

Where the wild things are

Straddling the Equator, the exotic Galapagos Islands are a living museum of evolutionary change

Story **Derek Hand** Photography **Jorge Garcia G** and **Derek Hand**



A little world within itself," wrote Charles Darwin of the Galapagos Islands in 1839. Earlier Spanish sailors, whose voyages strayed upon the archipelago, knew them as Las Encantadas – The Enchanted Isles. Designated as the planet's first World Heritage Site in 1978, the Galapagos have cast an enduring spell on travellers. The young Darwin landed here in 1835, on the final leg of his voyage as naturalist on board HMS Beagle. The original purpose of that voyage was to chart the coasts of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego; yet the knowledge gained by Darwin in barely six weeks on the Galapagos Islands would lead him to develop his theory of evolution through natural selection, a theory that lies at the root of modern humanity's attitude to the universe.

Today, the islands form the Galapagos Province of Ecuador and, as with the majority of visitors, my first experience of the country is the national capital, Quito. It is a city divided into two distinct parts: the Old City, with its colonial buildings and historic streets; and the New City, boasting office blocks, scores of restaurants, and the gringo district of La Mariscal, home to the capital's edgy nightlife and well worth missing.

Old Quito oozes all the charm that one might expect. It prides itself on its colonial architecture, its cobbled streets leading to the Plaza Grande, dominated by a cathedral built in about 1550. The city's gems are many – from the magnificent wood carvings in the choir of the nearby church of San Francisco to the neoclassical 19th-century Teatro Sucre – and are best explored on foot. With just a little Spanish and a spirit of engagement, Old Quito will reward you handsomely.

The Hotel Patio Andaluz, which claims to be an official national treasure, offers the ideal location for visitors, although its split-level rooms may not be to everybody's taste. Dining out in Quito is excellent and the Old City has some top-notch restaurants – try Mea Culpa, housed in the 17th-century Palacio Arzobispal, where diners in "semi-formal" attire feast on local and international cuisine, and the nearby Theatrum. But if you want to really mix it with the locals, head to El Criollo, where the set meals attract crowds at all times of the day. Indigenous Quichuas, wearing their traditional felt fedoras, sit alongside office workers, while extended families join tables for the daily Ecuadorian ritual that is lunch.

After three days of strolling in the Old City and a worthwhile foray into the new end of town to visit the Museo Nacional del Banco Central del Ecuador, my partner and I decide to take a day trip to Cotopaxi. One of the highest active volcanoes in the world, Cotopaxi also has one of the few equatorial glaciers, facts that were to emerge later. The travel agent we book through assures us that the weather will be fine; the last time he was at Cotopaxi he wore nothing more than shorts and a T-shirt. I am not convinced and rent two Gore-Tex hiking jackets for the day, the technology of their fabric light years ahead of everything else in my luggage.

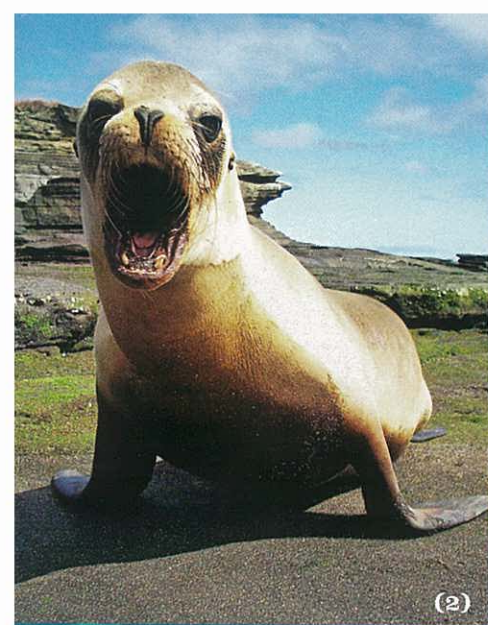
We wake early the following morning and the sun is shining as we set off on the Pan American Highway. Within an hour the metropolis is far behind us. Soon, the snow-capped peak of Cotopaxi is in sight. Caballeros, straight out of a Cormac McCarthy novel, ride by in the near



