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PATAGONIA TO THE GALAPAGOS

In a world where industrialization has touched nearly every corner of the earth, there still exists areas of the world where animals and plants live in harmony and man is the welcomed visitor rather than the frightened intruder. Welcome to Patagonia and the Galapagos!

Come with me as I hiked on uninhabited islands where you don't have to close your eyes to imagine with perfect clarity that this is what the world looked like, smelled like, and sounded like in the beginning, during the first days of creation. This is an in-your-face encounter with the natural world unlike anything anywhere else. Walk, wander, wade and even dive among many of the Earth's rarest creatures: Penguins and sea lions living right at the equator...marine iguanas, the only lizards in

the world feeding under the sea...blue-footed boobies doing sophisticated mating dances. Rather than fly, swim or run away , the animals of Patagonia and Galapagos accept visitors as just another of nature's creatures.

But first we have to get to Patagonia and Galapagos. Patagonia encompasses the tableland region of the southern tip of Argentina, extending from the Andes to the Atlantic ocean. Tonight's adventure takes us from Patagonia across South America to Santiago, Chile, then northward to Guayaquil, Ecuador, and to the Galapagos Islands located some six hundred miles out in the Pacific Ocean. So much for Geography 101. Trelew, Argentina, is about twelve hours flying time from Nashville by way of Miami and Buenos Aires. South America is

a world of beauty and mystery, teeming with vibrant cultures, unique wildlife and scenic beauty. I commenced my naturalist's view 700 miles south of Buenos Aires at the Punta Tombo nature reserve in March of 1992. With fifteen other border-lined insane fellow travelers, we headed to the Valdes Peninsula on the Atlantic. Here we viewed the largest rookery of Magellanic penguins in the world. More than a million penguins live on these shores, and their antics are as amusing as they are delightful. Penguins are unusual birds that live mostly in the Antarctic region. They look like little fat men in dress suits and breed as far north as New Zealand, Brazil and the Galapagos Islands west of Ecuador. The distinctive mating calls of these Patagonian birds have given them the colorful name of Jackass Penguins.

On land, penguins stand up straight on short legs, and walk with a clumsy waddle. Their backs are black, and their breasts are white.

The males and females look almost alike, with the female laying one white egg ordinarily. Penguins lost their ability to fly millions of years ago and their flipper-like wings look like arms from the distance.

Penguins are most at home in the water, but our intrusion did not disturb their nesting places--indeed they were so crowded that they barely left room for their nests. Some penguins keep the same mates for years and also the same nesting places. Nests are made of sticks, pebbles and grass, on the open ground or in crevices. The male assists in the incubation of the eggs and helps with caring for the young. These birds seem to love fun as much as human beings do. They will

take rides on moving ice floes just for the fun of it. They love to swim together and are noted thieves. They will steal pebbles from the nests of other penguins and slink along guiltily. We found that their antics are as amusing as they are delightful.

From the Penguin rookery, we ventured westward across Patagonia and the highlands of Argentina, the Andes mountain range to Santiago, Chile, on our way to Quito, Ecuador. Guayaquil, Ecuador, located on the west coast of South America, is the immediate staging area for departures for Galapagos, located some 600 miles west of Ecuador.

The flights to Galapagos are always overbooked but the last leg of our adventure was without hitch. Once you see the islands--magnificent in their rocky, barren, lava covered desolation and their

surprisingly well preserved and unspoiled ecosystem--it seemed fitting that a great effort should be required to get to them.

We arrived at Baltra airport which is little more than a runway and a wooden building. We were herded into a long, bluish-gray vehicle remindful of a Western State Hospital bus. This bus took us to the harbor for boarding a pangas, a dinghy type tender, suggestive of the river raft used at the Wild River Rampage at Opryland. This raft transported us to the **SANTA CRUZ**, a motorized ship designed for exploring the Galapagos Islands and its environments.

The Galapagos is a collection of thirteen islands and numerous islets that add up to a total land mass of about three thousand square miles. Just for comparison, this is about the size of the Hawaiian islands but with less than one per cent of the population. In 1959 the government

of Ecuador officially designated the Galapagos a national park. When we land, I'm immediately reminded of this when I'm directed into a short line to pay a \$40.00 entry fee.

On board the **SANTA CRUZ**, the first order of business is to explain the park rules. For the most part, they are standard behavior guidelines.

