needs on this earth. The hotel looks kind of like a

Mediterranean village or maybe something in the American Southwest in pastel blues and creams and yellows. Rooms have either balconies if they're upstairs or terraces if they're down, hammocks, ceiling fans, headboards with a cheerful sunburst motif, colorful bedspreads, plenty of hot water. The pool is large and inviting. The views out over the sea are exactly as they ought to be. The seafood in the restaurant couldn't be any fresher.

Puerto López, a fishing community with on-again, off-again electricity, is the perfect place to while away an afternoon over drinks and maybe a ceviche (and to reflect on whether or not we really need all that electronic gadgetry we are so addicted to), but the real draw in these parts is the Machalilla Park itself. This is a 230 square mile preserve of seacoast, islands and tropical dry forest, the onshore portion of which is outstanding for the showy, colorful bromeliads that have attached themselves to the trunks and branches of the trees, for hiking, for trekking, for birdwatching and for the really gorgeous Los Frailes beach — one of the best anywhere on South America's Pacific coast.

The MantaRaya's 30-foot Mantaray II speedboat takes just over an hour to reach the national park's offshore La Plata Island, which has sometimes been called the Poor Man's Galapagos. But no reason to make apologies for it. Because the island is belted in by coral reefs, marine life is plentiful and, for scuba divers, easy to get up close to. The flying creatures a visitor gets to see include frigate birds, albatrosses, various species of boobies. Between June and October, male humpback whales, up from the Antarctic, do some sensational breaching to attract the females for mating purposes. Porpoises do their own splashy act all year round.

Mantaraya lodge, www.mantarayalodge.com

The Manatee on the Amazon

Advantage Travel, the Quito-based company that owns and operates the MantaRaya, also owns and also operates a three-decker river craft called the Manatee Amazon Explorer on a river by the name of the Napo in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Cabins number 14 (for a total of 30 passengers). They are all air conditioned. They all have private bath. They all have hot and cold running water. Excursions of three nights and four days, four nights and five days, or seven nights and eight days explore several ecosystems and such important preservation areas as the Yasuní National Park and the Limoncocha Biological Reserve. There are noisy tropical parrots like crazy out this way, alligators, opportunities to fish for piranha, opportunities — for the bold — to go swimming with the wildlife. Accompanying naturalists make it all make sense in English. Reach the point at which the Manatee Explorer ties up by motorized canoe in an hour and a half from the town of Francisco de Orellana. Reach Francisco on an 11 a.m. flight of approximately an hour from Quito.

**Manatee Amazon Explorer, www.manateeamazonexplorer.com;
Advantage Travel, www.advantagecuador.com**

Ecuador Just for Fun

Want to know about an Ecuador destination that's just plain fun and doesn't make any pretenses about being either educational or culturally enriching or anything else uplifting? The place is called Montañita, it's up the coast to the north and west of Guayaquil, it's a destination for surfers and other laid-back types from the world over, and it has exactly the culture you'd expect in such a place — lots of bars, lots of good seafood, lots of nightlife, and a soundtrack, to put it in a nutshell, that tends to the Bob Marley view of things. For details, ask an Ecuadoran tour operator.

Ecuador the Trade Fair

U.S. tour operators who want to know Ecuador better should think about looking in at the International Tourism Fair, FITE, that is scheduled to take place from September 17 to September 20 at the Simon Bolivar Convention Center in Guayaquil. The event will be in its seventh annual edition, and organizers claim that last year's edition generated \$15 million in business.

FITE, www.fite.info

The Galapagos as Top Islands

The Swiss New Open World Corporation, which mounted the extremely successful 2007 New Seven Wonders of the World competition, is currently hosting a competition under the title the New7Wonders of Nature — yup, that's the way it's officially written. In Group B for islands, the Galapagos had recently been tagging along in an in no way shameful fourth place in the voting, but as of June 8 the Galapagos had climbed up to first place and they have now left even such mythic spots as Bora Bora and the luscious Maldives archipelago in the lurch. First phase voting ends on July 7. But there's still a long way to go. On July 21, 21 finalists will be announced. Then there'll be even more maneuvering before the declaration of the supreme winners in 2011. But, as of right now, the Galapagos are the islands to beat.

