
The Galapagos Islands

[by Lindsay Van Gelder](#)

The first time we see male Great Frigate birds puffing out their bright red chests, all I can think of is tomato-flavoured bubble gum. Our little group of tourists has run smack into mating season on Tower Island in the Galapagos, which means that every time a female flies overhead to check out the merchandise, the place turns into the bird version of a construction site. Hopeful, horny males peer up from their scruffy salt bush nests, inflate the pouches on their chests, flap their wings madly, and cry "Boobleybloobletybloop" (frigateese for, "Hey, babe! Over here! Over HERE!")



Most of the time, the picky females just keep going. But soon there's another potential customer winging her way above, and out go the chests again -- balloon-like, glistening, **huge** (size matters, according to our guide)...and like so many things in the Galapagos, jaw-droppingly strange.

A holiday in the Galapagos will probably be one of the priciest you've ever taken, and even if your base were a luxury yacht, it wouldn't be one of the cushiest. On any given day, you'll have to clamber in and out of rubber boats, across petrified lava, and over lounging marine iguanas. The islands, 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, feel like the ends of the earth. This, of course, is the point.



Many expeditions to the Galapagos start or end with the opportunity to get your urban fix in Quito. High in the Andes, surrounded by snow-capped volcanoes, it has a modern new town that's reminiscent of Miami, with all the yuppie amenities from ATMs to vegetarian restaurants. Quito's old town -- a UNESCO world heritage site -- is a colonial dream of ornate churches, cobbled streets, and pastel houses with iron balconies. Just outside the city is the Mitad del Mundo - Middle of the World - where you can stand with one foot in each hemisphere. Quito is also the place to do your shopping. Andean textiles are especially a bargain: Make sure to pick up a few traditional loose-fitting cream-coloured cotton shirts as gifts (or to wear yourself under the Equatorial sun.)



The islands are actually a national park, with strict -- and essential -- rules about where tourists can go and when. Everyone's seen pictures of the blue-footed boobies waddling right up to the tourists, knowing

no fear. You can also swim with penguins and wade into flamingo ponds (yes, the Galapagos has both). You can stand eyeball to eyeball with a giant tortoise who's a dead-ringer for E.T., and hike to a cliff high above the ocean where squadrons of albatross come in for a landing, right at your feet. But you soon realise that despite all the Kodak moments, the Galapagos is more than just another pretty place. Still mostly uninhabited by humans, it is a scientific laboratory dedicated to the study of evolution - and has been, since Charles Darwin's famous voyage there in 1835. To this day, the Galapagos has the highest proportion of endemic species -- those that are found nowhere else -- than any place in the world.



Except for eco-tragedies caused by humans, no effort is made by modern scientists to reverse the evolution that's happening all the time in the Galapagos. Sometimes this laissez-faire approach translates into massive die-offs of species that simply can't adapt to the changing weather or food supply. The survival of the fittest within a species isn't always warm 'n fuzzy, either. For instance, every one of those adorable blue-footed boobies is a vicious killer. To insure the survival of the species, the booby parents lay two eggs. But one is just an insurance policy. Unless it's a very good year, the sibs duke it out, and the weaker one gets kicked out of the nest to starve. Faced with all this nature red in tooth and claw, you may find yourself asking cosmic questions: "Why are we here? How did we get here? If my sister had been a blue-footed booby...."



But in the end, it's the beauty of nature in the Galapagos that stays with you, not the cruelty. One afternoon when our group was snorkelling off North Plaza Island, a colony of sea lions dived off the rocks above and, with much crashing and splashing, barrelled right into the water with us. They got startlingly close, zooming right past us like big furry underwater liverwursts. Suddenly our guide flipped upside down in the water and did a kind of headstand on the coral bottom. Immediately one of the sea lions did the same. Then another. And another. Who knew they had what evolved humans would call a sense of humour?

Soon all the animals -- and all of the people -- were leaping about joyfully. They honked; we laughed. We had become interspecies dancers. My snorkel choked up, and it wasn't just because of the waves.



