

A Week of Enchantment

A Journal of the Bloomenthals' Voyage to the Galápagos Islands — August 2000

In 1835, a young naturalist named Charles Darwin spent five weeks in the Galápagos Islands, an archipelago in the Pacific Ocean straddling the equator about 600 miles off the western coast of South America. The intriguing biodiversity he observed and the specimens he collected during this relatively brief sojourn ultimately constituted the basis for Darwin's formulation of his now-widely accepted theory of evolution, shattering forever the previously-unchallenged notion of the immutability of all species on our planet.

The pristine environment that Darwin documented in his writings has suffered somewhat in the ensuing 165 years from then until now, through both exploitation and absence of effective protection policies until fairly recently. Even so, it remains a unique location for close encounters with numerous varieties of flora and fauna that can be found nowhere else on earth.

Already familiar with the special character of the Galápagos from a previous visit, Hal and Sue Mozer selected the archipelago as a fitting venue to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary, taking with them on the trip their three children, Anne, David and Nanci, and respective spouses, as well as their five grandchildren.

The following is an account of Anne's immediate family's experiences and observations from this most memorable vacation. Anne's husband, Marty, and daughter, Emily, have co-authored this detailed record of experiences, with considerable input and editorial guidance from Anne and their other daughter, Lauren. The motivation for memorializing the minutia of this trip is to enable all of them, as well as anyone else who might be interested, to recapture the many memories as they inevitably tend to fade with the passage of time.

Thursday, August 3

M After a full day at work for Anne and myself, we returned home for dinner and final packing. Then we drove from Lawrenceville to Philadelphia, where we had reserved a room at the Airport Tower Hotel, just a few miles from Philadelphia International Airport. While the first leg of our flight wasn't until the following morning, we had decided earlier in the week that staying near the airport might be prudent, as the final night of the Republican national convention in Philadelphia also was Thursday evening, and we envisioned that I-95 might be clogged with 45,000 delegates and reporters trying to leave town, in addition to the highway's normal morning rush-hour traffic. The hotel turned out to be a dive, but a reasonable room rate coupled with free parking for the entire duration of our planned trip actually saved us a few dollars over our typical expenditure for long-term parking.

Friday, August 4

M The lodging strategy seemed to work. The hotel shuttle got us to the airport well ahead of the recommended check-in deadline and our flight from Philadelphia to Miami was pleasantly uneventful. Sue, Hal, Nanci, Justin and Keisha were waiting for us just beyond the arrival gate in the Miami airport, and the nine of us enjoyed a tasty lunch on the top floor of the airport's elegant tower hotel (not to be confused with the similarly-captioned sleazy joint where we had just spent the previous night). Someone apparently informed our waiter that it was Anne's 48th birthday, so her dessert was served with a lighted candle in commemoration.

We then made our way to the departure gate for the American Airlines Ecuador flight, where we linked up with the remaining three members of our “dirty dozen,” David, Patricia and Ana. From this point onward, our itinerary was in the skilled hands of Linblad Expeditions, the tour operator responsible for virtually all aspects of our travel to and stay in the Galápagos, as well as on the Ecuadorian mainland.

It wasn't long before we boarded the plane, anticipating an imminent takeoff. After several announcements from the captain about “mechanical problems,” however, we were informed that the needed repair couldn't be completed quickly, so this big bird wouldn't be flying this evening. Fortunately the airline had another aircraft available. The only hassle was that the replacement plane was sitting at a jetway in an entirely different wing of the airport, necessitating the addition of a train ride to the assortment of transportation modes we were already slated to use over the course of the week's travels.

Though the plane change delayed our departure by about two hours, the actual flight to Guayaquil, Ecuador's capital city, was of normal duration of about 4-1/2 hours. Our passage through Ecuadorian immigration processing, on the other hand, seemed for no apparent reason to take forever. Once we had finally satisfied the authorities that we weren't part of a drug smuggling ring (I'm over-dramatizing, of course), they allowed us to board a charter bus for our final transfer of the evening to the Hilton Colon Hotel. Though the Hilton had hot towels and assorted local fruit juices to greet us, the five star hotel's other amenities were unfortunately wasted on the four of us, as the lateness of the hour demanded a hasty attempt to grab a few hours of sleep in preparation for an early morning wake-up call.

Saturday, August 5

M It seems to be my destiny that when fewer than the normal number of sleeping hours are available, I react by taking extra long to fall asleep and also wake up prematurely, and this morning was no exception. I was already in the shower when the ringing phone in our room stirred the rest of the family into motion. After a quick breakfast, we were back on the bus for the return trip to the Guayaquil airport. This time, however, we boarded a 727 jet with a TAME logo, a Spanish acronym for the airline that is technically an arm of the Ecuadorian military.

About an hour-and-a half later, we landed on the island of Baltra in the Galápagos. Also known as South Seymour (virtually every island in the archipelago has at least two names, one English and one Spanish), this island's landing strip had served as a base for the United States Air Force in the defense of the Panama Canal during World War II. The tiny terminal was open air, and here our inspection was much more laid back, primarily concerned with ensuring that we weren't carrying anything potentially detrimental to the national park's delicate ecosystems.

Outside the terminal, another bus carried us the short distance to the dock. Several pelicans sat within arm's reach on the pilings and a number of sea lions lounged under the ramp or on nearby rocks, all indifferent to our proximity. Looking out into the bay, we caught our first glimpse of the Polaris, the 80-passenger ship that was to serve as both our hotel and our principal transportation for the next week. To reach the ship, we were ferried from the dock on Zodiac dinghies, essentially motorized rafts with inflatable sides, each of which could hold about 15 people. The locals call these boats “pangas,” and we readily adopted this name as well for these nimble craft that transported us between the ship and land all week.

