



**PROJECT REPORT
GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP
January 19 - 27, 2025**

Executive Summary

From January 19 to January 27, 2025, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully led a volunteer trip to San Cristóbal and Isla Isabela in the Galápagos Islands. The ten-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 Maya Fernandez, 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 visited Campo Duro on Isla Isabela where currently two giant tortoises are being raised in a protected environment until they are mature or are 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 384 volunteer hours were devoted to orientation, job training, safety and volunteer projects. This included 230 hours of sea turtle survey and data collection at five sites:

Loberia Bay - 4 hours

San Cristobal: Darwin Bay Survey - 4 hours

Kicker Rock - 5 hours

Isabela Bahia Tintores - 5 hours

Los Tuneles - 5 hours

Totaling 230 volunteer hours contributed by our team

Utilizing GoPro cameras at the four sea turtle survey sites, the volunteer group collected 1550 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 photographs, giving the researchers new data each trip. Also photographs of any disease or boat strikes aid the researchers with important data sets.

At Campo Duro we completed a new mowing plan which allows sufficient habitat for the two giant tortoises along with natural areas for the ground nesting seabirds.

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. Some of the group swam in Darwin Bay to experience the water temperature.

**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 watch the giant tortoises while they were being fed, observing behavioral characteristics.



The group then was transported to El Junco Lake, a freshwater lake in an extinct volcano cone in the highlands. 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 the first volunteer activity in support of the sea turtle research project. Before snorkeling, they 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. Several sea turtles were spotted as well as beautiful various fish. This location allowed the volunteers to get comfortable snorkeling and using the GoPro cameras.

Day 3:

The group boarded a bus and drove up to the highlands to visit Hacienda Tranquila. We were given a tour of this sustainable farm which raises cattle, chickens and goats, as well as helps eradicate invasive non-native vegetation and is planting native trees and fruit trees. It is also a research center for studying and monitoring the endangered native Galapagos petrels.

The group then assembled for a slide presentation by Daniela Alarcon Rual. The volunteers received specific information on how the facial recognition program for the sea turtles 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 rising water temperatures, 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.

After the tour and presentation, a delicious lunch of local food was served under a pavilion up on a hill with a beautiful view of the surrounding farm.

Day 4:

After breakfast, the volunteers split up and boarded two boats 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 Hammerhead 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 boats.

The group was then taken to Maglacena bay. This presented the opportunity to interact with wildlife in their natural environment including sea lions, marine iguanas and more sea turtles. 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 boarded two small planes for a 45-minute flight from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela.



Upon arrival the group met the local guide, Maya. After checking in at the hotel, Maya 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.

Following lunch, the group members were fitted with their bikes and 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 guide Maya 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 saw several Galapagos Penguin (the most Northern penguin in the world).

The group took a short hike exploring lava rock formations and saw 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 more 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.

Upon returning to the hotel the group boarded a bus to Campo Duro, which 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.



ConservationVIP® provides funds for Camp Duro to employ an individual to weed whack a good part of the 6-acre property to trim the grass and weeds. This promotes the grass to grow and helps keep down the weeds. It also allows the natural areas to provide natural habitat for ground nesting birds.

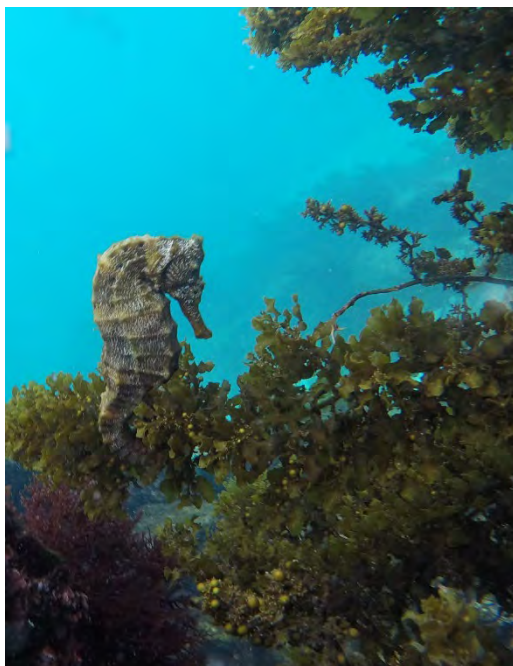


Upon arrival, the group received a tour and overview of the camp including orientation to the tortoise pen where the tortoises stay until they are released into the wild. Arriving at 3 pm, after putting belongings in the assigned tents, the group collected firewood for an evening campfire. The volunteers 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 an Ecuadorian country-style dinner and a roaring campfire.



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 Maya and Andres gave the group an extensive introduction to the volcanic origins of the Galápagos Islands including the 2015 and 2018 eruption events. We 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. The group then bussed back to hotel.

Day 8:

The group 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, stingrays 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.

In the evening, volunteers enjoyed a special dinner and celebrated the new friendships and lasting memories. The group had prepared a special presentation for Ecuadorian guide, Andres, thanking him for his work during the trip including the coordination and arrangements of hotels,

transportation 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.

Day 9:

In the morning after breakfast, the group flew to Baltra from Isabela again on two small planes, arriving in time to catch 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®