PRACTICALITIES:

- You'll appreciate the Galapagos more if you do some homework. Two must-reads are "Beak of the Finch", Jonathan Weiner's Pulitzer-Prize-winning account of modern evolutionary research in the Galapagos," and Darwin's memoir, "The Voyage of the Beagle."
- All Galapagos visitors become major shoe fetishists, especially if they've brought the wrong footwear. Wet landings on rocky beaches require Tevas, waterproof Nikes, or some other sturdy lightweight wader. You'll also need hiking shoes with Vibram-type soles for slippery volcanic terrain. You're required to hose off your shoes and leave them on deck every time you re-board your ship (a precaution to keep microscopic bugs and seeds from being carried from one island to another). Thus you'll also need slippers or other indoor tootsie-wear.
- Other useful items include light cottons and quick-drying fabrics, an extra swimsuit, sunscreen, mosquito repellent and lots of film. But the most crucial packing tip is to bring a hat. A dorky one with a big brim, not a trendy one or a baseball cap. Remember, you'll be hanging out underneath **thousands** of birds.



Driving Holidays in France

As Rick in 'Casablanca' said to Ilsa, 'we'll always have Paris.' So, **mes amis**, will you. The city of light is stylish and romantic, but there comes a time to move beyond it. Parisians themselves call the French hinterlands 'La France Profonde' - deep France - and it's where **they** go to relax for a few days away from gridlock and creeping skyscraperisation.

Unlike Britain, France is still in large part an agricultural economy. That translates **profonde**-ly into scenery: fields of Provençal lavender that are destined for soap and perfume, chestnut and hazelnut forests in the **Dordogne, Normandy's** apple orchards and cute-as-a-mutton dairy farms, waving wheat, olive groves, and vineyards whose grapes will eventually become wine and champagne. France is bordered by the two most spectacular mountain ranges in Europe - the Alps and the Pyrenees -- and has more than 1500 miles of coastline, much of it just a ferry ride away from southern England.



The pace in rural France can be as languid as a slow-running wedge of Brie. People speak slower, too -- and have more patience with

Anglo mangling of their language. But what makes the French countryside especially addictive is its variety. **Alsace** and the **Basque Country**, for example, are as different as Germany and Spain. Every region throughout France is a self-contained destination with its own charms, and when you've seen one, you've

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by no means seen them all. The hardest part is figuring out where to go first.

If you're a fan of stately homes, the **Loire Valley** has to be pig heaven. This is where the **ancien regime** played 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire,' and their architectural and landscaping one-upsmanship is as dazzling today as it was hundreds of years ago. There's no such thing as a dull chateau, but try especially not to miss Blois, with its



impressive external spiral staircase and the many-drawered desk in which Catherine de Medici supposedly kept her poison stash. Another must is Chenonceau, whose graceful arches span the Cher River. Catherine's rival - her husband Henri II's mistress, Diane de Poitiers - held court here until Henri's death, when Catherine gave her the boot. After you tire of 16th Century soap operas, the Loire is a great place to bike. Or check out the Gothic cathedral in Bourges, which has some of the most beautiful stained glass in the world.



For those who can't imagine a holiday without the sea, **Biarritz** is the empress dowager of the pack; its grand Victorian beachside promenade is the

height of elegance even in the off-season. It happens to be in the heart of the French Basque Country, home of one of the oldest cultures in Europe. The town of St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, inland in the foothills of the Pyrenees, has good restaurants and a lively market (make sure to sample **brebis**, the local sheep cheeses). It's also right on the medieval pilgrim path to Santiago de Compostela, known today as G.R. 65 -- which you can hike a segment of.

Prefer the Mediterranean to the Atlantic? There's always the **French Riviera**, of course, with its glam but jammed seaside resorts of Nice,



Cannes and St. Tropez, and easy access inland to **Provence** and the beautiful countryside that inspired a thousand Van Goghs. West of Marseille, though, you'll find a quieter, unspoiled piece of the French Med. If the beach town of Collioure looks familiar, it's because you've probably seen it in paintings by Derain and Matisse. Watch the locals play boules, drink the rosé (those are grapes growing on the hillsides above the town), and nosh the grilled sardines and anchovies that are a Collioure specialty. Like Biarritz, it's a pebble's throw from a great inland destination, in this case the **Languedoc** region. See Carcassonne, one of the biggest and best-restored walled towns in Europe, and sleepy Foix, whose grim hilltop castle is dramatically floodlit at night. Or take an unforgettable ride in an open car in the Petit Train Jaune (little yellow train) from Perpignan into the mountains along the Spanish border.