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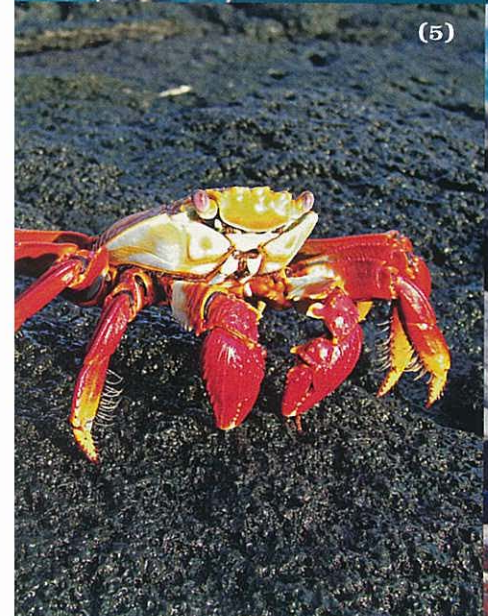


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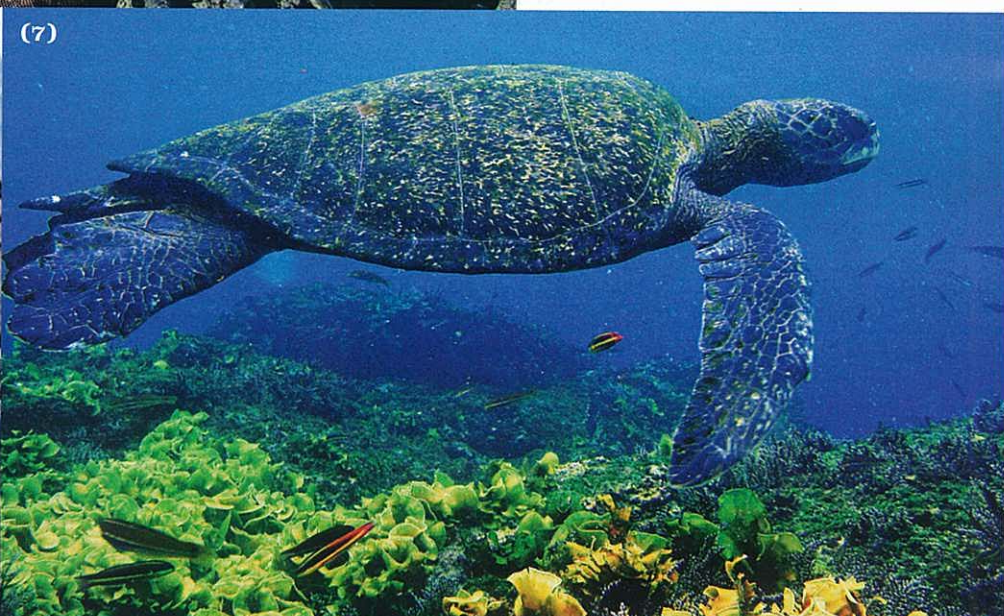
● Weird and wonderful: Among the more exotic creatures who call the Galapagos Islands home are the Galapagos Hawk (1); the Galapagos fur seal (2) and overleaf (11); the masked booby (3); the marine iguana (4); the Sally Lightfoot crab (5); the blue-footed booby (6); the marine turtle (7) and the frigate bird (8); the yellow warbler (9, overleaf) and the Galapagos dome-shaped turtle (10, overleaf). MV Evolution at anchor in Tagus Cove, Isabela Island, can be seen opposite, top left, and spectacular Kicker Rock, which rises 144m from the the ocean, is below left.



