

FLIGHTS OF FANCY ADVENTURES

GALAPAGOS

JULY 8-18, 2011



TRIP REPORT

Lying 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, formed by deep sea volcanoes and populated by the wind and waves, the Galapagos Islands are like no other place on earth. Only three million years old, and so recently inhabited by humans, the resident animals evolved with no fear of human predators. As a result, the birds, reptiles, mammals and even the fish either pay no attention to humans or express their curiosity by coming closer for a better look, allowing unbelievably intimate wildlife experiences.

Our trip began by traveling in a different direction - up. From Ecuador's capital city of Quito, at 8500 feet elevation, we spent our first day visiting Cotopaxi National Park. Named for its 20,000 foot tall glacier-covered volcanic mountain, access to the park is over rough, often boulder-strewn narrow roads. Somehow, our large and comfortable bus rambled its way upward and onward, managing roads that I would have thought were only suitable for jeeps.

We first stopped at the park's entrance station. While Enrique', our guide, obtained park passes for the group, we started looking for birds. First, we saw the obvious and common ones: Rufous-collared Sparrow ("Rufie"), Eared Dove, Blue-and-White Swallow and Great Thrush; then throw in Carunculated Caracara (say that 10 times fast) and Variable (Puna) Hawk. How about an Andean Condor perched in a tree? We then moseyed our way along to a small shop at the edge of open paramo (high treeless plains) and a patch of forest. Birds here were more numerous, and we picked out Masked Flowerpiercer, Sparkling Violetear, Rufous-naped Brushfinch and Brown-backed Chat-tyrant. Most amazing was an apparent family group of three Andean Condors - two adults and an all dark young one. Against the cloud-topped mountains, they hugged the green slopes, soaring effortlessly on 10-foot wingspans, with the adults flashing their pure white upper wings. Continuing upward, we came to a vast flat plain at the foot of Cotopaxi. At 12,300 feet, the breathing was hard, but the scenery was extraordinary. Bright purple flowers dotted this high altitude prairie, while wild horses and Andean Lapwings both dashed about. We went for about a one mile walk around a very shallow lake which ordinarily would be no problem, but had everyone gasping for oxygen at every slight incline of the trail. On the lake, Andean Gulls were busily building nests on grassy tufts while Andean Coots pattered about the shoreline and a few Andean Teal flushed in and out of the tall grasses. Rufous-tailed Wren briefly sang, appeared and made a hasty exit. Along the marshy edges, we found a couple of high altitude residents - Bar-winged and Stout-billed Cinclodes. Foraging in the bushes were Ecuadorian Hillstar, Slender-billed Miner and Plumbeous Sierra-finch. We adjourned for a late lunch at a delightful and quaint mountain restaurant and then made our descent back to Quito for the night.

The following day we awoke early for our flights - first to Guayaquil on the coast and then on to Baltra in the Galapagos Islands. I could sense the excitement and anticipation building in the cabin as the first westerly islands came into view. The air was clear and the sun was shining! Darwin's finches scuttled all over the ground. We had arrived! My good friend and outstanding guide for the trip, Juan Carlos Sosa, was on our flight and he escorted us on our bus ride to the dock. After instantly learning everyone's names, Juan Carlos provided our dockside orientation and we hopped into the rubber *pangas* (zodiacs) for transport to our home for the next week, the good ship *Yolita II*. We met the crew, got settled into our cabins, had lunch in the dining salon and began motoring toward our first destination, Bachas Beach on Santa Cruz Island. Juan Carlos gave us the mandatory safety and fire drills as we tooted along on clear azure waters. It was hard to pay attention, as Audubon's Shearwaters, Brown Noddies and Wedge-rumped Storm-petrels circled the boat.