The Ecuadoran Ministry of Tourism, www.turismo.gov.ec

OTHER ECUADOR OPERATORS:

Enchanted Expeditions,
www.galapagosenchantedexpeditions.com
LARC (Latin America Reservation Center),
www.larc1.com
Rolf Wittmer Turismo, www.rwittmer.com
Surtrek, www.surtrek.com
International Galapagos Tour Operators Association,
www.igtoa.org

Glorious Galapagos, Exciting Ecuador

From nature to native crafts: crossing the equatorial line with Kleintours.

MARJORIE KLEIN

I am in love. I look into those big brown eyes and can't resist. Oh, I know he's showing off when he circles me several times, and I must admit I'm impressed when he flips into those playful barrel rolls. But he has me when he stops short just inches from my face, stares deeply into my eyes, and blows bubbles. How can you say No to a sea lion?

Snorkeling with sea lions is just one of the mind-blowing experiences of the Galapagos adventure. Each day aboard Kleintours' cruise ship, the *m/v Galapagos Legend*, opens new worlds of exploration. Twice daily, we debark the

ship to board pangas that will carry us to the various islands, created from volcanic explosion eons ago. Each island varies in terrain, flora and fauna, but what is astonishing is the proximity and fearlessness of the creatures themselves, many of which are unique to each island. Iguanas huddle in cozy groups like old (really old) friends at a reunion, arms flung over shoulders, gripping with almost-human hands. No wonder Darwin was dazzled when he step foot on their territory; here is living proof of evolution, not just in the famed beak of the finch, but in the appearance and demeanor of other animals as well. (Say, doesn't that iguana look a lot like Aunt Florence?)

Animal Planet

Iguanas, lava lizards, sea lions, dolphins, giant tortoises, cormorants, penguins, hawks, herons, gulls, frigate birds, red Sally lightfoot crabs, blue-footed boobies, pink flamingos—whether it's endemic species you've never encountered before or creatures you've viewed in a zoo, it's an amazing experience to see these animals not only living in their natural environment, but crawling/flying/mating right under your nose. "Don't touch," warns Joffre Herrera, our guide, "and don't let them touch you." Which can be hard to resist when an adorable stuffed-animal of a baby sea lion comes waddling up and implores you with those big brown



Blue-footed boobies admire their boobie baby.

eyes, "hug me." Joffre, a naturalist, is a knowledgeable source of information with answers to any questions we may have about the history, biology, and peculiar attributes of the creatures that inhabit these islands—including, after dinner one evening on the ship, his entertaining recounting of a local soap-opera-legend concerning some idiosyncratic settlers on the island of Floreana during the 1930s (too involved to describe here, but definitely worth hearing).

The Galapagos experience is too other-worldly to absorb at once: The arabesque mating dance of the albatross, a ballet seen from the balcony. The funny flip-flop two-step of the blue-footed boobies, who seem to be wearing swim fins. The baleful stare of a giant tortoise, who may deign to move forward a foot or two if you're patient enough. The humungous red pouch of a male frigate bird in flight, looking as if he's fleeing a bank robbery with the money in a shopping bag. The cluster of crimson crabs on a bed of lava rock, a study in red and black. And of course my little underwater sweetie, the bubble-blowing sea lion with the big brown eyes.

Legendary Voyage

Our three-night/four day voyage on the *m/v Galapagos Legend* is a pampering experience. Breakfast (including custom-made omelets) and lunch are served buffet-style,

while dinner is sit-down, followed by the evening's entertainment on the upper deck, viewed as we peer over the railing. Attracted by the ship's lights, seemingly every sea creature in the vicinity churns the waters below in a constant splash of action: dolphins, turtles, rays, sharks, sea lions, flying fish, flitting birds—it's Showtime. Later, the stars are so bright outside my window that I wake up wondering, who turned on all the lights?

In addition to our ship, the 100-passenger *Galapagos Legend*, Kleintours' fleet includes twin luxury yachts, the 36-passenger *Coral I* and the 20-passenger *Coral II*. The ships boast amenities such as private bathrooms, five-channel TV, air conditioning, and, in some rooms, panoramic windows and balconies. The social area includes a spa, bar, swimming pool, Jacuzzi, restaurant, library, meeting rooms and boutique, with a staff that is multilingual and congenial.

