



A Fleming 65 is the right power cruiser for
an exploration of the Galápagos Islands.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY GEORGE SASS, SR.

THE NATURAL



LAND OF CONTRASTS. Each day saw different landscapes, from black lava flows (above) to white sandy beaches to rock formations on San Cristobal (opening spread). Venture's tender awaits her crew (left).

join renowned boatbuilder and intrepid cruiser Tony Fleming aboard his personal Fleming 65, *Venture*, for a voyage to the Galápagos Islands, located 525 miles off the coast of Ecuador.

Made famous by Charles Darwin during his scientific exploration aboard *Beagle*, this archipelago of volcanic islands is part of Ecuador's national park system and has become one of the world's most desirable destinations for adventurous naturalists and photographers. Today, nearly 150,000 visitors arrive annually by air to explore the islands on local tour boats. Cruising throughout the chain on a private yacht is possible, but it takes careful planning and the approval of the Ecuadorian government.

Because of environmental concerns, the Ecuadorian National Park Service, navy and ministry of defense enforce a series of regulations that can be intimidating to cruisers. To ensure things went smoothly upon our arrival, Fleming enlisted the services of Naugala, a yacht support agency that specializes in organizing private tours of the Galápagos. The company obtained the necessary permits, arranged for our guide (required to be with us at all times) and helped with *Venture's* refueling requirements. To cruise on one's own vessel, there is a daily fee of \$200 per person, plus a one-time, \$100 per person visitor's fee. On top of that, a licensed guide costs approximately \$350 per day.

Our detailed itinerary, created by Naugala and approved by the government, had to be followed exactly. By controlling the number of visitors, the places visited and the hours spent on each island, the authorities practice "sustainable development." Considering the spectacular sights and abundant wildlife we were about to experience, we were happy to comply.

Because of the distance involved when cruising to the



300 MILES IN 10 DAYS. Venture's ambitious itinerary covering seven islands was created by a yacht support agency and approved by the Ecuadorian government. In the spirit of "sustainable development," it had to be followed precisely. Port Ayora is the home of the Charles Darwin Research Station and National Park Service.

Costa Rica and the Galápagos and part of the Costa Rican national park. Uninhabited except for a handful of park rangers, this lush island with mountainous rainforests and sandy beaches was reportedly the inspiration for Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*. Conklin established a watch schedule of two hours on and six hours off for the four of us, and we set a straight course for nearly 300 miles. Although the

Galápagos, the majority of private yachts that reach the archipelago are sailing vessels. The Fleming 65, however, is a very capable offshore passage maker. Its 1,700 gallons of fuel give it a range of well over 1,000 nautical miles running between 9 and 10 knots, even with generous use of its generator. Fleming's plan was to depart Costa Rica, 700 miles from the Galápagos, and after a 300-mile exploration of the islands, refuel before making a 900-mile passage to Panama. On board were his captain, Chris Conklin, Conklin's companion, Fleming and myself.

Before reaching Darwin's world, we planned to visit the lost world of Isla del Coco, a large island halfway between

wind was on our nose all the way and the seas were lumpy, the Fleming's 135,000-pound displacement and seakindly hull gave us such a comfortable ride we could carry on our normal activities throughout the voyage.

Flemings are known for their quietness, and the loudest sound I heard while sitting on the flybridge during off-watch hours was the hull slicing neatly through the oncoming seas. We made landfall 31 hours after our departure. During our layover we explored part of this fascinating island with the help of a Costa Rican park ranger. But we were anxious to get to the Galápagos, and we eagerly continued our epic voyage the next day.

One of my favorite nautical books is Bill Robinson's *Where to Cruise*, which was published in 1984. As an author and past editor of *Yachting* (*Motor Boating's* sister publication), Robinson sailed to some of the world's most exotic ports. As I've traveled by boat over the years, I've checked off more than a few of the places on his list of favorite destinations. But I've recently been to a spectacular cruising area that even Robinson might have envied. I had the good fortune to



ILLUSTRATION BY BRENDA WEAVER

A MAN'S WORLD. Sea lions are mostly friendly and harmless, but large males are territorial and can give you a nasty bite if they feel threatened.