Brittany is the place to go for neolithic ruins. Around Carnac there are literally miles of Stonehengey dolmens and menhirs just

popped along the roadside. There's a great day trip by boat to Gavrinis, an island in the Gulf of Morbihan with an underground burial mound that tourists can enter. Its spooky engravings resemble serpents, feathers and giant fingerprints - haunting little art projects from approximately 4000 B.C. Brittany is also the place for oysters; each little cove along its extensive coastline has a slightly different variety. (Make sure to wash them down with Breton cider. And while you're at it, try a glass of **lait ribot**, the thick and tangy local buttermilk.) The most famous oysters of all come from the delightful little town of Cancale, from whose main street at night you can see the twinkling lights of the famous medieval

monastery of Mont-St-Michel, across the bay in **Normandy**.

France is full of small-town gems, like Troyes in southern **Champagne**, whose half-timbered houses and needle-narrow alleys are circumscribed by an Old Town area that's actually shaped like a champagne cork. It's not far from the equally interesting town of Rheims, home to champagne caves and the cathedral where Joan of Arc crowned the Dauphin.

Chantilly, near Paris, has miles of walking trails, a famous race track, a horse museum, and a chateau-museum whose collection includes the exquisite illuminated medieval calendar known as **Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry**. La Rochelle, the old Huguenot port that serves as the gateway to the Vendée, has one of the most evocative small harbours in the world, guarded by a pair of 14th Century stone towers. (The town fathers used to haul a chain between them to keep out pirates and other riffraff.) Be sure to try the delicate curried mussels, called **mouclade**.

For those who prefer the spaces between towns, the part of the **Vendée** known as 'Green Venice' has miles of lush, wooded waterways that are perfect for canoeing. France also boasts fantastic drives like Route N100, which heads east from **Avignon** to the Alpine foothills. Bordered for much of its span by a canopy of



impossibly graceful, leafy plane trees, it rolls past the kinds of villages that Peter Mayle made famous in 'A Year in Provence.' Don't miss the Fontaine de Vaucluse, where the subterranean River Sorgue gushes to the surface and becomes the mighty spring that inspired Petrarch when he was mooning over Laura.

So **allons, enfants** to **la patrie**. The day of glory has arrived - not to mention a nice long

weekend.

[-- Lindsay Van Gelder](#)

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Rome

by [Lindsay Van Gelder](#)

Athens may have the Parthenon, Jerusalem has the Western Wall, and the last scene of *Planet of the Apes*



has the ruins of the Statue of Liberty — but only Rome can boast acre after acre of ancient architectural litter strewn all over its landscape. That so much antiquity has survived smack in the centre of a major city is a miracle. If this stuff were in Britain, it would have been turned into formal gardens, the French would have built cathedrals over it, and the Americans would have bulldozed it and sold it to Disney. God bless the Romans for just letting sleeping rocks lie.

Most first-time visitors to Rome will probably want to focus on famous ruins like the **Colosseum**, the **Roman Forum**, and the **Baths of Caracalla**. (Before you set foot in any of them, stop in a book store and pick up one of the special guidebooks that shows photos of the crumbling monuments as they are today with a transparent overleaf page that 'reconstructs' them in their original intact glory.) Most of Rome's ruins and monuments are worth exploring with your left brain during the daytime and then going back to at night for a heart-stopping second look by moonlight.

As spectacular as the remnants of ancient Rome are, the city is a minestrone of many other time periods too, from the eras of Michelangelo to Mussolini. More than most destinations, Rome rewards those who do some homework and bone

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up on their history. One way to make sense of the city's riches is to explore it chronologically — imperial,

early Christian, medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, modern — or even thematically. (For instance, if you made it your business to track down every Caravaggio painting, or every Bernini statue, you'd see a lot of Rome in the process.) Or, you can simply hit the highlights.