Chaski Antawa Train

Pre-Galapagos, the Ecuador land portion of our trip begins with a comfortable overnight stay in Quito at either the Marriott or the Dann Carlton, followed the next day by a city tour that takes us to Ibarra, where we board the Chaski Antawa messenger train that will take us to lunch in Salinas. A bright red, two-coach re-creation of the old classic trains, its route weaves through the mountainous Andean corridor. The open train provides 360° views of this gorgeous countryside, a magical tour past cloud-enveloped volcanoes, through tunnels and over canyon-spanning bridges. Our guide Roberto Peralta and assistant Gabriel Vásquez keep us snacking along the way, offering chunks of sugar cane, bites of cherimoya (custard apple), and local cheese and biscuits.

Sponsored by Kleintours, the Chaski Antawa social project aims to help the people in the area of the Valley of Salinas by making it a tourist destination. Kleintours has invested not only in the train, but in a traditional arts and crafts workshop located in Salinas, as well as the restaurant where we have lunch at the end of our train trip. The project teaches the villagers cooking, nutrition, and service, and the manufacturing and marketing of their native crafts.

Shop 'Til You Drop

Our tour continues, taking us to the outdoor indigenous market in Otavalo: wall-to-wall (or stall-to-stall) native crafts including alpaca scarves, blankets, toys, jewelry, purses, flutes and other handmade objects created by local artists and craftspeople. Considered one of the "don't miss" craft markets in the world, it's a big, bustling, colorful array of Ecuadorian goodies.

Next stop: overnight at the Hosteria Hacienda Pinsaqui in the Lake Province. Steeped in history since its construction

in 1790, the restored hacienda is an authentic reminder of Colonial days. Surrounded by lush tropical palms and flowers, the hacienda is a romantic reminder of a time when fireplaces and candles lit the way for visitors such as Simón Bolívar, who spent nights here on his way to and from Bogotá.

We are welcomed by a roaring fire, a yummy tea that tastes like cinnamon and some wonderful liqueur, and a rousing band of Andean musicians who keep us wide awake until it's time for dinner and then some much-needed sleep in a room with its own little wood stove. In the morning, there are peacocks.

Our travels the following day take us 10,000 feet up the mountains to the crater lake Cuicocha, where the fog-obscured lake gradually reveals its islands like some mythical Avalon. Roberto informs us that witch doctors often meet here—believable in the mysterious swirling mist of this place. On a less ethereal but more practical note, we visit the town of Cotacachi, site of an open-air marketplace, and, as I later discover, an adjoining street of fine leather shops which I missed because I was wandering among the native craft stalls without a clue. The real leather treasures were just around the corner in shops that feature true bargains in stylish purses, shoes, jackets and other goods in the softest of leathers and suedes. My missed opportunity of the trip—but the outdoor market was fun.

Following our three-night/four-day Galapagos adventure, we return to Quito. After a luminous tour of Quito by night and a fun farewell dinner livened by yet another Andean band, a gigantic arrangement of roses in the lobby of the Hotel Dann Carlton brightens the end of the evening before we retire for the night. Roses, it seems, are everywhere in Ecuador, home of the long-stemmed rose—exported in quantity and in great profusion wherever you look. Even my bed had a perfect red rose to welcome me. I hated to leave it behind.

Even more, I hated to leave Ecuador and the Galapagos. I miss my little sweetie, my brown-eyed, bubble-blowing sea lion. But I'll be back.