(5)



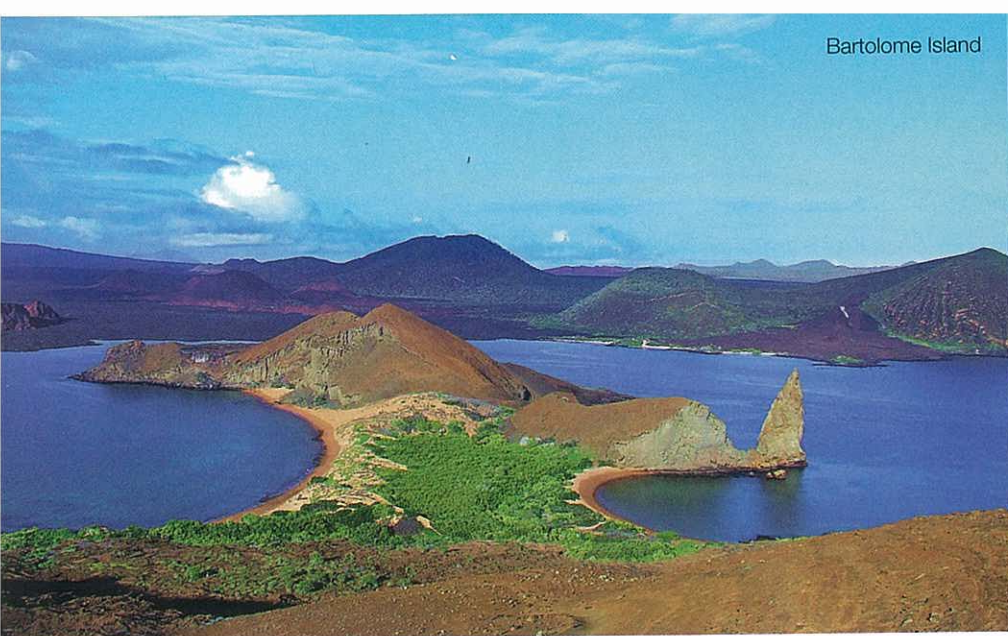
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distance. The road narrows and climbs, the air thins. Breaths deepen and quicken. A vast expanse of Ecuadorian wilderness opens before us.

With our car parked at about 4500m above sea level, we embark on our hike. Our guide, a sinewy type who moves like a mountain goat, sets off at a pace. Now, a word of warning: if you have never suffered from altitude sickness, let me tell you that it sneaks up and takes hold of you before you know it. We reach the hut where we are to have lunch after two hours of trekking, the covering of snow on the ground thickening all the time. Our guide encourages our group of four to go farther, to a height 5000m above sea level. The weather is fine, I reason. And that's an impressive height. We press on, step by step, the faint outline of our guide in the distance.

In an instant, the snowfall turns heavy. Very heavy. I can see barely a metre in front of me. Alone, I become disoriented and fall down in the snow, laughing hysterically, gripped by the effects of the high altitude. What possessed me to come here, I ask myself? After what seems an eternity, the downfall subsides and I catch sight of the other three in my group in the distance, waiting for me to catch up. I arrive. I am not exactly kitted out for the freezing conditions and I am probably teetering on the edge of hysteria, but I am standing 5000m above sea level. Hurrah! One quick smiling pose for a photograph and it's time to make our descent.

"You were very pale at first. And then you turned green," confides the Frenchman, whose walking stick I borrowed to stop me falling over on the way down, as we toast each other with a large glass of red wine in the hut where really we ought to have said, "Enough". Yet as teams of seriously well-equipped ice-trekkers and mountain climbers arrive into the hut, I am secretly pleased at my accidental conquest.

The next morning, we depart Quito for the Galapagos, a short flight that requires a brief stopover in Quayaguil, the country's largest city and seaport. It's a pleasant place to spend a day, although, I suspect, not much more. The river-front promenade stretches for several kilometres, inviting tourists and locals alike to stroll and take in the cooling breeze. At the northern end is the Museo Antropologico y de Arte Contemporaneo, an impressive space showcasing an eclectic range of Latin American artwork.

