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Why Visit the Galápagos Islands?

by Suzanne Hughes

A couple of years ago I saw the IMAX 3D film *Galapagos*. When I walked out of the theater, I told Steve, "I want to go there." Some dreams become reality; we just got back from the Galápagos.

The archipelago of the Galápagos Islands is an Ecuadorian National Park so it is no wonder that the only flights to the islands are from Ecuador. The two international airports, Quito and Guayaquil, each are gateways to the islands, but due to the way the flights work out, you must spend a night in the city both before and after your island vacation. I cannot speak about Guayaquil from experience, but there is a lot to do in and around Quito. The architecture of Colonial Quito is amazing. Just outside Quito, you can visit the equatorial monument, which contains a small museum of the history of the peoples of Ecuador, or take a trip to the Indian Market in Otavalo or Saquisilí. For the more adventurous types, Mt. Pichincha or Cotopaxi will get you up to 13-15 thousand feet in altitude.

Though the Galápagos are a National Park, five islands have permanent residents: Isabela, Floreana, Baltra, Santa Cruz and San Cristobal. Residency on the islands totals about eighteen thousand of which about half live in Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz.

Of course, the real residents of the islands are the animals, many of which are unique to the particular island they inhabit. The islands are spread out so the best way to see them is to take a cruise and live aboard a boat. Cruises range in length from 3 to 14 days. If you just want to say you went to the Galápagos, a 3 day cruise allows that but little else. If you want to get a feel for the actual differences and similarities of the islands, even a 14 day cruise will leave you wanting more.

There are a lot of warnings about traveler safety in



A Note from the Editor.

You may be wondering where I am. I'm at the equator, in Quito, Ecuador. For some reason, my travel agent took me here. I mean, I'm not complaining, I like it here. The weather is nice and it sure beats fighting those giant tortoises that live in the Galápagos Islands. I'll let her tell you all about that.

B.Bear

Ecuador, but it need not be a dangerous place to visit. By using the same common sense needed on a visit to Central Park in New York, you can have a safe holiday in Ecuador. In fact, once on a boat, the major threat comes from the other passengers because the crew members would lose their well paid jobs if they were ever found guilty.

But none of this is why you go there. You go to get a glimpse of a unique place where life developed in strange and diverse ways free from the influence of men. You go to see some of the most beautiful, diverse scenery on the planet. You go to see it all while it's still there since, sadly, the influence of man is rapidly destroying this wonderful place.

Our Trip to the Galápagos Islands

by Suzanne Hughes

After thoroughly researching traveling to the Galápagos Islands, we decided to give our money to Galapagos Travel. Galapagos Travel is a California based travel agent who specializes in educational trips to ecologically minded places with a special focus on the Galápagos Islands. I liked them for four reasons:

First, they lease the entire boat and personally fill the boat, no resales by other travel agents, and they provide a tour guide who accompanies the tour on the entire trip so someone is present to help if a problem arises.

Second, most excursions are only in the islands for 3-7 days, Galapagos Travel runs trips with 11-15 days in the islands so you get to see a lot more.

Third, to step foot in the National Park (over 90% of the islands), Ecuadorian law requires a naturalist for every 16 visitors. The naturalist has two jobs: first, they are knowledgeable about the plants and animals and will point them out to you and tell you about them; second, they are the ones responsible for enforcing the rules of the islands which are primarily geared towards protecting the environment. Galapagos Travel provides a knowledgeable tour guide who has visited the islands many times, so you have two people who are used to spotting the animals and answering questions about them.

Fourth, I selected Galapagos Travel because I liked the boat they use, the 'Tip Top III'. This is a first rate, state-of-the-art boat with capacity for 16 passengers and 8 crew (including the naturalist) and is very well maintained and operated.

We took a 17 day trip which was fully booked with 13 Americans, 1 Canadian and 1 German. Two nights were spent in Quito and 14 on the 'Tip Top III' cruising the Galápagos Islands. This article is about the time we spent visiting the islands.

The first day on the boat we discussed and agreed on a schedule. The park allows visitors ashore from 6 am to 6 pm. For most groups, the first trip ashore would be at 7 am, but Galapagos Travel advertises they will get you on the islands earlier than other boats, so we



The cliffs of Cerro Brujo

were encouraged to start earlier. We agreed on wake-up at 5:30, breakfast at 6 am with the pangas departing at 6:30. It was nice being out early, and for photographers (there were five of us who were pretty serious) who like the early light, it was great.

While on the boat, excursions were made to shore via the life boats also known as pangas. The tour leader, Barry Boyce owner of Galapagos Travel and author of one of the best guide books to the Galápagos, gave nightly lectures on the islands history, geography, birds, mammals and reptiles. This was followed by the naturalist, Ernesto Vaca, discussing the next day's itinerary which helped us plan what to wear. I mean, it doesn't really matter for snorkeling, but the type of terrain and landing would affect the type of footwear you needed. For example, if you had a dry landing (one where you stepped from the panga onto a dock or rocks, theoretically not getting wet) you could wear sneakers or hiking boots and be prepared for whatever terrain you would be walking on. However, if you had a wet landing (one where you stepped out of the panga into water) you had to carry your sneakers or wear sandals that you didn't mind getting wet, which might not be the best thing for walking long distances on sharp lava.



The Tip Top III anchored off Santiago



The pangas used to go ashore



The classic sea lion pose

Friday, February 20, 2004

You always remember the first sea lion you see in the Galápagos, it seems so special. Ours was while we were hanging around at the dock waiting for the panga to come to take us to the TIP TOP III. There were a couple of sea lions playing in the water and napping in one of the boats anchored in the bay. The mystery as to how the sea lion got in the boat was soon cleared up as we watched another sea lion knock him out of the boat and then the original clamber back in to the boat. What we didn't realize was that the idle time we experienced waiting for the panga was the last break we would have for the next two weeks.

