

Eugene Kaspersky

12 Galápa-goshes

and Other Ecuad-awesomenesses



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The best Christmas present ever!

What makes the perfect Christmas present? How long is a piece of string?! It all depends! But at least for me, as recipient, long ago I came to the conclusion that there's nothing better for Christmas than a long-awaited expedition to somewhere very far away – preferably somewhere sunny, definitely somewhere fun, certainly somewhere unusual, and unquestionably somewhere unforgettable!

The turtles, the iguanas, the... boobies, and all the other extraordinary wild animals; the volcanoes, Darwin, the theory of evolution, multicolored beaches, and a lot more besides. All these things I got to see and hear about little by little down the years from the books I read, documentaries I watched, or the tales I heard from friends who'd been to the Galápagos Islands themselves. Which is what made the run-up to our year-end trip ever so tantalizing: we knew we were in for a real treat that was going to astonish in so many different ways.

So, as you can see, our expectations were high. But once there, those expectations were exceeded – enormously! Curiously, the Galápagos Islands, and later Ecuador itself, gave us a few off-the-scale delights, plus several assorted, lesser – though still perfectly delightful – experiences every single day. However, in this book I'll be telling you about what were to me the 12 very best of these experiences. Just keep in mind – I won't be held responsible if, while reading this book, you decide to drop everything and fly down to the Galápagos to experience them for yourself!...

A country far, far away...

No one's denying the fact that the Galápagos Islands are a long way away from Europe. There may be places that are even further away, but not many. But anywhere that's further than 10,000 kilometers away, and which requires several avia-connections to get to – I think can safely be labelled 'very, very far away'. I mean, even for those coming from the place where most visiting

tourists come from – North America – it takes a whopping 10 hours on a plane to get down here! And there was you thinking it was just a short trip south for them?!

For a Russian, the route over to the Galápagos tends to begin in Moscow or St. Petersburg (of course, it could start earlier and still further

away, from one of the vast country's far-flung cities; first stop – Moscow or St. Pete). The first airport flown into is normally of the major European hub type. Then there may be another hub but on the South American continent. Next – Ecuadorian Quito or Guayaquil, and only then the short hop over to the Galápagos Islands – to the island of either San Cristóbal or Baltra.

Upon coming in to land tourists are given a peek of the peaks of Ecuadorian volcanoes



Basic backgrounder: Ecuador and the Galápagos Islands

1. Ever since the economic crisis here that struck in the year 2000 Ecuador has had no national currency of its own. In that year the US dollar replaced the sucre. Accordingly, take greenbacks with you if heading to the country – and best in smaller denominations: the purchasing power of a \$100 note tends to make street traders suspicious!

2. Ecuador's cities are replete with all the usual 'civilized' things we've come to take for granted – like ATMs... and street crime. By day, city centers are mostly safe, but come nighttime... well, let me just tell you how taxi drivers make sure all the car doors are locked once you – his fare – have gotten inside. Then they ask you not to wind the windows down – no matter what. Gulp!

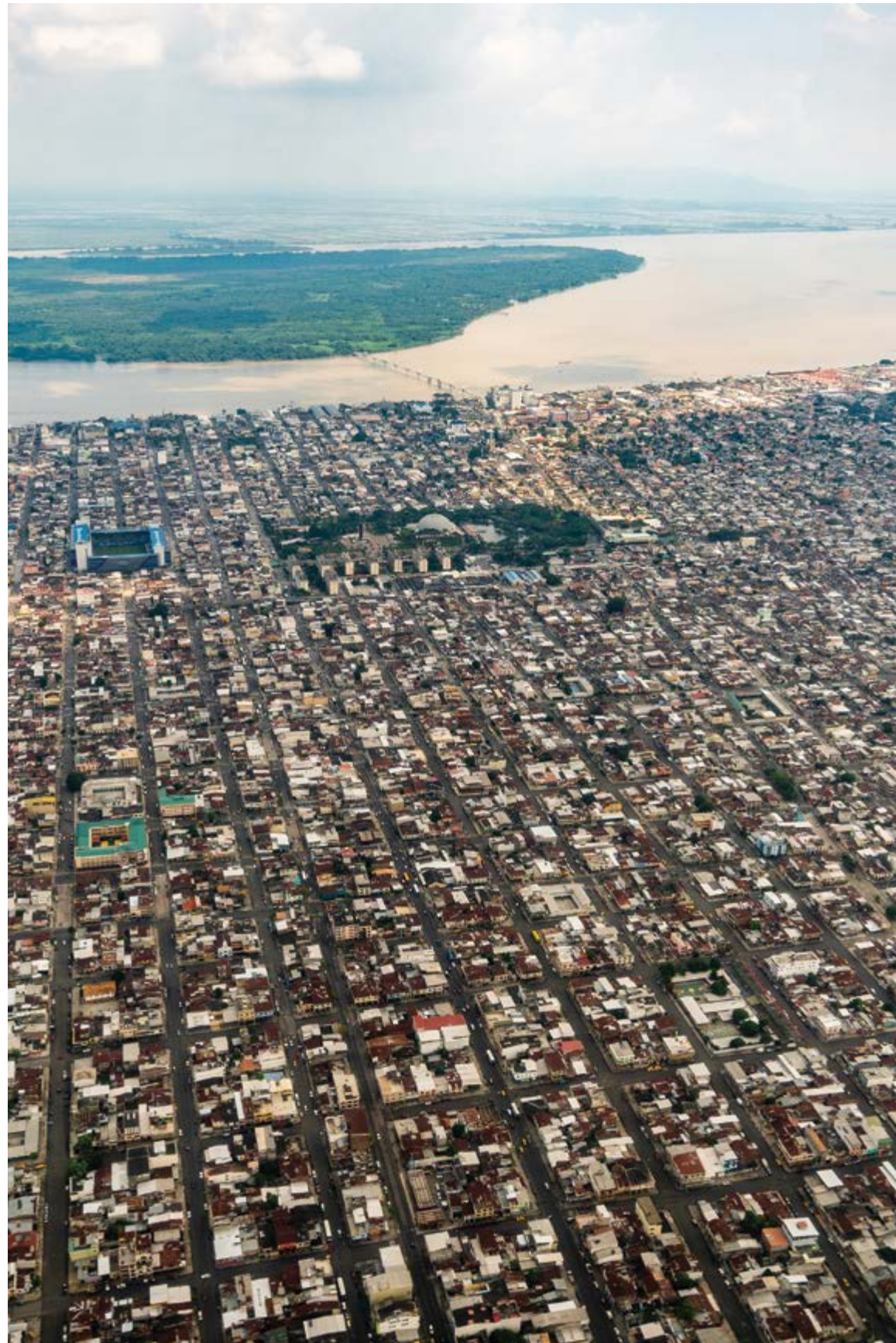
3. Ecuador is one of the most liberal countries in the world... in terms of visa laxity for international visitors! Most countries' citizens don't need one at all. Moreover, it's one of the mere six countries that recognizes... the World Passport!

The view of Quito from the hill that rises up above the city – El Panecillo



Before we take our final connecting flight – from the Ecuadorian mainland to the Galápagos Island named San Cristóbal – a brief digression, if I may. And I write this digression in the airport of the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city, after having flown there from the capital, Quito, with a Columbian airline.

Now, as a big fan of science fiction, of course I've read plenty of Kurt Vonnegut's works – starting while still at school. But for some reason his 11th novel – the 1985 mega-anti-utopian 'Galápagos' – had passed me by. I made up for that in 2017, finally procuring a copy and getting through it on airplanes. Highly imaginative, rather disturbing, and most excellent too. Anyway, part of the book is set in the Ecuadorian city of Guayaquil. And after having read about it, well, I was just really curious to go have a look at the place. So we did!



From the somewhat cramped 'economy-class' Guayaquilian habitation...

...To its roomy 'first class' residences



The Galápagos syndrome

No matter how you travel to the islands, the endemic force of nature of the Galápagos hits the arriving tourist hard straight away. Instead of the customary 'get to the hotel, drop the suitcase, collapse on the bed, fall asleep' after such a long, multi-connection journey across the globe, you basically get just the opposite: new arrivals' minds get fairly blown by the seemingly absurd abundance of utterly unafraid wild animals – and exhaustion is soon forgotten about. The tourists incur visual shock. But, shocked as they may be, they still start their clackety-clack with their cameras. And judging by the high quantity and high frequency of the clackety-clicks, it becomes clear that new arrivals are planning on digitalizing

every seal, every iguana, every crab, every turtle, or every whatever else it is they behold – and from every different angle! "Well, photographic opportunities as good as these clearly aren't going to last now, are they?"!

Of course, eventually the euphoria subsides and the astonishment gradually becomes less and less intense. With every new day while on the Galápagos the quantity of photos taken (per minute!) is lowered; however, their quality is increased. But, then, I see this 'acclimatization' effect on photography on most any group-expedition-vacation to an exotic and faraway place.

If a tribe of goats causes rapturous gasps and a few gigabytes of digital pics to be taken upon arrival, come the end of a stay a slaughter of iguanas will hardly raise an eyebrow – let alone encourage cameras to be taken out of pockets. Accordingly, after just arriving... well, it's a bit like when you're waiting for your main course at a restaurant: don't fill your hungry stomach with the bread they bring with your drinks before your meal!

Seals!!





The capital of the Galápagos Province of Ecuador is Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, though it's neither the largest nor the most central city.

Like all other towns and cities on the archipelago we visited, the capital is typically – equatorially – relaxed, swelteringly hot, laid-back and unrushed.



Basic backgrounder: Ecuador and the Galápagos Islands (cont.)

4. There are two time zones in the country: one covers the mainland (GMT-5), the other – the islands (GMT-6). Tourist boats and ships use the former.

5. There's a strict quarantine regime on the islands in place in order to protect the fragile endemic ecosystem. Accordingly, no food, no pets, no fauna, no flora – nothing organic really – is allowed in. Upon arrival by plane there are strict searches, and anyone found in violation of the rules is fined heavily.

6. The equatorial-Ecuadorian sun quickly roasts the unaccustomed delicate skin of any office-dweller from the north, so whatever you do – don't forget the factor-50!





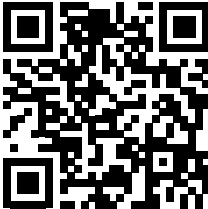
Well, no time for hanging around: it was time for us to head over to the harbor. We pile into a dinghy, and minutes later we board the 'Coral II', the small ship that was to be our floating home away from home for the next week.

Movement among Galápagos Islands is undertaken by sea only – no planes. And not only is the stuff tourists bring with them on a boat to the Galápagos carefully controlled, the number of tourists themselves is too. This is done through strict licensing of a limited quantity of boats that are permitted to ferry between islands. Each boat, depending on its tonnage, conveys with two or more guides, and it's these guides who oversee the stringent protective regime. They also are founts of fascinating information about the islands, and are happy to both answer the naïve questions of tourists from afar and get in group photos with same tourists – much to the latter's delight!

Seals everywhere! Even on the deck of our ship!

There are different kinds of tourist tours around the Galápagos Islands – from a few days up to two weeks. And they come in many different flavors to suit most any wallet too. We chose something somewhere in the middle – around a week in length (and medium luxury level), which would see us taking in most of the ‘greatest hits’ of the Islands; i.e., the central and southern parts of the archipelago.

The QR code here takes you to the website of the operator of the permitted boats and ships. You just choose the most suitable option, book it, pay, and a while later you turn up and it’s waiting for you...



Galápagosh-Ecuad-awesomenesses – warm-up

The title on the cover of this book says it all really in terms of what to expect inside on its pages: Galápagoshes – things that are astonishingly (Ecuad)awesome. Specifically, 12 big ones (at least one per day), and plenty of smaller ones too. And they kicked off on day one of our trip...

After briefly looking around our new digs, unpacking and catching our breath, we were back out for a stroll around the local park – to stretch the legs, get used to the local climate, and meet our guides who'd be with us for the week.

And no sooner had we entered the park than we were treated to our first two 'warm-up' Galápagoshes: The first: cactuses. They're colossal here! And they come in all sorts of shapes (including animal-resembling – even Mickey Mouse-resembling!) and sizes, sometimes growing up out of some kind of palm trees. In short, Ecuad-awesome!





The second warm-up Ecuador-awesomeness: the age of these volcanic rocks (which were to me, clearly, old lava fields). A hundred years old maybe? Several hundred? Actually – around a million, according to our guides! Eh? Surely not. How can lava look all freshly-baked like that a million years after it was deposited here during an eruption? So I turned to the internet... only for it to confirm, approximately, what our guides told us: volcanic activity began around 2.4 million years ago, and ended some 650,000 years ago!

So, how come there's nothing growing on this lava – not even moss? And how come it appears no erosion has taken place at all over the many millennia? Is it all due to the climate here? And do the volcanoes here wake up, erupt, spew lava, then go back to sleep again for another million or so years? Actually, yes – looks like it. And here's why...



First, the Galápagos Islands themselves appeared (and continue to appear) as a result of volcanic activity above the Galápagos hotspot; that is, a location where, for some reason, exceptionally hot underground magma comes close to the earth's surface. And since tectonic plates move around the earth's surface, the magma punches holes through the respective plate one by one as the plate moves across the hotspot (at a speed of around 3.7cm per year) over millions of years. This can all be seen quite clearly on maps, like this one here ->



Oh, and btw: the tectonic plate here moves eastward, and that's why the volcanoes on the eastern islands were active long ago, while those on the western islands are still active. Again – this can be seen on the map.

But back to why there's no vegetation growing on those million-year-old lava bricks...

It's simply due to the inhospitable climate down near sea level here. Turns out the ocean currents around the islands are very cold; the resultant climate is very hot and dry: great for cactuses; no so great for most anything else. Only higher up a volcano does the climate turn a little moister and things become a little greener.

But it's not all bad having a dry climate like that. It has helped protect the ecology of the islands from ecology's worst nightmare: Homo sapiens.

Folks only started settling here not all that long ago (though the islands were surely visited by the Polynesians on their extraordinary long-haul rafting outings across the Pacific). The Spanish came, and mostly went. The English came, and mostly went. Pirates and whalers – also. Why? Because it's so darn dry and barren and parched and uncomfortable here! Like I say: great for cactuses, but... you can't make porridge out of cactuses! Wait, maybe?...)



Over there (bottom-left pic) is the capital of the Galápagos Province, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. But we had to resist the temptation of a visit just then. We were in need of more Galápagoshes, and you tend not to find those in the city.