Upon reaching the Polaris, we were greeted by a number of the ship's staff and then spent an hour or so in an orientation session, led by Cindy Manning, Linblad's expedition leader, an American currently residing in Quito, and Willy, the hotel manager, a German national thoroughly fluent in English and Spanish.

All of our cabins were on the ship's main deck, the second level of four enclosed ones, counting from the bottom up. The rooms were compact, but very nicely equipped and well illuminated. Each had a pair of slightly undersized twin beds, separated by a narrow isle, with a nightstand between them on the outside wall. Above the nightstand was our "audio control," which allowed us to either receive wake-up announcements for optional pre-breakfast excursions, or to block these notices and sleep in. (We never took the second option, as all the early morning outings sounded to good to miss.) A large storage drawer was located under each bed. There were two small closets and a writing desk and chair. In one corner was our bathroom, with a sink, toilet, and shower sharing the snug compartment. We even had a normal window, whereas cabins on the lowest deck had only a porthole. All in all, these were pretty comfortable quarters within a vessel where space is obviously at a premium,

Once we had eaten lunch and unpacked a bit, we explored the rest of the ship. I can't remember just what we found when, but we eventually learned where most of the important places on board were located. The lowest level had the economy rooms, as well as a sauna, which I noticed once day when I glanced down a flight of stairs that I never actually descended. The second level, where our cabins were, also housed a gift shop and the reception area; where we transferred to and from the Zodiacs for all of our excursions. The third level contained the luxury cabins (or at least the higher-priced cabins, as I never saw their insides to personally attest to their luxuriousness), as well as the dining room and outside gym deck with several pieces of exercise equipment. The fourth level included the lounge, library and outside "teak deck" where the sun-worshippers caught their rays and read, as well as the bridge and (I believe) the crew's living quarters; the four main lifeboats were also stored on the perimeter of this level. There was also an open observation area above the bridge. Obviously, there were many more facilities situated strategically throughout the ship, such as the kitchen and engine room, but I never spent the time to figure out exactly where any of these were to be found.

All passengers and crew were then required to participate in an elaborate "abandon ship" drill, and I believe that we were considerably more intent than when we listen to the usual flight attendants' safety information talks, as this was definitely new material for most of us, even though we were quite confident that we wouldn't be exposed to the "real thing."

Finally, the time had come for our first venture into the natural realm of the Galápagos, the reason that we had undergone all this preparatory travel. Our destination for this initial encounter was Cerra Dragon on the north shore of the island of Santa Cruz.

E Cecibel, one of the Linblad naturalists, was our guide for the Zodiac tour, and Giovanni was the driver. We managed to organize the family enough to get all twelve of us on one panga. Not realizing what we were in store for over the course of the week, a bunch of us used up a half a role of film on the first blue-footed booby we encountered. (I hadn't taken any pictures yet at this point because Lauren and Dad were shooting the same things and I figured there was no reason to have all three of us photographing them.) In addition to the things we were expected to encounter, Giovanni discovered sharks, which we soon realized was a special treat based on how excited Cecibel and Giovanni were. There were both black-tipped and white-tipped reef sharks and Cecibel took a picture of one, which was later displayed in the daily report for this date on the Linblad website.

Part of the time the sharks were there, we were distracted by a couple of marine iguanas that were reasonably close to the Zodiac. Cecibel told us to ignore them and instead pay attention to the sharks because we'd see many more marine iguanas during the next few days, but sharks were less likely. I don't know about anyone else, but I wasn't completely convinced that we'd really be so close to marine iguanas again, but I was obviously proved to be extremely wrong. We did see a number of sharks later in the week though too.

- M In addition to the marine iguanas Emily has noted, we also spotted a two or three land iguanas from a distance beyond the range of our point-and-shoot cameras. This was, in fact, to be our only sighting of the land variety of these lizards, as they tend to congregate further inland and closer to the rims of the islands' volcanoes, destinations beyond those that were part of our itinerary. Also on the list of creatures observed during this panga ride were Sally lightfoot crabs, blue-footed boobies, magnificent frigatebirds (that's the actual common name for the subspecies, not simply a value judgement), Galápagos mockingbirds, yellow warblers, pelicans, cattle egrets, yellow-crowned night herons, and golden rays. With the exception of the rays, however, the remote glimpses of these animals from the panga would soon be supplemented with encounters close enough that only the National Park rules would stand in the way of our reaching out and petting them!

At pre-dinner cocktails that evening, we got to meet many of the other Linblad staff who would be instrumental in shepherding us comfortably and safely through the week's journey, as well as educating and entertaining us en route. Among these, were our five Ecuadorian naturalists, Cecibel Guerrero (whom we of course had informally met earlier during our orientation panga ride), Paula Tagle, Luis "Lucho" Verdesoto, Daniel Sanchez and Antonio Gallardo, who would be our guides on each of our outings, and Linda Burbach, from Tuscon, AZ, coordinator of on-board family activities. We were also introduced to our ship's captain, Fernando Peñaherrera, a retired rear admiral from Ecuador's navy, and several members of his crew.

Later that evening, once we were snugly tucked in our beds, the Polaris sailed from Santa Cruz to our intended destination for tomorrow's expedition, Punta Suarez on the southernmost island of Española.