Arriving on the island of San Cristobal, the MV Evolution, our home for the next week, comes into view at anchor in the harbour. The Evolution will host our group of 28, our every need accommodated by a staff of 18 and three naturalist guides, all proudly Ecuadorian, who welcome us aboard with genuine warmth and a

cold cocktail. Oh, this is the life! The majority of our fellow passengers are European – English, Danish, Dutch, Irish, Italian, Welsh – with a handful of Canadians and Americans and we range in age from seven to nearly 70.

A detailed safety briefing under our belts – if you should find yourself shipwrecked in the middle of the ocean, form a human shield with your fellow passengers by locking arms and, with your shoes firmly but comfortably laced and your legs facing outwards, fend off any sharks that might attack – we set forth on our voyage. First stop is Cerro Brujo, a powdery beach where a wet landing provides our first chance to swim with perhaps the most photographed of all Galapagos mammals, the sea lion. Anchor dropped, we board our Panga, the inflatable zodiac that transports us, at speed, between anchorages and the islands of the Galapagos.

A colony of sea lions resting on the beach is quite indifferent to our arrival; a very large male who blocks our pathway over a rocky headland shows no sign of budging, so our guide finds a different route to the distant sandy stretch. Wildlife rules in this little world. Within minutes, though, of diving into the warm turquoise water of Gardner Bay, half a dozen or so inquisitive sea lions swim over to investigate us. They're fast in the water and take a little getting used to. Finally at ease with their antics, I snorkel to the depths below, grabbing hold of a rock and hanging there, suspended upside-down; a sea lion joins me, also upside-down, looks me in the face and starts blowing bubbles. I exhale, to the sea lion's apparent delight as it swims 360 degrees around me and comes back to do it all over again.

Back on the surface and barely 300m from the shore, I hear Lars, a Danish financier travelling with his wife and young daughter, call out: "Sharks!" I look down and see white tipped reef sharks, eight in total, circling slowly in perfect formation in the water beneath us. Our guide, who has remained on the beach, assured us that humans do not form part of the food chain of the Galapagos, so Lars and I gently snorkel down to take a closer look. The sharks continue their formation, the silence adding to the exhilaration of being in their presence. Our fascination with them is not reciprocated and, after a while, they break formation and depart in search of a more peaceful stretch of ocean. As we head for shore, a large Pacific green turtle and a spotted eagle ray swim past.

Buzzing from our inaugural encounter with the famed Galapagos wildlife, we board the Panga for the Evolution and our first magnificent dinner afloat. It's a strict rule of all voyages in the Galapagos that every meal must be eaten on

board and no food may be taken ashore. As one might expect, touching the animals (let alone feeding them) is strictly prohibited: our guides caution that any trace of human scent on a suckling sea lion pup means certain death for the poor creature as its mother will reject it.

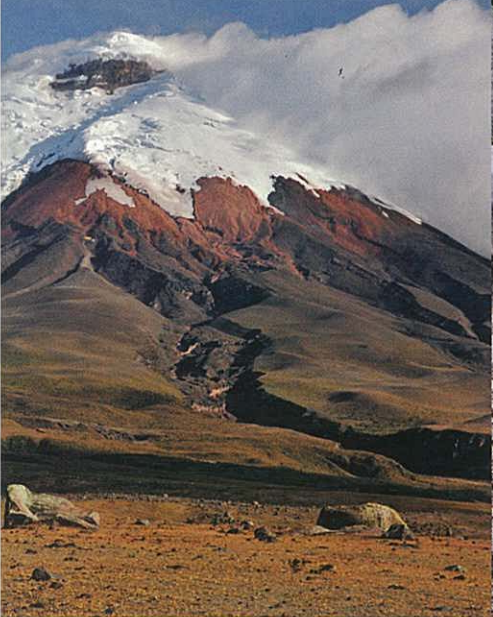
Our voyage takes us almost the entire length of the archipelago, from the southernmost island of Espanola, an isolated place where the Hood mockingbird and the waved albatross are endemic, north to Genovesa, and west to Fernandina, the youngest of the islands and one that is literally still growing. The national park authority tightly controls the designated routes of the many boats that carry visitors here and limits the number of visitors to each site.