It was right here on the shore of this bay, on September 17, 1835, on his famed round-the-world expedition on the HMS Beagle, where Charles Darwin first landed on the island. How do I know? Well, basically, 'x' marks the spot: you might just be able to make out the monument to him down there upon that there installed platform atop the cliff

Strict – and rightly so

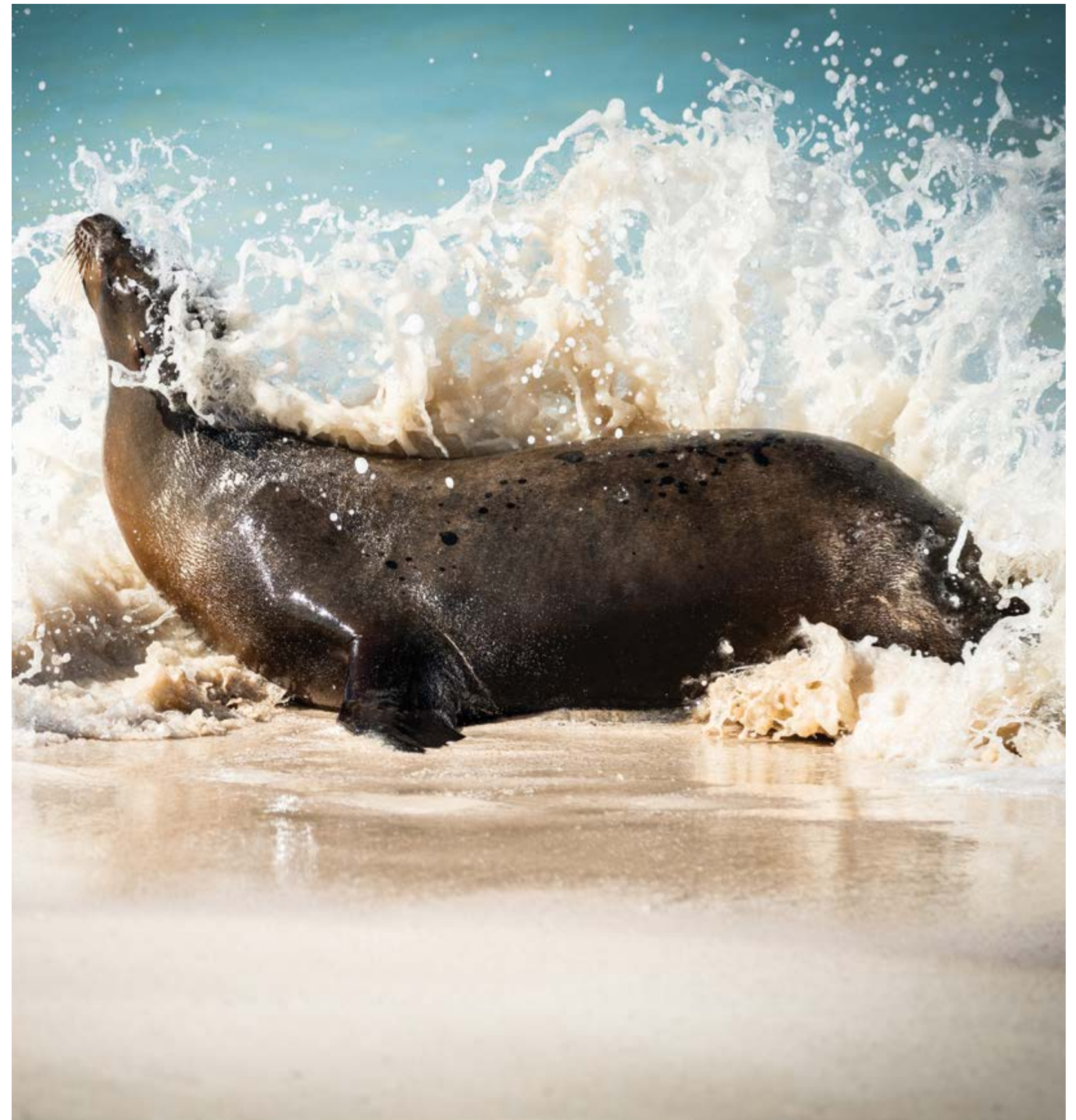
Time to turn our attention to the Galápagos animal kingdom – probably the most Ecuador-awesomely element to the whole Galápagos experience. Now I know why Charles Darwin was so bowled over by the uniqueness of the fauna here. For indeed, many of the species here are endemic – and by that I mean they can be endemic to a particular island! Not just that, but their overall number runs into the zillions, plus most of them aren't afraid of humans at all: we soon found out we were simply of no interest to them whatsoever! Perhaps they'll turn their heads slowly to gaze languidly at the disturbance we're causing, but that's about it. The only creature that did run off when it saw us was the crab, probably in instinctive survival mode.

Because the animals are so... indifferent to our species, thus so very approachable, there's a very strict rule in place here: no going up to them closer than two meters, and it goes without saying – no feeding or touching them. And this is strictly enforced. As mentioned, you can't bring things to the Galápagos that may harm the animals, including food, seeds, or your own animals. With such strict rules, Homo sapiens – thank goodness – haven't ruined the ecosystem here (like they have done the world over since their appearance on the planet). Back in the 1970s the authorities here stamped out poaching, established strict laws regarding the protection of national parks, and started to control rats, cats, and dogs imported by humans – some of which earlier

had attacked flamingos, while some actually caused a certain species of turtle to go extinct (among other negative consequences).

Fast forward four decades, and all is well. The animals are breeding and no one bothers them; at least – besides pesky tourists (who inch ever closer and closer – but never too close) with the clickety-clacking of their little gadgets.





Witch Hill

I'll be showing you plenty of Galápagos flora and fauna in the coming pages, but for now – simply some beautiful photos. This place is called Cerro Brujo – meaning Witch Hill – to the northwest of San Cristóbal Island.





When in Cerro Brujo – do its arch.
Which is just what we did...

Your boat slowly enters the arch-cum-cave that's some 10 meters in width and 50 meters in length. Surprisingly, despite the fine, windless weather and calm sea, the waves in and near the cave get really quite choppy. As yet unspoiled tourists enthusiastically snap away at spangled shells, crabs and other living things that have made the inner sides of cave-arch home; then, suddenly, the boat sharply kicks into action, it seemingly surfs the mysterious waves, and before you know it you're at the other end of the tunnel. The boat steadies; the snapping continues...



Practically everywhere you look here there are off-the-scale picturesque scenes – but especially when you look out to sea or along a sandy beach.



The inevitable long-ago cooled-and-solidified lava. Impressive



Galápa-gosh No.1: boobies!

The main surprising Ecuad-awesomeness on our first day was the blue-footed booby dance! We watched it at Punta Pitt, to the northeast of San Cristobal Island.

So what, exactly, are blue-footed boobies? Put simply, they're the most extraordinary of birds, with bright turquoise feet – blueish beaks too. No Photoshop here folks: those paws are for real! I couldn't believe it either when I first saw pictures of them (incidentally – many years ago;

and I'd wanted to see them (and their famed 'courtship dance') in the plume ever since).

This special wooing ritual is one where, basically, two birds of the opposite sex slowly walk to and fro in front of each other and start lifting their bright blue feet up one after the other (to the front, much as how a soldier marches for a parade) – apparently to show the mate (or potential mate) just how bright those feet are, for the brighter: the better. Why better?

Well, they make them brighter by eating better apparently, so the brighter the feet – the more attractive the bird. Bright feet = works hard; good income; would be a good parent, and has a nutritious, balanced diet to boot! So... basically kind of like all other living species on the planet). But I've never seen other species size up their potential love interest quite like the blue-footed booby. And it's such a cute spectacle of a dance that humans observing it start mimicking the moves spontaneously!



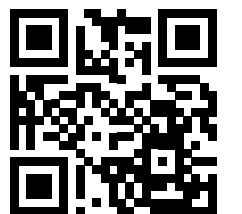


But it doesn't stop at a strutting ritual; there are sounds too: the male sort of whistles, while the female responds with sharp, somewhat unpleasant screeches; in fact, that's the only way the sex of a given bird can be determined. Wait; there's more: there's a great deal of head-bowing goes on, much ostentatious spreading out of wings, and plenty of... twig tossing at one another (kind of 'look, twigs – let's build a home nest together!'). In short: an Ecuad-awesome show!



An amazing show! And when it's performed just a few meters from you – the spectacle is even more special, with the boobies just carrying on with their courting ritual as if no one were watching. Clearly they've got other things on their minds)...

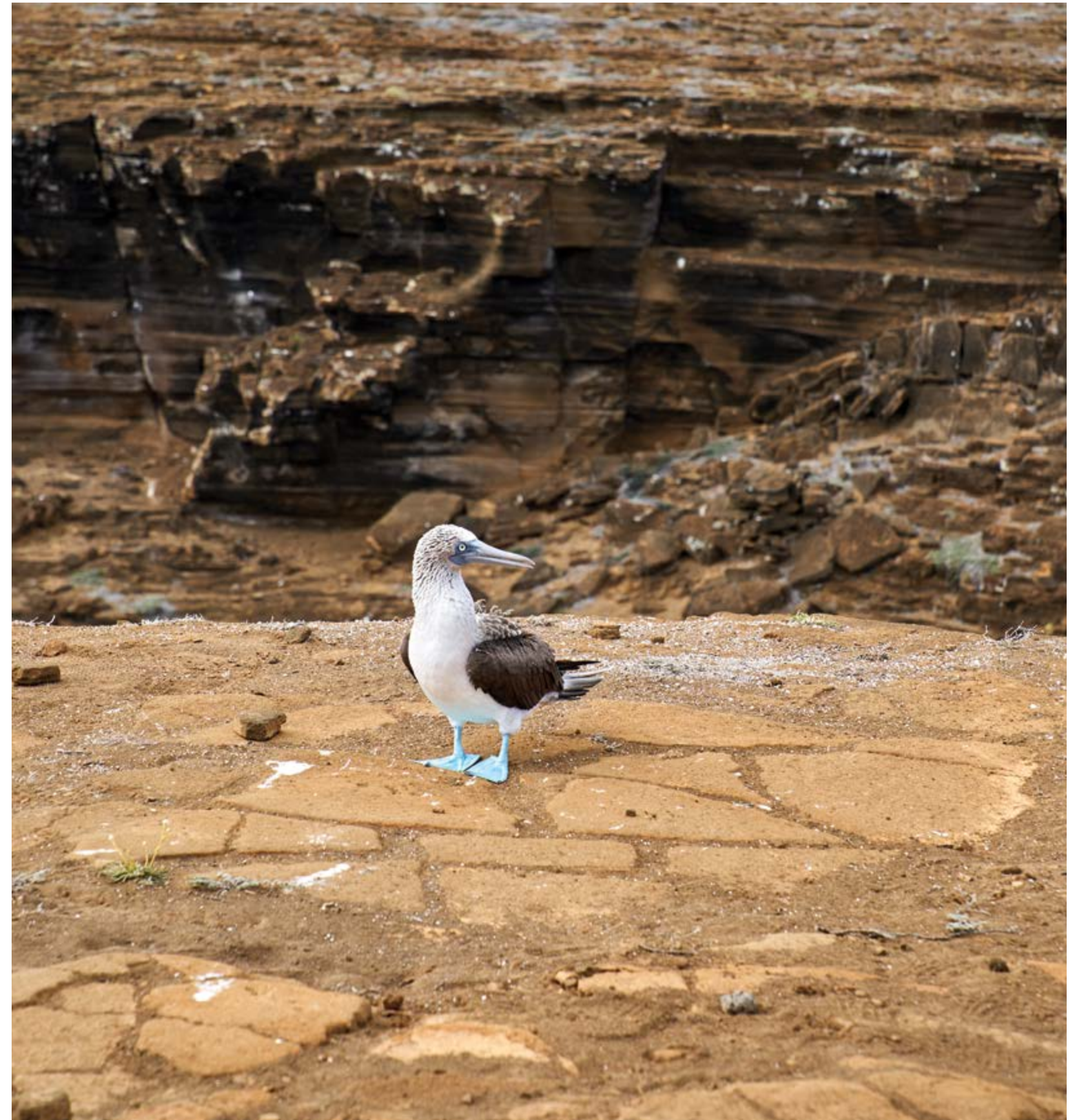
Video: the Dance of the Blue Boobies!



The boobies live on the land, but feed themselves out at sea. And boobies catching fish is another spectacular spectacle. They hover up above, peering down to see where all the fish are at, then dive down – in for the kill. The internet says these dives can be from up to 100 meters up, reaching 100km/h, and shooting them 25 meters below the surface of the water. I wonder how they can see anything so deep? Also, imagine the force of hitting the water at 100km/h! Well, the locals told us (and the internet later confirmed) that boobies have special air cavities at the front of their skulls to prevent them from getting concussion of the brain!

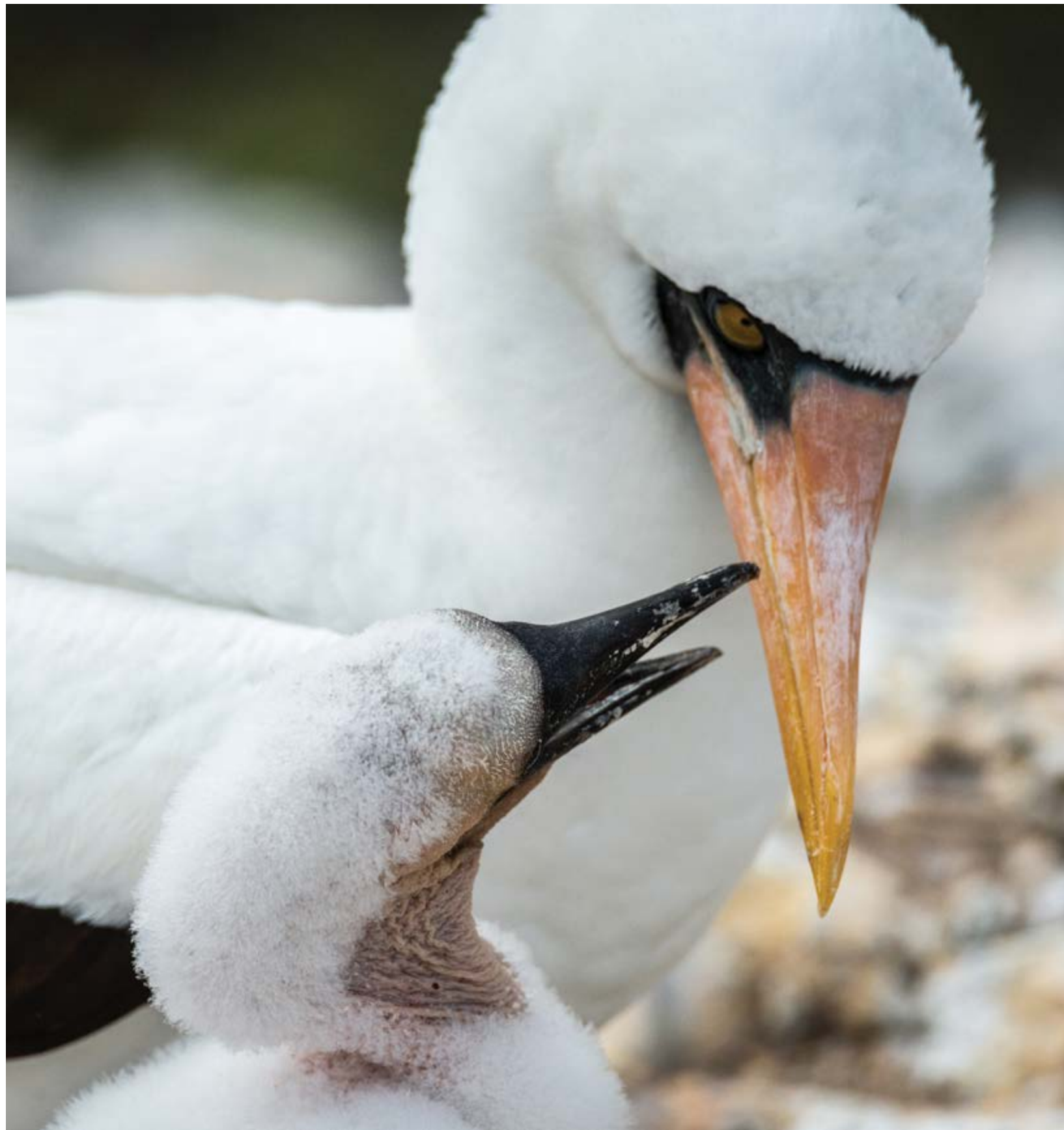


Video: Blue-footed boobie hunting





At Punta Suarez on the island of Española, we got closely acquainted with another type of booby – the Nazca booby. And I mean really close, for just like all the other wild beasts on the Galápagos, they've not been treated badly by humans for several (human) generations already, and since fear is a learned instinct – they've never had to learn it! That's all well and good, but at first, hearing the shrill shrieks these Nazca emit, you wonder if they somehow, from somewhere (?) have learned to fear Homo sapiens. But after a while, you get it: no, they're just very noisy by nature).