Sunday, August 6

- E We weren't as organized this morning as the previous day, so Grandma ended up being the only member of the family in my group. Lucho was our guide and among the first things we encountered as we started to walk up the rocky trail were a mother sea lion and her new-born baby pup – with the placenta still attached. The mother was understandably very wary of the "big scary mammals" walking a little bit too close to her young offspring, and demonstrated her concern by barking at us and chasing one of the members of our group until Lucho managed to distract her, at which point she attempted unsuccessfully to eat his shoe.
- M One particularly curious sea lion pup, mother's whereabouts unknown, spent several minutes conducting an intensive survey of my sneaker. He (or she) was actually too close to me for my camera to be able to focus. By the time I finally handed the camera to Anne to record the event, the pup had unfortunately lost interest.
- E After this pair of encounters between sea lions and human footwear, we continued inland until we met hundreds of one of the island's most popular, although not endemic, species – the blue-footed boobies. ("Endemic" refers to species that are unique to a particular geographic location, and not found anywhere else on earth.) We learned how to distinguish the male from the female in three ways: The males whistle while the females honk, the males are typically smaller, and the females have larger pupils. They also performed their famous dance for us (ok, so they were showing off for potential mates, not the funny tourists staring at them while wearing binoculars and cameras around their necks), proudly displaying their bright blue feet and then raising up their beaks and opening their wings in the ritual known (not to the boobies, just to the humans) as "sky-pointing."

As we continued on, we arrived at Española's famous "blowhole," a natural rock formation that causes the surf to intermittently drive a plume of seawater as much as 90 feet into the air, where we also saw masked boobies for the first time. We sat and watched the water spray powerfully out of the ground while the many birds flying around it and the beautiful ocean provided a gorgeous background for the magnificent scene.

- M Masked boobies, like their blue-footed cousins, can be found other places in the world, but biologists have recently concluded that those in the Galápagos have evolved into a new species known as Nasca boobies. Whether you call them Nasca or masked, these white and black seabirds exhibit a unique and disturbing trait. The mother typically lays two eggs within about a 5-day period, and these eggs hatch with a similar timing differential. Then several days after the second chick is born, its older and more fully developed sibling pushes the younger one out from under their mother's protective cover, to perish either from exposure to the hot sun or as an easy victim for predators. Neither parent does anything to discourage the siblicide. Scientists have concluded that masked booby mothers can only nurture one chick without jeopardizing their own health; the second egg is laid as an "insurance policy," in case the first one fails to hatch.

Punta Suarez revealed yet another of Española's unique treasures, the waved albatross. This huge bird, with a wingspan of up to 10 feet, spends several years at sea without ever touching the ground, but it nests exclusively on this one island. As elegant as they are in flight, their great weight makes it difficult for them to get aloft, so they take off at the edge of their nesting ground by jumping off the cliff into the wind. Likewise, their landings frequently result in uncontrolled headplants. . The albatrosses engage in an elaborate courting ritual, after which they mate for life. We were fortunate to observe all of these interesting activities (except for the longevity of their marriage, which we'll have to take on faith.)

- E Lucho told us about a previous trip when an albatross had startled him by landing on his chest as he turned around (man, wish I could've seen that ☺) and we also saw a lava lizard with two tails (good for two substitutions on Linda's scavenger hunt if I remember correctly). During the walk back to the Zodiacs we got our first taste of the garua (an interesting form of mist in the Galápagos' "dry" season that covers everything with tiny water droplets), and by the time we got back I was soaked.
- M Once we were back on board the Polaris, the ship sailed to nearby Gardner Bay, also on Española, for our first snorkeling opportunity. As we began to organize our equipment for dunking our bodies into the surf, I discovered, much to my chagrin, that, as a result of a planning miscommunication back at home, we hadn't brought a wetsuit for me to swim in.

For this first snorkeling activity, most of us entered the water from the beach to get comfortable with our gear, not expecting to see much of anything. The water temperature was a bone chilling 68°F, and my teeth were literally chattering for the 45 or so minutes that we swam. This was also the very first time that either Emily or Lauren had ever snorkeled, but each of them caught on very quickly, as we began to work our way into deeper water almost immediately.

Once we got out beyond a line of rocks below the water's surface, I was distracted from my discomfort as I spotted a variety of colorful fish. I did my best to remember distinguishing features of each, so I could look them up and identify their species once I was back on the ship. Doing so almost immediately upon climbing off the panga , I was able to confirm sightings of sergeant majors, yellow-tailed surgeon fish, at least two varieties of damsel fish, a few king angelfish, a large parrotfish, and hoards of unidentifiable small schooling fish, as well as lots of sea urchins, sea cucumbers and sand dollars. The range of different fish I observed was, in fact, so broad, that I'm not sure if I added any new ones on subsequent snorkel outings, on which I chose to focus instead on other marine life forms.

Each evening on board the Polaris, just before dinner, we would gather in the ship's lounge for cocktails and "recap," the latter being a combination of a debriefing about that day's activities and an introduction about those planned for the following day. During this particular evening's session, we set sail for the 4-hour trip to our next destination, the island of Floreana, although our printed schedule had indicated that the voyage, as those of other days, was not supposed to start until bedtime.

We never learned for certain why the departure time was changed, but the result was a dining room that swayed mercilessly back and forth throughout the dinner hour. Over the course of our meal, passengers continued to abandon their places in the dining room with very distressed looks on their faces. By the time dessert was served, fewer than one quarter of the group remained. In our family, only Anne, Hal, David and I remained at our table, and I was surprised to discover my apparent relatively low susceptibility to sea sickness.