Once aboard the TIP TOP III, after unpacking our stuff (being pleasantly surprised that there was plenty of space in the small cabin for everything),

having a small snack, and a safety drill, we were finally ready for our first shore excursion on North Seymour. As we stepped off the panga, we immediately were within feet of sea lions.

I had really wanted to see blue-footed boobies at some point on the trip; I saw many on North Seymour, some as close as two or three feet away. The main two things I noticed about these birds was 1) that they hang about in groups of no more than two and 2) that though all their feet are blue, they differ in the shade of blue tremendously from one bird to another.



Turtle tracks on Cerro Brujo

The majestic frigate birds were a little more remote than the boobies, but easily distinguishable with the naked eye. North Seymour was our first sighting of Galápagos lizards and both land and marine iguanas.

While planning for the trip, I had seen a lot of very good photos of these animals, but I had no idea how long of a lens was needed to get those photos. By the time we were heading back to the boat, I realized that I had probably gotten some pretty good photos of the frigate birds with my 300mm lens and I didn't even need a zoom lens for the boobies and iguanas, they were near enough to get close-ups with a standard lens.

That evening at dinner I found myself exclaiming that after just one visit I thought I had seen as many animals up close as I had actually dared hope to see on the entire trip!

Saturday, February 21, 2004

The morning began with a panga ride around Cerro Brujo before a wet landing at one of the beaches. Cerro Brujo is an eroded tuff cone, off the coast of San Cristobal, which means it is a high piece of land with majestic rock walls with numerous lava flows embedded in the rock. There is a tunnel through the rocks which creates a frame for viewing the famous Kicker Rock. Once everyone had taken their photos, the panga captain went through the tunnel (fortunately, waves and tides permitted this) which gave us a nice close-up view of the rock cliffs.

Upon landing on Cerro Brujo, the first thing we saw on the beach was turtle tracks in the sand. It was amazing how much like tractor tracks these looked. A walk along the beach, amongst lava and sand, brought us to a beautiful cove that displayed the TIP TOP III with Kicker Rock in the background. The naturalist pointed out flora and birds along the walk but I have to admit, I was just trying to absorb the beauty of the island and missed a lot of what he said.

We spent the afternoon at Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal. After a dry landing, we walked to the Interpretation Center where our naturalist played guide and we learned about the history of the islands. On the way to the Scout Training Center we stopped for ice cream at one of the local stores.



Kicker Rock

At the end of the day we had some free time to explore the city. Away from the coast, you could really tell you were at the equator. It was very hot!

Sunday, February 22, 2004

Sunday morning brought us to Gardner Bay on Española (Hood) Island. After a wet landing, we found ourselves on a pretty beach littered with sea lions. The classic sea lion pose was defined by this point: sitting with the nose up in the air. As others were still looking at the sea lions, I spotted an iguana down the beach. This was my first sighting of a Christmas Marine Iguana. I recognized it because of the brilliant red and green coloring which I had learned about at the lecture the previous evening. Since the iguana was moving along the beach, I had to follow it, get in front of it, and shoot it as it passed by me, then repeat. After getting several shots in this fashion, the iguana found a nice warm rock, climbed it, and lay in the sun accompanied by a female iguana of the same species. The female is black with little coloring, but the male is an awesome green and red shade, hence the name. A Hood Mockingbird joined the scene for a while before we spotted other marine iguanas and sea lions playing in the surf.

After returning to the boat, we went snorkeling. The snorkeling was good, but the water was a little cloudy. None the less, we saw a diamond sting ray, sea lions, king angel fish and yellow surgeon fish. The amazing part was I could actually recognize these fish.

The afternoon panga ride to Punta Suarez was yet another chance for the panga captains to show off their skills. As we headed around Española to get a good look at the blow hole, the waves were at least four feet high, but they were traversed with great skill. It was nice seeing the blow hole from both the ocean and from the island above it which we would not have been able to do (and keep our cameras dry) if it had not been for the skill of the captains.

The landing on Punta Suarez was almost a dry landing on a newly built dock, but one did have to be careful of the sea lions who occasionally decided to play harbor master. At this stop we saw Nazca Boobies, including chicks, for the first time. I still needed to have the mockingbirds and Galápagos Doves that we saw identified for me, but I started to recognize the Marine Iguanas by their coloring and squared off noses.

Our naturalist, Ernesto, was always looking for ways to amuse us, as well as dazzle us with his knowledge of the islands. He managed to do both this afternoon. He amused me by playing iguana soaking up the sun on a rock and dazzled me with his knowledge of the island.

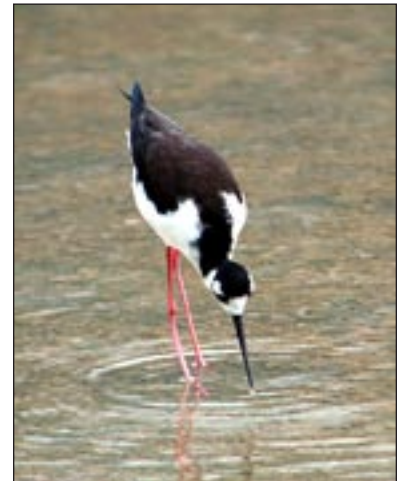
I specifically remember while we were walking back to the panga pick up spot, commenting to him about the sounds of the islands. His response was to tell me to follow him and he proceeded to take a few steps off the trail where I could listen to the music of the waves washing through the rocks and pebbles. Since the group was rather spread out at the time, this was a good opportunity to allow the trailers in the group to catch up. This was not the only time that the thought went through my head that even a blind person could come and be in awe of the wondrous nature of the Galápagos Islands. The sounds of the waves washing the rocks was one that I wished I had the video recorder so I could have captured the essences of this sound.