While sat next to a male Nazca and one of its offspring, our guide told us all about the day-to-day life of a Nazca booby. One thing he said that stands out in my memory was that a female booby lays either one or two eggs at a time. If there's just one – all fine and dandy. If there are two – things get all Darwinian: once both have hatched, one chick will start taking food from the other, and eventually might toss that unfortunate brother or sister out of the nest. It's 'survival of the fittest' in its rawest, most literal form! Wait: it gets better... – if neither of the little ones takes the upper hand over its sibling, mom steps in and throws the weaker one out herself! Brutal! Natural).

Just as our guide was getting to the end of his talk about these particular boobies, in flew a second – female – Nazca, quacking ever so loudly. What a racket! And she wouldn't stop – on and on it went! Meanwhile, the male just sat there by the little one – whistling calmly and melodically! Then, after listening to the cacophony (nagging?;) for a time, the male finally got up and stated bringing pebbles and sticks to the nest. "He's doing the tidying up around the home," our guide commented. "To please the missus!" Yes, sure looked like that.

Shift change: Mom comes home from 'work', dad hands over the kids into her care, kisses mom, and off he flies – to grab a bite to eat himself!





Discipline and daily routine

After that first Galápa-gosh – yes, all those birdy astonishments made up just one! – you’ll probably need to catch your breath a little before the second, and if you don’t take regular breaks you’ll wind up at the 12th a nervous wreck! Accordingly – interlude: a bit about our Ecu-tour schedule for the week, which worked just fine – so something like it is recommended for if ever you, dear readers, fancy a trip to the Galápagos...

Every morning at 7am a jolly tune would play through the ship’s PA system to signal it was time to be up. 07:30: breakfast. 08:00-08:15: the first group boarded the dinghy to get to the shore. ~08:30: the second group into the dinghy and to the shore. Once ashore, it was walkies, bathies, snappies, etc. for around three hours, then back to the ship for lunch. After lunch – back into the dinghy and ashore at a different spot for a different afternoon experience. And it was pretty much like that every day.

As to keeping track of the time of day, things were a little... specific to the location. Galápagos time is one hour behind that of mainland Ecuador, while the time used on board the ship is Ecuador time. Now, since many in our group would rely on their mobile phones to tell the time, many of said phones switched to local time automatically. This caused much swearing and ill-temper when some among us realized a little too late for comfort that they were an hour behind the dinghy’s daily toing-and-froing schedule!

A typical daily schedule

BACK HOME THURSDAY

AM

- 07H00 – Wake up call
- 07H30 – Breakfast at restaurant
- 08H10 – Snorkeling delivery
- 08H45 – Visit To Cerro Brujo
Disembark: Wet Landing
Walk, Snorkeling Or Swimming Off
The Beach , Any Kind Of Shoes.
- 11H30 – Back on board

PM

- 12H30 – Lunch at restaurant
- 15H00 – Visit To Punta Pitt
Disembarking ,Wet Landing
Followed By A Hike ,Difficult Terrain,
Good Shoes After Hike .Swimming
Or Snorkeling Off The Beach Very
Optional
- 17H30 – Back on Board
- 19H00 – Dinner at the restaurant
- 20H00 – Briefing Tomorrow Activities



Regarding those just-mentioned daily walkies, these were taken strictly along footpaths (remember: protected ecosystem and all), and they were mostly rather flat. Only once did we have to clamber up a steep hill – the hardest short stretch of all our walkabouts.

All the paths are clearly signposted and with keen reminders not to veer off them. And if ever you do, the guides are onto you straight away with their admonishments.

Daily path-strolling lasts around two hours; then its swimming/bathing/chilling on a beach, then it's back to the ship. The perfect way to spend a day really).



And here are... red-footed boobies! These beauts live up in the treetops



Galápa-gosh No.2: the maiden flight of a young albatross

The albatross is one of the most astonishing birds in the world. It can fly for thousands of miles from the shore, it can actually live up in the air for years without landing, it has the longest wingspan of any bird on the planet, epic poems are written about it, it can be considered an omen, and there are still many aspects about it that remain a mystery. I mean, like, how did they learn to fly just sooooo far? How do they sleep up in the sky?! And how do they sniff out the smell of potential prey from miles away?

The first time I saw some albatrosses was while sailing on a research vessel through the Drake Passage en route to Antarctica, as you do. They seemed to appear out of nowhere, soared so low over the ocean it looked like they were touching it, circled round the ship (just curious?), and then disappeared never to be seen again; and never once did we see them flap their wings! Literally: zero times! Indeed, they can glide for days (sometimes months or even years) upon the airstreams above oceans, but calm, windless conditions are lethal to the albatross: no wind means it simply can't take off – either from water or from land.

In fact, the species has gone so far down the evolutionary road that's led to its extraordinary gliding abilities that their wings are hardly even flappable like other birds' wings any more. Instead, albatrosses have special retainers into which the bones of the wings stick, fixing the two-or-three-meter-wide wings in place to resemble a glider plane, with no muscles being used at all – zero energy expenditure!

How do they sleep if they're up in the sky for ages? No one knows for sure. It might be that the two halves of their brains take it in turns to sleep and be awake, much like whales and dolphins' do.

Albatrosses are expert fishermen and fisherwomen. Much like the boobies, they're super-fast divers, though they don't go as far deep into the ocean as boobies. They glide crazy fast above the ocean yet still manage to notice where the tasty fish and other marine life is at down below; apparently they can sniff out 'food' from miles away.

They drink... seawater, having a special organ in their beaks (the little bumps with the holes thereon) that filters out the salt!

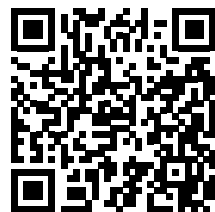
They nest and breed only in one place – where they were born. That is, after several years and hundreds of thousands of kilometers of flying gliding they return right back to their precise birthplace!

Truly fantastic fowl.

Simply seeing an albatross would probably have been the main Ecuad-awesomeness of our second day on the Galápagos Islands. However, what made it even more incredible was that we saw the first ever flight of a young albatross – off a cliff! But I'll get to that in a bit...



About my trip to Antarctica



The main breeding ground of the Galápagos albatross is on Española Island.

As we were walking along one of the island's paths, we came across an albatross 'domestic scene': mommy albatross, daddy albatross, and baby albatross. And as we all came to an abrupt halt right next to them, they didn't mind one bit – carrying on as if we weren't there! Mommy and daddy were getting rather touchy-feely. Probably saying their goodbyes: after all, when they fly off – always separately – they're gone for years before returning home. And since (as our guide told us) albatrosses are monogamous, well, of course these partings will get emotional).



Unlike its parents, the chick looked a bit startled. Perhaps we were the first tourists it had ever seen!



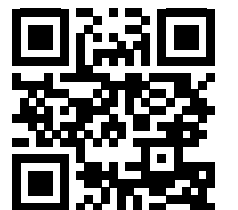


But seeing humans wasn't its only first for that day; next up was its first ever flight! But albatrosses can't take off from sea or land – they need a tall cliff by the ocean and a strong wind. Yikes. What if it doesn't manage it? We were on tenterhooks, to say the least. Of course baby albatross must have been too – more so).

First up – baby has to get over to the cliff. So it sets off on foot across the uneven ground thereto, occasionally flapping its wings as if to test them. Mommy and daddy are nowhere to be seen: their offspring left to fend for itself at such a tender age (in the best Darwinian tradition, of course :).

It eventually arrives at the edge of the precipice, and the wind is up (so far – so good). A last test of the wings, a short run, and... off it flies! Hurray!

Video: the maiden flight of a young albatross



Galápa-gosh No.3: Galápagos marine iguanas

The Galápagos Islands are teeming with another endemic species – a reptilian one: the marine iguana; so much so it's often called the 'Galápagos marine iguana'. These mini dragons were never far away from us throughout the whole expedition, turning up in the most unexpected of places – from the main streets of towns to steep rocky cliff faces. They were literally everywhere!

Early on, the unaccustomed tourist, hypnotized by the sudden overload of the senses caused by the gorgeous and vast Galápagos expanses all around, risks accidentally stepping on an iguana spreadeagled right in the middle of possibly the busiest places on the islands! Accordingly, stay alert, and always look where you're stepping!

Our guides explained this and that about the marine-vegetarian way of life of these cold-

blooded reptiles, but I'm afraid I remember precious little of it. What I do recall is: they're born, they do little besides lounge about under sun, they feed by the sea mostly on seaweed, they sleep outdoors, then they dig burrows in the rocky earth, breed, and then die! And it's been like that for several million years already! (So, it seems I do recall quite a bit after all.)

The main thing though – surely you'll agree – is that they just look so funny!



In some locations marine iguanas throng together in huge hordes



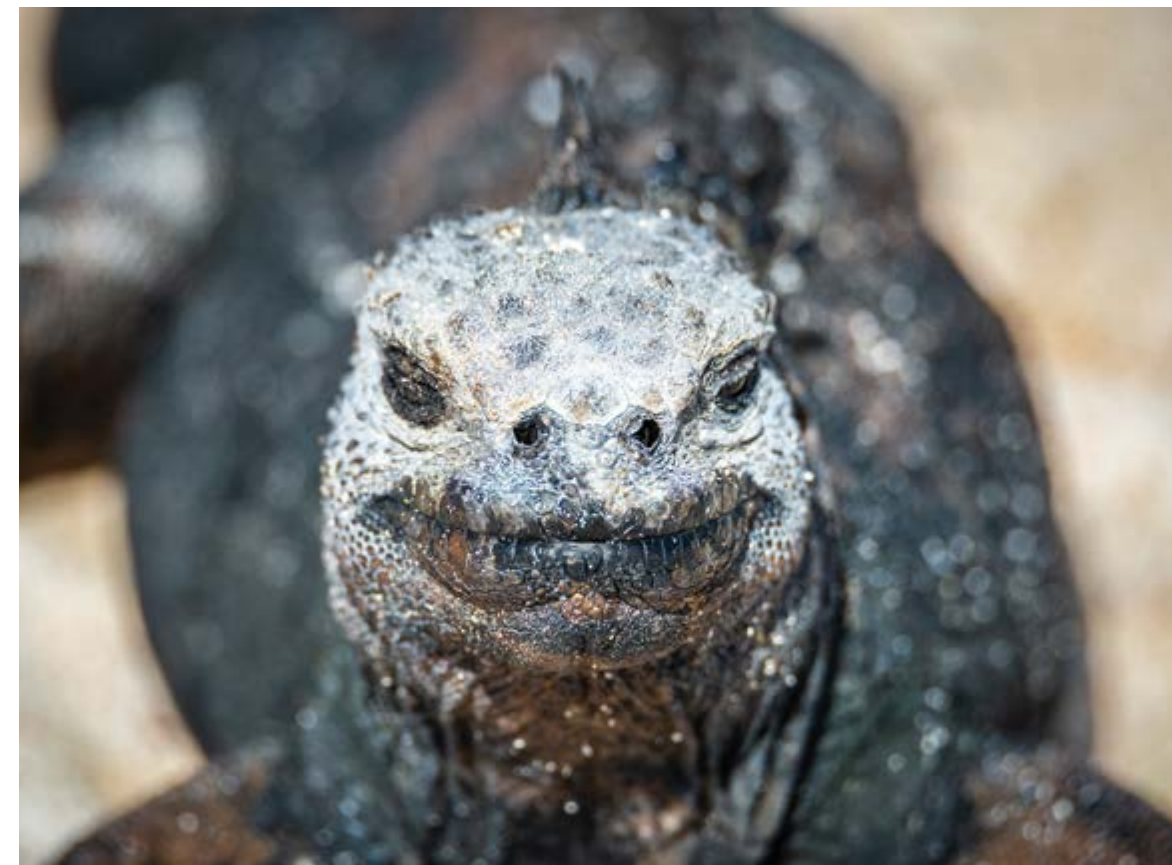
The red color on the body is a sign of the onset of the mating season



The veritable 'zoo' environment here is astonishing in that all the different species live side by side in perfect harmony: the indigenous Galápagos creatures don't eat each other (instead, they get their sustenance from the sea: for some – seaweed, for others – fish).

Accordingly, they never seem to take any notice of what goes on around them: no checking to see if predators are approaching, and that of course includes humans – ignored completely! But we don't take such nonchalance personally, since we're happy in the knowledge that fearless wild animals make excellent photo-ops!





Since the freshwater situation on the islands is not the best, while the diet of the iguana is exclusively of seafood, this reptile has developed – over millions of years – a mechanism of eliminating much of the salt it consumes – through special glands that emit it via their nostrils!

Btw: an iguana can stay underwater without breathing for a full hour!



Galápa-gosh No. 4: yellow iguanas

The 'Galapagos land iguana' is another endemic of the islands that features in the International Red List of endangered species.





These fascinating creations roam on several of the islands, but tourists are normally shown them at Cerra Dragon on Santa Cruz where there are plenty. Oh my *guana*! Marvelous creatures!

At first it appeared that they're afraid of humans, seeming to move away whenever we approached. But after a while we realized they weren't scared, they were just indifferent! Simply going about their business, taking no notice of the visiting homo Sapiens, moving around wherever they felt like. Someone among us started humming the Imperial March (Darth Vader's Theme). Yep: fitted the scene perfectly!

Oh, what a beaut!



Before realizing they weren't actually frightened of us, we got out the super-long zoom lens for some close-up pics. And really close-up they were). Then, having become aware of our error of judgment, we got a bit closer... just in time to view this iguana's attempts at picking a few berries off a bush. The whole enterprise took nearly 10 minutes. She was just so slow and clumsy, needing several tries at guiding the berries into her mouth with her tongue! The spectacle proved a real hit with the audience, and was photographed at least a dozen times – on each camera!

Btw, somewhere on the islands there are pale blue and pink-colored iguanas. However, they're very scarce, almost to the point of extinction, so tourists are kept well away from them (even if they weren't they'd be hard to find as they hide away in the quietest, most concealed places).



Video: The 'Jaws' theme fits perfectly too)



Galápa-gosh No.5: turtles

I wonder, do you know quite how unusual these remarkable reptiles are, as I didn't until our Galápagos trip? Our guides informed us (confirmed later by the internet, just in case) that these marine turtles live for around 80 years, migrate for years around seas and oceans, and always (or almost always) return

to the very beach where they were born. Yes, much like albatrosses. I wonder, just how do their navigation systems work so incredibly accurately? The mind boggles...

We saw our first turtles at Punta Cormorant on Floreana Island. Now, you'd think there might be at least one or two Cormorants to be seen (at Cormorant Point), but you'd be wrong. However, instead, there are one or two scores of sea turtles – this day's main Ecuad-awesomeness!



Unfortunately, I missed the guides' explanation regarding the timing (duration, frequency, season...) of the reproduction cycles of these beasts. I'm therefore not able to say whether we were particularly lucky with our timing to have caught the 'reproduction process' in full swing, or whether it's a non-stop (!) process. In some places the ocean was fairly teeming with excited and/or contented (!) turtles engaging in their romantic interactions, while up on the beach we could see the fascinating process of the turtles burying their eggs. So, like I say, we were very lucky – we got the full monty, regardless of whether it was a common sight or not).

A few turtles were doing the beach-scanning thing right in front of us – crawling to and fro, with one even seeming to find a good spot and digging herself a birthing burrow. Having swum ashore, a female turtle takes a real long time selecting the best spot to lay her eggs: not too near the water – so the high tides don't wash them away; not where it's too hot or too cold; and taking into account other factors I can't quite recall. Btw, like all reptiles, the sex of a baby inside an egg not long before birth depends on the surrounding temperature: a little cooler – a boy; a little warmer – a girl! Incidentally, one of the theories as to how the dinosaurs died out is based on this very fact: as a result of a mega volcanic eruption (at the Deccan Traps) a volcanic winter ensued, and the poor dinosaurs thus gave birth only to boys and no girls...