The dining fiasco had a particularly unfortunate impact on our family, as this was the actual date of Hal and Sue's wedding anniversary. The kitchen staff had secretly planned to commemorate this important milestone during the dessert course. Unfortunately, Sue was one of the earliest motion sickness casualties to seek refuge in her cabin, so there was to be no celebration this particular night.

Monday, August 7

- M The colorful human history of Floreana Island includes Post Office Bay, the site of an optional pre-breakfast jaunt ashore. In 1794, a whaling captain named James Colnett set up a "post office barrel" here. Whalers, who would be at sea for years, would leave letters in the barrel and ships heading back to England would pick up the letters and deliver them to port. The tradition has continued to the present day, and visitors to the island may volunteer to deliver, preferably in person, any mail whose intended destination around the globe will be accessible to them at some point in the future.
- E I had to get up way too early in the morning, (granted I did sort of choose to) but I had fun so I guess it was worth it. The only letter I sent was one to my best friend Adena that Ana and Wahida, a 14-year-old girl from Pennsylvania traveling with her grandmother, had decorated. I was hoping there would be a letter or two for our area that I could deliver, but the closest one was for somewhere in NYC. I considered taking that one, but the address was nowhere near the part of the city where I go, and I'm too much of a wimp (don't believe me, just ask Justin) to wander around New York alone.
- M Backtracking for a moment, it should be noted that on this particular morning, I would have been awakened early even if I had planned to sleep in and set the speaker in our cabin to the "do not disturb" position. Shortly after 6 a.m., the telephone in our room rang. (In describing our cabin earlier, I neglected to mention that we had a phone, since I never imagined we would use it for anything.) I had just jumped into the shower, so Anne picked up the handset. At the other end was the ship's radio operator, telling her that there was an overseas call for me, but with no indication of whom the caller was, but that I should report immediately to the radio room.

It also wasn't entirely clear from the message where on the ship the radio room was located, so I quickly dried off, grabbed my glasses and darted around the various decks until I eventually found the correct location. Because of the inherent difficulty of making calls to a ship at sea, and how early in the day it was, I had grown ever more apprehensive that I was about to be told of some terrible crisis back home. I was simultaneously both relieved and annoyed to learn that it was merely someone from my office, inquiring about a computer file he could not find. As it turned out, this unusual incident resulted in the only contact that any of us had with the outside world during our entire time aboard the *Polaris*.

After breakfast, we had an unscheduled outing to an islet off the shore of Floreana called Enderby, a potential site, we were told, for observing mating frigatebirds. Our timing must have been off, however, and our voyeurism was thwarted, as we spotted a number of frigate babies instead. While riding back to the ship through a particularly dense garua mist, I caught a glimpse of a sea turtle breaking the water's surface about 30 feet off the bow of the panga.

The official agenda now had us snorkeling again, this time in deep water off Champion islet. From the previous day's experience, I was admittedly not entirely enthusiastic about the idea, for I now had a clear sense of the level of discomfort I would undoubtedly feel as I bobbed around in the frigid surf. Once I had been swimming for awhile, however, a truly awesome encounter with some

frolisome adolescent pinnipeds kept me motivated enough to stay in the water far longer than I had intended, despite my exaggerated apprehension of imminent hypothermia.

E Awesome is an understatement! We were actually playing impromptu aquatic games with a bunch of sea lions, some of which swam within inches of our dive masks! The beach master (a huge male who carefully watches over a large harem of females and their pups) was there, and for a little while he didn't seem to be too happy about our presence, but he soon became accustomed to us and we managed to have a wonderful time!

M Our lunch this day was a special one, consisting of a sumptuous buffet of traditional Ecuadorian cuisine. The five cooks responsible for the feast greeted us in the dining room decked out in formal white chefs' uniforms, while the waiters all sported Panama hats. We learned that these hats had originated in and continue to be exclusively produced in Ecuador rather than Panama, but achieved the misnomer when Franklin D. Roosevelt was photographed in one at the dedication of the Panama Canal. The buffet table's centerpiece was a whole roasted pig wearing sunglasses, which was perhaps an Ecuadorian tradition that is still evolving.

With all the terrific food, we needed a longer than usual siesta before venturing out for our afternoon excursion, but we eventually were shuttled to the beach at Punta Cormorant, where the sand has an unusual green tint from the mineral olivine of which it is in large part composed. Despite the location's name, curiously, none of the Galápagos' cormorants live here.

E At least, we were supposed to see a green beach, but apparently the sun wasn't behaving so it just looked tan. With the way Linblad manages to get all the Galápagos animals in the right place at the right time (with the exception of the tree finches which often appeared on the ground and the ground finches who could often be found in trees) I'm surprised they didn't manage to control the sun too.

M We next hiked about a quarter mile over a low ridge, along which we saw a number of interesting endemic plants. At the trail's opposite end, we found a second beach, but this one's sand was white. Paula, our guide for this hike, explained that this sand is manufactured by parrotfish, who feed on the nearby coral and expel the remains as grains of sand after it passes through their digestive systems. From the trailhead, we could see ghost crabs in the distance, but they quickly disappeared into their nests as we approached, exemplifying why they are so named. A number of more sociable hermit crabs did hang around to keep us company.

Then we retraced our steps and set off on a different trail to a lagoon where flamingos sometimes gather. There are only about 500 of these stately birds in the archipelago, and they periodically move from island to island, so you never know whether or not you will actually see them on any given day. En route to the lagoon, we spotted a lava heron whose crown feathers stood upward in a convincing impression of a punk hairdo. Once the flamingos came into view in the distance, I edged forward for a better photo vantage-point, stepping into some pinkish mud from which it was difficult to extricate myself. We also saw pintails and wimbrels sharing the pond with the flamingos.