Monday, February 23, 2004

Monday brought us to Floreana where we spent several hours walking from



The Harbor Master at Punta Suarez



Black-necked Stilt on Floreana



Yellow-crowned Night-heron on
Flour Beach



Hood Mockingbird on Española



Blue-footed Booby feeding frenzy



Post Office Bay on Floreana



Brown Pelican nesting on Punta Moreno

Punta Cormoran to the "Flour Beach". While Punta Cormoran is a green beach due to the olivine crystals present from volcanically derived silicates of magnesium and iron, "Flour Beach" is composed of fine white sand derived from finely digested corals. The lagoon we passed along the way was the home to some black-necked stilts and many flamingoes. On this excursion, we saw other shore birds, but I remember the Yellow-crowned Night Heron the most because of the way he posed for us on Flour Beach.

This Flour Beach stop was unusual for another reason. Though we had seen other boats in the water and other groups on land, they had not been at the same location as we were. On Flour Beach, there were at least two other groups of people from a different boat roaming the beach area at the same time we were. It actually made it seem crowded.

One of the tourist stops on Floreana is called Post Office Bay. This is the home to an old barrel that was set up in the late 1800s for the whalers to leave mail to be carried to its destination. Today, the cruise ships stop here and everyone goes to shore where they drop off unstamped postcards and sort through the postcards there to take and deliver any that are near their home. We took a postcard and delivered it to a couple in Atlanta that were tickled pink to get people hand delivering a postcard from the Galápagos.

After lunch and a siesta, we headed ashore to Puerto Velasco Ibarra on Floreana. A truck ride to the highlands brought us to the vicinity of the original Wittmer family compound. On the walk to the caves they called home, we passed a tortoise viewing area. Since this was the first time we could actually see the infamous tortoises, we were disappointed that the gate was locked and we could only see them from afar.

We saw the caves and original living areas of the Wittmers close up. When you see a hole in a rock that someone called home, you get a different idea of roughing it. Fortunately, a ride back to the coast brought us to the hotel that is currently operated by the Wittmer family. It's amazing to see the difference between the original 'home' on the island and that of today. It hasn't even been 75 years.

Tuesday, February 24, 2004

No trip to a foreign country is complete without a little bit of rebellious behavior. Today, the plan was to land on Isabela and enjoy a horseback ride to the caldera of the Sierra Negra volcano. Unfortunately, the fishermen on Isabela were currently protesting the tourism industry and the captain of our ship was not comfortable sending his passengers ashore where the protests were happening. The tour leader, naturalist and captain put their heads together and decided to visit Punta Moreno on the other side of Isabela instead.

This meant that we cruised around the southern tip of Isabella a day earlier than expected. Along the way to our playground for the afternoon, we were treated to the sight of a feeding frenzy. At feeding time, blue-footed boobies head out toward sea. When one spots something in the water, he will rise over 80 feet in the air then suddenly plunge towards the water, wings folding in at the last second, before entering the water beak first. When the other boobies see this, they start doing the same thing. It was amazing to see hundreds of these birds feeding this way.

When we arrived at Punta Moreno, we played. Before lunch we went snorkeling. After lunch, we had a panga ride to one of the lagoons. The



Driftwood on Fernandina

Galápagos, but it is also the youngest at just about a million years old. It is made up of six volcanos, five of which are still considered active. So it is no wonder that the amazing thing about Punta Moreno is the lava flows. Amidst all kinds of rough ahah lava you will suddenly find a crater containing an oasis of grasses, mangroves and water. I had started to get used to seeing the lava cactus growing out of the solid lava rock, but these oasis were really something to see. Especially when one hosted a flock of flamingos!

Wednesday, February 25, 2004

Today was one of the few days we never actually went ashore. This in no ways means we didn't have a busy day, nor does it mean we didn't have a visually stimulating day. The day started with a panga ride around the Islas Marielas and Elizabeth Bay. Essentially, these islas are two rocks which stick up out of the ocean. But they are two rocks full of life.

Blue-footed boobies could be seen throughout the rock surface, but they were primarily lined up along each ridge and the crest of the islas. We saw sea lions and penguins playing in the water around the rocks and along the lower edges of the rocks and pelicans hiding amongst the rock.

We saw abundant sea life snorkeling and this was our first time we snorkeled with penguins. It was also the first time I actually dared take the Minolta Dimage XI under water in its waterproof case. I am glad I did because I got several shots of surgeon fish, penguins and sea lions. My favorite shot was of a chocolate chip starfish. This starfish looks just like a cookie press cookie decorated with chocolate chips, hence the name.

Kayaking was especially fun this day. After lunch, the pangas departed from their mother boat to go to the lagoons near Elizabeth Bay. Since no shore trip was planned, the kayaks were filled with what was termed 'group a', the first group of people to kayak. While they kayaked, I took pictures of the sea turtles, rays and pelicans that we saw. Then when it was time for 'group b' to load up the kayaks, instead of passing, I decided to trust my Nikon to Ray's care (another photographer who was not kayaking) and join Steve in his kayak.

It was neat seeing the sea turtles a little closer to the water, but we were only there for about ten minutes when Ernesto gathered the kayakers up to head to one of the other lagoons nearby. En route to the new area, we got to do some open water kayaking.

