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# Journey to the rim of the Sierra Negra volcano

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A view of the caldera of Sierra Negra, one the Galapagos's most active volcanoes.

By **Karen Campbell** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 16, 2017

ISABELA Island, Galapagos Islands — It's a bumpy ride down a lava road to reach the trailhead of Sierra Negra. The second-largest volcanic caldera in the world and the most active volcano in the Galapagos Islands, it's located at the southern end of Ecuador's Isabela Island and offers a spectacular vista across its six-mile wide crater.

But getting there is half the fun. Roughly 30-40 minutes by car from Puerto Villamil (you'll need to go with a registered guide in order to get into the park), the ride offers a great opportunity to view the island's different ecosystems. The sparse vegetation of the sandy coastal region and the arid zone, dotted with prickly pear cactus, abruptly changes into the lush

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brilliant green or verdant farmland and meadow-like pampas. Tall papaya trees, primarily colored hibiscus, and the pale giant blooms of angel's trumpet frame the roadside. If you're lucky enough to pass a guava tree ripe with fruit, you can pluck one and suck out the sweet pink meat on the spot. Though they are not indigenous to the Galapagos, they've self-propagated, with a little help from the birds.

Once you've entered the park, the two-kilometer hike up to the volcano's rim can take between 30 minutes and an hour. The dirt path with wide grass edges has decent if often uneven footing, but it's a fairly good incline up to the top, so wear shoes with good traction and take water with you — and, of course, a hat, plenty of sunscreen, and a camera. You might also factor in a light jacket.

It pays to take your time. The pathway is lined with ferns and flowering guava trees — though these don't bear fruit, the old ones are big and majestic with striking variegated bark. The soundscape is a gentle cacophony of locusts and birds.

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At the top, the view at the first lookout offers a stunning expanse. To the left, you can see the white-pocked mountain of an old sulfur mine. To the right, brilliant green cliffs slope down into the caldera, where different layers of lava are marked by striations and variations in color — the last eruption was in 2005 and lasted eight days.

If you continue hiking another 2½ miles or so along the rim, you'll get a view of the island's north side, including several smaller volcanoes and a drier, almost alien landscape of lava fields and scrubby undergrowth. But that first lookout provides such a spectacular view and excellent photo op, that many tourists, especially the bigger groups, often linger awhile then head back down. The excursion provides an excellent half-day experience, and for us, that was just right. A snorkeling adventure awaited our return.

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