



**PROJECT REPORT**  
**GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP**  
**December 3 - 11, 2023**

**Executive Summary**

From December 3<sup>rd</sup> to December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully led a volunteer trip to San Cristóbal and Isla Isabela in the Galápagos Islands. The six-member volunteer group included ConservationVIP® trip leader Mark Hardgrove. Ecuadorian guide Andres de la Torre aided the group throughout the trip with transportation, meal logistics, and local guide translations as needed. His knowledge of the park and islands, wildlife, history, birds, and culture contributed significantly to the experience of the volunteers. In addition, Genesis Coronel and Jenina who are certified Galápagos National Park Service local guides accompanied the group at various locations on the trip.



Group volunteer activities supported the ongoing sea turtle research project conducted by the University of San Francisco de Quito at the Galápagos Science Center on San Cristóbal Island. Dr. Judy Denkinger, Marine Biologist/Professor from the University of San Francisco de Quito and Project Manager, oversees the sea turtle project volunteer work on San Cristóbal and Isabela. Volunteers photographed sea turtles at four different locations on the islands of Santa Cristobal and Isla Isabela which contributed data for the University of San Francisco Science Center's Sea turtle research database.

The volunteer group also briefly worked to improve the habitat at Campo Duro on Isla Isabela where now only two giant tortoises are raised in a protected environment until they are mature or healthy enough to be released in a natural setting in Galápagos National Park. In addition, all areas we visited or worked in were surveyed for plastics and trash pickup was conducted if necessary. The removal of ground trash, especially plastics, helps protect the nesting and feeding of shore birds, sea turtles, sea lions, and reduces ocean pollution that negatively affects all sea life.

During the trip, a total of 175 volunteer hours were devoted to orientation, job training, safety and volunteer projects. This included 120 hours of sea turtle survey and data collection:

- San Cristobal: Darwin Bay Survey 4 hours
- Kicker Rock 5 hours
- Loberia 3 hours
- Isabela Bahia Tintores 3 hours
- Los Tuneles 5 hours

At Campo Duro we worked 12 volunteer hours (including travel and work) on giant tortoise habitat improvements. During our hikes 42 hours of trash survey and collection.

- Sierra Negra Hike 10 km 5 hours
- Cliff hike at La Loberia 4km 2 hours

Utilizing GoPro cameras at the five sea turtle survey sites, the volunteer group collected 1300 digital photographs of underwater marine life. These sea turtle and other marine life photographs supply data about sea turtle populations to support the research conducted by the University of San Francisco de Quito at the Galápagos Science Center. Facial recognition software is used to analyze the photographs, giving the researchers new data each trip.

## Detailed Trip Report

### Day 1:

The trip Leaders and Ecuadorian guide Andres de la Torre led an in-depth orientation at the hotel Casa Opuntia on San Cristóbal Island, beginning at 2:00 PM. Following the orientation, the group hiked to the Interpretive Center and Darwin Bay (the location where Charles Darwin first landed in 1835), for background information about the history of the island with an introduction to the flora/fauna of the island. An extensive walk was conducted allowing the group to learn about endemic vs. native vs. invasive plants and animals.



**Day 2:**

After breakfast, the group travelled by bus to Centro de Crianza de Tortugas. At the Crianza, which is part of the Galápagos National Park's semi-natural breeding programs and sanctuaries for giant tortoises, the volunteers began their education and familiarization with giant tortoises. The volunteers were able to see tortoises from recently hatched to approximately 40 years of age in the breeding center. They were then able to observe the giant tortoises while they were being fed, observing behavioral characteristics.





The group then was transported to Puerto China where we all hiked along a boardwalk down to the shoreline. Here we climbed a small rock peninsula to view the sea lions and marine birds in action. After a hike back to our bus, we returned to the hotel and walked to lunch.

After lunch, the volunteers were fitted with wet suits, snorkel and camera gear, then hiked to La Loberia Bay for their first volunteer activity in support of the sea turtle research project. Several sea turtles were spotted as well as a beautiful/various fish. This location allowed the volunteers to get comfortable snorkeling and using the GoPro cameras.