But I digress. Back to sea turtles!...





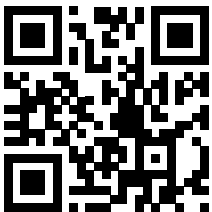
The next beach we visited, judging by the quantity of spawning sites, is a real hit with the turtle community here; we couldn't see any turtles, but signs of their presence were everywhere.

Next up for us: a spot of swimming among the turtles – hurray! Under the ocean we went with our face masks on and underwater cameras in hand to observe them up close going about their daily marine business, which seemed to be mostly eating some kind of subaqueous vegetarian delicacies – plus wondering what the visiting humans were doing underwater when they don't have gills).

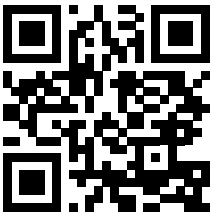




Video: underwater fun with the turtles!



Video: underwater selfie with the turtles!





Perhaps our most intimate insight into the love life of the Galápagos turtles we picked up at Caleta Tortuga (Black Turtle Cove). While at Punta Cormorant what they mostly do is the very family-oriented and responsible burying of their eggs, here at Caleta Tortuga is where... the 'earlier stages' take place: the lustfully carnal stages!

Basically, it's like a bar, night club and hotel all rolled into one. And why not? Only natural wanting to propagate one's species. Perhaps we shouldn't have taken pics; how would we have liked that?

Apparently, the lovemaking process lasts... a full six (6!!) hours. And the poor female is underwater for a lot of that time. Well she needs to come up for air occasionally – like in this pic to the left. Perhaps to make it easier on the poor she-turtle, sometimes they swim-and-copulate on their sides – then there's no need to come up for air!



Occasionally other males swim up to the action hoping to get in on it! Oh my gosh. What? Tortoises doing threesomes? Or more? Tortoise orgies? Well. Now I – and you! – have seen it all).

Meanwhile – check out the pesky voyeurs. Put those cameras away – peeping Toms!



Galápa-gosh No.6: Galápagos tortoises

Another day – another gosh!... There are only two places in the world where large land-dwelling tortoises live – here on the Galápagos Islands, and in Seychelles. Here, logically, they're called, Galápagos giant tortoises. In Seychelles – Aldabra giant tortoises. And to the untrained eye, you can hardly tell them apart.

The tortoise. Not the sharpest tool in the shed, even among reptiles – which are hardly known for their intellectual prowess. Probably the world's slowest animal too. And when it comes to sophistication, good manners and good looks – the tortoise clearly was at the back of the line when they were being doled out to the different species. Poor things. BUT!...

But... there's still something about these creatures that charms, enchants, enraptures and enthralls. Maybe it's something in our genes that tells us that, despite their outward appearance, the tortoise is wholly... tasty!... But more on that later. For now: giant tortoise pics!...



Our guide told us how the DNA of both Seychellois and Galápagos tortoises is practically the same; i.e., they're the same species family. That means that they could crossbreed (though no one's tried such an experiment) and have offspring.

But these two types of tortoise got me thinking. Both are endemic to their habitat, yet they're close relatives. How come?!

If you look on a map of the world, the nearest mainland to the Galápagos Islands is South America – 1000km to the east (and you thought they were just off the coast?). To get to Seychelles there's another 3500km to cover to get to the Atlantic, then another 6500 to get to Africa, then another 3000 to finally get to Seychelles. That makes a whopping 15,500 kilometers between the Galápagos and Seychelles. That's going east. Going the other way it's even further: 15,000km to Indonesia, another 4000 to the Indian Ocean, and another 5000 to Seychelles – 24,000km!

In short – there aren't many places on the planet further from each other! Yet still these tortoises are relatives?!!

Here's a theory of mine: A long time ago, the Aldabra giant tortoise wasn't endemic to the Seychelles; it roamed everywhere along the equator where the climate was tropical – right around the globe. And they lived happily and long (as they do today) since their shells would put most predators well off them as a dinner dish. But then along came... Homo sapiens and various other humans.

They start to emigrate all over the world, wherever they go destroying the ecosystem around them. First they go after anything tasty and nutritious – especially if it doesn't run fast, and that of course meant tortoises (with humans more able to get at the meat with their bigger brains, hands, and later – utensils, etc.). And nearly every single tortoise on the planet got gobbled up by hungry humans without a care. The few that were left – they happened to be located in Seychelles and on the Galápagos Islands.

The more observant... observer may at this point ask: 'So where are the bones?' Since archeologists often find remains of extinct animals wherever they find the remains of ancient man. So where are the tortoise remains?

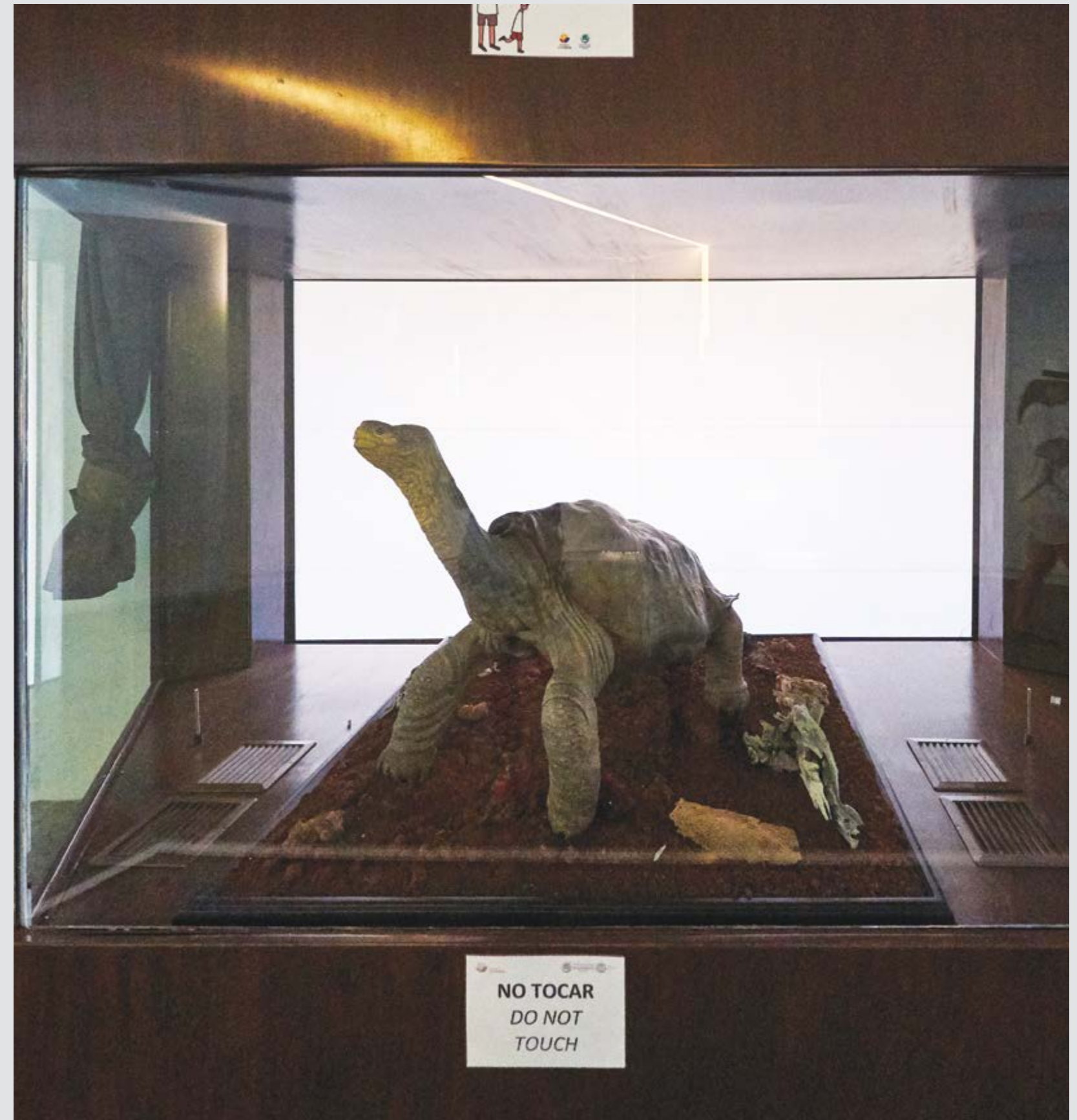
Let me explain. Tortoises breed along coastal zones. Eggs laid are buried by the mother under the sand of a beach. This means that tortoise remains should be looked for along the coast, not up in mountain caves (where ancient human remains are typically discovered). Also, since man settled across the world tens of thousands of years ago, the sea level then was much lower – by more than a hundred meters. So it doesn't take Sherlock to work out that ancient remains of tortoises should be searched for underwater!

One could counter this with the fact that the Polynesian islands were settled upon by man much later – some mere one or two thousand years ago. But those are islands! If there were any tortoises there. Any bones that remained on land were blown away by a hurricane, of which there were (and still are) many around those parts.

And that's why there are no ancient remains of giant tortoises: no bones, and no drawings of them on cave walls. But there is one exception! You'll remember how the flat planet stands upon the backs of four elephants, right? But do you recall how those same elephants stood on the backs of... a giant turtle?!

So, why did a few survive on both Seychelles and the Galápagos Islands? Easy. The Galápagos Islands were settled upon not long ago at all, relatively speaking, so Homo sapiens simply didn't get the chance to destroy everything on the islands. And today, the islands' tortoises are protected and cherished. And Seychelles – they too were settled upon later than the norm: only after the mid-18th century. Before then only passing pirates and expeditions would visit the islands briefly. Thank goodness! Only because of that have giant tortoises survived to this day.

Alas, it's not such a happy ending. Still today subspecies of these tortoises are becoming extinct. In 2012 the last Pinta island tortoise (*Chelonoidis abingdonii*) – Lonesome George – passed away. He now stands – stuffed – in the American Museum of Natural History next to Central Park in Manhattan, New York.





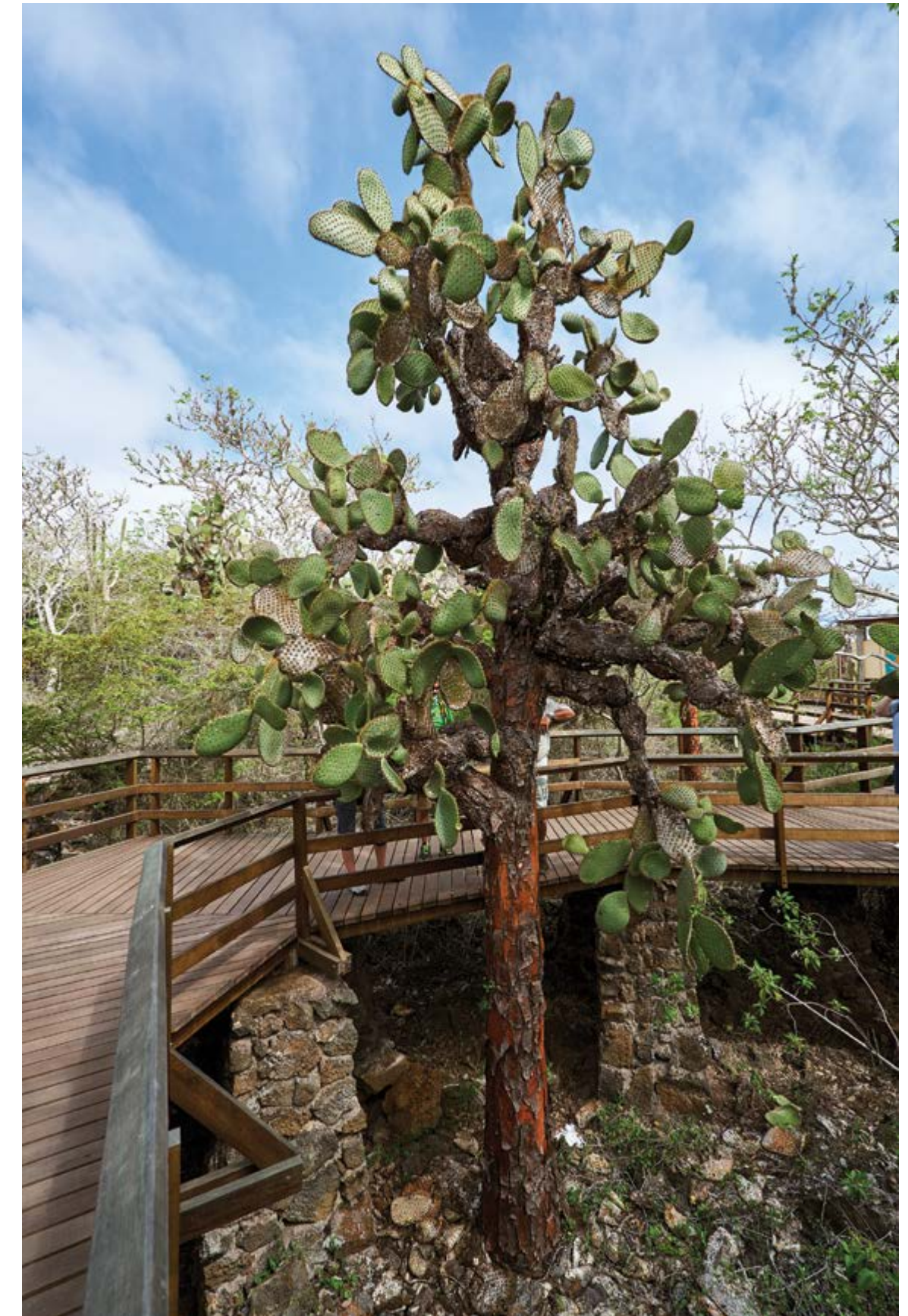
Galápa-gosh No.7: so pleasing to the eye – the tree-like cacti!

Before looking at the pics here, you'd be forgiven for thinking there's not much to 'gosh!' about when beholding a mere cactus. Now, after your inevitable quick peek here: no forgiveness needed!

For here on the Galápagos, as you can see, the cacti are colossal, and their shapes – simply crazy. Just look at that fat trunk there in the first photo – it looks like it's of a fir tree; but no – it's a cactus, specifically – an opuntia (aka – prickly bear!).



Hard to believe these are the same species as those little green prickly plants placed on shelves or (in the past) next to computer monitors ('to eat up the radiation!') – bonsai cactuses compared! It must be down to the effect of the stable ideal cactus climate here, plus the Galapagan good habit of protecting precious nature from the damaging influence of Homo sapiens).





What's curious is that the age of cactuses is practically impossible to determine: they don't have rings inside their trunks as trees do. However, there are a few things that can tell us if a cactus is a mere teenager or a fully-grown adult. For example: the bark on the trunks generally is split up into segments, and the older the cactus – the less distinguishable those segments are.

The 'leaves', btw – or whatever you call those fat green prickly things – grow bigger and fatter and bigger still, and sometimes eventually become the trunk of the cactus!

Each segment takes around eight to 12 years to grow. So if a cactus has, say, at least a dozen-or-so segments (often the case), plus new Mickey Mouse ears have sprouted... wait – that's surely getting on for a century, no?!

Astonishing natural constructions!

Galápa-gosh No.8: penguins!

Yes – you read that right: penguins! On the Galápagos Islands on the Equator!

I'd actually heard of the 'Galápagos penguin' (*Spheniscus mendiculus*) before, and knew that an in-person bird meet-and-greet was a must. And today was the day for that meet-and-greet. Hurray!

It has to be said that there aren't a great many penguins on the Galápagos Islands (compared to, say, Antarctica) – only around 40,000, according

to our guide. And since they're relatively so few in number, guides here tend to show you... just one or two of them – not tens of thousands of them like on the Antarctic coast!