E Once again, I ended up in a different group from my parents, and so was seeing the sights in a different order, with Lucho as our guide. We were the first to see the gorgeous flamingos, and we learned that they stand on one leg in order to avoid losing heat through the other. Then we walked to a beach on the other side of the island, which had some of the softest sand I had ever felt. We all removed our footwear for our stroll along the beach and Lucho explained how all the tiny balls of sand below our feet were created by ghost crabs.

M Dinner this evening was served while the ship remained at anchor, to the relief of many on board, and it wasn't until later during the showing of a video titled "Galápagos – Land of Dragons" in the lounge that we embarked on our longest trek thus far, nearly 120 nautical miles, crossing the equator during the night into the northern hemisphere and around the northern tip of Isabela to continue our exploration the following morning.

Tuesday, August 8

- E We were awakened shortly after dawn (again much too early for my liking), to find the Polaris circling the islet of Roca Rodunda, not much more than a jagged round rock sticking out of the water, but that was to be expected, since Roca Rodunda means “round rock” in Spanish. There were a lot of seabirds nesting among the cliff’s nooks and crannies, but the really great part of the morning started during breakfast when an announcement was made by Cindy over the public address system that Common dolphins had been spotted. We all ran to our cabins to retrieve our binoculars and cameras and then scurried up to the bow of the ship to get a good view. The dolphins created a magnificent picture as 20 of them leapt in beautiful unison or a solitary one breached high out of the water. There were lots of cow-calf pairs, and the naturalists estimated that there were between 200 and 300 dolphins total. Watching them was spectacular, and even though the ship turned around so we could have a second viewing of them, I was still disappointed when they were finally out of sight.
- M (Each day, one of the naturalists shot a photo of some special aspect of our trip that was posted on the Linblad web site that evening, to be enjoyed around the world by anyone who might be monitoring our travels. Examining the archival files on Linblad’s web site several weeks after returning home, we discovered that the photo of this day was shot from the ship’s bridge, looking out over about a dozen passengers on the bow who were enjoying the dolphins’ performance, and we recognized at least three members of our family among this group.)

- E Leaving Roca Rodunda, we headed south and again crossed the equator, the only time during our trip that we did so while the majority of people on board were awake and alert. Just as we approached the dividing line between the two hemispheres (yes, some of us swear that we actually saw a line extending across the surface of the water!), we were lucky enough to be visited by King Neptune and his gang of friendly followers (who looked strikingly similar to Daniel, Antonio, Paula, and Cecibel, all of whom were conspicuously missing from the ceremony. Coincidence? I think not).

After drinking “iguana blood” (which curiously had the same refreshing taste as a virgin strawberry daiquiri if I remember correctly) and kissing either a fish or King Neptune’s flippers (or in the case of lucky souls like me, just a stuffed iguana), the great monarch of the sea baptized us as different varieties of marine animals. I was christened a Giant Damsel Fish, which was perfectly fine with me, for although they are territorial, they were among the most gorgeous fish I saw while snorkeling.

- M Contemplating this outlandish ceremony, I wondered what the implications of baptisms and christenings might be on those among us of Hebrew persuasion, but I quickly put this philosophical dilemma behind me as we continued to sail along the shore of Isabela, dropping anchor at Punta Vicente Roca, on the snout of Isabela’s seahorse profile. Here we set out on panga to watch an amazing feeding frenzy of blue-footed boobies, as they dove en masse like rockets into the surf in pursuit of their prey.

During this outing, we sailed into a cave along the coast, carved into the lava rock by the constant beating of the surf, and several members of our group tested the echo-generating potential by shouting at the top of their lungs. Daniel showed us how a liquid produced by a particular snail could be used as a purple dye, with one of the grandmothers on our panga volunteering to have part of her hair re-colored for demonstration purposes. Finally, we spotted a number of reputedly rare Mola molas, also known as sunfish, whose shape makes them appear to have only a head and dorsal fin, and seeming to be missing the rear half of their bodies.

Though Isabela is by far the largest of the Galápagos islands, it apparently has a relative dearth of good places near its edge to explore on foot, so we never actually landed on this island. Instead, we continued to Punta Espinosa on the northern tip of Fernandina, the westernmost and newest island in the archipelago. The entire island is an active volcano, having most recently erupted in 1995.

- E After lunch, we were offered our third snorkeling opportunity, but during recap the previous night, Cindy had portrayed the area as freezing with low visibility and little chance of seeing much. Based on her description, I doubted that I'd enjoy going, so I decided to stay on board the boat and relax. Big Mistake! Apparently the day was out of the ordinary in that not only was the water among the warmest encountered on the trip, but was also clear enough that the sea turtles and many other creatures in the area were easily seen. Of course — the one day I didn't go was awesome. That was the first and last adventure of the trip that I decided not to experience.
- M Among our family, only David, Nanci and Lauren chose to ignore Cindy's less-than-enthusiastic characterization of this snorkeling outing. Besides the sightings Emily has just described, Lauren even managed to get underwater photos of sea turtles, marine iguanas and reef sharks. Not only were the hearty trio rewarded with sightings of wildlife that the rest of us missed, they also seemed to be deriving insatiable joy in gloating about what the "weenies" had missed by staying behind, (that is until we threatened them all with unspecified dire consequences if they could not contain themselves!)