The park naturalist , explained that since this was a protected area, there would be no smoking, no feeding of animals, no touching of animals, and all trash would be carefully contained in a cotton sack with a small rope around your neck. All visitors must be accompanied by government trained guides. Our guide informed us that she was a biology major with a four year university degree. Since each island has its own endemic flora and fauna, shoe bottoms must be washed after leaving one island and before visiting the next. Of course this is to

prevent the accidental transfer of seeds or organisms from one island to the next. In ^{ek-o-systems} ecosystems this delicately balanced, one displaced seed can result in the introduction of a tree or plant that can disrupt an island's entire environmental equilibrium.

These barren, volcanic islands appear to be right out of a **star wars** set.

The enchantingly goofy-looking animals were surely drawn by Dr.

Seuss. As they waddle up and look me square in the eye, my first

thought was, **walt, eat your heart out**. These islands are the ultimate

Disney dream--an out-of-this-world extravaganza; wonderful but

definitely weird.

The islands are not pretty in any traditional, tropical-island kind of way,

and many of them--covered with little more than scrub, cactus and lava

rocks--are actually quite ugly. No one is likely to mistake this for the Caribbean or the South Pacific or anywhere else people go simply for physical beauty of the place. On an overcast day, the earth tones give the island a kind of sad, forlorn look. Even the water, is icy, by tropical standards because of the Humboldt Current, which sweeps up the Pacific coast of South America from Antarctic.

But the islands do have a haunting, rough-cut look, as if they have been left behind, stuck in some geological adolescence, while the rest of the world moved on to middle age.

Charles Darwin was a British naturalist whose theory of evolution through natural selection caused a revolution in biological science.

After graduation from Cambridge in December, 1831, he sailed as a

naturalist with a British expedition aboard the H.M.S **Beagle** on a five year exploratory voyage along the coast of South America and to the Galapagos. He searched for fossils, and studied plants, animals and geology. On our visit to Santa Cruz Island, we took a full day excursion to the Darwin Research Station at Academy Bay. It was here that the giant tortoise pens where the species that inspired Darwin is being preserved. Said to be the king of the island, the Galapagos turtles are the oldest reptiles in existence and are capable of reaching 200 years of age and weighing up to 600 pounds. Indeed the word, Galapagos means turtle in Spanish. Lonesome George, a mateless 200 year old turtle, is probably the most famous inhabitant of this island. The turtle is said to be the most endangered species of this fragile archipelago. Able to live for more than a year without food or water, they became

the fare of choice for mariners on long voyages. Out of an estimated two million tortoises, only fifteen thousand remain.

Our second stop is North Plaza Island, packed with splendid vegetation and all kinds of rare Galapagos wildlife --sea lions, iguanas and many tropical birds. The Galapagos sea lion is a species closely related to those found in California. They are common throughout the archipelago, and the friendly and inquisitive females are favorites with the tourists especially when cavorting with swimmers. The bull sea lions are larger than the females and have a characteristic domed forehead.

It's here that we also learn there are two kinds of landings--wet and dry. Wet landings require hopping out of the pangas as it rocks with

the waves, into water that can range from above the ankles to about mid thigh. This would seem to be a pretty simple gross motor skill, an act of physical coordination easily accomplished by any adult. Well, it turns out, not any adult, but there are extenuating circumstances.

First of all, you must be able to jump out of the **pangas** and into the surf while holding hiking shoes, socks, canteen, backpack, and more camera equipment than a **CNN** news team, along with that stupid garbage bag swung around your neck.

Of course, if you loss your balance and fall into the water, your assured of getting everything soaked and being laughed at as well. Isn't human nature wonderful?

The second problem also comes into play with dry landings because they often require climbing over slippery, steep lava rocks. Not everyone who makes this trip is exactly what you'd call fit. I'll confess that I had nightmares about being trapped for 15 days with a bunch of bird watching reprobates in thick glasses and Banana Republic outfits, or maybe even worse, a boat load of nuts and berries vegetarians who would rant and rave and then sulk every time meat or fish is served. This is, after all, hallowed ground for naturalists. Instead, I found a rather pleasant mix of fellow travellers of various ages, tastes, and backgrounds, with one thing in common--they all like unusual places. After a night briefing on Hood Island, we arrived at a small beach and were welcomed by a committee of mockingbirds. Hood Island has great colonies of uncommon red-and-green trimmed marine iguanas,

Darwin finches, blue-footed and masked boobies and sea lions. Hood Island is the only place in the world that hosts a breeding colony of waved albatross. The marine iguana is a prime example of a species that has evolved by adaptation. Galapagos marine iguanas are the only lizards in the world feeding under the sea. They are unique in the world feeding on seaweed and in some places covering the coastal rocks by the hundreds. The marine iguana was found in profusion on Fernandina Island.