We were shown our few penguins on Bartolomé Island. That's in the southern hemisphere. However, if the internet is to be believed, Galápagos penguins also reside on neighboring Isabela Island. Well, if that's true, then technically it's possible to meet penguins... in the northern hemisphere! Who knew?!

I just wonder – how did these penguins end up all the way up here by the equator? How they survive up here – that's clear: the ocean currents here are much cooler than usual for equatorial latitudes; also, the fish, crabs and other marine life that they feed on are stocked here in abundant quantities and are clearly – as we witnessed – most tasty to the Galápagos penguins. But how did they get here in the first place? A mystery.





Galápa-gosh No.9: underwater swimming with seals

On which of the Galápagos Islands do seals live? All over every single one of them! They're everywhere – even in the towns. You really do have to watch your step so as not to trip over one.

They can take a nap stretched out across a sidewalk, for example – obviously without a care if they might be in the way or likely to be stepped on by an unsuspecting tourist! Sounds funny, and I guess it is; but there's seriousness too: if you do... disturb one, it could bite: ouch!





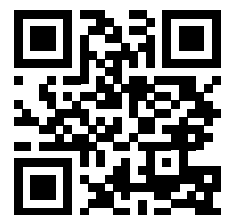


Our most dramatic encounter with Galápagos seals was on Rabida Island. Here they not only lounged about not far from us on the beaches, they also kept coming up to us real close when we took a dip in the ocean! No doubt they were just as curious about us as we were of them.



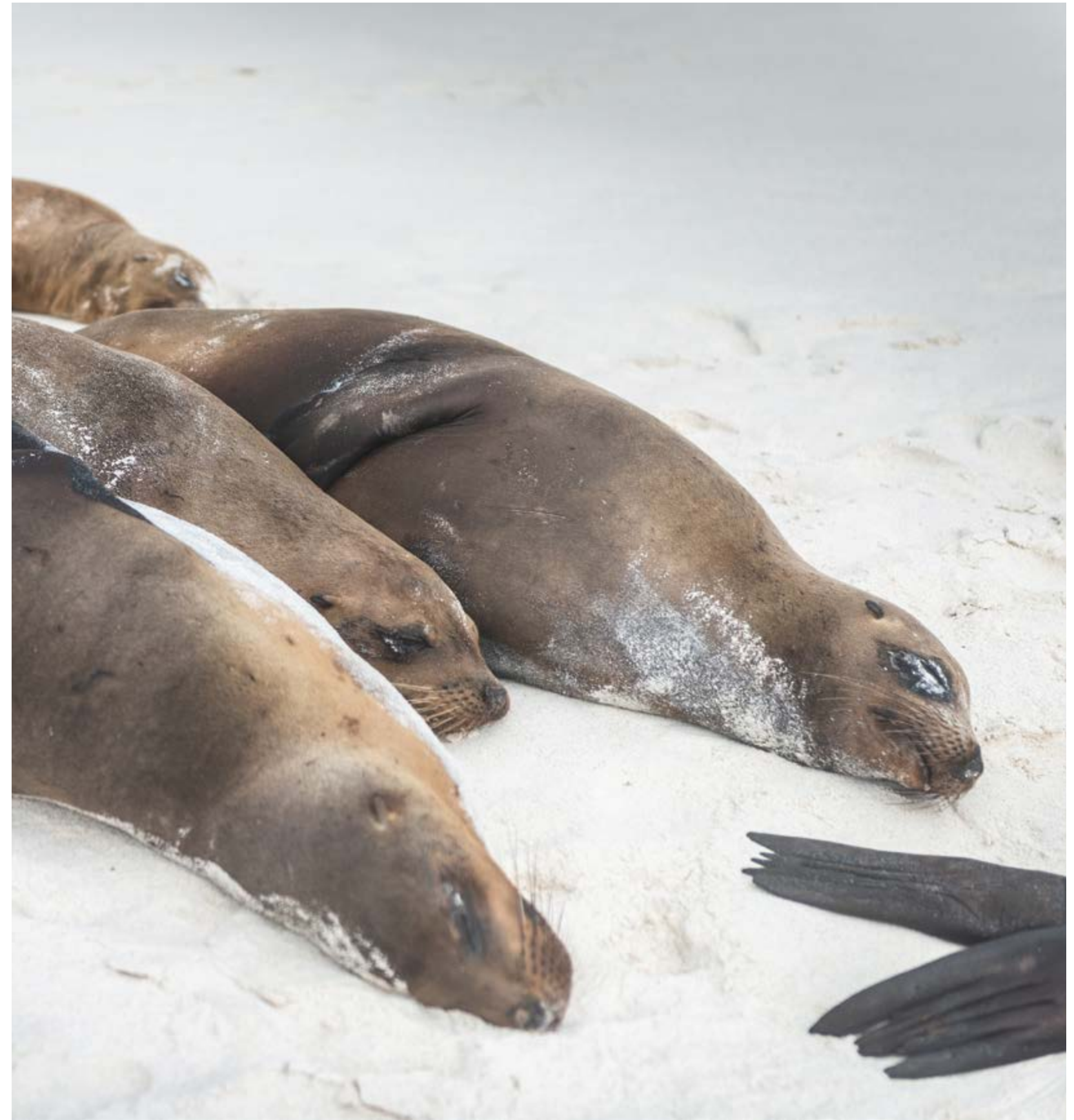
Swimming with seals is insanely fun. They twist and spin and turn around you for a while, then go off and do the same around another (initially startled and a little anxious!) tourist, then come back for a repeat performance, perhaps with the addition of some crazy acrobatic somersaults – and it goes on like that forever while you’re in the ocean with them! They never stop! The sweeties).

Video: Swimming with seals



Over on the island of Punta Suarez, there's a seals' kindergarten! Here the young marine mammals loll about on the sand while mom's out at work procuring dinner – catching fish. But how do the moms find their own offspring among a whole colony of little ones? Actually, our guides told us, by smell.

Our guides also informed us how harsh life can be for baby seals. If, for example, mommy is... attacked and eaten up by a shark, other moms won't feed her young one; it's simply left to die. Poor little thing! Still, if that 'poor little thing' sweet baby seal meets a penguin off its guard (an adult one at that), then it's that penguin's offspring who'll be winding up orphaned!... And the penguin, in turn... and so on and so forth – you could go on forever. But instead, let's just look at some photos of these beauts!



Galápa-gosh No.10: why are flamingoes pink?

Apparently, there used to be a large population of flamingoes on the Galápagos Islands. Today – not so many, with just small groups of them grazing against the backdrop of the volcanoes and rarely nesting on the lava fields.

Now, can you guess why flamingoes became a rarer sight on the Galápagos? Actually, the flamingo population on the Galápagos Islands was rather devastated by... rats brought to the islands by Homo sapiens – the rats really liked flamingo eggs. On one of the islands a full-on flamingo genocide took place and now the birds don't nest there at all.



It was while observing them and taking these snaps when we were told why the flamingo's plume is famously pink. Turns out that a flamingo actually has white feathers originally, at birth, while the pink color comes from their copious consumption of carotene – the stuff you get in carrots. Flamingoes feed on water-based living creatures like crab and prawns, which contain plenty of carotene. And the more a flamingo eats – the pinker he or she gets, and the more attractive they are to the opposite sex! Yes – just like the blue-footed booby (the brighter their feet – the sexier they become :).



Galápa-gosh No.11: volcanism and other geology

I've already told you about the volcanic origins of the Galápagos Islands, so we'll take it that the history and theory are done and out of the way. So now, let's enjoy the 'results' of that history/theory; first up: lava tubes, on the island of Santa Cruz.

(Wait: one last bit of history/theory! These constructions are formed during lava flows,

which cool from the top to form an upper crust, while inside the lava continues to flow.)

I'd been inside such lava tubes before – in Kamchatka and Hawaii, and on the slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily. I think that they feature in practically all the world's relatively fresh volcanoes – and that includes those on the Galápagos Islands.





Next on the volcanism agenda were two giant... holes in the ground – Los Gemelos (The Twins). Now, you could at first think these are volcanic craters, but they aren't. They're sinkholes that formed by the earth's surface collapsing. That is, they probably came about when underground lava tubes collapsed. So just imagine how big those tubes once were! I guess we'll never know quite how big now. Or – just maybe – perhaps one day someone will by chance discover an entrance down into the earth that could lead to a whole underground labyrinth of giant lava tubes?!

Btw, these sinkholes are some 800 meters above sea level, so there's a completely different climate up here. Though it's a dry, barren (notwithstanding cactuses, that is) landscape down by the sea not too far away, up here it's humid as heck and thus a veritable jungle. It's so humid in fact that, not only has the jungle itself grown up all thick and tall, but moss has grown all over said jungle too. It's literally everywhere!





But it was time to move on to the ultimate volcanism of all the Galápagos Islands: the grandiosely enormous and impossibly picturesque volcanic landscapes that produce a profound awareness of the insignificance of we humans, the futility of existence, and all that. Ladies and gentlemen, introducing: Bartolomé Island.



Now, I've seen plenty of volcanism – in all corners of the globe, but volcanic landscapes like these – never. Such a high concentration of craters in such a small area – in a word: wow! Though the main volcano of the island is extinct, the place was still gurgling and making popping sounds just like oil in a hot frying pan. My goodness. Such a shame none of us took a video.



Down there – underwater volcanic craters

The setting sun on this Martian landscape – oh my gorgeous!



While surveying these volcanic scenes our guide told us that this eruption occurred some million years ago. But I didn't believe it! The landscapes here look just too fresh for a million years. So I looked it up, but couldn't find anything to the contrary. I did read on the Russian Wikipedia page that apparently this is the youngest of all the islands of the archipelago. I also found: 'Age: 1.5–2 million years' – according to another source. But as to approximately when this volcano blew its top – nothing.

If you look carefully, here on the slopes of the main volcano you can make out where the lava flowed down in streams, and, in places – where the roofs of lava tubes collapsed. You can see that the streams were very thin. That must mean that the temperature of the lava was very high and it flowed almost like water.

It goes without saying – we climbed to the top of the main volcano. It's only a hundred meters high, so why not? Handily, there are steps right the way up (a total of 369, apparently; I tried counting them – but lost count around 43 :). After half an hour of steady, comfortable climbing of those steps, stopping off for occasional photography and mini-historical-and-geological lessons from our guides, we made it up to the top...



And up at the top – the views all around: oh my *grandiose!* In a word: marvelously Martian. Ok, two words.





The only thing that beats the sunset on Bartolomé Island is... the sunrise on Bartolomé Island. But we decided to save that for next time...

Video: sunset on Bartolomé Island



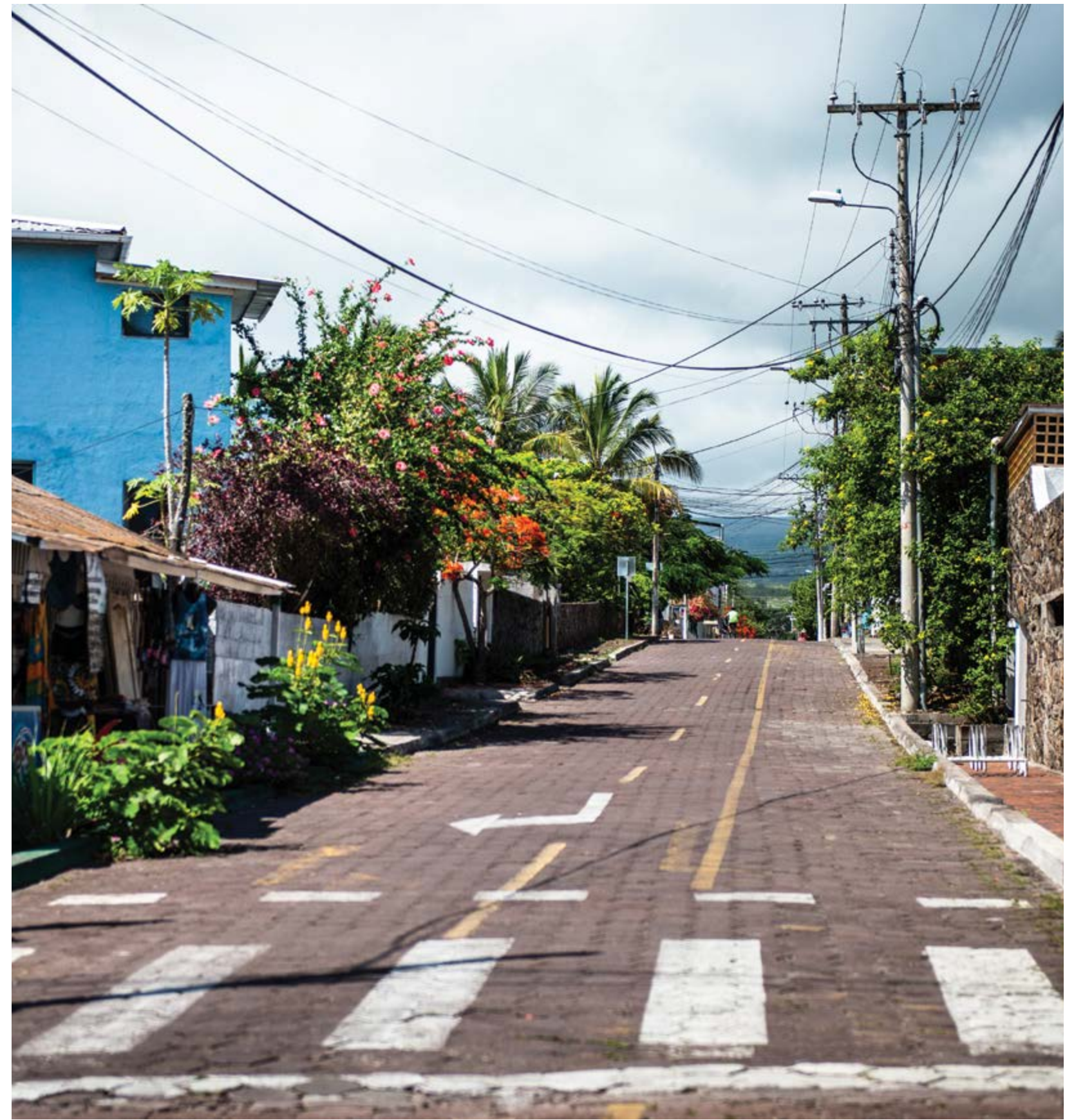
The sun having disappeared, it was time to head back to the ship

Galápa-gosh No.12: urbanism

The largest town of Santa Cruz Island – and also of the entire archipelago – is Puerto Ayora. Population: around 12,000. Charming little place by the sea it is too. The town is also the center of the cult of Mr. Darwin – home to both the Charles Darwin Foundation and Research Station.

Though it's the largest settlement on the Galápagos – there was practically no one about at all! The place was like a ghost town. There were clearly tourist-oriented attractions and amenities – just no tourists! Not many locals either.