I should point out that until this afternoon, I had been fairly diligent in maintaining a record of each day's activities by jotting them down in a small notebook shortly after they happened. This marks the point in our trip when my initiative slipped away, so I have only my memory and those of the rest of our family to rely on from here on in. The remainder of this narrative may therefore be less accurate than earlier portions, both in the sequence of events and the venues where we allege that they occurred, so I hope Galápagos experts will forgive us for unintentional distortions about what is to be found where.

Shortly after the snorkelers returned to the ship, we all went to Punta Espinosa. During the panga ride, we saw the Galápagos' two endemic flightless seabirds. The first, the flightless cormorant, is the only cormorant in the world to have lost its ability to fly, its wings having over time atrophied to stubby appendages useful only for balance while waddling around on the rocks, apparently the result of having no natural predators from which to flee. The other is the Galápagos penguin, furthest among all penguins from Antarctica and able to thrive near the equator because of the Humboldt current that flows from the southeast, cooling the waters well below the temperature one might expect in this tropical setting.

Once we had landed at Punta Espinosa, our route took us across fields of ropy pahoehoe lava, on which we found marine iguanas congregating in groups of several hundred each, many lying on top of one another as if in the aftermath of a college fraternity drinking binge. A bit later, we even saw a lava lizard hitching a ride on the head of a marine iguana, who seemed oblivious to his passenger. Along our walk, we periodically met up with small groups of sea lions, found skeletons of both sea lions and iguanas, and Nanci even found a snake along the edge of the path. As usual, this list of sightings fortuitously coincided quite nicely with the items Linda had included for this day's scavenger hunt.

For dinner this evening, Sue and Hal were invited to dine at the captain's table. As desert was being served, a cake with lighted candles suddenly appeared, and the 50th anniversary celebration that had to be scrubbed two nights prior finally came to fruition.

Our intended destination for Wednesday morning was the southern end of Santa Cruz, and after examining a map I incorrectly concluded that we would continue our circumnavigation of Isabela to get there. Instead, we headed north, retracing our route of the previous night, with two more equator crossings while we slept. I later learned that the effective distance either way was about equal, and that strong currents from the open ocean on the west made the route I had assumed we would take a less desirable option.

Wednesday, August 9

- M After four days onboard ship, island-hopping in the middle of nowhere, stepping out of our panga into the bustling “metropolis” of Puerto Ayora, home to the approximately 8,000 human residents of Santa Cruz, seemed somehow incongruous. Perhaps this bout of culture shock can be attributed to my previous experience on the high seas having been limited to ferry crossings of the waterways in Washington State and 3-hour Circle Line tours around the island of Manhattan.

From the Galápagos National Park Service dock, we walked the short distance to the Charles Darwin Research Station, where endangered giant tortoises are bred in captivity until they are large enough to survive on their own on their respective islands of origin. Among the station’s notable inhabitants is a Pinta Island tortoise named Lonesome George, who, at age 70 or so, is the last living member of his subspecies. Three female tortoises of a similar subspecies have been sharing living quarters with George, but so far he seems interested only in a platonic relationship.

The original giant tortoise population of the Galápagos was enormous, but was sadly decimated by whalers who, until about the late 19th century, captured them in huge quantities and brought them aboard their ships for meat after discovering that they could store these creatures alive for months without food or water. A few subspecies are now totally extinct as a result. When Darwin visited the archipelago, one of the locals bragged that he could identify the island a particular tortoise came from simply by the shape of its carapace (shell). Darwin was intrigued that such differences could exist between otherwise similar animals living so close to one another. Comparing the tortoises, lizards and birds of each of the four islands he visited with their respectively-variant ecosystems filled in an important part of the puzzle that eventually led Darwin to his notion of natural selection.

The most engaging stop in the Darwin Station was at a feeding platform of about half-a-dozen giant tortoises. Other than being instructed not to feed or touch the animals or walk on their “table,” nothing stood between us and them, so we lingered for some time before leaving, watching the tortoises munch on large, leafy green plants and taking lots of pictures. One tortoise seemed to be competing with Patricia, David and Ana to see who could stretch their necks the highest, a great photo op — except for Ana’s persistent refusal to pose wearing shorts instead of a skirt. Then we walked down Puerto Ayora’s main shopping street, purchasing assorted souvenirs along the way, to catch a bus in the center of town that would take us to our lunch stop in the highlands.

On the bus, those of us wanted to get some exercise were given the option to walk the final mile up the rustic access road. Only Linda and our immediate family elected to hike. The walk was pleasant and not particularly taxing, and we soon arrived at the small Altair restaurant, which had been reserved for a private lunch for the Linblad group. Joining us also in the open-air dining area were Jacqueline and Gil De Roy, the mother and brother respectively of Tui De Roy, author of *Galápagos – Islands Lost in Time* and *Galápagos – Islands Born of Fire*, two of the best photo-essays ever published on the wonders of this enchanted corner of the world. The De Roys design and hand-fabricate custom silver jewelry, which they offered for sale to any of our party who was interested. Many of the kids and even a few of the adults played volleyball in the adjacent court, with Emily suffering a sprained finger during the competition. When the ship’s doctor could not be found to treat the injury, Nanci fabricated a splint from a pair of Popsicle sticks.

- E After lunch, our family were among the few who opted for the “do it all” group (the description that Cindy had given to those who wanted to participate in every outing available), and managed to land a private tour with Daniel, our own naturalist/photographer for the afternoon. First we went up into the highlands where we visited two astronomically huge sinkholes that were created by the collapse of volcanic parasitic cones.