What, Where and How (Much)

Galapagos Cruise and Ecuador Land

(including lodging, Chaski Antawa train and Otavalo),

9 days including 3 night/4 day cruise: \$2490;

AeroGal Aerolineas Galapagos, www.aerogal.com.ed/

Miami-Quito-Miami: \$412; Quito-Galapagos-Quito:

\$417.90;

J.W. Marriott Quito, [www.marriott.com/hotel/travel/](http://www.marriott.com/hotel/travel/uioodt.jwmarriott-hotel-quito/)

uioodt.jwmarriott-hotel-quito/;

Hotel Dann Carlton Quito, www.danncarltonquito.com;

Hosteria Hacienda Pinsaqui, www.haciendapinsaqui.com

Kleintours, www.kleintours.com

M/V ANTARCTIC DREAM SET FOR EXCITING 2009-10 SEASON

Antarctic Shipping S.A. looks to another successful season for the *Antarctic Dream* Expedition, after a year that saw over 40 different nationalities enjoy its thrilling voyage. Again, the passenger ship has been running one- to two-week expeditions between seasons in the Arctic departing from Spitsbergen, Norway, until mid-September when it returns to Ushuaia to begin its exciting 2009-10 Antarctic season.

Antarctic Shipping S.A. was created in 2002 by a group of former naval officers with the goal of reconditioning the former *Piloto Pardo* with the best available technology and comfort for tourism trips to the Antarctic Peninsula. The new cruise ship, *M/V Antarctic Dream*, provides the unforgettable experience of touring the Antarctic and neighboring islands for 11 days from November to March.

Passengers on a typical voyage range from age 30–75. The expeditions attract independent-minded travelers with a strong interest in exploring remote regions, and the camaraderie and spirit that develops is an important part of the expedition experience. All the voyages have a wide variety of nationalities aboard led by at least five expedition staff and 43 crewmembers.

Among the features of the *Antarctic Dream* are cabins that have closed-circuit TV and individual/central heaters, a command bridge open to passengers, zodiacs, a bar, library, auditorium/projection lounge, fitness room/sauna, boutique, heliport, and sick bay/First Aid (doctor on board). The ship meets all safety and quality standards required by the demanding market.

Antarctic Dream's 2009-10 season begins November 7. Space is still available. Those interested are urged to visit the website for detailed information and pricing. On the Announcements page, travelers can get a feel for *Antarctic Dream's* exhilarating adventure by linking to a video and reading feedback.

Antarctic Shipping S.A. is the first Chilean company to boast a cruise ship featuring trips to the Antarctic. The company's commercial headquarters are located in Santiago.

Antarctic Shipping S.A., 877-AD TRIPS (238-7477), antarctic@antarctic.cl, www.antarcticdream.com

ANTARPPPLY EXPEDITIONS HAS NEW PROMOTIONAL RATES

Antarpply Expeditions' Classic Antarctica expedition cruise aboard the *USHUAIA* offers a spectacular show of the pristine the Antarctic Peninsula and South Shetland Islands. The voyage navigates some of the most beautiful waterways between towering rock faces and spectacular glaciers, with up to two landings a day if possible.

Passengers have an opportunity to experience such highlights as famous Beagle Channel, scenic Mackinlay Pass, Drake Passage, Livingston Island and King George Island, the largest of the South Shetland Islands, with colonies of many varieties of penguins, gulls, terns, and seals—and often whales in their natural habitats. The island is home to many different countries' scientific bases.

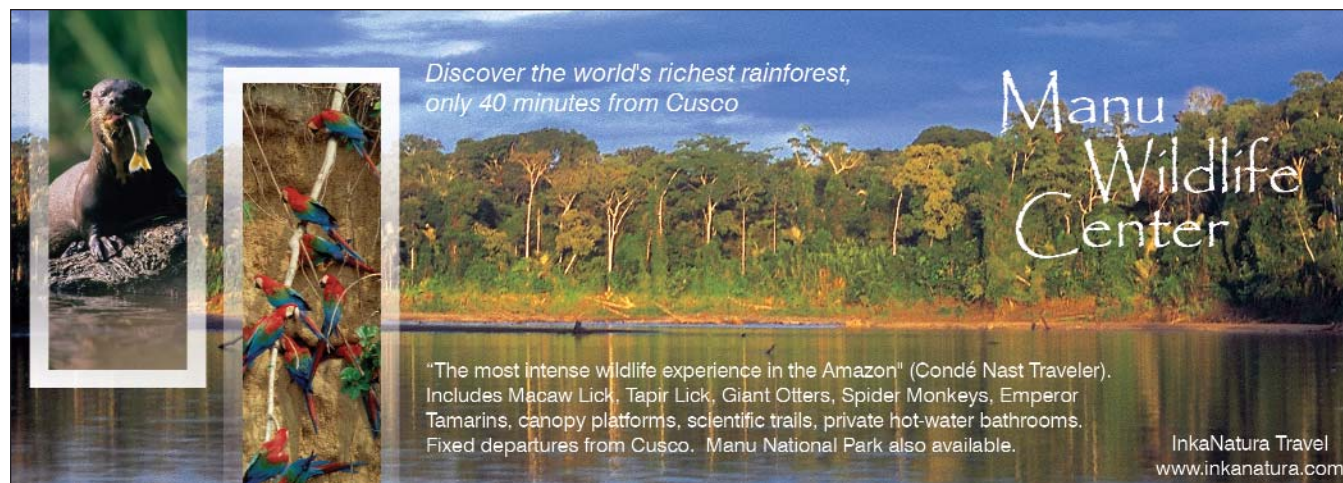
Antarpply Expeditions has announced special 2009-10 season promotional rates for bookings received by September 30, 2009, that start as low as \$3,950 ppdo for nine nights/10 days, and \$4,390 ppdo for 10-night/11-day itineraries. Voyage departures are from November 7, 2009 to March 30, 2010.

