

## **A Laboratory of Life: The Galapagos Islands**

### **Global region**

Pacific Ocean

### **Domestic region**

Pacific Ocean territory of Ecuador

### **Internationally Designated Areas**

Galapagos Island World Heritage Site

1978

Galapagos Island Biosphere Reserve

1984

Humedales del Sur de Isabela Ramsar Wetland

2002

The nineteen islands of the Galápagos are a living showcase of evolution. At the crossroads of three ocean currents 1,000 km off South America, the Pacific archipelago bursts with marine life and ranks among the world's richest ecosystems.

Ecuador declared the Galápagos its first national park in 1959, protecting 97% of the land. The Galápagos Marine Reserve, established in 1986, safeguarded the surrounding waters and cemented the islands' importance as a protected area.

### **Darwinian inspiration**

Extreme isolation and diverse archipelagic landforms provided ideal conditions for the emergence of remarkable plant and animal forms that are found nowhere else. When Charles Darwin visited in 1835, marine iguanas that dive for algae, flightless cormorants, giant tortoises, towering cacti, and unique finches of diverse beak shapes and sizes inspired him to develop the theory of natural selection.

The archipelago continues to showcase evolution in action. Darwin's finches and mockingbirds, giant tortoises, land snails, and countless plants remain iconic examples of adaptive radiation as species take on new forms. Volcanic eruptions, seismic shifts, and erosion add further drama, making the Galápagos both a scientific treasure and a thrilling ecotourism destination.

### **Designations bring more global prestige**

UNESCO recognised the islands' peerless biodiversity in 1978, making them the first World Natural Heritage Site. In 2001 the Marine Reserve was added, highlighting its dazzling underwater spectacle. Snorkelers and divers encounter rays, sharks, turtles, and schools of brilliant fish in one of Earth's richest marine environments.

The Galápagos Biosphere Reserve, designated in 1985, covers the park's entire land area. Through zoned protection to enable sustainable development initiatives, the reserve promotes food security, invasive species control, and sustainable tourism. In 2002, Ramsar status was granted to the Humedales del Sur de Isabela, wetlands of mangroves, beaches, and shallow waters that shelter flamingos, tortoises, and endemic fish.

**Tourism that funds conservation**

Visitation is carefully managed within this precious MIDA to ensure that the benefits of tourism are shared fairly with locals. With so many of the locals dependent on tourism for their livelihoods, the protection of the islands' fragile ecosystems depends upon community awareness and participation.

MIDA status also strengthens the Galápagos by protecting vulnerable habitats and creating a premium ecotourism destination. Hiking lava trails, kayaking mangrove channels, or watching tortoises roam freely allows travelers to witness the continuing evolution of life on our precious planet.