



**PROJECT REPORT
GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP
January 25 through February 2, 2026**

Galapagos Islands, Ecuador Volunteer Trip Report – February 2026

Executive Summary

In January 2026, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully led a volunteer trip to *San Cristóbal* and *Isabela* Islands in the Galápagos Islands. The group of nine volunteers included Mark Hardgrove and Rubén Fernández Vélez, the trip leaders. Ecuadorian guide Andrés de la Torres assisted the group throughout the trip with transportation, meal logistics, and translations for local guides as needed. His knowledge of the park and islands, wildlife, history, birds, and culture significantly enhanced the volunteers' experience. Also participating were local guides certified by the Galapagos National Park Service, Genesis and Janina, who accompanied the group on *San Cristóbal* and *Isabela* islands.



Galapagos Sea Turtle

The group's 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. Volunteers photographed sea turtles at five separate locations on the islands of Santa Cristóbal and Isla Isabela which contributed data for the University of San Francisco Science Center's Sea turtle research database.

In addition, the volunteers group also visited and enjoyed the experience of spending the night at the eco-friendly Campo Duro Eco-Campo, as well as enjoying stargazing and its beautiful sunrise. Additionally, in each of the areas we visited or volunteered in, we surveyed for plastics and removed trash when necessary. The removal of ground trash, especially plastics, helps protect the nesting and feeding of shore birds, sea turtles, and sea lions, and reduces ocean pollution that negatively affects all sea life.

During the trip, a total of 90 volunteer hours were devoted to orientation, task training, safety and volunteer projects. This prepared the group for 234 hours of sea turtle survey and data collection at five collection sites:

Loberia Bay - 5 hours
Darwin Bay Survey - 4 hours
Kicker Rock - 6 hours

Isabela Bahia Tintores - 5 hours
Los Tuneles - 6 hours
Totaling 324 volunteer hours contributed by our team

Utilizing GoPro cameras at five sea turtle survey sites, the volunteer group collected 1,400 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. Modified facial recognition software is used to analyze photographs, giving the researchers new data each trip. Also, photographs of the turtles which indicate any disease or boat strikes aid the researchers with important data sets. We also photographed the carapace to document any injuries, or blade strikes which may have injured the individual sea turtle during its life.



Sea Turtle



Sea horse



Chocolate chip Sea Star



Sea Lion

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, which is the location where Charles Darwin first landed in 1835, for background information about the history of the island with an introduction to the flora and fauna of the island. An extensive walk was conducted allowing the group to learn about endemic vs. native vs. invasive plants and animals.



Darwin's Bay

Day 2:

After breakfast, the group travelled by bus to Centro de Crianza de Tortugas. At *Centro de 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 which ranged in age 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.



San Cristóbal Island Breeding Center

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 Lobería* 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 several sea birds nesting along the coastal rock formations, marine iguanas and to experience the volcanic activity that has created the island. While snorkeling, several sea turtles were spotted and photographed as well as various beautiful fish, and juvenile and adult sea lions. This location allowed the volunteers to get comfortable snorkeling and using the GoPro cameras.



Day 3:

The group boarded a bus for a ride to the highlands to visit *Hacienda Tranquila*. We were given a tour of this sustainable farm which raises cattle, chickens and goats and native plant species 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 Galápagos petrel.





ConservationVIP Volunteers planting endangered native *Lecocarpus Darwinii* plants

The volunteers assisted with planting endangered *Lecocarpus Darwinii* plants. After the project, we enjoyed a delicious lunch of local food served under a pavilion on a hill with a beautiful view of the surrounding farm.

Day 4:

After breakfast, the volunteers boarded our 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.



Kicker Rock (Sleeping Lion)

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, marine iguanas and more sea turtles. After returning by boat back to San Cristóbal, we walked to the hotel to get cleaned up.

Before dinner, the group then assembled for a slide presentation by Marine Biologist 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 individual sea turtles 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 temperature and fishing

from Chinese fishing fleets along with 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.

The group was then taken to a local chef's and fisherman's home for a special dinner of local seafood and vegetarian options.

Day 5:

The group boarded two small planes for a 45-minute flight from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela. Upon arrival at Isla Isabela, the group met Janina, the local guide.



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 who live in different areas of Isabela. Different species evolved as they adapted to their local regional environment, separated by huge lava flows for millions of years.

Following lunch, the group members decided not to ride the mountain bikes, so we hired a bus and visited a local mangrove boardwalk with snorkel access, and we enjoyed the crystal-clear waters while surveying the site for sea turtles. The group got to record several sea turtles and sea lions in their natural environment.



Flamingos at Isabela Mangrove

Stopping at a mature mangrove area, guide Janina walked the group 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.



Sunrise in Isabela Island. Sun at left, Moon at right

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).



Galapagos Penguin swimming with Iguana

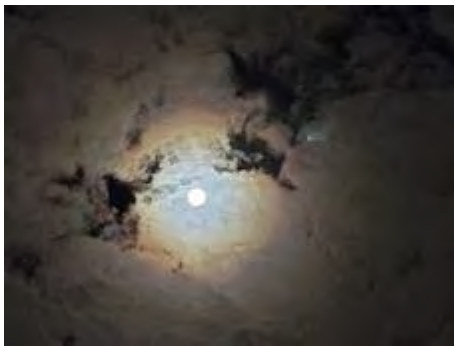


Frigates and Seagalls

After 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.



Upon arrival, the group received a tour and overview of the camp. 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, a roaring campfire and enjoying stargazing.



Full Moon at Campo Duro



Stargazing

Day 7:



Volunteers heading to Volcano Sierra Negra by bus

After breakfast, the Volunteers left Campo Duro and traveled by bus to the *Sierra Negra* trailhead where we visited a new trail into the volcano sulfur mines. This proved to be a more enjoyable way to access the *Caldera*. Along the way the local guide Janina 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 bused back to the hotel, stopping again at Campo Duro for lunch.





Volunteers at Volcano Sierra Negra, Isabela Island

Day 8:



The group traveled by boat from the marina to *Los Tuneles* (The Tunnels). After entering the water to survey the area, the group was able to photograph several large sea turtles (the largest seen thus far), white tip sharks, stingrays as well as sea horses whose size is unique to the Galapagos. The topography of the ocean floor underwater consists of several tunnels created by lava flows, giving the volunteers a unique perspective on the lava formations compared with what they had previously seen.

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.

At our final dinner together, we also thanked Janina who is one of our favorite guides. Having grown up on Isabela, she demonstrates the passion and excitement shared by the local population supporting the creation of the Galapagos National Park.



Snorkeling at Los Tuneles, Isabela Island

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!

Submitted by Mark Hardgrove
Trip Leader for ConservationVIP®