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Luckily, the heart of the city is compact and walkable. Walking is advisable in any case, since the cabs are pricey, the underground Metro doesn't go to most places, and the sardine-packed buses can be a nightmare — unless perhaps you're a pickpocket. (Rome is not a criminal hotbed, but purse-snatchings by thieves on motorcycles are not unheard of. Exercise your usual urban caution in crowds.) A saunter also means a chance to interface with the Romans — from the Dolce'd and Gabanna'd ladies-who-mangia to the men in real Friar Tuck outfits. Romans have all the stylishness of their counterparts in Paris or Milan, but with a lot less adrenalin. The long lunch hasn't yet given up the ghost, and the **passaggiata** — that ritual see-and-be-seen early evening promenade — is also alive and well in Rome's piazzas.



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As you're tromping around in the footsteps of the Caesars, you'll quickly realize that the current occupants of most arches, bridges,

theatres and other classical monuments are four-footed. Years ago, Rome's stray cats were a pathetic and scraggly lot, dependent on pasta leftovers. Today, a city law gives all felines the right to live undisturbed in the places they were born. (Volunteers, many of them headquartered

in the bowels of the **Largo Argentina** temple ruins, neuter them, provide cat food and veterinary care, and try to find them homes with both locals and visitors.)

As always in a city with a heritage worth preserving, be prepared for some scaffolding. And remember that Rome wasn't built in a day and it can't be toured ***in toto*** even in a week. So throw at least three coins into the **Trevi Fountain**, because you'll absolutely have to come back.

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Rome Sights

Even if you were to wander aimlessly about Rome without a map, you'd still run into jaw-dropping sights. If you want to be more programmatic, here are some of the Eternal City's absolute bests.

MOST BEAUTIFUL SQUARE:



The pedestrian-only **Piazza Navona** is a wedding cake in stone: baroque palazzos and churches, three fabulous fountains, and cafés serving

pricey chocolate and coffee items to ingest slowly while people-watching at all hours. The square is supposedly on the site where the virgin martyr St. Agnes was stripped naked and then miraculously proceeded to grow enough hair to preserve her modesty. The church built here in her honour bears a facade designed by baroque architect Francesco Borromini; according to local legend, one of the fountain sculptures by his rival Gian Lorenzo Bernini — a human figure, hiding his eyes and covering in horror in the general direction of the church — is passing critical judgment on Borromini's talent.

BEST NEIGHBORHOODS FOR WALKING:

As you sashay down the **Spanish Steps**, you will feel like a Ziegfeld Girl (even if you're a boy). The steps are a destination in and of themselves, for



swanning about *dolce vita*-style, but they're also a genuine passageway. Above them is the **Borghese Gardens**, Rome's green lung, with lovely vistas of the city; at the bottom is shopping artery **Via Condotti**, with Gucci and Bulgari. Another great neighbourhood, both for strolling and eating, is the old **Jewish Ghetto** along the Tiber near the **Teatro Marcello** monument. (Don't miss the still-occupied

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apartments that were built during the Renaissance into the upper remains of the Teatro, a theatre whose construction was begun by Julius Caesar.) The **Campo de Fiori** is the site of Rome's biggest outdoor market, selling fresh artichokes, truffles, olives, tomatoes, basil and other artworks of Italy's vegetable world. A little further afield across the Tiber is **Trastevere**, with its flea markets, hanging laundry, crumbling brick walls, and vine-covered old stucco houses in vibrant reds and ochres. Finally, the newly hip, funky former slaughterhouse district of **Testaccio** is what Trastevere used to be, pre-gentrification.

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CLASSICAL TEMPLE THAT'S MOST LIKELY TO BE OVERLOOKED (AND SHOULDN'T BE):



The Pantheon is more than 1600 years older than the monument-come-lately of the same name in Paris. But it's in such great shape that you

could be forgiven for not realizing that it was dedicated to Mars, Venus, Jupiter and other planetary gods in 27 BC and then rebuilt by Hadrian more than a century later. It's still in use as the burial place for Roman greats, like the painter Raphael. Standing under its sky-lit, honeycombed dome (142 feet high, the same as its diameter) is like being inside some very sacred orange squeezer.

