

## Santa Cruz Island

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Male giant tortoise grazing on the highlands.

Today we experienced the land of Giants. In our morning outing we headed to the Fausto Llerena Galapagos Tortoise Breeding Center located in the headquarters of the Galapagos National Park. Learning about the different conservation programs, such as restoring the dynasty of the giant tortoises on the islands, was our main goal. We explored the different rustic corrals that house species of tortoises from Santa Cruz and Española islands. The objective of the Galapagos National Park through the breeding program is to breed these species in captivity and later to repatriate them to zones that have been affected by humans and alien species.

Since the passing of Lonesome George, Super Diego has become the iconic tortoise who has helped the Galapagos National Park repatriate more than 2,000 baby tortoises into the wilderness of Española Island. This individual has helped us to restore the population of tortoises in this island since 1976 when only 14 adult tortoises were found on the island of Española.

Later in the morning we walked back to town and passed by the colorful cemetery and fishing market where the artisanal fishermen displayed the catch of the day. Later in the morning, heading by bus to the highlands, we enjoyed the different vegetation zones. We also did a quick stop at a private farm to learn about the processing of sugarcane and coffee and a local school to learn more about the commitment that National Geographic and Lindblad Expedition have with the community of Santa Cruz Island.

After lunch we took a walk into a lava tube that was formed 1.5 million years ago when the volcano in Santa Cruz Island was very active. We also found gigantic tortoises in the reserve area of the national park that made their way to the private farms. Walking through the humid zone with dense vegetation was unexpected since most of the day we were exploring the coastal zone. Finding the giant tortoises in their natural habitat and been surrounding by birds was a great way to finish our adventure on Santa Cruz Island.