### **Day 3:**

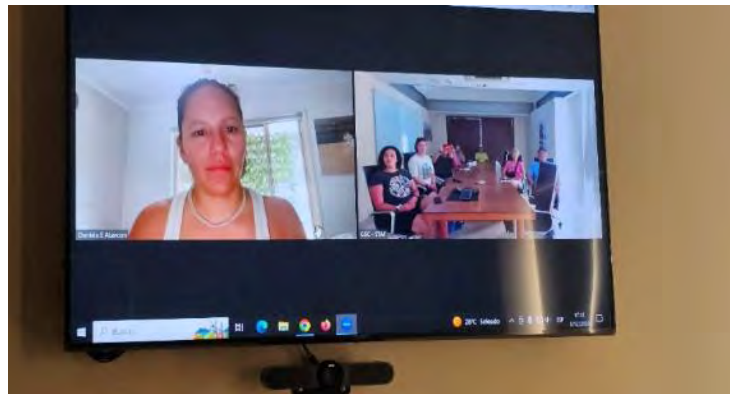
After breakfast, the volunteers hiked to Darwin Bay where they deposited their snorkeling gear and then went on a hike allowing them to see a number of birds nesting along the coastal rock formations, marine iguanas and to experience the volcanic activity that has created the island. After returning to the beach, the group donned their snorkeling gear and surveyed La Loberia bay. Sea Lions along with sea turtles, marine iguana's and schools of various fish were plentiful. The group members, by this point, were very good at snorkeling and obtained photos of the sea turtles and other marine life.





After returning to the hotel to clean up and rest, the group went to the University de San Francisco Science Center where they received a tour by two of the Science Center Interpreters. The volunteers were able to see the labs where research is conducted and receive an overview of the types of research/conservation work being done at the Science Center.

The group then assembled for a slide presentation by Daniela Alarcon Rual. Since Daniela is completing her PhD in Australia, her presentation was presented via Satellite from Australia to the Science Center! Our Volunteers received specific information on how the facial recognition program is being used to gain an understanding of marine turtles and aid in the conservation efforts. This allows the individual sea turtle to be tracked all over the world giving insight into their migratory patterns, mating behavior, etc. The turtles are under threat due to warming waters, boat strikes, pollution and the number of predators eating the eggs that are laid on shore. Many questions were asked by the volunteers showing significant appreciation for the projects in collaboration with the Center.

**Day 4:**

After breakfast, the volunteers boarded a boat for the trip to Kicker Rock, a volcanic cone featuring a monolithic rock formation rising over 500 feet above the ocean. On the journey we observed many birds including blue-footed boobies, Nazca boobies, frigate birds, and the swallow tail gulls. The boats then proceeded to Kicker Rock and took a tour around these large rocks allowing for different views and more spotting of wildlife. The group spent approximately two hours in the water using the GoPro's to take pictures of turtles, fish, sea lions and sharks. Approximately 15-20 sea turtles were photographed as well as several eagle rays and sharks.







Upon returning to the boat, the group shared what they had seen and experienced. The sight of sharks, stingrays and such a large number of sea turtles was an amazing experience. A delicious freshly prepared lunch was then served on the boat.

The group was then taken to Magdalena bay. This presented the opportunity to interact with wildlife in their natural environment including sea lions and marine iguanas. After returning by boat back to San Cristóbal we walked to the hotel and after getting cleaned up, the group was then taken to a local chef's home for a special dinner. This also supplied the opportunity to say goodbye to Genesis and thank her for her passion, energy, and friendship.

#### **Day 5:**

The group all boarded a 9-passenger plane for a 45-minute flight from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela.



Upon arrival the group met the local guide, Janina.