The Galapagos penguin is smaller than the Magellan penguin which we saw in such profusion in Argentina. It is difficult to believe that here at the equator, this species of Antarctic origin penguin, live on the islands side by side with tropical animals. While clumsy on land, the black and white Galapagos penguins "fly" underwater.

Our next stop took us to Floreana Island, with more sea lions, pelicans, and flamingos said to be the pinkest in the world. Incidentally, it is said that the pink hue is acquired from the shrimp in their diet. Here we scrambled across the slippery wet lava amid a funky barnyard smell--the tip-off that we were surrounded by sea lions, color-coded to the volcanic rock and invisible until they moved. Lava lizards matched the local grasses and marine iguanas were mottled like lichen covered rock. ^{Liken} But I quickly discovered the trick in spotting animals: Look where the cameras were pointing.

The island creatures come astonishing close; at times you literally stumble over them. They turn your eyes into 500 mm lenses and its the details that are striking--the toenails on a sea lions flippers, the

pulsing belly of a lava lizard, the unblinking gaze of a fuzzy white booby chick.

On Isabella and Tower Island, we observed the famous blue-footed booby bird. Boobies are members of the ^{GAN'ET} gannet family and their name derives from their absurd tameness; they were frequently killed for sport in less-enlightened days. Seabirds were the true discoverers of the Galapagos, drawn by the plentiful fish in the surrounding waters. Later, when the first sailors landed, they dubbed the birds, "boobies" because they were so easy to kill-hunters could just walk up to one and shoot it. Blue-footed boobies are the most common of the three species breeding in the Galapagos and the only one to raise more than one chick. Boobies breed by plunge-diving close to shore and are noted for their comical and complicated courtship dance. The females are

distinguished from the males by their eyes--the pupils appear to be larger because of pigmented area around them.

On Tower Island we find the red puffed frigate bird. Also called Man-O-War, the frigate is about the size of a hen and has extremely long, slender wings, the span of which may reach to about eight feet. The birds have a bare-skinned throat pouch, which in courting males becomes bright red and inflated, for display purposes, to the size of a person's head. The frigate bird is perhaps the most aerial of all birds and alights only to sleep or to tend its nest. It is unbelievably fast and skillful in the air, soaring effortlessly, then diving to recover falling fish dropped by bobbies or other seabirds. The red-footed boobie is also found primarily on Tower Island.

Climbing to the summit of Bartolome, a vast expanse of brown-black lava strewn with ice-blue tiquilia plants look like some radioactive strain of Queen Anne's lace and looking up from the beach at Tower Island one sees clouds of birds wheeling overhead like an Alfred Hitchcock fantasy. Iguanas squatted on the wave-washed rocks where small Galapagos penguins dove and swam. Blue footed boobies stood on ledges that were frosted like gingerbread with the birds' droppings. Sea lions lounged in amphitheater-like recesses of rock.

If every shore excursion was extraordinary, I came to think of shipboard life as the price we paid. With seventy five of us on board, the **Santa Cruz** felt like a floating motor coach. We were divided by language into four groups of twenty and our days were regimented with morning and

afternoon excursions named for Galapagos animals and announced by

PA (Last call for the boobies--last call for the boobies.)

Built with a shallow draft to cruise near the islands, the **Santa Cruz**

rocked wildly at the slightest hint of wind or wave. Every time we

weighed anchor, the PA would come alive, paging the ships doctor to

attend to the latest bout of seasickness. At meal time there were

fewer of us in the dinning room . I figured the shut-ins were consoling

themselves with the fact that, except for the succulent Galapagos

lobster served the last night, "upscale institutional" is the kindest thing

that could be said about the food.

We have hiked on uninhabited islands, we have stood in the

middle of a nesting field at sunset surrounded by blue footed boobies,

a ridiculous but irresistible bird that will forever look like it's wearing the

wrong shoes, as they tended their new born chicks. We have witnessed the masked booby regurgitate its fish dinner for its young. We have sat beside 600 pound turtles. And we have paused on a deserted beach to watch at arm's length, the self assured Galapagos hawk, having finished its just-killed prey.

Every day was like a Discovery Channel highlight video but our journey of discovery must end. South America is a world of beauty and mystery, teeming with vibrant cultures, unique wildlife, scenic beauty and interesting history. As we pause for reflection in a topsy-turvy world, may mankind find the tranquility and harmony evident among the creatures of Patagonia and Galapogas.

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