



Call of the Wild

In Part One of our Galapagos adventure series, our intrepid writer prepares for a cruise to the Galapagos with boatbuilder Tony Fleming. By George Sass, Sr.

Bill Robinson's 1984 book "Where to Cruise" has a prominent place in my nautical library, and over the years I've referred to it during periods of restlessness, using it as my checklist of "places to cruise before I die." As the editor of *YACHTING* for 25 years, Robinson had opportunities most of us only dream about, and even though my family and I have been cruising actively for the past 20 years, we still haven't been to half of Robinson's favorite areas throughout the world.

But there's one exotic cruising area not listed in

"Where to Cruise" that I'm planning to visit this summer, and I can't help but think that Robinson would be envious of my good fortune in joining Tony Fleming aboard *Venture*, his Fleming 65, for a ten-day exploration of the Galapagos Islands. Lying 525 nautical miles west of Ecuador and part of that country's national park system, this archipelago made famous by Charles Darwin is a dream destination for naturalists and photographers.

The first reaction I get when I tell fellow cruisers of our plan is, "I thought there are severe restrictions about

ALL-PURPOSE CRUISING: *Venture*, a Fleming 65, cruises at displacement speeds of 8.5 knots to conserve fuel, but its semi-displacement hull allows it to run in the high teens when necessary (above). Tony Fleming makes the boat and the meals (right).



GEORGE SASS, SR.

visiting these islands because of environmental concerns." The answer is, "Yes and no." It depends on how you get there, how you plan to explore the islands once you arrive, and whom you hire to help you with all the government regulations.

The key to planning such an ambitious voyage is to start several months ahead, and requests for visiting and cruising permits should be made at least two months prior to one's arrival date. Fleming began his research on the Internet and discovered the Web site of the Galapagos Marine Company, which led him to Lisa Greenberg's company, Pacific Bound Yachts, a yacht-support agency specializing in organizing tours of the area.

Navigating the Sea of Regulations

Greenberg is a native Floridian with an Ecuadorian mother and has been helping yacht captains and owners navigate their way through the red tape and ever-changing rules and regulations for years. Having lived in the Galapagos for much of her adult life, she is intimately familiar with not only the natural beauty of its environment, but with the political scene as well.

She explains that the purpose of all the regulations and corresponding fees is to help preserve the delicate ecosystem by following a program of "sustainable development." In fact, Unesco's World heritage Committee recently listed the islands "in danger," partly because of increased levels of tourism. One of the less invasive ways to visit and cruise the islands, however, is on a large yacht, because the fees are high and the impact is relatively low.

To begin with, private yachts entering the Galapagos Islands can choose to

explore the area on their own bottom or hire one of the local companies to take them on a guided tour by boat. Those who want to cruise between the islands on their own yacht must pay a daily cruising fee of \$200 per day, per person onboard, and that includes crew members and guests, even those who choose not to set foot on land.

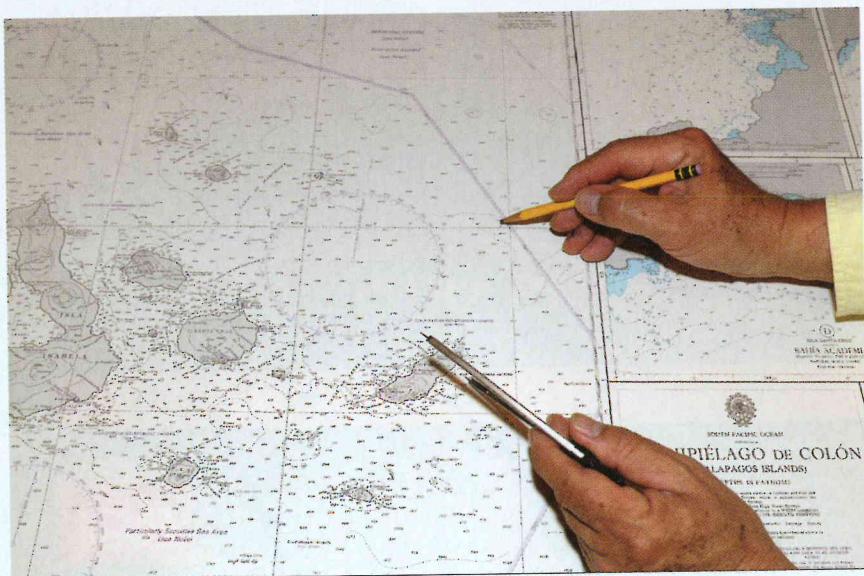
A typical megayacht may have a crew of 15 to 20 who remain onboard with only eight guests who go exploring, so the

megayacht math appears to support the concept of "sustainable development." In addition to the cruising fee, all visitors, regardless of how they enter, are charged \$100 per person as a visitor's fee. All these fees are shared among the Ecuadorian National Park Service, the navy, and the Ministry of Defense.

