

Galápagos

Travelogue and personal Account of a Trip to Quito, Ecuador,
and the Galápagos Isles, January 9-19, 2007,

by Herb Windolf

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When in 1535 Bishop Tomás de Berlanga's galleon, on a trip from Panama to Peru was blown off course, its crew discovered the Galápagos Isles, about 1,000 km to the west of the coast of Ecuador. The bishop described the giant turtles found there from which the islands received their name.

The islands became a favorite hangout for buccaneers and, later, visiting whalers, who, it is estimated, took more than 100,000 turtles from there, stacking them alive in their holds as fresh meat supplies.

Then, in 1835, Charles Darwin visited on the Beagle, observing those turtles, also eating them, as well as taking recordings of geology, botany, land and marine animals and those famous finches – except that he didn't record from which island they came! Anyway, those finches played only a subsidiary role in his Theory of Evolution.

12 main islands plus 12 minor ones, all volcanic, are the product of a hot spot similar to Hawaii and Reunion, the oldest island being about five million years old. Basaltic lava flows from various shield volcanoes continue to erupt, giving all islands a very rough terrain.

My wife Ute and I had booked our trip with Wilderness Travel, flying into Quito, Ecuador's capital, at 2,500 m elevation. A tour took us through its Old Town, a World Heritage Site, its many churches, and the presidential palace. It all concluded with a sumptuous dinner at a Spanish restaurant with lots of tapas and Spanish wine. The dinner was to be a seafood casserole or paella. Precocious me, I jested with our host whether I could come back the next day for paella, having the seafood casserole tonight. Well, courteous as our hosts were, I got both. The following day an Airbus A320 took us to Isla Baltra, Galápagos' main airport. In WW2 Baltra housed a US military base for the defense of the Panama Canal. Today 97% of the islands are national park, which can be visited only with a guide.

Though eons the creatures native to the islands flew or rafted there from the mainland. Seeds carried on the feet or in the stomachs of wayward birds vegetated the once utterly barren grounds. The marine iguanas, unique to Galápagos, once land animals, had to sustain themselves on seaweed, in order to survive upon arrival, thus evolving in this manner.

We boarded the brigantine Diamante with the other 10 passengers and our knowledgeable and caring guide Fausto Arellano, then skippered over to the north shore of Seymour island. On our first land excursion we walked past frigate birds, the males expanding their big, flaming-red throat pouches, waiting for females flying overhead to descend and chose them for mating. We saw our first blue-footed boobies doing their funny mating rituals, lifting first one foot then the other, then stretching and raising their heads in unison. Their name is derived from the Spanish word 'bobo', meaning clown, a true application of the term. Later on we took our first snorkel excursion in calm waters, seeing a variety of tropical fishes, among which were

barracudas and sharks. My most pleasing experience was a little 2" black-striped fish, which 'attached' itself to me for the entire range, dashing about in front of me, sometimes only 10 cm from my mask.

All in all we visited nine islands, small and large. The distances between them were usually covered by night, so that we had the following day available for land and marine excursions. This meant that engine noise and the sometimes substantial wallowing of our ship rocked us to sleep. Never did we need to partake of our supply of Dramamine, although Ute liberally dispensed it to some of our fellow passengers.

The next morning saw us at Santa Fé island. Upon landing we spotted a Galápagos hawk perched on a stone marker. Everyone took close-up pictures of the utterly unafraid being. Then we walked past sea lions, land iguanas, boobies and frigate birds. Giant cactus trees spread along most of our walkway. In the afternoon we arrived at Academy Bay on Santa Cruz island with its main town of Puerto Ayora. A walk there took us to the Darwin research station, where, among land iguanas and turtles, we got a glimpse of Lonesome George, a desk-size tortoise, the last of his species from one of the islands. The station is engaged in breeding tortoises and land iguanas for repopulating of several islands, where stocks have been severely depleted due to introduced foreign creatures and pests. These days the total number of human inhabitants on all the islands is about 20,000 ;-).

A long and bumpy overnight trip took us south to Isla Española and plenty of nasca and blue-footed boobies, albatross and marine iguanas along a rather hot walk. Really – the tameness of the animals is something to behold! If one wanted to – it's not allowed – one could pet many of them. At the end of the hike a small lighthouse provided the only shade far and wide until our pickup by the dinghy.

The next day found us at Isla Floreana at Punta Cormorant and the Devil's Crown, the 10-12 m tall broken basaltic remnants of a marine crater. Five intrepid explorers ventured out to snorkel the broken remains in an S-curve in rather rough waters. Sure, there was interesting marine life, however – I, a poor swimmer with only first-time experience using flippers, became quickly overcome by the experience and had to make an effort returning to the accompanying dinghy to get out of the water. My only comfort was, that two others had to do the same some time later.

By afternoon we anchored in Post Office Bay, a relic from whaling times, when whalers were away from home for years at a time. It became a custom to leave letters in something akin to a mail box for people of returning ships to leave through the deposited letter addresses to carry to the folks back home. Today tourists can leave their stamp-less postcards for other visitors coming through to carry to their destinations. Ute picked up two; one for Scottsdale and one for Tucson. I had one card destined for Tasmania and didn't dare put it in the box for fear it wouldn't arrive in the lifetime of the recipient. After another long overnight sail we found ourselves at Punta Moreno on the biggest island of the archipelago, Isla Isabela. A major lava flow had covered the area all the way to the ocean. I must mention here, that access to the land is permitted only at designated spots where white-tipped stakes mark the route a group of tourists may take. Following these, we passed by several lower-level ponds of brackish water, but with rather lush vegetation in the otherwise barren landscape. They were home to ducks and flamingos.