Included in the price are the voyage aboard the *USHUAIA* as indicated in the itinerary, meals throughout the voyage aboard the *USHUAIA*, shore excursions and activities throughout the voyage by zodiac, a program of lectures by noted naturalists and leadership by experienced expedition staff, miscellaneous service taxes and port charges throughout the program, comprehensive pre-departure material and a detailed post-expedition log.

Not included is any airfare, whether on scheduled or charter flights; pre- and post land arrangements; transfers to/from the vessel; passport and visa expenses; government arrival and departure taxes; meals ashore; baggage, cancellation and personal insurance (recommended); excess baggage charges and all items of a personal nature such as bar and beverage charges and telecommunication charges; and the customary gratuity at the end of the voyages (guidelines provided).

The vacation is fully detailed on the website.

Antarpply Expeditions, info@antarpply.com, infoantarpply@speedy.com.ar, www.antarpply.com



Discover the world's richest rainforest, only 40 minutes from Cusco

Manu Wildlife Center

"The most intense wildlife experience in the Amazon" (Condé Nast Traveler). Includes Macaw Lick, Tapir Lick, Giant Otters, Spider Monkeys, Emperor Tamarins, canopy platforms, scientific trails, private hot-water bathrooms. Fixed departures from Cusco. Manu National Park also available.

InkaNatura Travel
www.inkanatura.com

The Broad Success Formula of Gran Pacifica in Nicaragua

Investors and retirees find more for less when they join ECI's innovative development, and they get to better the lives of locals while they're at it.

It's a project where everyone wins. An investment equation guaranteed to please those in search of pleasurable, affordable comfort, and regional workers who see their lives improving as their talents and products are added to the mix. Not to mention savvy investors who continue to demonstrate that "spreading tourism around" benefits all.



MICHAEL COBB

Michael Cobb, CEO of ECI Development, talks about Gran Pacifica—a lovely, innovative beachfront resort project that's putting smiles on the faces of investors, new residents and guests, and the native populations welcoming them. To a great extent, the company relies on local companies to supply its

needs, and is quite satisfied, according to Mike, with the product selection, workmanship and quality they've realized here.

Travel World News: *I imagine the local effects being incorporated into Gran Pacifica add immensely to its charming beauty. How did you come upon this remarkable idea to source from the natural surround, while effectively boosting—and uplifting—Nicaragua's labor force?*

Mike Cobb: "Many of our founders are Rotarians and/or have longstanding humanitarian and service hearts. Our project is first and foremost a business venture designed to make a profit, but making a profit and serving the community are two sides of the same coin. A core philosophy that runs deep in our organization is the helping hand rather than a hand-out. Gran Pacifica is already delivering on this goal and has the potential to be a huge engine for employment, tax generation, training and social growth of the region over the next 25 years." From an architectural standpoint, Nicaragua has an incredible heritage of architecture, and the patterns and possibilities to use an authentic interpretation of this treasure are very special indeed. Our pattern book is a sophisticated means to ensure compliance to the tradition, but with enough flexibility to allow for creative expression on the part of today's Nicaraguan architects. Every home on the property has been designed by a local architect, something we are very proud of.