And there's more. Every private yacht exploring the islands must have a licensed guide on board at all times at a cost of



GOOD TO GO: Chris Conklin is Venture's experienced captain, and his casual, friendly demeanor helps create a relaxed, enjoyable atmosphere onboard (above). The British Admiralty charts are the most up-to-date paper charts of the Galapagos Islands (below).



GALAPAGOS RESOURCE GUIDE

Bluewater Books & Charts,
(800) 942-2583;
www.bluewaterweb.com

Commanders' Weather,
(603) 882-6789;
www.commandersweather.com

Pacific Bound Yachts,
www.pacificboundyachts.com

Galapagos Marine Company,
www.naugala.com

approximately \$350 per day. Greenberg prides herself with matching the right guide to the yacht's captain and guests. "I deal mostly with 'Level 3' guides," says Greenberg. "These are the seasoned, experienced guides who are bi- or trilingual and often have post-graduate degrees in marine biology or related fields of science. But beyond their qualifications, it's important to match their personalities with that of the crew and guests."

Beyond the cruising, visitor, and guide fees, there are daily mooring fees that are comparable to those in popular U.S. anchorages. There is also a 15-day maximum limit to cruising permits, and you are no longer allowed to switch out groups and extend your stay. New to the list of regulations is the prohibition of diving from your own vessel. Divers must now hire one of the officially approved local dive operators.

If all these regulations seem discouraging, one must understand how fragile and precious this ecosystem is, and how easily it can be damaged by an unlimited number of unsupervised tourists. The number of tourists visiting the islands in 1969 was 1,000. Last year, more than 140,000 visited. And on top of these rising numbers is the recent threat of eco-terrorism. Recently it was discovered that 53 sea lions had been brutally clubbed to death. This sad, mysterious matter is under investigation.

So, before any charts are purchased and waypoints are set, it is necessary to get the regulatory issues out of the way by hiring an experienced yacht support agency. And to fully appreciate just how rare these islands are, it's important to do your research and learn about their ecosystem before you set sail.

Getting Ready for the Voyage

Venture will be leaving from the Los Sueños Resort and Marina in Costa Rica after completing an exploration of the Sea of Cortez. Once done visiting the Galapagos, she'll transit the Panama Canal on her way up the east coast of the U.S., eventually crossing the Northern Atlantic. Tony Fleming is one of those rare boatbuilders who spend a lot of time on their boats. *Venture* is hull number one of the popular Fleming 65 series, and he's constantly looking for ways to tweak its design, giving valuable feedback to the yard in Taiwan where all the Flemings are built.

Our planned route to the Galapagos is to head 300 miles southwest from Costa



RED TAPE EXPERT: Lisa Greenberg of Pacific Bound Yachts was indispensable for obtaining all the permits to visit and cruise the Galapagos Islands.

Rica and stop at Isla del Coco, a small, mountainous island covered with a lush rainforest. Supposedly, the island was the inspiration for Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and today it is designated as Coco's Island National Park, sometimes referred to as the "Little Galapagos of Costa Rica."

From Coco, it is another 350 miles to the Galapagos. *Venture* is a semi-displacement yacht that cruises efficiently at 8.5 to 9 knots, burning less than 10 gph. Since she carries 1,700 gallons of fuel, she has a safe range of 1,500 miles at this speed. It is comforting to know that she can also run at speeds in the high teens if necessary, although at a much higher fuel burn. Through Greenberg, Fleming has arranged to purchase up to 1,000 gallons of fuel in the Galapagos, which will enable him to make the 900-mile crossing to Panama with plenty of reserve.

The most current paper charts for the Galapagos Islands are the British Admiralty Charts, and I was able to find a complete set that would get us from Los Sueños to the Galapagos at Bluewater Books & Charts in Ft. Lauderdale. Already onboard are Passport e-charts that are part of the vessel's PC-based Nobeltec navigation system. And as extra backups, both Fleming and I use a Mac program—MacENC—that utilizes small, independent GPS receivers connected to our laptops.

Getting to the islands will require two relatively short, open-ocean passages. Since weather forecasting will be important, *Venture's* captain, Chris Conklin, will be using the services of Commanders' Weather in New Hampshire to obtain forecasts for our present location, route, and destination. One \$30 telephone call gives Chris a verbal consultation and enough data to plan each of these passages. For longer passages, a more detailed text message costs \$65.

Although Greenberg has assured Fleming that basic provisioning can be done in the islands, the yacht will be fully stocked during its stay in Los Sueños. *Venture's* freshwater capacity is a generous 300 gallons, and the boat is equipped with a high-volume watermaker.

I had the opportunity of joining Fleming during his two-week voyage from San Diego to La Paz, Mexico late last year (see "Bound for Baja," February 2008) and happily discovered his epicurean talents match his boatbuilding and design skills. Best of all, Fleming is an accomplished videographer and filmmaker, and I can't think of a more interesting shipmate to be with when we explore Darwin's treasures together. Next month: Underway! □

Stay tuned for next month's feature story on the exploration of the Galapagos Islands with Tony Fleming aboard Venture.