SEXIEST BERNINI STATUE, FEMALE:

'**The Ecstasy of St. Teresa of Avila**' in the **Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria** near the **Piazza della Repubblica** depicts the famous Spanish mystic in what can only be described as sensual overload.



SEXIEST BERNINI STATUE, MALE:

The water-guzzling sea god Triton at the **Fountain of Tritone** in **Piazza Barberini** has the lats and pecs of a serious gym bunny.

BEST CHURCHES:

There are dozens of basilicas in Rome and approximately 400 smaller churches and monasteries. Our advice is that, when you're passing one, consider nipping in — odds are that, even in a minor church, you'll find some artistic treasure that would be a huge deal in

any other city. **Sant’Agnese Outside the Walls** has its own catacombs; the sumptuous, Michelangelo-designed **Santa Maria degli Angeli** is a marble palace that incorporates the ruins of the Diocletian Baths; the Jesuit **Church of San Ignazio** has an awesome *trompe l’oeil* ceiling with barefoot cherubs spilling out of the heavens, seemingly right on top of your head.

Another jewel of a church is **Santa Maria in Cosmedin**. Mostly constructed in the 6th Century, with an exquisite tile floor, it’s small and (for Rome, anyway) austere — a nice spiritual antidote to all the grander basilicas. But its most famous feature is outside under the Portico: the **Bocca della Verità** ('Mouth of Truth'), a huge, spooky face cut into the wall with a gaping maw. According to legend, if you never lie and you stick your hand in the monster-mouth, no problem; if you’ve got something to hide, the big yap will bite your hand off. Once used to test the faithfulness of spouses, the Bocca of today is mostly the province of Roman parents who want to scare their kids and tourists posing for mock-mutilation photo ops.

SIGHT MOST LIKELY TO MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE A CHARACTER IN "THE NAME OF THE ROSE":

The Knights of Malta, also known as the Knights Hospitaller of St. John of Jerusalem, is a military-religious order whose roots go back to the Crusades. Their villa headquarters are in the **Piazza dei Cavalieri di Malta** on the **Aventine Hill**. You can’t go through the gate, but you can look through the keyhole. Trust us on this one.

BEST DAY TRIPS :



London has the Cotswolds, New York has the Hamptons, and the ancient Romans had **Tivoli**, less than 20 miles away, and easily accessible by public bus, train and guided tour. The top sights are the ruins of **Hadrian’s Villa**, and the **Villa d’Este** (see our [Gardens feature](#)), a Renaissance cardinal’s residence. Both have stupendous fountains — you’ll feel cool in summer just looking at them (although Rome itself has thousands, too.). If you’d rather head for the hills, the medieval fortress town of **Orvieto** is just a little over an hour by train from Rome’s Tiburtina Station. Aside from its dramatic location high atop a sheer cliff of volcanic rock, Orvieto’s got a gorgeous striped stone cathedral with a lacy facade of inlaid mosaics.

MOST OVERRATED SIGHTS (NOT THAT YOU'LL LISTEN):

The **Sistine Chapel**

is indeed breathtaking (bring binoculars), but the **Vatican Museum** of which it is a part is not. You'll read guidebooks that tell



you to get there early to beat the crowds; the only problem is that the crowds have all read the same guidebooks. Nor can you head right for the Sistine Chapel; for hours you'll be led, like sprockets on some papal assembly line, through every room in the museum first.

Another big snore is the busy **Via Vittorio Veneto**, where all you'll find is other tourists looking in vain for Fellini starlets. If you insist on going, your trip won't be a total waste if you stop into the **Church of Santa Maria della Concezione** at number 27. Nondescript on the outside, the inside of the church can best be described as Stephen King meets the Flying Nun. Room after room is decorated with the remains of thousands of Capuchin monks: artfully piled skulls, mosaics made out of bones, tibias and femurs tastefully arranged around doorways, ribcages hanging off the walls, even a few full skeletons clad in traditional brown friar garb, like Grim Reaper Ken Dolls. You won't need to go see the Catacombs after this. On the other hand, maybe you won't ever sleep again.

— [Lindsay Van Gelder](#)