TWN: *How does Gran Pacifica differentiate itself from other residential developments for retirees in Nicaragua?*

MC: Gran Pacifica has spent over \$10 million in infrastructure and construction to assure a high level of services and amenities for our residents and guests. Paved streets, sidewalks, water, sewer and fiber-optic Internet and cable TV are standards. This, and a requirement to build a home when purchasing a property, have created over 45 addresses complete in just three years. A real community is shaping up. If you want neighbors and state-of-the-art services, we have set ourselves apart from almost all others in Nicaragua and the region.

TWN: *What is the range of size permitted for purchasing parcels in your development? And prices? Are the properties sold furnished—or not, if desired?*

MC: Lots range from 6,000 square feet to 10,000 square feet and prices range from \$69,000 to \$250,000. We have village, golf and ocean-view lots. Home sites have a two-year must-build clause in the paperwork. Most folks are now choosing a turnkey home. It's just so much simpler. Complete home packages with a casita village lot start at \$99,900 unfurnished. We have an integrated design team who assists with color selection, decorating and furniture packages for folks who want that. We also have a property and rental management group who provide after care and concierge services to owners and guests.

TWN: *Has the sudden downturn in the U.S. economy, and to a slightly lesser extent, the world's, affected the boom in Latin American development, perhaps causing somewhat of an exodus to countries where one can live more cheaply in a pleasant, warm, less-hurried atmosphere?*

MC: Yes, and this will quicken as people realize that, more and more, they have much less than they anticipated in retirement. An E&Y study done last year points to this and the state of many retirees is terribly sad. E&Y predicts that 60 percent may face the prospect of living past their assets. I can't think of a worse fate in retirement than every day worrying about living longer than my money lasts. Moving to Latin America offers a higher quality of life for less and may be a silver bullet for many trapped by limited incomes and what will likely be higher prices if/when inflation kicks in.

TWN: *Can one expect to find most of the conveniences they've left behind in America? Is that one of the benefits of owning/residing in a real developer's development here?*

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GRAN PACIFICA FROM PAGE 39

MC: Moving to Latin America is an adjustment in culture, but many of the things we take for granted like fast Internet, water pressure, etc. we have integrated into Gran Pacifica. This is rare in many projects in much of the region. Either the developer has invested and built these things or they do not exist. Many projects are simply ghost towns with no homes, limited infrastructure and little hope of ever being much more. Real consumers, people looking to live in Latin America, should demand to see the reality of infrastructure and amenities. Promises are easy for a developer to make, but extremely difficult to deliver upon. Especially now in today's financial climate. A great mantra for buyers is to "Buy what you see."

Other quality-of-life aspects will be addressed by Gran Pacifica in the next few years as we get a critical mass of residents who can begin to develop their own ideas of what is meaningful for them. Gran Pacifica has built the physical infrastructure. However, it is far better for associations, clubs, shops, restaurants, amenities to take root and grow organically from the needs and wants of the residents.

The magic number is about 60 residents for this to occur in a large and sustainable way. Gran Pacifica should hit this threshold in the next two years, and when we do, the community functions will take on a life of their own. This is the best possible scenario.

Nicaragua's Director of Government Affairs Adiak Barahona acknowledges ECI's vast contributions in the areas of: job creation at all levels, permanent infrastructure and environmental protection, social programs and donations, tax generation, local supply chain development, the commercialization of national products and services for tourists, the creation of business opportunities and the support of micro-companies, and the promotion of Nicaragua as an attractive and safe tourist destination.

Details on owning in Gran Pacifica and other features of this retirement choice are explained on the website.

Gran Pacifica, 800-959-NICA (6422),

www.granpacifica.com/why.html,

info@granpacifica.com, www.granpacifica.com

NATUREAIR GETS PRESTIGIOUS WTTC AWARD



Alex E. Khajavi, CEO NatureAir and Brett Tollman, Board Member of the World Tourism and Travel Council.

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) has named NatureAir the 2009 Tourism for Tomorrow Conservation Award winner for best demonstrating sustainable tourism practices, and commitment to the protection of its natural heritage.

