

The Wonder of the Galapagos

“Aargh!” I cried in my best pirate voice as I brandished a wooden sword and wended my way through the crowd on the quarterdeck. I was Smee and led a crew of three pirates determined to take over the ship.

“Aargh!” cried my husband, One-Eyed Jake, behind me.

King Neptune and his Queen Nereida followed as we made our way to the Jacuzzi where the king would stand in judgment over those celebrating the crossing of the equator.

That morning, Tania, the events coordinator of the cruise ship M/V Galapagos Explorer II, had recruited us to play the role of pirates as we sailed through the Galapagos archipelago 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador. I hadn’t acted since high school some 35 years ago but how hard could it be?

Little did I know when we planned our trip to the Galapagos Islands we’d have roles in a ceremony we’d been eagerly anticipating, but crossing the equator was not the only reason for this cruise around the islands. My husband and I have degrees in biology so seeing the Galapagos was a dream we’d had for many years. To walk in the footsteps of Charles Darwin and see how his observations of the biota of the Galapagos (meaning “saddle” in Spanish and referring to the shells of saddleback turtles) spawned his theory of evolution was the lure that drew us to these islands.

The idea of cruising the archipelago on a ship designed for active eco-tourists who thrill at the sight of exotic creatures and don’t mind a two-hour hike to see them, also appealed to us.

We flew first to Quito, the capital of Ecuador, and then transferred onto a Tame airline flight bound for the Galapagos. We landed on the island of Baltra at an airstrip the Americans used during World War II. The Galapagos Islands were a strategic base protecting the Panama Canal. A bus took us to the dock where we piled into zodiacs for the trip to the Explorer II moored in the harbour. It is a small ship, 88 meters long and 15 meters wide with 52 cabins, a sundeck, Jacuzzi, inside and outside bars, lounge, gift shop and sick bay.

As the ship steamed to our first stop, the guide coordinator, Billy Chiquito divided us into five groups and told us of the rules designed to preserve the fragile environment of the Galapagos. The animals on these islands have no fear of humans so it is very tempting to pet them. We were told this is forbidden. Baby sea lions touched by humans are rejected by their mothers and so will die. Also no 'souvenirs' must be taken from the islands including shells, rocks, and plant material. Billy also warned us not to deviate from the marked paths. Ecuador takes its conservation of the Galapagos very seriously (UNESCO placed it on their World Heritage in Danger list in 2007) and charges anyone who violates the rules.

As the sun sank toward the horizon, we stumbled into the zodiacs for our first tour. We did a dry landing on the rocky coast of Santa Cruz Island (all the islands were created by volcanoes), at a place called Dragon Hill (Cerro Dragon). It was named after large land iguanas but the first 'dragon' we saw was a small marine one. Our first sighting of these famous creatures.

An Ecuadoran naturalist helped us identify the animals and explained their behaviour and habitat choices. This young man was vigilant in protecting the island

environment from its worst enemy--us. He made sure we stayed on the muddy trail (red from iron in the lava rock) and when we came upon a land iguana (about two feet long with a bright orange head) sprawled across the path; he ensured we kept our distance. Our destination was a lagoon famous for its flamingos but none were seen. We did spot a black-necked stilt strutting along the far shore before the sun set and we returned to the ship.

After a lovely meal in the cozy dining room, Billy told us of our next day's adventures. At 6:30 sharp, soft music began playing and a voice told us it was time to enjoy our day. Breakfast was a buffet and the omelet chef was excellent. We would need the energy of eggs, as the morning tour was a two and a half hour hike up a volcano on Bartholomew Island and then an hour snorkeling off its beach. The latter meant a wet landing in the zodiac. I quickly learned that slipping off the zodiac onto the beach isn't a problem but getting back in, isn't for the faint of heart. I must have looked as awkward as the sea lions we saw clambering over the rocky shore.

To begin our hike, we landed on the black lava shoreline of the island. Here orange sally lightfoot crabs scuttled across the pockmarked rocks. These creatures are the 'cleaning ladies' of the lava and of any iguana that needs ticks removed from its skin.

Our hike followed a planked sidewalk and stairs (360 steps if you believe the guide) up the island's inactive volcano. There were many stops along the way to learn about volcanology and the creatures that call this barren landscape home, like lava lizards, locust, and lava cacti. The view from the top was worth the climb. We gazed down at Pinnacle Rock which can be seen in the movie, 'Master and Commander' (a

period piece taking place in 1805), but was really created by the US military using the promontory as target practice during World War II.

We had rented our snorkeling gear from the ship and after the hike, spent an hour plying the waters around Pinnacle Rock seeing angel, puffer, and rainbow fish. We also spotted chocolate chip starfish and two types of sea urchins. We even saw a four-foot white-tipped shark lurking beneath a shelf of lava.

Then it was lunchtime. Yes, we had done all that in one morning! Before eating, Billy gave those who wished to learn more a lecture on topics such as ‘Save the Ocean’, ‘Marine Mammals’, and ‘Penguins’.

Ecuadorian food is fabulous with savoury soups, stews and fresh seafood. I lost count of the varieties of potato the chef served. Tania, the social director, introduced me to the Ecuadorian way to eat cerviche. This is a cold, tomato-based appetizer that uses lime juice to ‘cook’ the seafood. She explained that you sprinkle unsalted popcorn on top of the cerviche then drizzle it with lime juice. It was a perfect lunch.