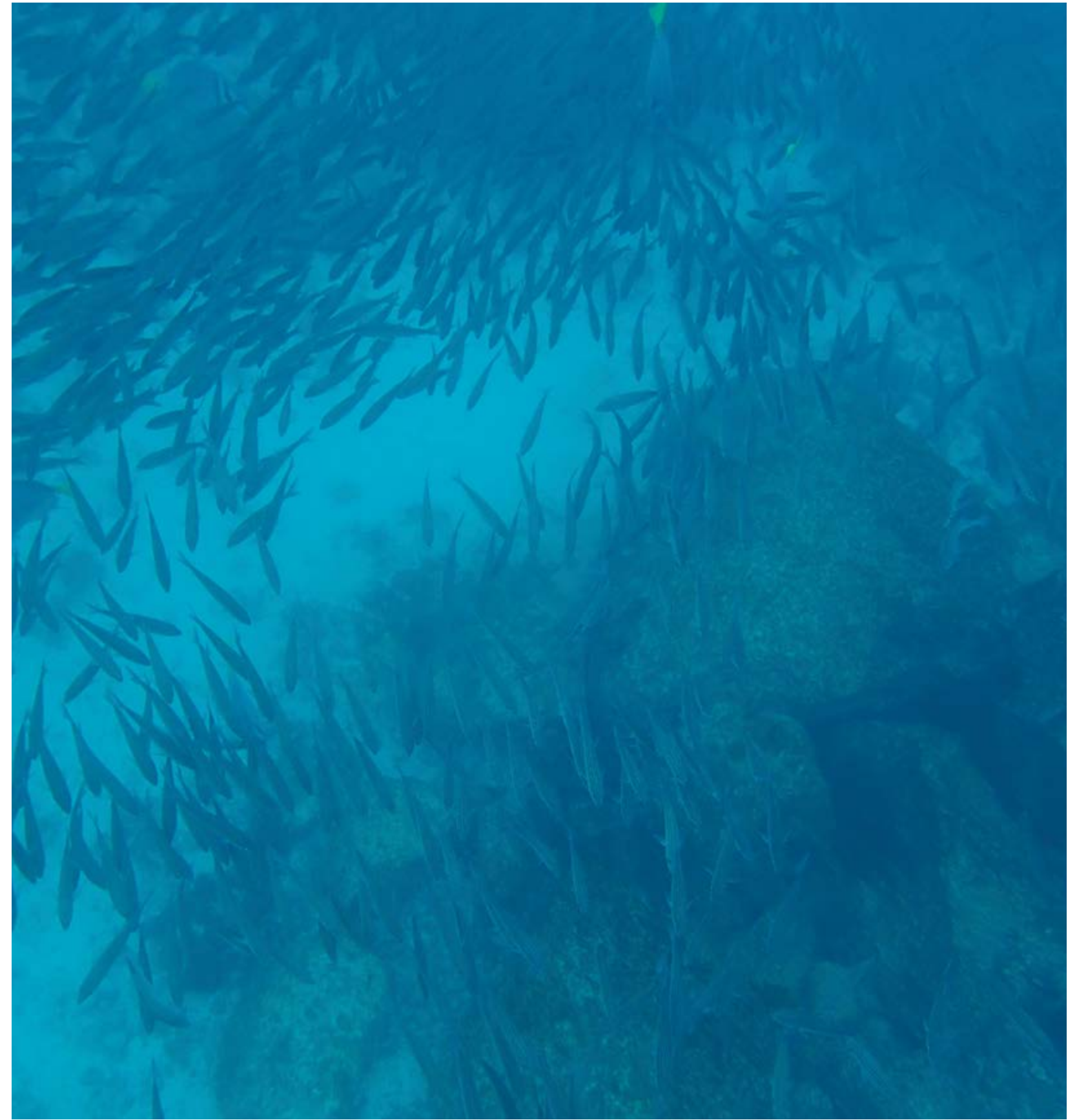
No-gosh: the underwhelming underwater world in the Galápagos Islands

You'd probably expect the marine life in the oceans surrounding the Galápagos to be exotic, plentiful, varied, colorful... tasty! But you'd be wrong. There are fishes, but most of them are tiny. Sure, there's a zillion zillion of them, but no matter how many – they're still mere minnows, or something like that: fodder for the seals and the boobies.

Large, bright, unusual, photogenic fishes – there are hardly any of them. And coral around the Galápagos – also very under par: just bits of it here and there.

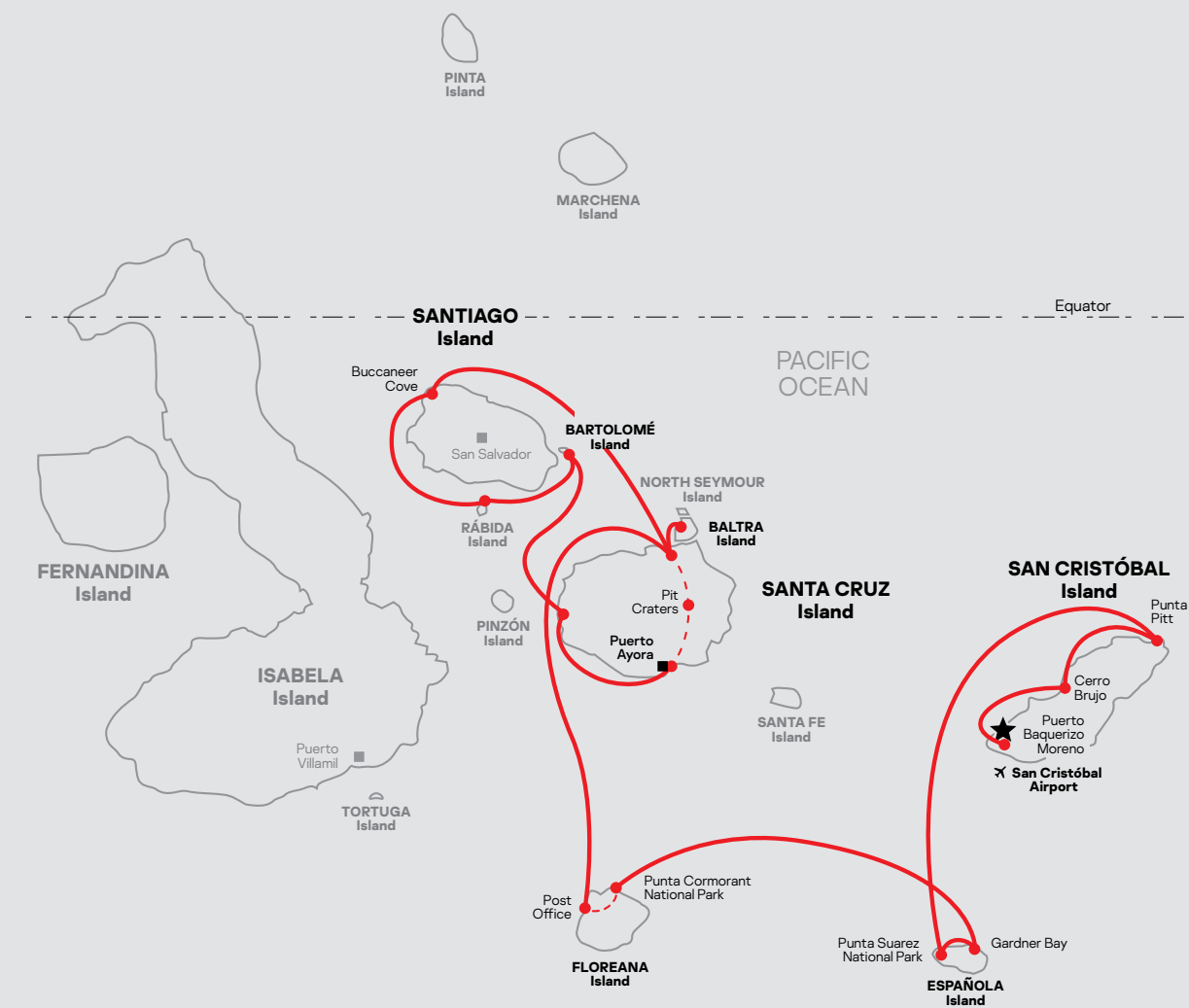
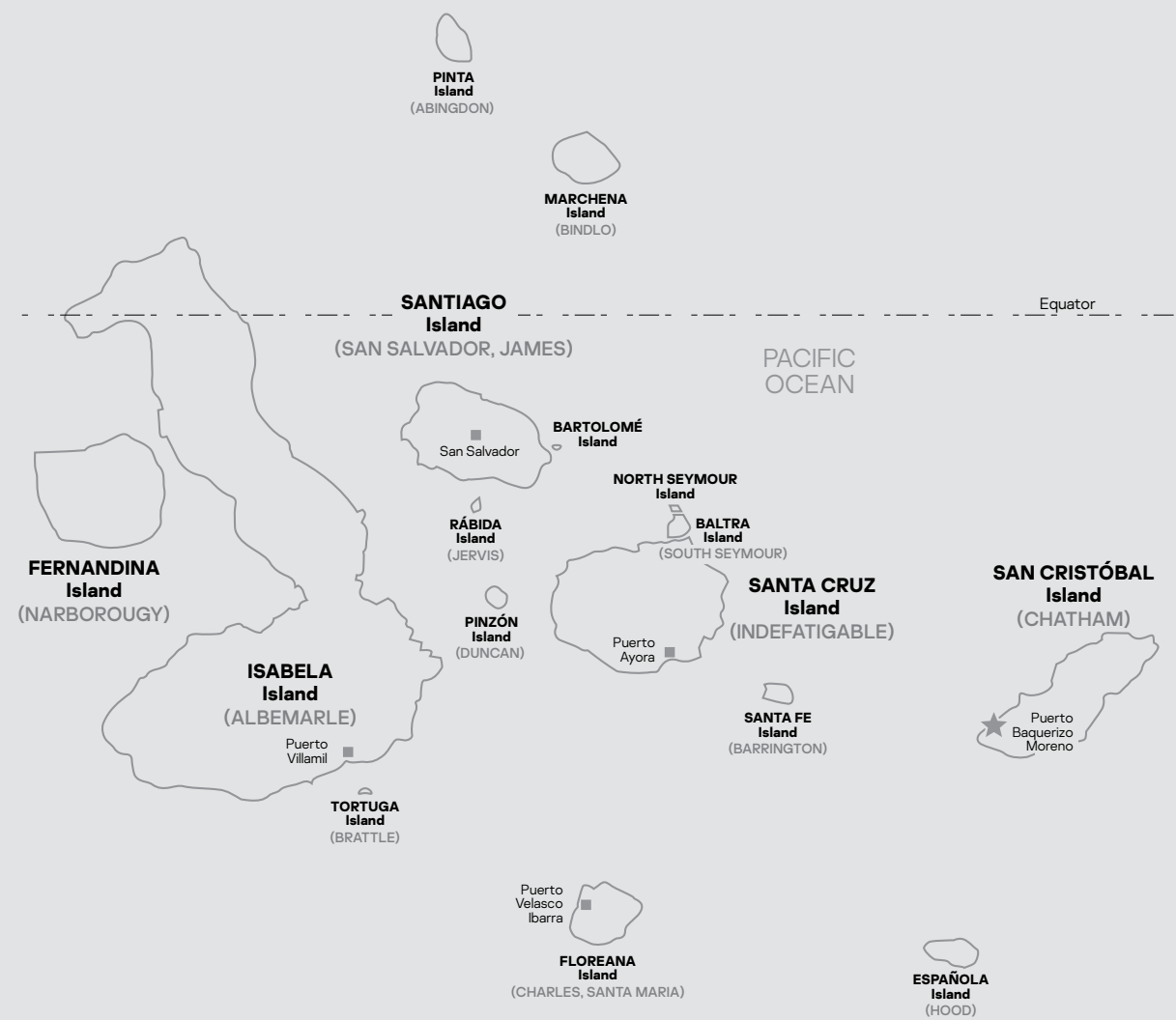
What's more, we almost always launched our underwater forays from beaches, whose sand would make the seawater somewhat murky so not all that much was visible anyway.

Next time, we'll opt for the diving centers we kept seeing in the towns. I reckon folks there will know the good spots.





And there's me complaining about the lack of colorful, exotic fishes?!



So you think that's about it – the Galápagos Islands 'feast' fully ingested? Well, almost. But now I think some aromatic bitters are needed – to help the digestion of all those delicious Galápagos dishes. And there's no better digestive aid than... reading maps, as you'll know).

But first we need to get to grips with the local place names on the maps of this part of the world. See, these islands were 'discovered' by the Spanish, then the English, then again by the Spanish, and each time (almost) every island earned itself a new name! This caused no end of confusion – and still does to some extent. To make it easy for you though, check out the above simplified map – with both the Spanish names (sometimes two of them!) in English, and also the former British names.

As regards the islands we visited – all eight of them – here they all are listed:

- **Santiago Island** / San Salvador / James Island
- **Bartolomé Island** / Bartolomé Island / Bartolomé Island! This is the one island with just one name ("This island ... [is] named after naturalist and lifelong friend of Charles Darwin, Sir Bartholomew James Sullivan, who was a lieutenant aboard HMS Beagle." – Wikipedia)
- **Rábida Island** / Jervis Island

- **Baltra Island** / South Seymour
- **Santa Cruz Island** / Indefatigable (!) / Chavez
- **San Cristóbal Island** / Chatham
- **Floreana Island** / Santa Maria / Charles Island
- **Española Island** / Hood Island

Manage to digest all that?!

Now for the particular places on the islands we disembarked at:

- On **Santiago**: Espumilla beach / Buccaneer Cove
- On **Bartolomé**: [too small for place names]

Ok. Perplexing place names: done. Now, finally – the cognac and cigar: checking out the map and map+route, above!

And there you have it folks, the Galápagos Islands – done, from top to bottom. Highly recommended, it goes without saying. They're a pain to get to, the whole trip ain't cheap, and the

- On **Rábida**: [ditto]
- On **Baltra**: its airport
- On **Santa Cruz**: Los Gemelos / Pit Craters / Twin Craters; Cerro Dragon / Dragon Hill; Caleta Tortuga Negro / Black Turtle Cove!

ship rocks a bit too much for comfort for some (for those who stay on one, as we did), but the raptures, the impressions, the emotions, and the future memories – I think they more than compensate for all that. But don't take make word for it – have a go yourself! I promise you: you won't regret it.

- On **San Cristóbal**: Cerro Brujo / Witch Hill; Punta Pitt / Pitt Point
- On **Floreana**: Post Office Bay and Cormorant Point [no Spanish names]
- On **Española**: Suarez Point / Punta Suarez; Gardner Bay

Our tour of the Galápagos Islands was over. All that was left to do was fit in our traditional few days of 'decompression' after the more active main part of our expedition before we were to head back home. That decompression was to take place back on mainland Ecuador (also included here – some mainland adventures we had just before we flew over to the islands)...

Happy New Year – in the Ecuadorian Mountains

Some prefer taking it easy over the Christmas and New Year period. Others – like *moi* and posse in recent years – don't take it easy for one second, and instead jet off to a far-away hot clime for some untraditional festive celebrations of our own devices – further from the center. I mean – further from the center of the Earth. In case you're wondering what I'm talking about here, let me back up.

Now, this Earth of ours – it isn't actually round! It's sort of round – but not perfectly round: it's kind of flattened in at the top and bottom (the North and South Poles), like a soccer ball would be if pressed into a hard floor with, say, a foot. In kilometers, this translates into the sea level at the equator being some 21 kilometers (!) 'further from the center' of the Earth than at the poles. So, the nearer we may be to the equator, the further we would be from its center. Even further, of course, if we're near the

top of a volcano near the equator, whereby we could add a few more kilometers, depending on the volcano's height!

We've been 'further from the center' on New Year's Eve on Kilimanjaro (Tanzania), and half-way up an Indonesian volcano (Arjuno-Welirang) too – in both cases some 6380 kilometers meters from the center of the Earth. But here in Ecuador – we were even further from the center: 3600 meters above sea level, which works out at... 6382 kilometers from the center! A record – hurray! But wait – it gets better: we were actually further from the center than if we'd been at the top of... Mount Everest, which is some 3000 kilometers north of the equator, not right next to it!

Bizarrely, not only were we furthest from the center, we were also the most comfortable we've been on one of our 'furthest' New Years.

We arrived at the luxurious Papallacta spa resort on New Year's Eve after a short-yet-high-altitude trek, and after checking in we were straight into the natural hot-spring pools to soak the muscles and take the edges off the mild altitude sickness. In a word: aaaaaaaah!