Then we began bird-watching, hoping to find a vermilion fly catcher, as Daniel had informed us that anyone who saw one was guaranteed good luck for a week (I think) and anyone who actually

managed to photograph one would be sure to have outstanding luck forever. Searching for nearly a minute, we spotted one several feet above the highest treetops, preparing to dive. After excitedly witnessing its rapid descent, we all quickly snapped a photo within the second or two we figured the bird would be in close enough range for good pictures. To our surprise, the bird still seemed perfectly content to stay right by us, and as we all marveled at our good fortune, the stunning red creature flew off to greet the next group of tourists, only to be replaced by another one a minute or two later. By the time we left, each of us had covered several feet of film with flycatcher images and had amassed enough good luck to last through many lifetimes.

Next, we boarded our personal bus, which brought us to a farm that was located in the middle of giant tortoise migratory routes. There we found a number of the large creatures and even enlisted the help of Daniel in getting a few family photos with them. Once we were done in the fields, we went to a small pavilion to relax and have coffee or tea if we wished to. Displayed on a platform near where we were sitting was an empty tortoise shell and Daniel came up with the marvelous suggestion that I get inside of it. I told him I had no clue how I'd manage that, but he solved that problem by lifting me up and sliding me in feet first. (It was good for a scavenger hunt substitution) A few people took pictures, and after Daniel helped me out, Keisha took a turn inside the shell too.

Finally, we returned to Puerto Ayora for another chance at our shopping spree. I don't remember exactly what I bought before lunch and what I purchased afterwards, but throughout the course of that day I bought a cute little blue footed booby and a wooden tortoise for Adena and a wooden sea lion and an Ecuadorian doll for me. I also got a purse as my birthday gift from Aunt Nanci, Justin, and Keisha, and I looked around in shops at lots of other things that I wanted to buy.

- M Joining us at cocktails on the *Polaris* that evening was Roz Cameron, public relations director of the Darwin Research Station, who spoke in greater detail about the station's mission and accomplishments. Then after dinner, we were treated to a music and dance performance by a local group who called themselves "Galápagos Identidad," using traditional Andean instruments and styles, but containing lots of references in the lyrics and movements to Galápagos places and features. Both guests and crew took to the dance floor, and Willy, the German hotel manager, was the unexpected standout in swaying to the Latin rhythms.

Thursday, August 10

- M During the night, the *Polaris* sailed north, crossing the equator yet another time, heading for Genovesa. We anchored at Darwin Bay, a submerged caldera, which required the crew to carefully align the ship with two navigational towers on the island and be sure that we were properly centered on the narrow channel where it is deep enough to accommodate the ship's draft. Coincidentally, this island's English name is Tower, but that is in honor of a British admiral rather than any of the island's natural or manmade features.

On shore, we were able to get closer than previously to nesting great frigatebirds. We also spotted a number of other shorebirds at close range, including swallowtail gulls and yellow-crowned night herons,

Having previously seen two of the three main booby varieties on other islands, our chance had now come to pay a visit to the third, the red-footed booby. Distinct from the other two types, which lay their eggs on the ground without ever constructing a real nest, the red-foots build substantial nests in trees. As far as we know, they are the only web-footed birds with prehensile feet, useful of course for grasping the branches on which they perch.

By now you may be wondering how boobies acquired their funny-sounding name. Unlike most birds, the eyes of boobies are both oriented forwards, giving them the binocular vision that is important in their hunting. The relationship of boobies' eyes to their beaks also imparts a somewhat

comical appearance. In Spanish, the word for clown is “bobo,” the anglicizing of which into booby seems most appropriate once you’ve seen them.

After the walk, those who wished to had a chance to snorkel. I joined in, not wanting to miss anything, but the only thing I remember was that the water was finally a tolerable temperature.

In this afternoon, we set out on the pangas again for Prince Phillip’s Steps, near the mouth of the bay. Along the way, on the ledges of the nearby cliffs, we saw red-billed tropicbirds with paired long tail feathers reminiscent of the tail of a kite. We then landed and climbed the steep stone risers, a natural staircase named in honor of the Duke of Edinburgh who visited here in 1965, with railings added by the National Park Service to make them more easily climbable. The steps led to a relatively flat plateau, where we saw more masked boobies, some with chicks that couldn’t have been more than a few days old.

Hiking for awhile, we came upon a feeding area of short-eared owls, which we had to be content to observe with binoculars, as they were perched some distance from the pathway to which we were restricted. Unlike most owls, those on Genovesa hunt during the day, since there are no hawks on this island, sparing the owls any competition as they hunt their prey.

The scheduled activity for that evening was an astronomy lecture on one of the Polaris’ exterior decks, to study the constellations of the southern sky. The sky was overcast, however, but the Linblad folks fortunately had a backup plan. The ship’s pastry chef, a very competent singer, entertained us, performing Spanish melodies in the lounge. Accompanying him on guitar was the ship’s first officer, who also happened to be Cecibel’s husband, and Daniel playing maracas.

Having by now crossed the equator multiple times, no one on board seemed to pay much attention to the fact that we were about to traverse it once more during the night, as we sailed for the tiny island of Bartolomé, off the eastern shore of Santiago.

Friday, August 11

- M The morning began with a landing on Bartolomé, where we ascended to its 359 foot summit by climbing 372 steps constructed by the park service to minimize erosion of the fragile volcanic tuff by scrambling tourists. (Keisha kept a careful count as we climbed, and claims that the official statistic is off by two steps.)