Daily life on board the Evolution quickly falls into a steady routine: breakfast call at 6.15am, followed by a land visit an hour later; back on board by about 11am for lunch, followed by a siesta as we sail to the next island, pods of dolphins playing in the bow's wake; most afternoons are spent snorkelling or kayaking; a daily briefing by our talented naturalists is followed by dinner at about 7.30pm. Adjourning to the bar, the Irish and the Welsh take turns leading us in song late into the night. Some nights are spent at anchor, others under steam, moving between uninhabited islands lit only by the moon. "We will cross the Equator at about 2.30am," our captain announces over dinner one night. "You will feel the bump under the boat."

Landing on Espanola, we are greeted by the sight (and, at times, the foul stench) of colonies of marine iguanas resting on the lava rocks. These prehistoric-looking lizards belong to a species that is thought to be nine million years old, possibly even older. They are the only sea-going lizards in the world, having adapted to life on the Galapagos by learning to dive down 20m to feed on algae. Back on land, they rest on the lava rocks, loudly expelling excess salt from their nasal glands, the dark tones of their skin rapidly absorbing heat from the equatorial sun.

Although they are clumsy on land, they are impressively strong swimmers, as I discover when a few swim overhead while I snorkel. In fact, stay long enough in the water and a vast array of marine and bird life comes by. Near Isabela Island, two Galapagos penguins, their northerly habitat made possible by the cold Humboldt Current, fly past at great speed. Even blue-footed boobies dive nearby, dropping like arrows from the sky to feed on shoals of colourful fish. Frigate birds fly overhead. And of course, there are the sea lions, seemingly endlessly entertained by human clumsiness in the water.

Back on land, the islands are as diverse as the



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(11)

wildlife that occupies them. In the highlands of Santa Cruz Island, the famed giant tortoises of the Galapagos, weighing up to 300kg, wallow in stagnant ponds. Santa Cruz is also the site of the Charles Darwin Research Station, home to Lonesome George, described in *The Guinness Book of Records* as the "rarest living creature". As the last remaining Galapagos giant tortoise of his species, 90-something Lonesome George is the focus of intense international attention as scientists plot and scheme for him to mate with one of the female tortoises (of different subspecies) introduced into George's world to prevent him from becoming extinct. "Some people think he might be gay," confides our naturalist Juan Carlos Sosa Mutis.

To the west, Fernandina Island, the youngest

in the archipelago, is a mere 700,000 years old and the most volcanically active – its La Cumbre volcano erupted in April this year after four years of inactivity. Despite the island's hostile landscape of black lava, Fernandina is home to an abundance of bird species that includes the flightless cormorant, a curious bird that has lost the ability to fly yet stands tall, proudly spreading its sparsely feathered wings to dry in the breeze.

Walking in the early morning sun on San Salvador Island, I imagine the young Darwin exploring here, enthralled by this most foreign of lands as he gathers his specimens. And while we humans celebrate Darwin's bicentenary, the inhabitants and the islands of this little world called the Galapagos remain blissfully indifferent to the lot of us.



FACT FILE

- Quasar Expeditions' (quasarnautica.com) seven-day cruise of the Galapagos starts at \$US4250 per person, twin share, excluding flights, park entrance fees and

surcharges. Quasar also organises flights from mainland Ecuador to the Galapagos.

- Lan Chile flies from Sydney to Quito via Santiago de Chile (lancom).

- Accommodation in the heart of the Old City: Hotel Patio Andaluz (hotelpatioandaluz.com) and Villa Colonna (villacolonna.ec).



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