High up in the mountains (~3600 meters above sea level!), amid lush greenery and sweet aromas, we stayed in charming little bungalows beside which there are small naturally-hot pools. A bit further away there's a larger pool, but none of us made it there – we were too content with the little ones next to our cabins!

(Btw: the nearest to the center I've ever seen in the New Year was at the South Pole in 2010 – 6360 km!)



New Year on Kilimanjaro



New Year on Arjuno-Welirang



New Year at the South Pole



We saw in the New Year twice in 2019!...

In the afternoon of New Year's Eve, 2018, the clock struck... 4pm, and so, of course, the champagne bottles popped and much merriment ensued – much to the puzzlement of the staff and other residents. Then, eight hours later, we popped the corks once again! For of course – the time difference between Quito and Moscow is eight hours (almost like Kamchatka, only the other way round)! So our first celebrations were for the midnight celebrations in Moscow, the second – for the hour striking midnight locally! (Note here in the pics – you see how light it is? Yes, this was 'Midnight in Moscow, Lunchtime in L.A. Quito!')

As we were so tired after our mountain marching, we kept the celebrations... modest. This even went so far as us watching a movie in the run-up to the local midnight. Certainly this isn't what we'd normally do, but, fairly exhausted, it seemed ideal for this occasion. We even watched it from a hot pool. And this actually turned out to be one very enjoyable, very memorable New Year!

Btw, the film was Irony of Fate, a much-loved, much-quoted, Russian classic, which is shown every New Year and is watched by practically the whole of Russia every year too (apart from me, that is: I hadn't seen it in maybe 20 years, which only added to my delight!).

We need to do that again!



Lower – into Quilotoa

As I'm sure you'll know, Ecuador has plenty of volcanism. Right down the middle of the country from top to bottom there's a section of a mountain range that goes by the name of the Andes you may have heard of, along which are no less than ~three dozen volcanoes, many of which are situated in the 'Alley of the Volcanoes' – with mountain ridges and volcanic cones on each side.

Not only is the quantity of volcanoes very impressive, the quality is too: unusual though attractive; monumental and hypnotic; with almost perfectly round huge craters with lakes therein and sheer cliffs therearound; and assorted other OMG panoramic views. And the first one we inspected was Quilotoa.

The top rim of the caldera is nearly 4000 meters above sea level. To get down to the lake, which is around 400 meters below the rim along the vertical axis, you walk down a dusty path, which takes around 30 minutes accounting for multiple stops for snaps. So, down we walked. Then – back up...



To be honest, the walk down into the crater isn't the most pleasant. The steps can be high, while in some places there are no steps at all. The numerous passing horses are always snorting and... fertilizing the path frequently, the wind gets the dust up, and let's not forget that the path is nearly four kilometers above sea level – so altitude sickness can be a problem if you're not careful (we'd flown straight here from the low plains so had to slow the tempo right down). That said, the surrounding vistas almost made up for the lack of comfort.

We finally made it down to the lake. Once there, there was good news and bad. Good: you can hire kayaks! Bad: in places there's lots of green sludgy stuff (mercifully, not everywhere) making taking a dip not the easiest/most pleasant.

Anyway, when I see a large body of water – green sludgy stuff or no – you know already what I'm wont to do...



I get in it! And as I did I realized this was the closing of the 2018 swimming/bathing season – my last dip of the year.

Both the locals and other visiting tourists seemed a little surprised we were swimming around in the lake instead of kayaking atop it. But after a while, some of the other – younger – tourists decided “if you can't beat 'em – join 'em”, and in they splashed too, shrieking as they did.

The shrieks were probably due to the fact that the water was rather cold. Still, for us, it was just what was needed after the long, sticky, dusty descent. It also turned out that this was hardly fresh potable mountain water as pure as the driven snow: I accidentally licked my lips at one point and understood immediately that it quite possibly contained every single element of the periodic table! Best not drunk. Imagine if a chemical reaction took place after drinking some?)

Btw, I set myself a new record swimming here – the highest natural-lake spot of bathing for me ever! Previous records were: (i) at an altitude of around 3200 meters in Lake Kari on Mount Aragats in Armenia in 2016; and (ii) at 3300m in a lake in a glacier (!) in the Tian Shan mountains in Kyrgyzstan in 2017. Here our bathing took place at 3500–3600m above sea level.

Ecuadorial secret about the equators

And you thought there was just one equator?...

Even if you know hardly any Spanish at all, it's fairly easy to work out that the etymology of 'Ecuador' has something to do with the equator upon which the country sits. And you'd be right: ecuador is in fact the Spanish for equator.

So it seemed obvious to me that we just had to visit said ecuador/equator. If we didn't, it'd be like going all the way to Paris and not visiting the Eiffel Tower; or to London and not snapping Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament; or to Moscow and not seeing the Kremlin, St. Basil's and Red Square; to Rome without the Colosseum;

Sydney – the Opera House; Kamchatka – grizzly bears; New York – the Empire State Building; and so on and on and on... (now there's a list that could go on forever:). So that's just what we did – we went to visit the equator and the 'equator museum', both of which are in suburban Quito.

We arrive at **Mitad del Mundo** – the Middle of the World – and there was the equator, painted as a line in yellow, with a monument to it for good measure. It goes without saying that tourists flock here (just like we did). I guess the attraction is similar to that of Greenwich in London (where Greenwich Mean Time is calculated from). To say you've been right in the middle of the world's

surface (0° - 0' - 0") between the North and South Pole is kinda cool.

Of course, we climbed to the top of the monument. Looking north – the northern hemisphere; south – the southern hemisphere. I noticed how some of the nearby residential blocks also sit right on the equator: the living room and dining room – northern hemisphere; the bedroom and bathroom – southern hemisphere!

The large 'N' and 'S' on the ground indicate which side's north and which is south. Actually rather handy, as it's quite tricky working it out based just on the location of the sun up in the sky.





Just round the corner there's a place called the IntiÑan Solar Museum. Now, you won't believe this, but... there's a second equator here! It's like, if they get overloaded with tourists at the first equator, then there's an 'overflow' equator, just 100 meters to the north!

After finding out about the 'second equator', the collective mood of our group rather sharply turned to one of... 'whatever': suddenly the momentousness of this fundamental geographical-cartographical object all but vanished. Ah well, what's it matter if there are two? And anyway, the excursion became a bit more light-hearted, less serious. For example, here's a sundial. But not just any old sundial. It's an Ecuadorian equatorial sundial. It needs to be vertical and double-sided since the sun is always real high in the sky right above one's head here. Or something like that, anyway. I just wonder – how can they tell the time when the sun's directly up above during an equinox?



The next attraction on our excursion was this here... egg! We were told how it stands up vertically on that there thin stand only directly on the equator – which is precisely where it's positioned here in the pic. If you try it a few meters into the northern or southern hemisphere – it doesn't stay stood up! Still, even if you are directly on the equator, eventually a gust of wind blows it over.

Further – cooler...

I didn't manage to get a photo, but here they also explained and showed how water, when being drained out of some container like a sink or tub, after having the plug pulled, swirls (whirlpool-like) one way on one side of the equator, and the other way on the other side. No, really! They pulled the plug in the bottom of a tub in the northern hemisphere – it swirled one way; they moved the tub to the southern hemisphere, filled it up again, pulled the plug again... it swirled the other way! Told you further – 'cooler'!



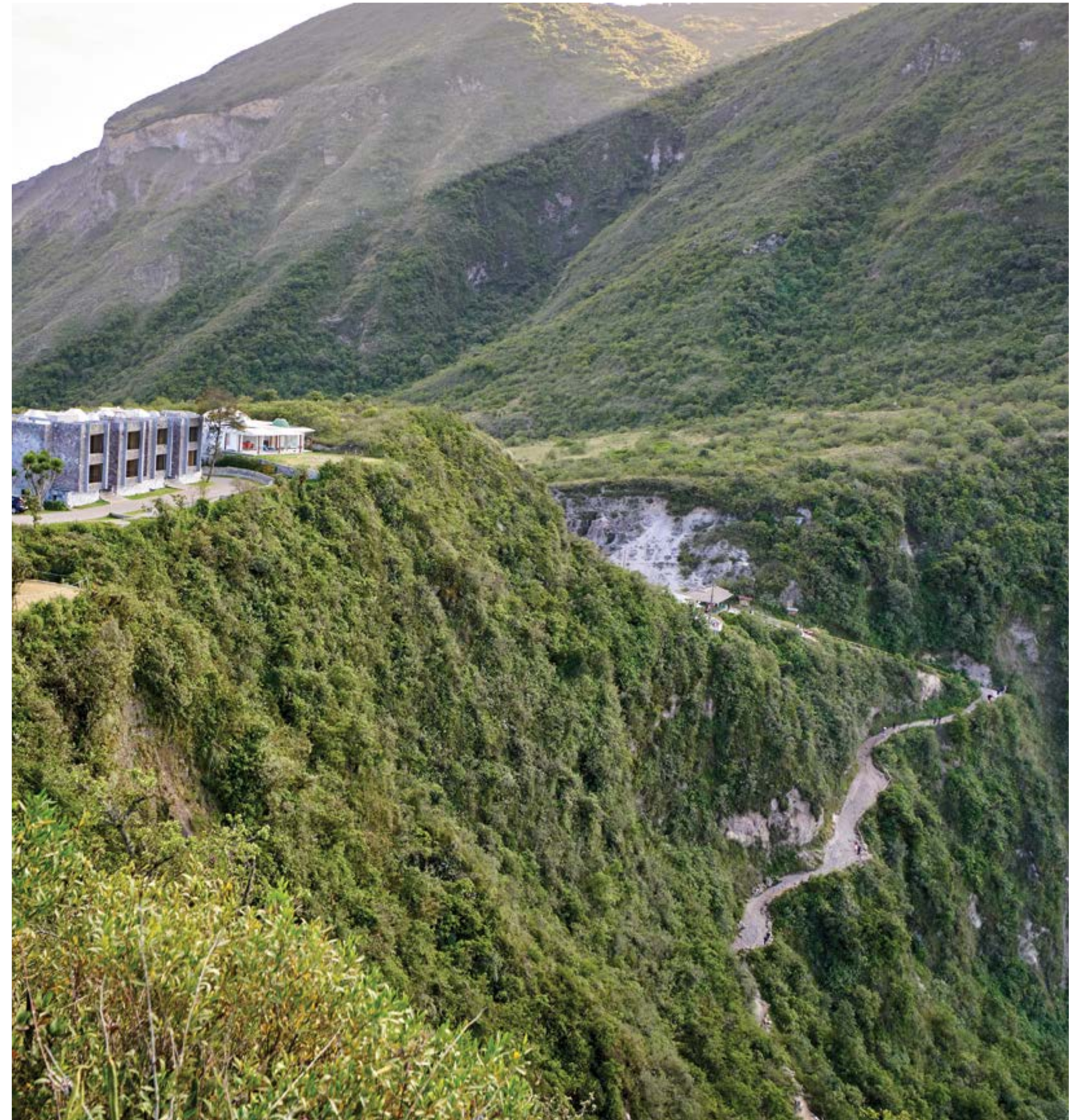
This 'magic' on the equator is the 'Coriolis force' at work. Hmm. I wonder: if you straddle the equator – one leg into the northern hemisphere and the other into the southern, might that... I don't know – tear you in two or something?!

All this Coriolisness got me thinking... Surely, tapping its force on the equator could also give us an 'eternal engine'; water going this way, then that, non-stop – forever, or at least while ever the planet keeps on spinning round. Equatorial nations needing boosts to their budgets – take note! 'Feel the Coriolis Force, Luke'.

Ok, ok; that's all just my imagination running away with me, as it often does. And anyway, the 'equator' isn't really, erm, a real 'thing'. There's no physical line that runs round the globe in the middle. Besides, this 'conditional' line is prone to movement up and down the side of the globe. Continents 'swim', tides rise and fall, winds blow to and fro... And it all gently rocks the planet this way and that. I saw this once with my own eyes – at the South Pole on New Year's Day, 2010: they actually move the real South Pole marker every year (between 9 and 10am on New Year's Day morning, New Zealand time)!

Anyway. Back to Ecuador... It too moves around above the earth's mass. So can you guess what GLONASS or GPS on smartphones tells us? Yep: that the real equator isn't the one indicated by the yellow line that runs through the monument, or the red one a little way away from it! It's actually somewhere else, a bit further north! Even the internet agrees with such blasphemy: 'the actual equator is some 240 meters north of the monument area' (Wikipedia).

And when the scientific-tectonic-equatorial debate becomes too much, there's not far to go for some relief and rest and relaxation: to the voluptuous Pululahua volcano. And what a beauty she is.



Condor trekking

My pals and I love a spot of trekking in remote places around the globe. Just two or three days normally does the trick: enough to get in plenty of gawping at luscious landscapes, plenty of exercise, plenty of curiosity satisfaction, and of course plenty of pretty photography.

And our New Year trip to Ecuador proved no exception. Carrying small backpacks, accompanied by horses carrying the larger items like tents and so on, we walked along a lengthy stretch of the Condor Trek.



The main attraction along the Condor, at just over 5700 meters high, is the Antisana volcano. Wow, it must get cold – and steep – up there toward the top. And to think... some folks climb up to the peak!

Perhaps noticing our shock upon viewing the extreme conditions up there, our guides told us how folks can take a rather easy-going path that goes all the way up to the crater (from the other side, which is not as crazy steep as this side). Alas, we didn't have time for that: we'd have needed several days to acclimatize for going as high as 5700 meters above sea level. We'll have to leave that adventure for another day.

This time, we were walking along the west side of the volcano – and nowhere near its crater up top.



One thing that puts a bit of a dampener on the trekking experience in general in Ecuador is the ubiquitous (at least high up in the mountains, where we often found ourselves) dense covering of hardy shrubbery – something like agave, but which the guides referred to (erroneously I believe) as cacti.

One thing that... adds a bit of excitement to the trekking experience in general in Ecuador is the presence of... bears. Yes, brown bears – of the grizzly persuasion! ‘What?! Bears?!’ we asked, fairly astonished. ‘Yes. And if we’re lucky, we’ll see some,’ came the giddy reply of our guides. And sure enough – we were lucky: a long way off (mercifully!) we could just about make out a black dot: ‘Bear!’ trilled our guides.

Turns out it was an Andean short-faced bear, aka, the spectacled bear – (mostly) vegetarian, much like Chinese pandas, and the only surviving species of bear in South America. They graze on mountain cacti. Hmmm. That got me thinking...

I wonder how pandas ended up vegetarian? It’s a trait that seems most un-bearlike. It’s hardly that their consciences got the better of them and they all suddenly decided: ‘No more animal cruelty due to our eating animals for their meat’. How does a species get turned off the diet they were ‘given’ by nature? What happened? I’ve no answers I’m afraid.



Though it’s claimed the Condor Track is the best walk there is here, we were rather underwhelmed. Ok, us lot – we have been spoiled, having trekked along world-beating paths like the Routeburn Track in New Zealand, the paths in Torres del Paine National Park in Chilean Patagonia, or the one that runs atop the caldera rim of Ksudach volcano in Kamchatka. The Condor Track, by comparison, hardly lends itself to blissful meditative strolling one bit. I guess we just wanted the natural beauty to be off-the-scale and all in one spot. Antisana is impressive, but that’s about all that is. The Condor is just so high up – ~4000 meters above sea level: tricky for any office dweller; then there’s the commonplace mud and sludge; and then there’s the occasional barbed wire (grrrr).

In short, interesting, but not outstanding. At least – so it seemed to me.



Ecuadorian exhilaration: Cuicocha

The next Ecuadish on the menu was... more volcanism: yeh! We headed over to Cotacachi Volcano and its lovely caldera lake called Cuicocha – around two hours' drive from Quito.