Bachas Beach, on the northwestern shore of Santa Cruz, is a perfect stop for a short afternoon walk and snorkel, since it is so close to the departure docks. We boarded the *pangas* and motored in for our first "wet" landing, one where we make a barefoot landing at the water's edge. A Yellow Warbler munching bugs on the beach rocks was our first reminder that we were indeed in the Galapagos. From a distance, we watched and photographed it foraging for minute insects when Juan Carlos said, "Walk up to it. You can get as close as you want!" Of course, he was right. On the islands, no living thing is afraid of humans, so we could get within a few feet of any wildlife we encountered. As we slowly strolled the beach, Lava Gulls flew by and Magnificent Frigatebirds soared overhead while Juan Carlos explained some of the basic ecology of the islands. Brightly colored Sally Lightfoot Crabs worked the shoreline rocks and Ghost

Crabs scuttled along the sand. Suddenly, like a squadron of fighter jets flying under the radar, an immense flock of several hundred Blue-footed Boobies came in low and smashed into a small cove right next to us, slamming into a school of fish that became trapped by the onslaught. It was a fantastic display of a coordinated attack. How do they do it? Does one booby spot the fish and then go back and get the others? Astonishing! We continued on to a small brackish lagoon set behind the beach. A group of coral orange Greater Flamingos wandered the shallow pond, walking on “stilts”, with their long necks fully extended and heads upside down in the water. They are filter-feeders, sucking in water like a baleen whale, then rapidly pushing it out with their tongues, filtering microscopic bits of food with strainers on their beaks. Their feeding techniques can be quite amusing, as a bird will run circles around its submerged head, kicking up particles to feed on, looking like it’s trying to screw its noggin into the mud. A pair of White-cheeked Pintail ducks, with their striking red beaks, and a nattily feathered Black-necked Stilt also patrolled the lagoon. In the deep white sand, we could see where Pacific Green Sea Turtles had recently dug their nests, leaving the leathery eggs to incubate on their own. We then donned our wet suits for the first time, waded into the cold summer water and enjoyed our first snorkeling. Although the water wasn’t terribly clear here, it was good to get wet and establish basic snorkeling techniques for the novices in the group. Back on board the *Yolita*, we enjoyed a welcome cocktail with the crew, who appeared stunningly in dress whites. Juan Carlos gave us our itinerary for the next day, displaying the first of his classic drawings of each island, our route and what kind of shoes to wear (for a wet or dry landing). Our first delicious dinner on board followed and then it was an early night for our tired seafaring party.

As was usually the case, we traveled at night and awoke the next morning on the eastern side of Santa Cruz at South Plaza Island, a small islet that is home to numerous Land Iguanas, finches, Galapagos Sea Lions and many other birds that nest and soar along its cliffs. It was a dry landing and we could wear our walking shoes as we stepped onto a small concrete pier from the *panga*. Sea Lions were everywhere and had to be encouraged to get out of the way as we came ashore. Giant prickly pear *opuntia* cactuses dotted the landscape, grown tree size here to avoid the predation of Land Iguanas that love to feast on them. The prickly pear is the only source of water available to these giant lizards and despite the difficulty of eating the spine-covered fruit and pads, they have figured out how to remove the spines with their mouth and feet before consuming the moist flesh. Cactus Finches also make their living on these cacti, probing the flowers for seeds and insects. Whenever a Cactus Finch knocks a flower off, a Land Iguana immediately scurries over to gobble it up. The island resembles a tilted tabletop and we climbed the short slope to the steep cliffs on the other side, overlooking the windswept ocean. Frigatebirds, Swallow-tailed Gulls and Red-billed Tropicbirds soared along the vertical cliffs, while swarms of Audubon’s Shearwaters swirled among the rocks below. We watched a Swallow-tailed Gull regurgitate a six-inch fish for its chick, and then swallow it again to continue the predigestion process before the chick could eat it successfully. At the far end of the island resided many sea lion “bachelors”, males who had lost their harems and were resting up before returning to the sea to round up another batch of willing females. So many sea lions here had slithered up the limestone rocks from the low side of the island to its heights that the rocks were worn smooth by the friction, helped along by large amounts of corrosive sea lion urine. Juan Carlos had to “shoo” a number of lounging sea lions off the dock before we could return to the *pangas* and our ship.