It had been worked out that the pangas would pick us up at this second lagoon so we wouldn't have to kayak back. Unfortunately, we got to the rendezvous point a little early and there was no sign of the pangas. I don't remember who suggested it, but someone suggested kayaking back to the

kayaks were towed behind the pangas so anyone wishing to kayak around the lagoon could do just that. Being a little worried about my Nikon, I chose to stay in the panga and enjoyed the pelicans and flightless cormorants from where I was taken, instead of having to work to get there. Also, BearBear was with us for this stop and they didn't have a life jacket small enough for him.

After a dry landing on Isabela, we got to see what made this stop so special. Isabela is not only the largest island of the



A Chocolate Chip Starfish

Islas Marielas where we were scheduled to have a pre-sunset panga ride. Somehow, Ernesto was talked into it and instead of having a short open water kayak excursion to the pangas, we had a rather long one to the islas. As we kayaked past the ship, I noticed a few longing glances from the people in the three kayaks sent towards the boat.

Kayaking around the Islas Marielas proved to be one of the highlights of the trip. For one reason, I never thought I would be able to kayak that far in open sea, but we made it, and it felt good. As we approached the coast of these rocks, it was obvious that the kayaks sat lower in the water than the pangas so you were actually closer to the wildlife and could see them better. The kayaks were also quieter than the pangas so the wildlife swam close to us without being scared off. The quietness was wonderful, and the penguins and sea lions were just inches away. I remember wishing I had a camera to capture the photos of the penguins since they were so close, but I also remember being glad I wasn't burdened down with a camera and could just watch the penguins playfully cavorting only inches away from me in the water.



A Panamic Cushion Star

The real question we all had was whether the pangas would be willing to pick us up from this new location as part of the late afternoon panga ride, or would we be kayaking back to the boat. When only one panga left the boat, we had our answer. So around the second rock we kayaked and then back to the boat. Because we missed the sunset panga ride, we missed photographing the sun setting behind the Islas Marielas, but I think the beauty of the animals and sea so close to us was well worth it.

Thursday, February 26, 2004

In 1954, the Alceda volcano erupted on Isabela island. This created impressive geological formations along Urvina Bay. As we traveled along the coast in the panga, I was awed by the details of the rock we passed. What I didn't realize at the time was that the coastline was actually moved $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile by the volcanic activity exposing coral skeletons and other marine remains. The coast I was seeing was only about half a century old in places.

After a wet landing on Urvina Bay, we saw many land iguanas. Our naturalist sat down on a bed of lava and declared that in 1950 he would have been sitting on the beach because he was on the area that was affected by the Alceda volcano. On the way back to the panga for the return to the boat, a Galápagos Hawk was modeling on a bed of lava along the coast. I was so involved in photographing the hawk, that I didn't even notice that the pangas had been called and were coming in around the bend to pick us up. That was one of the few times I wasn't one of the first ones to board the panga.

That afternoon, when we went snorkeling at Punta Espinosa off the coast of Fernandina, it may not have been the coldest water we were in, but it was close. The water temperature was about 62° Fahrenheit. This is not what you would expect when you are swimming at the equator but thanks to the Humboldt Current, the water temperatures stay very cool which allows for the multitude of sea life to be present. Thanks to our long 3 mil wetsuits, we didn't freeze. This was the first time we got to snorkel with the sea turtles.



Lava on Fernandina



Nazca Booby on Isla Genovesa



Juvenile booby on Isla Genovesa



Razor Surgeonfish

Our tour leader had said that Fernandina was his favorite stop on the trip. There is only one visitor's site on Fernandina, Punta Espinosa, and we visited it for our afternoon shore excursion.

By this time in the trip, we had begun to expect something a little different at every stop we made. This one was no exception. As we stepped out of the panga onto the rocks, it was hard not to notice all the marine iguanas which lounged about. In fact, there were so many, you had to be careful not to step on them as you made your way away from the water. Upon closer examination, you could see Sally Lightfoot Crabs and lava lizards interspersed amongst the iguanas.

The path led over some nice lava forms which photographed fantastically in 3D. Lava cactus grew out of the lava in places and there were beaches with waves breaking and sea lions playing to be photographed. We saw an old diesel engine partially buried in the sand. It was the only man made thing we saw left on the islands that didn't belong. Our naturalist actually said that he had permission to sell it to anyone who could come and take it away without harming the environment.

On this island we also witnessed a couple of bull sea lions fighting for their territory. It was amazing to see how seriously they fought each other. Just around the corner we saw a nesting ground for the Flightless Cormorants and we were able to watch a couple of chicks in their nest with their mother as several frigate birds flew by overhead.

For such a small island, Fernandina is very rich in life and geographical history.

Friday, February 27, 2004

With everything that we've seen and done, it's hard to believe that we're only at the midpoint of the trip. Or more to the point, most of the boat trips in the Galápagos are only 7 days in length. If we were on one of those, today would have been the day we were leaving. But since it's not, it's another fun filled day, fortunately, not as energetic as some.

The morning started out with a panga ride at Tagus Cove and my beginning to get real camera envy. I mean I had a good camera, the Nikon D100 with a 70-300mm lens on it, what more could I want? How about a lens with vibration reduction. Shooting from a rocking boat in low light situations can produce some very blurry pictures, which I got plenty of on this panga ride. The sad part was, the panga driver knew I was trying to get pictures of pelicans, blue-footed boobies, rock crevices and formations, lava flows, sea lions, iguanas and the common noddy. He pointed them out to me and got me positioned so I could get good shots, but for the most part, it was all in vain. I couldn't keep the camera still enough in the lighting conditions. I just have to rely on the brain photos which deteriorate much quicker with time and are hard to share.

