Galapagos encounters on Quasar Expeditions Galapagos cruise aboard the Evolution. Remember, they can play with you, but you can’t play with them.

Her talk was one of the nightly nature lectures designed not only to educate passengers about the local flora, fauna and history of the islands but also to instruct us on how to be respectful and responsible tourists during our week-long cruise. Probably everyone who yearns to visit the Galapagos has his or her own bucket list of attractions they hope to see. For me, it’s the blue-footed boobies of Darwin’s famous species of finch. For others, it’s the marine life, for this is one of the few places in the world where tropical and cold-water animals swim together in near perfect harmony.

For me, not just seeing sea lions up close and in abundance but swimming near them with them was at the very top of my list. In fact, we were able to do just that during one of our daily snorkeling excursions, which also involved swimming with Galapagos penguins, hammerhead sharks, rays, sea turtles and eels. While from the deck, sharp-eyed passengers spotted dolphins, whales and whale sharks.

On our walks, we picked our way along beaches studded with smoking seashells, snot and hundreds of frigate birds, the red throat pouches inflated in hopes of attracting a mate; and hiked past salt lagoons teeming with bright pink flamingos.

We also saw prehistoric-looking land and marine iguanas and hundreds of flame-orange crabs scuttling across the black rocks.

The Evolution also offers indoor and alfresco dining areas, an indoor lounge where we gathered for our nightly talks or to just hang out, an open-sided bar on the top deck where drinks and snacks are served after the last outing of the day and a small shop where hats, swim gear, souvenirs and other items are for sale. The cruise line supplies wetsuits and snorkeling equipment.

There is also a sun deck with a Jacuzzi that proved to be a popular spot after snorkeling excursions.

Staterooms are located on three decks and are generally cozy, ranging from 263 square feet on the A deck to 172 square feet on the D deck. Each features an en suite bathroom, and some offer twin beds that can be converted into king.

While we enjoyed our nightly talks, which usually imparted a wealth of information about the animals and islands we were going to visit the next day, some typically had their own briefings at the alfresco lounge. Here, one of the guides offers a more interactive explanation of upcoming activities and reviews photos and videos from that day’s adventures.

After dinner, there is usually a stargazing session on evenings when the skies are clear, and one night the sea below us glowed with bioluminescence stirred up by the movement of the ship.

When young passengers are aboard, Quasar staffs the ship with guides who are experienced at dealing with children, and most of them are parents themselves.

As to physical requirements, an average level of fitness is ideal both for excursions and for the onboard experience, although we saw a few senior passengers on our trip who walked with canes. Most were still able to participate in many of the activities, and guides were careful to explain whether any upcoming walks would be challenging and whether landings would be "dry" — that is, made from the dinghy (or zodiac in Quasar speak) to the beach — or "wet" from the zodiac into shallow water.

Occasionally a few passengers would pass on an activity and choose to hang out at the bar or in the lounge, chatting with one another and the onboard crew. It’s worth noting, however, that moving from one deck to another requires navigating fairly steep stairs, so passengers would need to be able to handle that level of activity.

For that reason, Quasar recommends that children be about 8 to 10 years old or older to fully enjoy and participate in the experience.

Since a huge part of the appeal of the cruises lies in the excursions, Quasar’s staff is skilled at handling any disparity in fitness and energy level on the family cruises.

On land excursions, for example, check GALAPAGOS on Page 42.
extra time at the beach or swimming in the ocean while waiting for the adults to catch up.
The cruises include a snorkel outing nearly every day, and for most passengers, these are the highlights of the cruise, because children typically want to stay longer in the water playing with sea creatures or looking for fish. Qasas offers a second guide to stay with them. The doctors on the Evans also accompany children in the water on the family cruises for added safety.

Illustrations and devices are available on the parga for anyone, including adults, who may have concerns about their swimming skills, and on our cruise several adults used them daily. I was particularly struck by the experience of one elderly passenger who was reluctant to snorkel at all, presumably because she was an inexperienced swimmer, but once at the guides coaxed her into the water, had her hang on to a life preserver, and, after some hesitation, pointed out marine life below, so that the passenger was euphoric when she came out of the water in a state of elation.

Because cruise itineraries are strictly enforced by Galapagos National Park, cruise ships are not able to vary their itineraries too much or add new destinations, but Qasas offers two versions of the seven-night cruise: steps back in time from Santa Cruz Island to Baltra Island and the reverse itinerary, in the Steps of Pirates and Darwin, which focus on the central and southern islands and the central, western and northern islands, respectively.

Qasas's staff is skilled at handling any disparity in fitness and energy level on the family cruises.

Our full day on land included a visit to Santa Cruz to explore the Charles Darwin Research Station and to the Highlands to see the giant tortoises at the Tortuga Reserve as well as some free time to poke around the shops in town.

For our trip, we flew into Guayaquil on Copa Airlines for a tour and overnight and then onto Santa Cruz via Arima. Rates on the Evolution for 2020 range from $6,145 to $8,200 per person, not including alcoholic drinks, airport transfers and the Galapagos National Park fee of $100 for adults, $40 for children. There is a 15% discount on cruise rates for up to three children per family who are 15 years old and younger.