After checking in at the hotel, Janina led the group on a hike to the Centro de Crianza, the Giant Tortoise Center on Isla Isabela, where tortoises are bred and kept in safe captivity from the time they hatch until they reach the maturity necessary for safe release into a wilder environment or into their natural habitat. While at the Crianza, the group learned about the captive breeding program, which supports several subspecies of tortoises. They also learned that Campo Duro, where they would be performing volunteer work later in the week, is one of the wilder environments where injured young giant tortoises go prior to release into the wild.

Following lunch, the group members were fitted with their bikes/helmets for the ride to the Wall of Tears. The ride, 10 miles round trip, ends at the Wall of Tears, which serves as a haunting reminder of the time when Isla Isabela was used as a penal colony. Prisoners toiled in the hot equatorial sun to build this monument as punishment to serve their time. Along the way, the group got to see several Giant Tortoises in their natural environment.





They stopped at a mature mangrove area and the local guide Janina walked them through a mangrove forest to a freshwater area and explained to the group more about mangroves and the key role they play in preventing loss of land mass during storms. Along the way, the group hiked up to the viewpoint where they had an almost 360-degree view of the island.



### Day 6:

Today the group was shuttled by bus to the marina and boarded a boat to the Islet of Tintoreras where different forms of lava on the islands are found and mangrove trees are more mature. Blue-footed boobies, lava egrets, crabs, and many adult and juvenile marine iguanas, and sea lions inhabit the area. During the boat tour the group were able to see a Galapagos Penguin (the most Northern penguin in the world).



First, the group took a short hike led by Janina, the local guide, exploring lava rock formations, an assortment of iguanas and a few white-tipped reef sharks in the surrounding waters. Various bird species were seen as well. The group then performed their fourth and last snorkeling volunteer work in the waters of Las Tintoreras. The area was full of sea turtles and other marine life. The activity presented the group with the opportunity to continue to take pictures of Sea Turtles for identification purposes.



The group checked out of the hotel and boarded the bus to Campo Duro, the location for the next volunteer project of the trip. Campo Duro is an Eco-Camp located in the cooler, lush, tropical highlands on the slopes of the Sierra Negra Volcano. The camp works under permit with the Galápagos National Park. The 6-acre privately-owned camp found within the park boundaries provides a protected reserve to help raise Giant Tortoises in a more natural environment prior to being released into the wild. The project for our volunteers for this trip was to cut back the excessive vegetation by mowing lanes through the tall grasses. This new approach will allow the grass areas to be mowed more frequently promoting grass vs weeds. It also will allow the longer natural areas for ground nesting bird habitat.



Upon arrival, the group received an orientation and overview of the camp including orientation to the tortoise pen where the tortoises stay until they are released into the wild. After lunch, the group began the work focused on cutting back the excessive vegetation and growth inside the fenced area.



Campo Duro Tents

In addition, a weed whacker funded by ConservationVIP® worked for two days to trim the grass and weeds. The volunteers enjoyed the beautiful, lush surroundings, organic food, homemade Aji, outdoor showers and the quiet, dark evening with no artificial light pollution. Our evening was spent enjoying a country style dinner and a roaring campfire.





Campo Duro tents/mattress

**Day 7:**

The Volunteers left Campo Duro after breakfast traveling by bus to the Sierra Negra trailhead where we started a 10-mile hike. Along the way, the local guide Janina and Andres, gave them an extensive introduction to the volcanic origins of the Galápagos Islands including the 2015 and 2018 eruption events. They hiked the trail along the caldera up to the point that was impacted by the 2018 fissure eruption. The volunteers were able to gain insight into the forces of nature that continue to create the island.