After a late morning snorkel around Punta Vicente Roca, and lunch, we navigated north, past the equator and around the northern tip of Isabela. It was interesting seeing the navigational equipment report 0 0 0. We saw some sharks in the water and the desolation of the north western shores of Isla Isabela.

Saturday, February 28, 2004

The only time a sea lion looking creature is not a sea lion, is when it is a

fur seal. The only time we saw the Galápagos Fur Seal was at James Bay on Santiago. These animals actually are different than sea lions. They are much smaller with a different shape nose, longer hair and prefer to live on the rocky shores where the cruise boats prefer not to go. Fortunately, the colony at James Bay is accessible. In addition to the fur seals, we saw marine iguanas, pelicans, the American Oystercatcher, Blue Heron and the Willett. The amazing thing was that I was beginning to actually identify some of the birds.

Snorkling first at James Bay, then at Rabida showed us a wide range of colorful fish. Some that we saw were the Razor Surgeonfish, King Angelfish, Parrotfish, the Black Striped Salema and the Panamic Cushion Star. It was always fun getting back to the boat and trying to recognize the fish that we had just seen in the numerous books that were available on the boat.

The sand on Rabida was a dark red from the fine iron oxide dust that came from the volcano. This didn't stop the sea lion from coating himself with the sand for protection against the sun. Unfortunately, the drought of the past two years on the islands has taken its toll here. It is a dry crisp land with little green vegetation other than the prickly pear cactus.

Sunday, February 29, 2004

Today we visited Santa Cruz. Fifty percent of the population of the Galápagos Islands permanently live on this island. It is the home of the Charles Darwin Research Station. When we left the boat first thing in the morning, we were gone until after dinner giving the crew a welcome break, no passengers. Of course, I'm sure they were busy scrubbing things down, restocking essentials and doing all the things that are necessary to keep a cruise boat going. Some hopefully had a chance while we were anchored to visit with family or friends that live on the island.

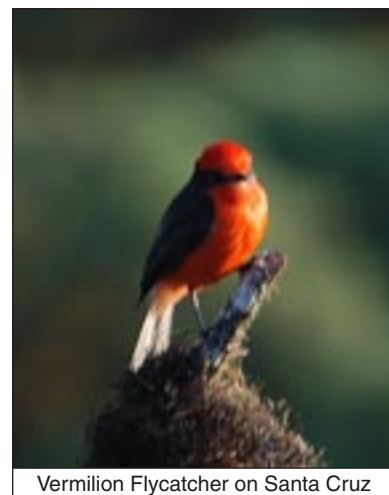
As for us passengers, this was the day to see the Giant Tortoises of the islands. The morning was leisurely spent at the Charles Darwin Research Station, in town and wandering the coast along the Hotel Galápagos. After a leisurely lunch at the hotel, we went up to explore the highlands. Another guide showed up to help us see over a dozen tortoises in the wild.

The Vermilion Flycatcher, in it's magnificent red, played in and out of photo range at a couple of the locations we stopped at. This is the only island where we saw this beautiful bird.

I realized that I was actually starting to recognize the Galápagos Dove. As we were hiking around Los Gemelos (The Twins) there were several of the doves along the path. I really wished we had more time to hike in the highlands. These two giant sinkholes were full of vegetation and I could only imagine the number of birds and other wildlife that could have been seen if given enough time. The air felt so good here and there was a peacefulness that was begging to be experienced for a prolonged time.

Monday, March 1, 2004

Today I learned that each finch has its own personality and look; I don't mean species, I mean each bird. While we were visiting with Jacqueline De Roy, one of the longer time residents of Santa Cruz, the hundreds of finches that she feeds were gathered around the table and ground about 10 feet from where I sat. This was the first time I actually used binoculars to carefully see the behavior and details of something that close. Unfortunately, a lot of the finches that visit her have a disease that rots their feet and many were



Vermilion Flycatcher on Santa Cruz



Candle senna found on Santa Cruz



Greater Flamingo on Isabela

having problems walking around on the ground.

After some souvenir shopping time in the city, we were back on the boat to continue on to Santa Fe. Santa Fe has another one of the pretty white sand beaches with the sea lion welcoming committee. This is a very dry island, with lots of the prickly pear cactus, in fact these are the largest trees in the archipelago.

As we were waiting for the pangas to pick us up, I was busy photographing the Galápagos Doves that were wandering the beach when I noticed a Sea Lion bull standing guard over a bright yellow hat. Lucy, one of the ladies on our tour, was victim to the wind blowing her hat off. The one thing we had all learnt was that a male sea lion gets his own way, so everyone just waited until the sea lion decided the big yellow blob was of no interest and wandered off. I noticed that Lucy had her hat tied down with a couple of shoestrings the next day.

Tuesday, March 2, 2004

Finally we got to see the Red-footed Booby. There are two landing areas on Isla Genovesa, Prince Philips Steps, which we went to in the morning, and Darwin's Bay, our afternoon stop. There was little green vegetation along the morning walk, but the wildlife was plentiful.

I still remember the awe I felt when I first saw the coloring of the bill of the Red-footed Booby. There was something about the way the pink melted into the blue beak that really caught my eye. Pictures I had seen really didn't prepare me for the wonder of this reality.

There were several booby chicks that could be seen from the path. Most of these chicks were nothing more than a ball of fluff with a wide open beak waiting for their mother to come and deposit some food.