The height of the caldera differs depending on whom/what you consult – among locals, different websites, and our own GPS kit: from 3100 to 3450 meters, making the lake around three kilometers above sea level! And it all looks something like this:

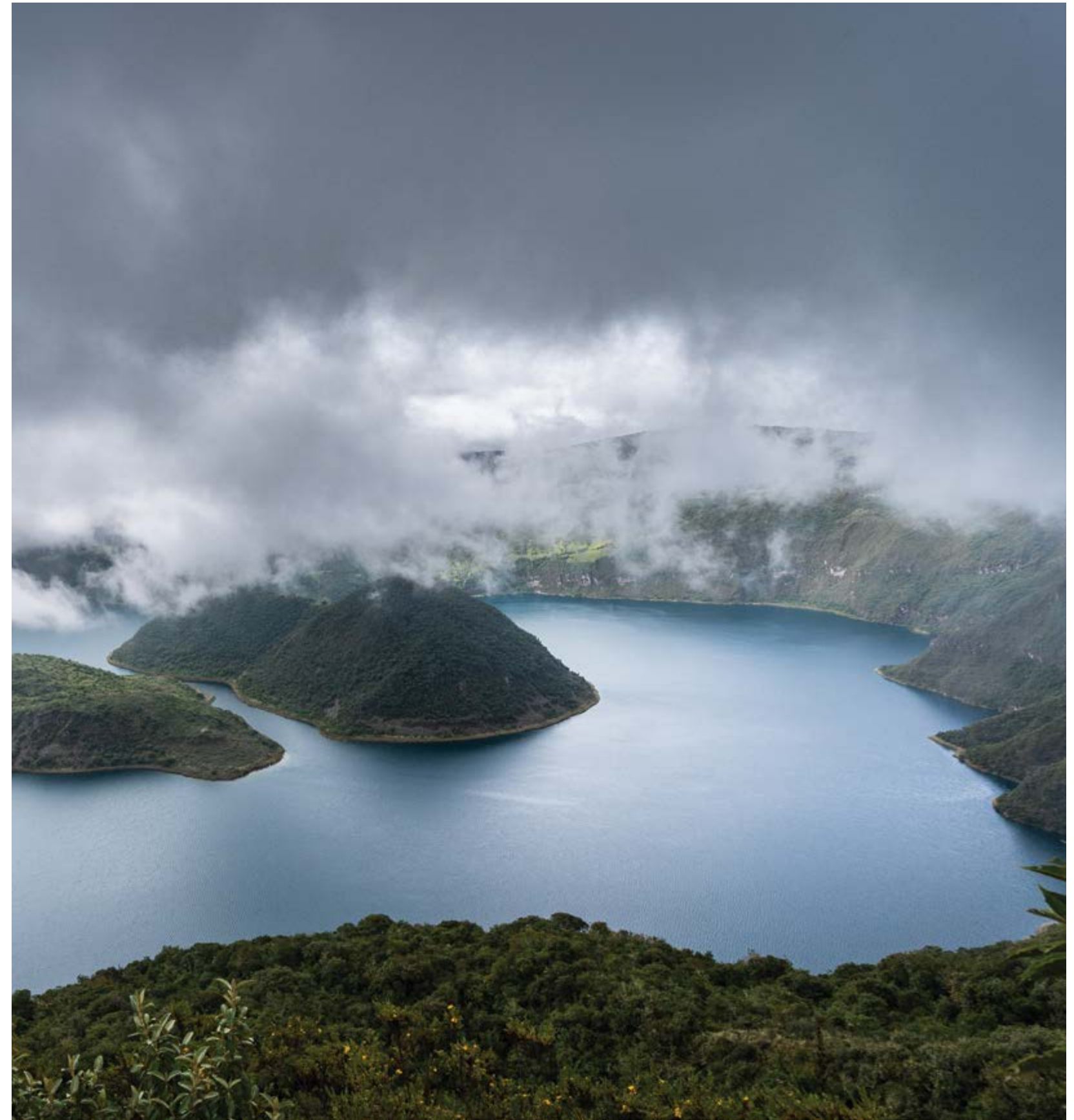




A fairly easy path runs the full way round the lake, which takes around four or five hours if walking at a gentle pace (decompression, remember?!) – or six or seven hours if non-stop stopping for snapping the super scenery, which is of course what we did. It's a wonderful day's walking, and the path is helpfully dotted with clear signs.

Visibility was frequently impaired by quickly descending cloud cover. But at least it disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared

Someone sure got the location right here: this place has the perfect panoramic view of the caldera



Peeking at the peaks

All this trekking across mountainsides and up and down volcano-sides – but not one peak reached? Why not?! Here's why:

First, we're tourists preferring a leisurely pace – not tourists-cum-triathlon-participants!

Second, the snow-covered peaks here are more than five, if not six thousand meters above sea level. Altitudes of such caliber require long preparation, slow acclimatization, and special climbing equipment – all very serious.

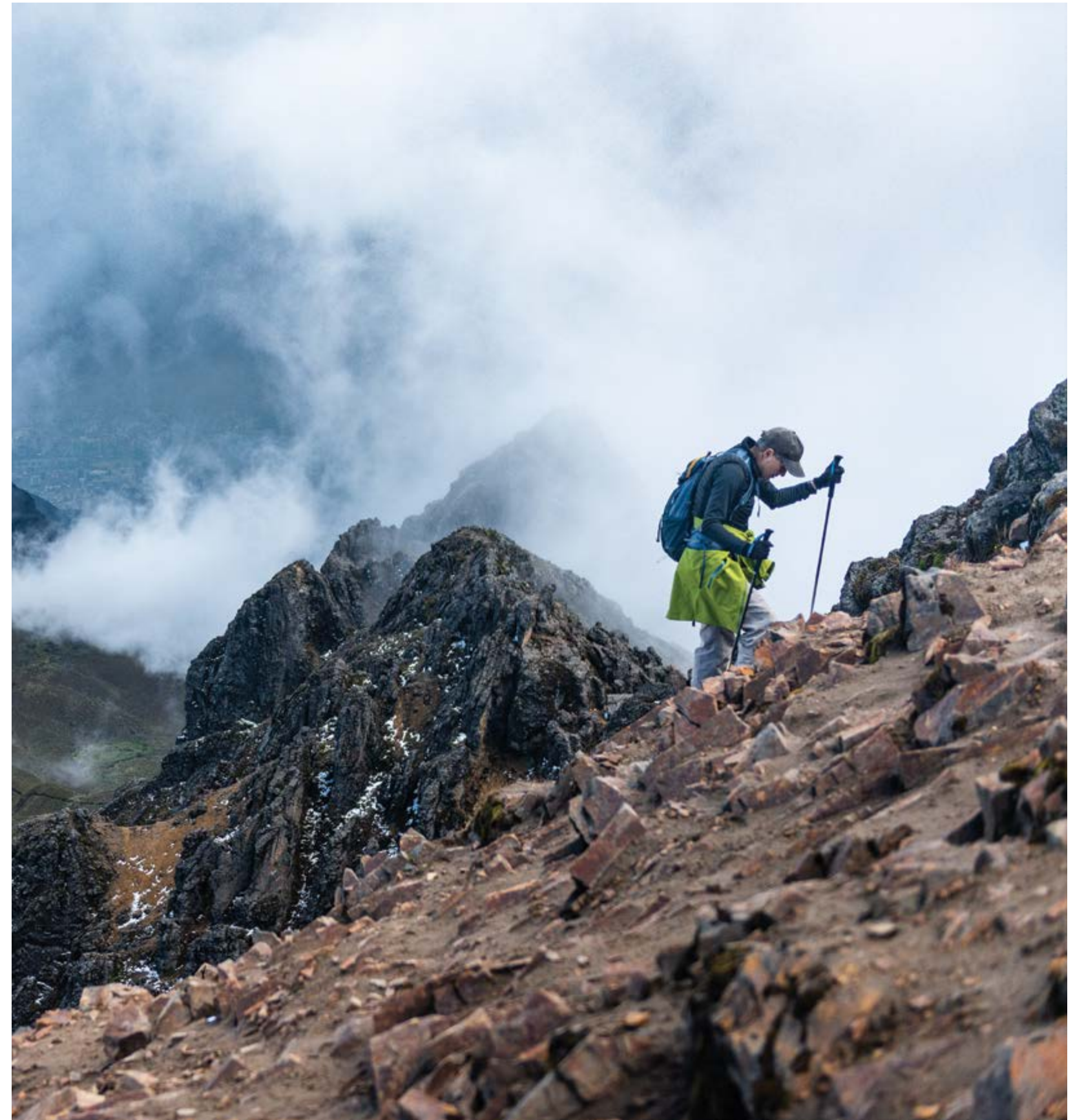
Whereas we were on holiday; fun was on the menu, not seriousness! Still, not all was lost: we did manage, toward the end of our trip, a climb up to the top of an 'amateur' volcano – Ruku Pichincha, which, handily, towers up high above the Ecuadorian capital, Quito.



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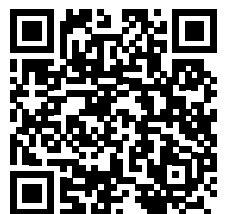


At the top: much ooh-ing, ahh-ing, and OMGing, as you might expect. And as a bonus (as if we needed one) the early stages of altitude sickness added to the feelings of euphoria. Oh my gladness-and-gee! One more bonus: the cloud cleared as we reached the top. Oh my good-luck! And the views of the capital below – oh my grandiose!



While still up at the peak we were surrounded by some strange breed of bird – not quite chickens, not quite eagles, but something in-between: chickles). Hungry they were too: not surprised all the way up here...

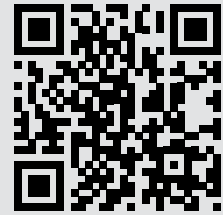
Video: five minutes at the top of Ruku Pichincha



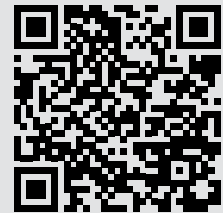
And that's about it! Ecuador-Galápagos – done! I hope you liked the words and the photos, and I hope you now want to get there yourselves. For Ecuadorian-Galápagos scenery is sublime, the wild beasts – wonderfully bewitching, and the small towns – simply tremendous!

And finally, for the traditional 'decompression' at the end, and also so as to reinforce the impressions of the foregoing material – a few last summary pics: the 'Greatest Hits' of all the expedition's photos taken by me and my fellow expeditioners.

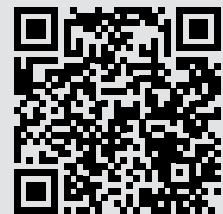
My travelogue collection



Video of the Ecuadorian expedition



My video-travelogue











Eugene Kaspersky

12 Galápa-goshes

and Other Ecuad-awesomenesses

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The Galápagos Islands. What first comes to mind when you hear those words? Far away? Well they sure are that. Somewhere in South America? Yep. Mysterious? Kind of. Exotic wild animals? Oh yes. Charles Darwin? HMS Beagle? The Theory of Evolution? The equator? Sunny? Hot? Dry? Ocean? Volcanoes? Well those were the associations I'd had in my head from my geography lessons at school, my 'travelers' club' membership, and a great many books – both fiction and non-fiction. All that – as if in special preparation for an eventual visit to the archipelago one day...

Fast-forward a decade or three, and the Galápagos Islands featured on my 'Top-100 Most Beautiful Must-see Places on the Planet' list for years. But I'd never been there myself. That finally changed in 2019: the 'usual suspects' and I headed on over there for a taste.

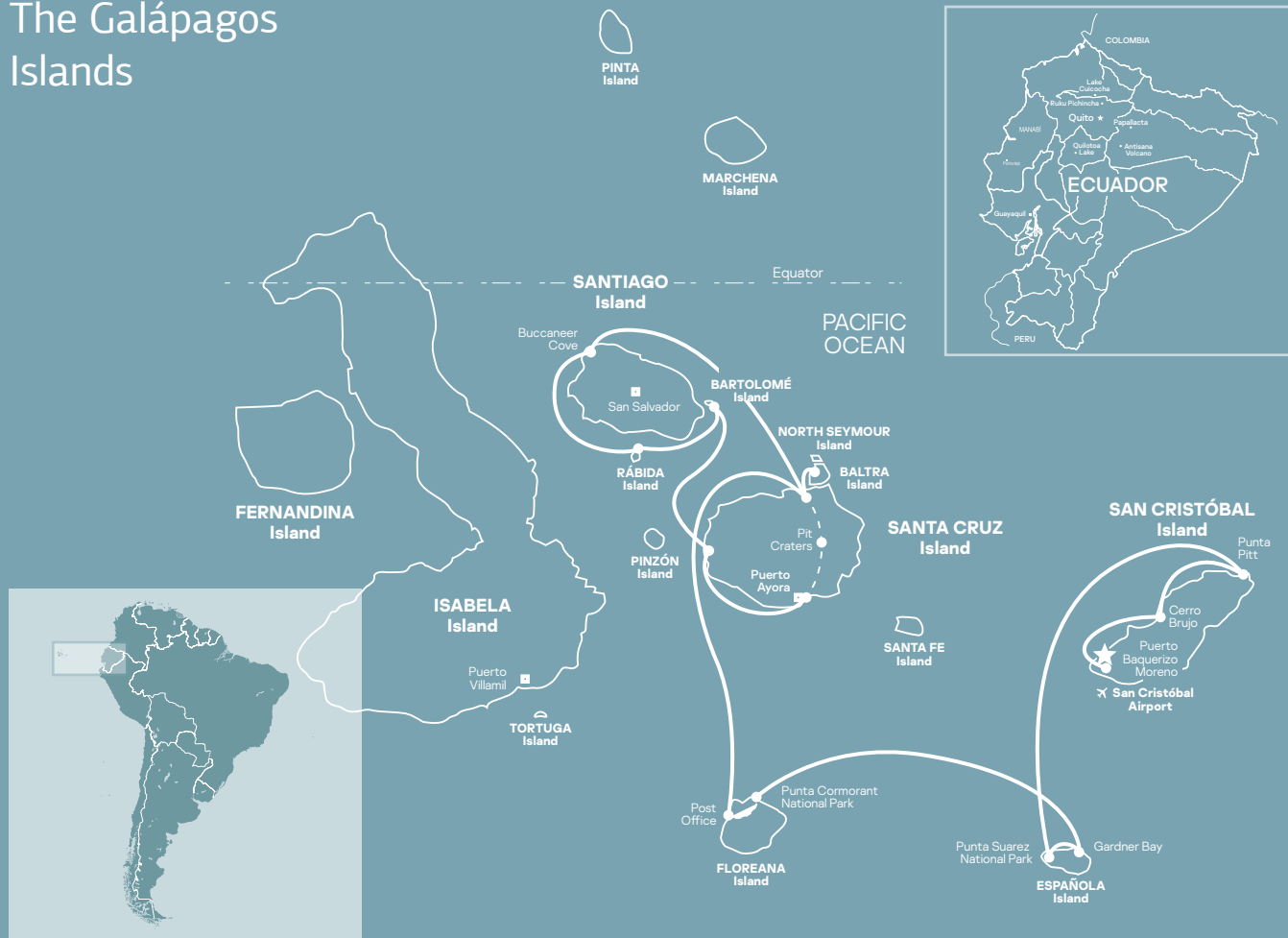
So what can I say now, having been there? I'll say the following:

Far. Mysterious. The wildest, extraordinarily beautiful animals. The Equator. Yet I 'knew'

all that before. Not quite: for it's only when you go there and see all the magical things for yourself that you can say you really 'know' the Galápagos Islands. But don't worry if you haven't been yet: I've written a travelogue book on the archipelago so as to share all the best impressions from the tortoise's mouth: the perfect 'prequel' to your necessary, mandatory, inevitable visit one day to the Galápagos Islands. This is that book! Enjoy!...

– Eugene Kaspersky

The Galápagos Islands



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