**Day 8:**

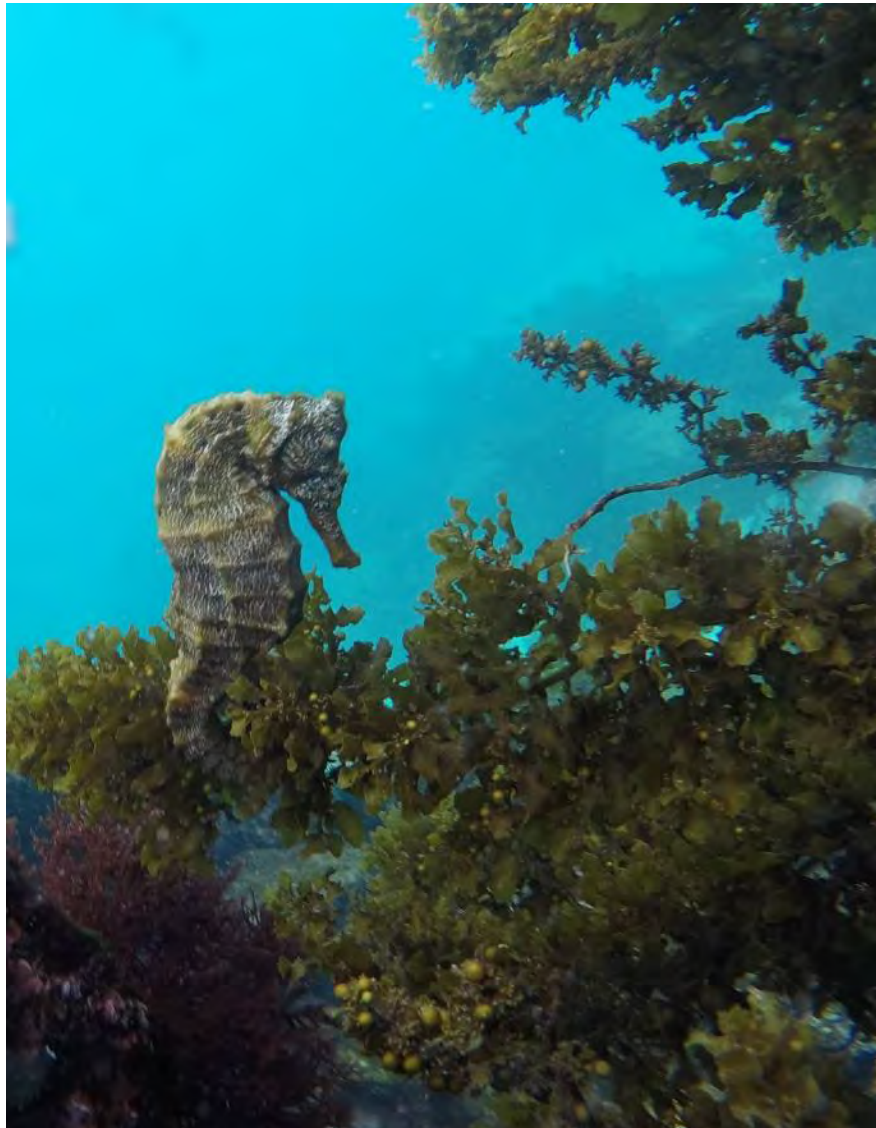
We all traveled by boat from the marina to Los Tunneles. After entering the water to survey the area, the group was able to photograph a number of large sea turtles (the largest seen thus far), white tip sharks, a stingray, a Moray Eel, an octopus as well as several sea horses whose size is unique to the Galapagos. The topography of the land underwater consists of a number of tunnels created by lava flows, giving the volunteers a unique perspective on the lava formations compared with what they had seen previously.







Los Tuneles



In the evening, volunteers enjoyed a special dinner and celebrated the new friendships and lasting memories. The group had prepared a special presentation for their Ecuadorian guide, Andres, thanking him for his work during the trip including the coordination and arrangements of hotels, rooms and restaurants, the fabulous food and especially his knowledge of the local culture, islands, birds and flora and fauna. The compassion and the positive attitudes of the volunteers on this trip were infectious and aided in the large amount of work done. They made it look easy.

**Day 9:**

In the morning after breakfast, the group flew to Baltra from Isabela again on the small plane, arriving in time to catch their connecting flights to other destinations or to home. Volunteers left understanding the significance of the Galapagos and that even small accomplishments make a huge positive impact! Indeed: "ordinary people performing extraordinary services".



Submitted by Mark Hardgrove Trip Leader for ConservationVIP®