One slightly older chick was trying to figure out this flying thing. He was standing at the edge of a little rise and kept running down it trying to flap his wings. He reminded me of being on the hills trying to hang glide. It's too bad he couldn't see the videos that were being taken of him. Maybe he could have analyzed them and figured out what wasn't quite working. Unfortunately, we had to leave before he got his first flight in.

Walking back to the pickup point, we were on the far side of an open lava beach, when a Short-eared Owl was spotted. I could see it through the binoculars, but that was about all. Fortunately, the hawk like eyes of our naturalist spotted several others as we continued walking.

It's odd seeing owls out in broad daylight. But these owls feed by landing somewhere, being perfectly still and blending into the background. Small birds, which do not see them, will sometimes wander too close and the owl can snatch them for a snack. I was able to capture a bird in the claws of an owl with my 300mm lens. Of course it is a good thing that I shoot digital because it took about fifty pictures to get that one.

Genovesa is a nesting ground for the Great Frigate Birds. When the male has his gula sac all inflated, the red patch shows nicely against the barren landscape. After examining the photos I took, I realized that the female I was shooting was actually a Magnificent Frigate Bird: It had a blue eye ring.

In the afternoon at the Darwin's Bay stop, the landscape was no longer barren, instead there was the green of many mangrove trees. The Red-footed Boobies that nested in these trees made for nice colorful photos. As we climbed up to the higher parts of the island, there were Swallow Tail Gulls



A Red-footed Booby peeking out of a red mangrove



Nazca Booby chick on Genovesa



A male Magnificent Frigatebird



Short-eared Owl on Genovesa

After sunset, there was a night time snorkeling expedition. The group on the boat split into three factions for this trip. Some did not go, in retrospect they may have been the smart ones, a couple of us just went out in the water to see the phosphorescence we had heard so much about, and the rest actually did the hour snorkeling. If we thought the water was cold during the day, at night we found out the meaning of cold water. It is amazing how much the sun warms that top layer of water that the body floats in when you are snorkeling!

They always tell you, don't drink the water. Well, I didn't, but you couldn't tell by the way my body felt. I made it out of bed to get to the door and tell Barry that neither Steve nor I would be on the morning expedition. Yes, we were both down for the count at the same time. Sombrero Chino, Sullivan Bay and Double Sided Beach on Bartolome looked like really neat places, but other than a couple of pictures from the deck of the boat, I didn't see them. At least by afternoon I could move around enough to sit on deck and I even made it to dinner that night. To show how accommodating the crew was, when served dessert, a nice rich dessert that the stomach really couldn't have handled, they brought ice cream for Marcus and I when we requested it. It's amazing how good something can be when it's actually what you feel like eating.

Thursday, March 4, 2004

of these amenities). When they came, she looked up and was appalled to find out they thought she needed any help, she was exclaiming that her heart was so happy to actually get to see such a wonderful site and proceeded to walk down the hill and back to the boat.

The view of Pinnacle Rock from the top of this hill is probably one of the most photographed views on the islands. The landscape reminded me of the pictures that were just sent back from the Mars rovers, but I didn't see any tracks, so I guess this wasn't where it was staged.

Still feeling a little queasy, I didn't want to trust myself snorkling, so I enjoyed a panga ride while others were





Swallow-tailed Gull



The traditional Pinnacle Rock shot as seen from Bartolome's 'Heartbreak Hill'



Lava lizard climbing the prickly pear cactus on South Plaza



Golden Cowrays seen in Black Turtle Cove

snorkeling. We knew it was lunchtime when we saw a Lava Heron feasting on a Sally Lightfoot Crab. This was another missed photo op, with just three people in the panga, all the time in the world and about 3 feet away, I should have had a whole series of good photos. Unfortunately, my Minolta that I was carrying overheated from being in its underwater case and not being underwater and was having trouble shooting.

For our final afternoon, we went ashore on South Plaza where several land iguanas greeted us to get their pictures taken. When you see this many iguanas close together, you start noticing differences in individuals. It is no wonder that people who actually stay and study them can tell each animal apart. Over 100 land iguanas were counted while walking around the island. My favorite iguana shot was taken here amongst the Galápagos Carpetweed. Galápagos Carpetweed is a very colorful ground cover that added a new dimension to the photos.

There was a Yellow Warbler that followed us for awhile. It was amazing how he made sure to stay the same distance all the time. I kept trying to get a better photograph of him, but he never got close enough for me to get a clear photo without that vibration reduction lens.

On the ground is not the only place to look for lizards. The lava lizards climb the prickly pear cactus using the spines as steps. Here on South Plaza (Plaza Sur), the cactus grows to 3 meters in height. One lava lizard had climbed over five feet up to rest on the pad of the cactus.

The distinctive red eye-ring of the Swallow-tailed Gull made them easily recognizable sitting amongst lava rocks.

One couldn't help feeling a little sad, knowing that this was our last afternoon out on the islands. In fact, it was the last time we would be exploring these islands on foot. It was the last time we would be only a foot or two from these wonderful, fearless birds and iguanas. As a result, it was with great reluctance, that I boarded the panga to head back to Tip Top III.

Friday, March 5, 2004

The panga ride around Black Turtle Cove was a fitting ending to the cruise. It was peaceful, quiet and I just didn't want it to end. We saw a shark in the water, some rays playing at the surface and a blue heron on the coast. My favorite sighting was a pack of golden cowrays. About fifteen of these were gliding along the surface in unison, back and forth under an overhang of branches. These cowrays really added to the peacefulness of the ride. They were so beautiful looking, I even tried to shoot them even though I knew shooting on a floating panga in the low light early morning conditions, almost guaranteed it wouldn't come out.