Our next 400-mile passage was uneventful, as *Venture* continued to prove to be an ideal passage maker. After two days and nights at sea we arrived in Port Ayora on the southern coast of Santa Cruz, the island with the highest population. Small freighters, mini-cruise ships, large dive boats, small tour boats and private sailing yachts filled the busy harbor. After dropping anchor we were met by a representative of Naugala and a park ranger who checked our permits and passports. Later that day we were introduced to our official guide, Patricia Stucki, who would be with us for the next 10 days.

Stucki is a fascinating woman who was born in Switzerland. She has lived in the Galápagos for nearly 10 years. She speaks several languages, is an avid naturalist and environmentalist and, as we soon discovered, is as comfortable under water as she is on land. The shark tattoos on her lower calf send a message that this woman means business, but we found her to be a genuinely warm person who loved sharing her local knowledge with us. We were in good hands.

The next 10 days were as exhausting as they were exhilarating. Studying our charts, we realized our schedule had us covering an ambitious 300 miles between islands,

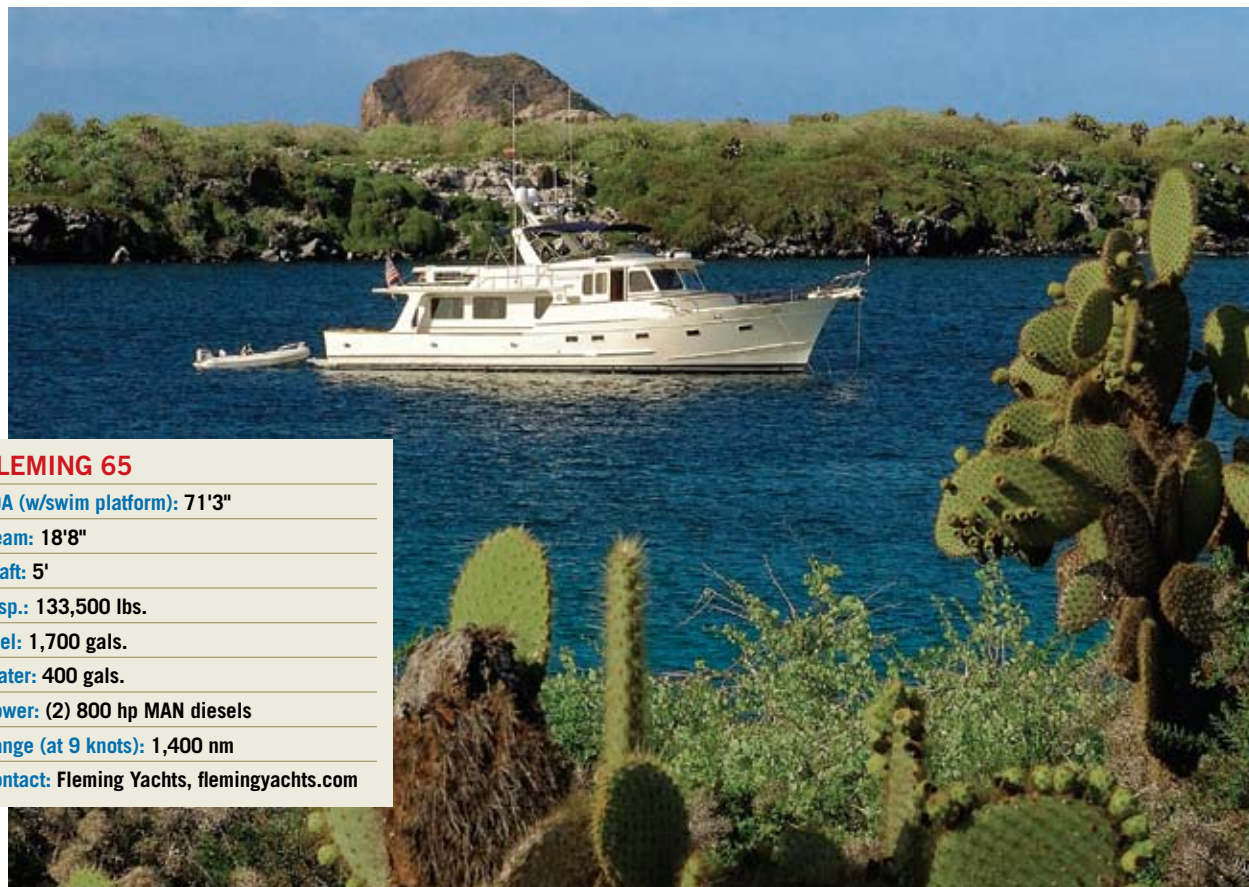
and each day would be filled with hiking, snorkeling and exploring by dinghy. During our stay we visited the islands of Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, Española, Santa María, Isabela, San Salvador and Baltra. Typically, we traveled in the afternoons, arriving at our anchorage before sundown. With few navigation aides and treacherously rocky shores, only commercial tour boats ventured out at night. Although we had electronic charts, we relied heavily on the detailed paper charts loaned to us by Naugala. We also learned that while our guide had encyclopedic knowledge of the natural habitat of each island, she wasn't an experienced navigator. Stucki normally worked on tour boats with professional captains and crew, so we took full responsibility for navigating from island to