We enjoyed lunch on board while we motored to our next destination. A squadron of Magnificent Frigatebirds elegantly floated above the ship, riding the air wave created as we moved along. A giant Manta Ray coursed along the bow. We encountered the first of 100s of Dark-rumped or Hawaiian or Galapagos Petrels, and were thrilled to see a Humpback Whale surface and blow many times before breaching! We were now in a small protected cove on Santa Fe Island and were about to have our first experience at snorkeling from the *panga*. We got our gear together on the ship, dressed in wet suits, climbed into the *pangas* and then when we reached our swimming area, jumped overboard. The water was amazingly clear and blue, revealing scads of beautiful tropical fish swimming among the rocks and small bits of coral. This was like birding underwater! A group of sea lions even came over to play with us, performing their acrobatic moves all around, swimming between legs, chasing the bubbles from snorkels and otherwise being completely entertaining! After about an hour, we returned to the ship, had a snack and then made a wet landing onto a beach littered by sea lions. They were completely unconcerned as we wandered amongst them, watched mothers nurse their pups and a few animals frolic in the surf. After watching a young Lava Heron catch and eat several small Sally Lightfoot Crabs in the rocks, we took a short hike around the cove, finding many Galapagos Doves, Yellow Warblers, Galapagos Mockingbirds, a Rice Rat and the very pale endemic race of Land Iguana before returning to the beach just as it was getting dark. On the *panga* ride back to the ship, we encountered a school of about 100 Spotted Eagle Rays “flying” just below us in the shallow clear water.

Summer can bring the windiest, waviest, “lumpiest” seas of the year to the Galapagos and this year was no exception. Tonight’s trip to the island of Española was a roller coaster. Hold on to the sides of the bed and ride that buckin’ bronco! Fortunately, it was the only really bumpy voyage of the trip, as we mainly sailed on quiet seas. Our first excursion of the day was to Punta Suarez, well-known for its colonies of Waved Albatross, Nazca and Blue-footed Boobies, Swallow-tailed Gulls and Galapagos Hawks, plus the extraordinarily curious Hood Mockingbirds. We made a dry landing and were immediately greeted by carousing sea lions, mockingbirds, and Lava Herons having crabs for breakfast. Marine Iguanas basking in the sun were also plentiful and those on Española are exceptional in their red and green coloration, leading to their nickname of “Christmas” iguanas. We walked along a short stretch of beach and then followed a level but rock strewn trail across the island. Warbler finches were everywhere. A rarely seen Galapagos Racer snake came spiraling down the path as we stood aside to let it pass. Soon we came to the first of several Waved Albatross colonies. These huge sea-going birds nest nowhere else on earth except Española and require large, flat areas for their landing strips. To take off again, they must walk to the cliff edge and leap off, riding the blast of sea air that provides perfect updraft. Some pairs were still courting, but most were sitting on eggs, with a few chicks already in evidence. We had our first delightful experience with courting Blue-footed Boobies, the clowns of the Galapagos. The males whistle. The females honk. They both “sky point” with their wings and tails, while proudly showing off their bright blue feet to each other. Some were still dating while others sat on eggs or had small chicks. All were within a few feet of the trail and I noticed everyone broadly smiling as we watched the show. An adult Galapagos Hawk keenly watched us from a few feet away as it perched in a trailside bush. We continued on to the vertical cliffs facing the open Pacific Ocean. Pounded by the sea and with almost constant wind, this is a perfect place to watch all the birds soaring above and below. Due

to rock that that has been undercut and punctured by the sea's action, a huge blow hole squirts geysers 75 feet high when just the right wave comes in from below.

A short ride over to the western side of the island brought us to Gardner Bay, perhaps one of the most beautiful beaches on the planet. Sparkling clear aquamarine waters, calm seas, bored and sleepy sea lions laying all over the beach, red and green iguanas scampering around feeding on algae covered rocks. Who could ask for more? But more there was, as Hood Mockingbirds lined up for a scrimmage, Large Cactus Finches struggled to crack seeds from the spiny mericarps of the caltrop fruit (remember reading about that in "The Beak of the Finch"?), American Oystercatchers probed the pure white sand for tiny crustaceans, colorful Lava Lizards fought battles with each other, spinning in circles and then playing "dead". Perhaps the most entertaining event of the afternoon was provided by a young Galapagos Hawk, which decided to "attack" a blue beach towel we had draped across a driftwood log on the upper beach.