After doing a tour of the ship’s bridge and learning how to make Explorer II cocktails, it was time to go on another hike and snorkeling adventure.

The zodiacs did a wet landing on Santiago Island then we began a two-hour hike along the coast. I grew tired of using the adjective ‘amazing’ when describing the animals we saw but they truly were. Our group hiked passed several colonies of marine iguanas, sea lions (moms and babies), lava herons, sally lightfoot crabs, mockingbirds, American oystercatchers, pelicans, turnstones, plovers, finches, and fur sea lions. We even caught a glimpse of a sea turtle swimming beneath a bridge of lava.

“Does anyone know what this is?” our naturalist guide asked at one point along the trail. He held up a skull with horns.

“Looks like a goat,” my husband replied.

Our guide nodded and explained that people have tried to inhabit each island in the archipelago with varying success. Most of the islands are now nature reserves but domestic animals, abandoned when people left, wreak havoc on the vegetation. It is an ongoing battle to remove such pests.

Our snorkeling was curtailed by a male sea lion protecting the coast and his females but we still saw a vast array of tropical fish. While swimming in a school of silver ones, a female sea lion swam beneath me which was disconcerting. So was my interaction with a barracuda. That’s one scary-looking fish.

We returned to the ship exhausted but the day wasn’t over yet. It was Karaoke night! Neither my husband nor I had ever done Karaoke but it didn’t take much to persuade us to join our new friends in singing. We made fools of ourselves but inspired Tania to choose us to be pirates.

The next day, we watched the marine iguanas (reddish brown) of Fernandina Island (largest colony in the Galapagos) swim out to sea to feed. The males go further out so the females can feed on the shoreline sea plants. It was nesting time on this island and the females were digging nests, defending them, and laying their eggs. Baby iguanas ‘hide’ on the backs of adults to escape the Galapagos hawk which hunts the island. Across the folded lava rock punctuated with lava cacti, sea lions lounged and flightless Cormorants haunted the tidal pools unconcerned by the fact that this volcano is the most active in the archipelago.

It was deep water snorkeling off Isabela Island that afternoon. Here sea turtles feed and we saw nine of these wonderful creatures. It was a thrill to have one swim beneath us and munch on the seaweed. Later we did a zodiac tour of the cliffs and saw blue-footed boobies, pelicans, brown noddy terns, nasca boobies, and a couple of penguins that loved posing for our cameras.

The ceremony to celebrate crossing the equator took place just before supper. We had first crossed this invisible line during the night but did so again so could toast the event. My husband and I felt honoured to be a part of this auspicious occasion that sailors have marked since the day of the tall-masted sailing ships.

The next morning's hike wound through a frigate bird colony on North Seymour Island. The males impressed everyone, including a few female frigates, with their puffed red breasts. Their name comes from the ship favoured by pirates as these birds often steal fish from pelicans and gulls. As we passed two blue-footed boobies, the male began his mating dance. The female didn't seem interested but then she didn't leave, either. He gave her two small sticks and then with lightening speed, dipped his wings.

Meanwhile, all around us juvenile frigates tested their wings and the babies, white fluffy creatures, sat in nests within feet of the path. I laughed at the antics of the swallowtail gulls as they love staring at their red feet. They reminded me of the glass birds that bob on the edge of a drinking glass as if sipping the liquid.

Snorkeling followed the hike but my husband and I opted out of this. We could have joined a group seeing the fish in glass bottom boats but decided to relax on the sundeck and enjoy the gentle rocking of the sea.

After lunch we took a bus to see the famous giant tortoises of the Galapagos on Santa Cruz Island. Most were content to munch on passion fruit they found on the ground but one big male, about 500 pounds, seemed determined to hunt for his. I must admit when he lumbered toward me, I knew fear and yet, they were gentle creatures.

Our time on the Explorer II ended when we arrived at Puerto Baquerizo Moreno (the capital of the Galapagos) on San Cristobal Island. Our last tour was to the Interpretive Centre. This is where we learned of the human history of the islands. Discovered in 1535 by Fray Tomas de Berlanga, the Spanish bishop of Panama, it became a haven for pirates in the late 1600s. Whalers stopped for water, tortoise meat, and sea lion skins in the late 1700s and after Ecuador claimed the islands, colonization began with the building of penal colonies. Since then, settlements have come and gone, as life on the archipelago is not easy. UNESCO declared it a Natural Heritage Site in 1978 but the Ecuadorian government had already begun regulating human habitation in 1936 and had made the islands a National Park in 1959.

Seeing the wonder of the Galapagos Islands from the ship, Galapagos Explorer II is an adventure worth embarking upon. Guests spend four incredible days exploring the islands with knowledgeable guides and see more wildlife than one would ever see outside a zoo. Its diversity of landscape, flora and fauna gives a vibrant image to the words of Charles Darwin:

“The natural history of these islands is eminently curious, and deserves attention...Hence both in space and time, we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact, - the mystery of mysteries- the first appearance of new beings on this earth.”

If you go:

The Galapagos Islands (www.galapagosislands.com)

The Galapagos Explorer II (www.galapagosislands.com/html/galap_explorer_ii.html or www.galapagosexplorer.com)

To view our photographs, go to www.vashti.com/galapagos/