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island and finding the safest areas to anchor. Fortunately, we had nearly perfect weather during our 10-day exploration. Seas were usually no more than 3 to 4 feet and winds were typically in the teens. Because of the very limited availability of fuel throughout the island chain, Fleming ran *Venture* at its fuel-sipping speed of 8 to 9 knots. He arranged to refuel at the end of our tour, and when he did so in Baltra, *Venture* had less than 100 gallons of diesel in its tanks.

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FLEMING 65

LOA (w/swim platform): 71'3"

Beam: 18'8"

Draft: 5'

Disp.: 133,500 lbs.

Fuel: 1,700 gals.

Water: 400 gals.

Power: (2) 800 hp MAN diesels

Range (at 9 knots): 1,400 nm

Contact: Fleming Yachts, flemingyachts.com

PROTECTED WATERS. *Venture* anchored out throughout its 10-day expedition. Here it sits off the islet Plaza Sur, near the island of Santa Cruz.



ANIMAL PLANET. The wildlife was not intimidated by us including (clockwise from top left), an iguana, Sally Lightfoot crab, sea lion and marine iguana.

Soon after sunrise each morning, we were off exploring our new location, which was guaranteed to be different from our previous one. The diversity of the topography and wildlife was stunning, and while sometimes we felt like taking a break from the intense schedule, it was impossible not to want to see everything.

Landing a dinghy on most islands is not allowed, although you can use one to drop off or pick up crew. For that reason, we took turns driving *Venture's* tender back and forth to give Conklin an opportunity to see the sights. Not all landings were easy, either, as some were through breaking surf and others against jagged, volcanic rock.

Although we stayed on clearly marked paths, we were able to get as close to the incredible wildlife as we dared. We competed for walking space with sea lions on rock ledges. Blue-footed booby birds allowed us to watch their mating dance up close. Brightly colored Sally Lightfoot crabs scampered by, close enough for us to see their bulbous eyes. Land iguanas would cross our path, stop, look at us and seem to smile. Dozens of marine iguanas would suddenly appear before us, basking in the warm

sun before their afternoon swim. We'd look up and see a red-ballooned frigate bird take flight. We'd look down and catch a sea turtle surfacing with his eyes seemingly fixed on our cameras. Walking quietly along a jungle path we discovered a 300-pound land tortoise munching on a salad of greenery. Wildlife was everywhere, and it didn't seem to care whether we were there or not.

Cruising here is not to be taken lightly. Several anchorages are quite deep and require at least 400 feet of chain. The holding ground is varied, and two of *Venture's* three anchors were severely damaged after being caught under large rock formations. On one occasion we found ourselves between a rock and a hard place, waking in the middle of the night to the sickening sound of surf. A wind shift got us perilously close to a rock ledge, and we had to move in total darkness.

Thanks to the well-found yacht, its capable and friendly crew, the fascinating stories and wonderful wit of Fleming and the enthusiasm of Stucki, this voyage to Darwin's world was a resounding success. Exploring the Galápagos Islands will undoubtedly be the ultimate cruise in anyone's book. ♦