Ute and I helped our lone Argentine couple to negotiate the treacherous terrain. I

felt, by myself, I could have been “rock flying”, as Johanna Angermeyer called it in a chapter of her book, *“My Father’s Island”*, the story of five brothers leaving Germany upon the rise of the Nazis, journeying to Galápagos to make their life there. I read Johanna’s book from the ship’s library. Today, some of the Angermeyer’s descendants own several brigantines, the Diamante, the somewhat larger Sagitta, and others.

In the afternoon a short sail took us to Elizabeth Bay. In our dinghy we entered several narrow mangrove-framed arms where the outboard motor was shut off and, in silence, we were propelled forward only by oar strokes. This made it possible to spot a number of big green sea turtles and a hawksbill in this retreat. Then Fausto pointed out several “tree lions”, actually sea lions, which had climbed up fallen, now inclined tree trunks, taking their snooze up there. That evening the clouds broke and we experienced a beautiful sunset, later on seeing Orion at the zenith.

Isabela originally consisted of six separate islands, each formed by its own volcano. A narrow isthmus at Elizabeth Bay is covered by a major, very rugged lava bed. Once Isabela was home to close to 100,000 feral goats, their ancestry going back to goats being set out on the islands by buccaneers as fresh meat supplies, and multiplied escapees from the farms on southern Isabela. Since they severely affected the native wildlife and vegetation, a program was developed to eradicate the herds, at least on the northern part of Isabela, the lava-covered isthmus providing an impenetrable barrier between south and north Isabela. The cost estimate was one million dollars. New Zealand sharpshooters with helicopters were brought in who eradicated the northern herds to the last animal, the corpses rotting away, providing food for various flesh eaters. Today, the land is still littered with the bleached bones of goats. When the program was finished it had run up to costing 20 million dollars!

A short overnight ride took us to Bahia Urbina on Isabela, where we did a morning hike through the brush area, seeing plenty of big land iguanas, all of which numbered for observation. Right at the beginning of our hike a huge tortoise came ambling down our trail providing for a great photo opportunity. With sandy beach areas for egg laying in short supply, these tortoises, as well as the land iguanas, climb all the way up the flanks of the volcano, then descend inside to find loose material in which to deposit their clutch of eggs. Then the newborn have to make their arduous walk back down into areas where they can find food. The hike led us through a section of desiccated logs and branches, remnants of a once flourishing mangrove forest, in the 1950s uplifted five meters by an earthquake.

A short sail across Canal Bolivar brought us to Punta Espinosa on Fernandia Island, where I decided to let everyone see more marine iguanas and birds, whereas I spent the solitude on deck reading. I figured, being the oldest of our group, yet, maybe, still one of the nimblest on land, I deserved to take my leave whenever I felt like it. I had just finished reading Kurt Vonnegut’s satirical and pessimistic novel *Galápagos* from the ship’s library, in which he describes humanity’s devolution. But he also described how marine iguanas, feeding on seaweed at low tide, with males diving up to 10 m to feed and staying up to five minutes under water, line themselves up afterwards on the rocks to have the sun ‘cook’ their food. My returning wife confirmed the lineup of iguanas doing just that.

Then we took off under sail to round the northern tip of Isabela with everyone assembled on the bow of the Diamante, drinking wine and watching whales surfacing

and, eventually, experience another gorgeous sunset, the Sagitta paralleling us in the distance.

By morning we had arrived at Punta Egas on Isla San Salvadore, where I decided on one more snorkel adventure among a wide-spaced lava outcropping, our dinghy anchored in the middle. The water was not very deep and a variety of fishes could be seen, however the back and forth surges of the waters once more became too much for me and, unpleasantly, the dinghy was nowhere to be seen, hidden by one of the outcroppings. Well, I made it back to the boat, but decided that this had been my last snorkel in open waters. A hike along the broken lava-covered shore with many partially inundated lava tubes, took us past sea lions and a small colony of fur seals. The ubiquitous bright-red sally lightfoot crabs scampered about wherever we landed.

Cruising along Salvadore's north shore we arrived at the small island of Bartolomé where a few of us, despite the rain, climbed the 300 plus stairs up Pinnacle Rock, remnant of an extinct volcano. That evening our cook prepared a sumptuous farewell repast in his tiny kitchen which we took in the inside cabin/dining room due to inclement weather – the rainy season had begun. Aside from our captain, Ernesto, our crew consisted of the cook, a mechanic, a sailor and a steward with overlapping duties. Everyone was always helpful and courteous. Often, though, we had taken breakfast, lunches, and dinners on a nicely arranged outside table, a tarp protecting us at daytime from the tropical sun.

Very early next morning another dinghy ride took us into a mangrove bay at Coleta Tortuga Negra on Isla Santa Cruz, however few siting were made on this last venture. Then it was back to Isla Baltra to catch our plane back to Quito. That evening we enjoyed another farewell dinner outside town with tapas and Argentine steak.

After this our group parted, some returning home, others venturing farther. We visited the anthropological museum in the morning, once more the flea market and a spiffy gallery to pick up some souvenirs. The Hilton Colon was nice enough to let us stay in our room until 20:00 after which we were taken by our city guide William to the airport for the night flight home to Phoenix via Atlanta.

The Galápagos Islands are justifiably famous for the tameness, peculiarity and variety of their wildlife nowhere else to be found on the planet. To our guide I called them at one time: The Serengeti of the Pacific. But, like everywhere else, it is a 'paradise', an environment compromised, which, to restore, a number of organizations are working on very hard. Its lands are still raw and, because of the still erupting volcanoes will remain raw for times to come. The vegetation, being limited in variety, is unattractive. But in the rawness of the land and how life took a foothold, even prospered, lies their attractiveness.