NatureAir was selected for its 100-percent carbon neutral aviation program that engages customers in a non-voluntary carbon offset scheme, and a commitment to fuel reduction in the air and on the ground. NatureAir has developed Costa Rica's only bio-diesel fueling station, and formed the non-profit foundation NatureKids, which teaches local communities English and Environmental studies.

"In 2004, NatureAir made a highly ambitious pledge to set new standards for sustainable practices in the airline industry, compensating for 100 percent of its greenhouse gas emissions through preservation and reforestation of tropical forests in the Osa Peninsula," said Jean-Claude Baumgarten, WTTC President & CEO following the awards ceremony in Florianópolis, Brazil, at the 9th Global Travel & Tourism Summit.

The Tourism for Tomorrow Awards have been dubbed as the 'Oscars' of the tourism industry. As part of the judging process, applicants are required to fill out a comprehensive application form, and then finalists must partake in a thorough multi-day on-site evaluation by the Chairman of Judges.

NatureAir, www.natureair.com; World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), www.wttc.org

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HILTON HOTELS RETURNS TO PANAMA WITH FOUR PROPERTIES

Hilton Hotels Corporation announced its return to Panama with the signing of four multi-year agreements in Panama City, Panama: two management agreements for a brand-new Hilton and new-build Embassy Suites by Hilton hotel, one franchise agreement for a Doubletree by Hilton™ conversion and one franchise agreement for a newly-built Hilton Garden Inn. Each hotel will represent the first in the country for each brand.

“We are truly excited about these developments in Panama City and being back in such a great city,” commented Daniel Hughes, senior vice president of operations, Caribbean, Mexico, and Latin America, for Hilton Hotels Corporation. The 351-room Hilton Panama will be a first-class property developed by Star Bay Group, Inc., and Hilton Hotels Corporation will operate the hotel under the terms of a multi-year management agreement. Led by F&F Properties and its president Saul Faskha, construction of the Hilton Panama has begun and completion is scheduled for 2011. Located in Panama City’s financial district, the 27-floor hotel will form part of a 68-floor mixed-use complex with 650,000 square feet of office space.

The Embassy Suites by Hilton Panama City will be developed by Sabadell Investment Inc. and Hilton Hotels Corporation will operate the hotel under the terms of a multi-year management agreement. Located in the prime financial district of Panama City, the 21-floor hotel will be part of 71-story building with premier office space.

The Doubletree by Hilton Panama City will be developed and operated by Blue Star Hospitality, S.A., under a franchise agreement with Hilton Hotels Corporation. The 213-room property is undergoing an extensive renovation to re-brand as a Doubletree by Hilton hotel in Spring 2010. The eight-story hotel is strategically located at one of the city’s most important intersections in the business district.

Developed by Metropolitan Hotels SA, the Hilton Garden Inn Panama will feature 163 spacious guestrooms and seven suites offering the Garden Sleep System® bed; ergonomic Mirra® chair by Herman Miller; MP3 capable clock radio, and more. The hotel also features a complimentary 24-hour business center.

All properties will participate in Hilton HHonors®, the only guest rewards program that allows members to earn Points & Miles® for the same stay and redeem points for free nights with No Blackout Dates.

Ted Middleton, senior vice president, development, the Americas, for Hilton Hotels Corporation commented, “Hilton’s expansion in Panama City is part of our overall plan to grow our portfolio of properties in the Caribbean and Latin America. Owners and developers understand the value of our brands and we are very optimistic about our growth opportunities in the region.”

Panama City is the political and cultural center of Panama, and the financial center of Central America.

Hilton Hotels Corporation, www1.hilton.com/en_US/hi/index.do

LARRY WATERMAN WINS MIAMI AIRPORT “VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR” AWARD PLUS A PRESIDENTIAL CITATION



Retiring after 40 years in sales and marketing with the airlines, including Pan American, LACSA, and, TACA, Larry Waterman answered an ad seven years ago for customer service volunteers at MIA and has not only won an award from the Miami airport for his dedication (more than 4,000 hours), but also received the, “U.S. Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award,” the highest level of recognition given by the President’s Council on Service and Civic Participation.



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