From the top, although the sky was a little overcast, we were able to enjoy the most photographed vista in the Galápagos, including the water-filled circle of a now-submerged caldera and the imposing monolith of Pinnacle Rock. On our descent, I spotted an especially colorful lava cactus specimen, one of the only plants that can grow in the uninviting volcanic rock, and examined more closely a lava tube that had been pointed out to us by Antonio during our climb to the top.

- E After breakfast, we landed on the beach and took a short walk over a sand dune to another beach on the far side from where the Polaris was anchored. For this excursion we were warned that there was a good chance we wouldn’t see anything interesting, but based on my experience with the snorkeling that I opted to skip, I decided I was going to go anyway, and I’m glad I did. On the way over to the beach we saw a snake, the only one I saw during the whole course of the week. Soon after we made it all the way across the dune we noticed a shark, and then a minute or two later we saw another one. Ultimately we realized there were “Seven Sharks and a Ray” there (and we thought that would make a really good title for a documentary or something) and at least some of them were swimming within a foot or two of where we were wading in the water. We also saw the usual marine iguanas, lava lizards, Sally lightfoot crabs, and sea lions, along with several American oystercatchers and a number of brown pelicans in the trees.
- M We then returned to the first beach to snorkel. With Emily, Anne and me buddying as a threesome, we actually got to see sharks for the first time while swimming, hovering at the surface while they

were hanging out 12 feet down or so among some rocks. Not to be outdone, during this same snorkeling outing, Lauren and Nanci had both a ray and a penguin as swimming companions.

Just in case it wasn't hard enough to keep track of what we saw on the particular island we visited any of the previous days, the challenge was increased even further today, as we left Bartolomé and sailed on to Santiago, landing at Puerto Egas after lunch. Now uninhabited, Santiago was, during the 1960s, the site of a salt factory, whose operation was only made possible because of monetary subsidies by the government, attributed to a friendship between the president of Ecuador and Señor Egas, for whom the site is named. When a new president subsequently took office, the subsidies ended, and so did the Galápagos salt factory.

Near the beach was another man-made feature, equally as strange to me in this setting of exotic plants and animals — an unpretentious but nevertheless functional soccer field. Some of the passengers, especially those whose normal activity back home includes nearly daily exposure to this passion-filled sport, immediately ran off to either play or watch games involving both guests and staff, while a second group, including Lauren, relaxed on the beach before joining the growing assembly of bystanders.

Anne, Emily and I missed most of the soccer play altogether, as we were more intrigued by our final snorkeling opportunity, especially since we were rewarded by finding, with David's eagle-eyed assistance, an octopus swimming near the sea floor and camouflaging itself by actually changing colors as we watched it.

When we finally decided to literally throw in the towel and join the others at the soccer field, a match was just wrapping up between the "pro" teams, made up of Polaris crew members, except that Justin and another teenage passenger were also allowed to play in this round because of the expertise each had exhibited in the earlier amateur bouts. Justin, it was reported, had scored two goals shortly before we arrived.

The soccer games continued, but we left for a short hike that took us to a place where the lava bed that has been cut by the erosive force of the ocean's waves, forming a series of natural footbridges across the flowing seawater. On the ledges of the grottos' side-walls, we found Galápagos Fur Seals relaxing and taking an occasional dip. Smaller, darker, and much rarer than the California sea lions that we had been running into all week, these creatures are actually sea lions rather than true seals, as they have both external ears and the limb structure of the former genus. The other notable feature of these grottos is "Darwin's toilet," a unique rock formation that alternately fills with seawater and then abruptly "flushes" as the waves roll in and out.

Shortly after our return to the ship, we had our final recap session, highlighted with a presentation by Cindy and the other naturalists to Linda, who also was about to leave the Polaris, as this week marked the end of family trips for this season, with the ship about to return to its normal passenger base of 60-somethings. Then, to commemorate our final evening in the Galápagos, the usual elegant dinner was capped off with a particularly special dessert, baked Alaska, displayed in all its flaming glory in the center of the dining room.

Saturday, August 12

- M In the morning, as we charted a course back to our journey's starting point, we spent a short time circling the small island of Daphne Major. While the many crevices in its rocky surface provide attractive perches for seabirds, its steep slopes and absence of convenient spots to disembark from even a small boat would seem to render this body of land most inhospitable to humans.

As it turns out, this is precisely why two unusual members of our species, namely Peter and Rosemary Grant, have spent much of their time over the past 20 years on this island, whose relative inaccessibility has protected it from both deliberate and unintentional alteration from its natural state.

The Grants, husband and wife scientists from Princeton University, have banded, weighed and measured literally every single finch on this island and have carefully monitored what has happened to each bird and all of its progeny. Specifically, the changing availability of food from season to season, accelerated by the impact of El Niño events on the archipelago, affects the beak structure of the finches in subsequent generations. Through this effort, the Grants have been able to directly scrutinize the phenomenon of evolution, attributable to natural selection, from one generation of finches to the next, within time frames of less than a year. In effect, their research has turned Darwin's theories into easily-observable fact. The Grants' studies have been documented in a well-written book by Jonathan Weiner entitled "The Beak of the Finch."

Leaving Daphne Major behind us, we sailed back to Baltra for our flight to the Ecuadorian mainland. Our vacation continued, as we spent the next two days touring Quito, Ecuador's capital and Otavalo, a major market for the country's native Quechua indians. But our enchanted adventure had sadly come to an end, unanimously concluding as have countless other visitors before us, that there is no place on this earth as wondrous as the Galápagos.