Some people complained about the bugs that were present on the water, but they weren't biting, so they weren't bothering me. As the sun burnt through the haze, I knew we would be heading back to the boat.

Whenever I leave the beach, I always do so reluctantly. This time, it was really hard. As I left the Tip Top III, and headed for the airport, I couldn't help but think that I was leaving a part of me behind.

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Visiting Quito

by Suzanne Hughes

It was up to us to fill our time in Quito, fortunately the travel agency had plenty of ideas for us and employed an English speaking person who met people at the airport, arranged tours, and generally took great care of us while we were in Quito.

Before the Boat Tour

We were in Quito two nights before our boat was scheduled to leave. This might seem like overkill, but the plane didn't get in until after nine pm and we needed to be at the airport to catch a nine am flight to the islands. This gave us just the one day in Quito to allow any missing luggage to catch up to us. Fortunately, we had no luggage go astray so we were able to enjoy the day.

Thinking we would be tired from traveling the previous day, we scheduled a tour of the Equatorial Monument and downtown Quito for the afternoon which left us to wander around outside the hotel in the morning.

As we stepped out of our hotel, bright and early (for us), the first thing we noticed was how wonderfully cool it was. With temperatures in the fifties, Quito is at 9350 feet, the equator can be a very pleasant place to be. The hotel we stayed at, the Hotel Mecure Alameda, was in a great location. In the early morning air, we stretched our legs walking to the Parque El Ejido nearby. Had it not been for all the warnings, we would have enjoyed the park more, but we were afraid to venture too far into it and stayed on the outskirts.

We walked back towards the hotel on the Avenue Amazonas. This street begins with the Hilton complex and is lined with shops. It was interesting when we stopped in a little market to buy a couple of cokes, since Ecuador adopted the US currency in 2000, the preferred currency is the dollar coin. When we tried to pay using a twenty dollar bill, we got the same kind of reaction that you get here in the states when you try to break a 100 dollar bill.

We found a McDonalds located only a couple of blocks from the hotel, where we had lunch. We have always been amazed at how clean fast food places are in foreign countries.

After lunch, we met up with Tanya, the English speaking coordinator, who introduced us to our driver and tour guide for the afternoon. It was nice having a personal guide who knew where to go at the Equatorial Monument and could explain about the different Indians from around Ecuador that are highlighted in the museum.

What we didn't realize was that it rains in Quito in the afternoon. In the old city, as we darted between churches, it was a good thing we had rain jackets since it was pouring. But inside the churches, it was amazing to see the amount of gold that was used. There were literally walls and columns covered in gold. No wonder there was such a gold rush to the new world in the 16th and 17th centuries when these churches were built.

When we drove around El Panecillo, where the Virgin of Quito watches over the city, the fog and rain was so bad, we couldn't even see it.

Visiting Quito - continued on page 20



Outdoor art in the Parque El Ejido



An Otavalo Indian weaver at work



A Hummingbird



Animals of the Galápagos Islands

In the Galápagos, a combination of cold Antarctic currents and volcanic activity combined with geographic isolation has produced a unique and extraordinarily fragile environment filled with fantastic creatures.

Consisting of 13 main islands, 17 smaller islands and more than 40 exposed rocks, the Galápagos Islands, part of Ecuador, are situated on the equator about 600 miles west of Ecuador. 90% of the land masses are part of the Ecuadorian National Park. There are only 54 sites, located throughout the islands, where visitor access is allowed. Even then, hours are limited and a registered naturalist must accompany visitors at all times. While the regrettably necessary limited access and uncertain weather makes photography in the Galápagos challenging, it is literally a nature photographer's paradise.

Each island has its own unique environment and animals adapted to that environment. On one, marine iguanas blend into the lava perfectly, on the next, they show bright red and green skins. In some places you must carefully pick your way through the large numbers of Galápagos Sea Lions, while on others you spend hours looking for a single example of a species.

The land is just as varied as the creatures that dwell on it. One beach is green olivine; the next is rust red iron oxide as fine as flour. The islands sit on the meeting line between continental plates and are volcanically active. In some places you can walk on land that was under ocean only a few years before. In others, inhospitable lava fields stretch for miles.

Although it is officially designated a World Heritage Site, commercial fishing activity and increasing "cruise ship" style tourism threatens this fragile world. Visit, and photograph it, if you get the chance while it still remains wild and unspoiled.

The Red-footed Booby

Smallest of the boobies, the Red-footed Booby is only 28 inches long with a 4½ foot wingspan. The distinguishing features of this bird include their red webbed feet and the colorful blue and pink bill. This is the only booby that nests in trees. In the Galapagos, they are primarily seen on Genovesa and the eastern side of San Cristobal.



The Marine Iguana: subspecies venustissimus

In the hour that marine iguanas can spend in the water, their body temperature drops by 18-21 degrees. They then have to bask in the sun to recover. The subspecies 'venustissimus', isolated to Española, since it is a 12 hour swim to the nearest island, is the most colorful, featuring a red tint and adding green coloring during mating season. No wonder the male is nicknamed a 'Christmas Iguana'.



The Galápagos (or Giant) Tortoise

Up to 550 pounds in weight, the Galápagos Tortoise nearly faced extinction from early visitors to the Islands. Today, due to the efforts of the Darwin Foundation, many tortoise hatchlings have been protected and released to the wild. This tortoise is of one of the dome backed species which originated in the highlands on one of the islands and now resides at the Charles Darwin Research Station.



The Galápagos Sea Lion

The first animal most people see when they visit the Galápagos is the Sea Lion. Males are larger and darker in color than females. Males may measure up to 90 inches long and weigh up to 550 pounds while the female will weigh up to 250 pounds. The bull, being very territorial, will charge any human or male sea lion if he feels his territory or his harem of 5 to 25 cows is threatened.



The Great Frigatebird

Distinguished from the Magnificent Frigatebird by the greenish sheen of the mantle feathers, it is very hard to recognize these birds prior to maturity at four years when they develop their final plumage. The adult male develops the red throat pouch which he inflates to attract females. The wingspan can be an impressive 80-90 inches.



The Galápagos Hawk

This bird is feared by many creatures. It feeds on carrion, small and helpless birds, iguanas, lizards, young tortoises, snakes and rodents. A mature adult will have a wingspan of 45 inches. Found throughout the Galápagos and nowhere else, the Galápagos Hawk is listed as an endangered species by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.



The Flightless (or Galápagos) Cormorant

Only found along the coastline of Fernandina and the northwestern coast of Isabela, this species of cormorant has lost its ability to fly. They can easily be recognized by their short 'tatty' looking wings which they still spread to dry after swimming like their flying relations. Grown males may be up to 40 inches high but weigh less than 9 pounds.



The Land Iguana

Located on Fernandina, Isabela, Santa Cruz and most widely found on the small island of Plaza Sur, the land iguana is a vegetarian feeding primarily on cactus. Males take up to 12 years to reach maturity and grow to 40 inches long. The Land Iguana is listed as a vulnerable species by the World Conservation Union due to the limited areas it inhabits. This iguana is seen amongst a bed of Galápagos Carpetweed.



The Galápagos Penguin

The Galápagos Penguin is the third smallest penguin in the world, only 18-21" tall, and the only penguin whose natural habitat is in the northern hemisphere. They survive at the equator due to the cooling waters brought by the Humboldt current and are found mostly on the western isles of the Galápagos. Designed for swimming, these birds literally fly through the water but cannot take to the air.



The Blue-footed Booby

It's name being taken from the spanish word 'bobo', it is easy to assume that the booby is a stupid animal. They show no fear and can be very clumsy looking on land. Eating fish, this bird can dive from heights of 80 feet to catch its prey. The Blue-footed Booby can easily be recognized by the bright blue feet which are used extensively in the birds mating rituals.



The Marine Iguana: subspecies cristatus

The ideal habitat for the marine iguana is near the water, where it feeds on algae at water's edge, with a sandy beach nearby for nesting. The dark sooty grey coloring of the marine iguana is perfect camouflage on the lava rocks where it must warm its body after its daily swim. Other than color and being found in the water, the identifying characteristic of the marine iguana is the blunt shape of the snout.



After the Boat Tour *(Visiting Quito - continued from page 13)*

When we returned to Quito, we had two days to fill. Steve arranged a trip to the Otavalo Indian Market on Saturday and I had already scheduled a trip to Cotopaxi on Sunday.

On the way to the market, we made several stops. Most of these were to see the views, or get a chance to get a photo at a spot that marks the equator. A couple of stops were made at venues selling favorite Ecuadorian artifacts.

The Indian Market was a medley of sensory delights. In one area you had the smells of cooking, in another, the colors of fresh fruits and vegetables, and in another the softness of the hand made woolen sweaters. There were tables of linens, yarns, sweaters and ponchos next to vendors selling jewelry, mostly of silver or beads, while others had wood carvings and leather works. The most amazing thing about the markets was how far the dollar went. This is a place where you can do a little bartering, though too much is not recommended. The prices asked for most things were so low, that I felt guilty paying so little and couldn't even think of bartering.

On the way home, we stopped at a little restaurant nestled in the hills and had a traditional Ecuadorian lunch. We also met one of the local weavers in his shop where he demonstrated the art of looming before we returned to Quito.

On Sunday, our driver greeted us with the news that he had a flat tire that needed to be changed on the way to Cotopaxi. This translated into an unscheduled stop at a 'vulcanizadora' for about 30 minutes for us to admire the scenery and the local rooster while the tire was being changed.

Our next stop, the first real one, was in the Cotopaxi park. We stopped to take a walk to a lake where we saw water birds at a distance. More interesting were some of the plants we saw along the way and the Hummingbird we saw hiding amongst the leaves. He had a black head with an iridescent purple strip, very different from the ones that frequent our feeder at home.

As the drive continued up the mountain road, it quickly became apparent why 4-wheel drive was necessary. Even with 4-wheel drive, the driver didn't manage to make it to the parking area located at an altitude of 14,700 feet. We had to walk up the road about a quarter of a mile to get to the parking lot, then try to make it to the refuge hut that is at an altitude of 15,750 feet. It is amazing at this altitude, how much it takes out of you to walk just to the rock that's twenty feet away. The views of the valley were superb. The fog and mist from the snow kept coming and going along the side of the mountain. Needless to say, we didn't make it to the hut. Maybe

if we had attempted it after lunch, instead of just before, we could have, but we gave up about half way there and went back to the car.

The drive down the mountain went much quicker than the one up. About half way down we stopped at a little valley and had a picnic lunch. It's amazing how much warmer it was. There were several small mountain flowers growing wild around the picnic area. The rain had even stopped.

As we headed back to Quito, we passed several towns, farms, and pretty flowers on the side of the road. Unfortunately, the rain had started up again, so the temptation to stop and photograph anything just wasn't there.

Our short time in Ecuador was just long enough to show us how beautiful and diverse the country is and to convince us we would like to spend more time there.



The Andean Highlands