After dinner, we pulled anchor and motored toward the island of Floreana. One of the few inhabited islands in the Galapagos, Floreana attracted settlers in the 1920s, as well as the earlier pirates and buccaneers, because of its small but constant stream of fresh water. We awoke to the beauty of sunrise over the Devil's Crown, a collapsed and drowned caldera that now rises from the sea like like Neptune's tiara. We visited Post Office Bay, where for centuries travelers have deposited their letters in an old rum barrel, to be sorted through by new visitors and delivered by hand to their worldwide destinations. Here we heard all of the "dirt" of the Galapagos, as Juan Carlos gathered us around in a circle and spun stories of sex, mayhem, murder, intrigue, power, domination and greed that had truly occurred among a small group of rather bizarre people who lived and died on this remote shore. As we approached Cormorant Bay, we detoured to Champion Island to see a few of the remaining Charles Mockingbirds, relegated to this tiny islet since their stronghold on Floreana had been decimated by marauding pigs, rats, dogs and cats and other introduced species. After landing on a beautiful beach speckled with semi-precious Olivine stones, a short walk to the large briny lagoon revealed nesting Greater Flamingos, Smooth-billed Ani, and Vegetarian Finch, with its large parrot-like beak. A fantastic pink and silver sunset brought conclusion to another wonderful day in the islands.

Upon arising the following morning, we found ourselves smack in the middle of Academy Bay at the town of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island. Despite being surrounded by all sorts of cruise ships, barges, transports, private yachts and sailboats, the first thing we noticed was a group of Black-tipped Reef Sharks circling the *Yolita*. What did this mean? Nothing, apparently, as we safely boarded the *pangas* and landed on shore. We walked away from the bustling town of Puerto Ayora and out to the Charles Darwin Research Station, the scientific hub of the islands. Along the way we were birding, of course, and found a rare and elusive Dark-billed Cuckoo plus Small, Medium and Large Ground Finches. Juan Carlos guided us around the station, explaining the Giant Tortoise repopulation programs, the efforts to remove introduced predators from the islands and the differences among the various races of tortoises on each island and volcano. A pair of copulating tortoises was observed, reminding me of the Sydney Opera House. We met 100-year old Lonesome George, the last surviving tortoise from the island of Pinta. We had some time to ourselves to wander back into town through "T-shirt Alley", a collection of souvenir shops lining an otherwise pleasant lane through the mangroves. At the

small fishermen's harbor, multiple catches were being cleaned, all to the admiration and delight of a group of young Brown Pelicans, eager for an easy handout. After leaving as many dollars behind as we could manage, we gathered at the downtown harbor under the widespread wings of a giant Waved Albatross. In the mangroves, a Yellow-crowned Night-heron patiently waited for the sun to go down so it could begin its evening forays for fish and crabs. After lunch on board, our group boarded a bus and headed for the highlands. Stopping briefly at the Narwhal Restaurant brought a delightful surprise - a Barn Owl nesting in a loft just over the bar! With one fuzzy chick and two eggs, the owl stood her ground while we each took turns standing atop the bar for a quick look. Next stop was the Giant Tortoise Reserve at Santa Rosa. Large numbers of these wild behemoths slowly wander the area, grazing on grass, wallowing in mud holes and generally enjoying their multi-century lives. On the same property, we descended into a huge lava tube, created when cooling ancient lava flows left a hardened outer shell as the molten lava poured through. Finally, we ascended to the heights of Santa Cruz in dreary, moist late afternoon grayness, as the summertime *garua* mist held fast atop the highest point on the island. The road passes between *Los Gemelos*, the twin caldera craters formed when two volcanic cones collapsed. Surrounded by a forest of "old man's beard" draped *scalesia* trees, this area is a very unique habitat favored by a number of species, including Vermilion Flycatcher, Small Tree Finch and Woodpecker Finch, which uses tools to extract grubs from tree limbs.

Our next day was spent visiting two very dry small volcanic islands, Rabida and China Hat. We awoke early and coffee in hand, watched a flock of Elliot's Storm-petrels delicately picking micro-organisms off the surface of the oily smooth sea. These little birds "dance" on the surface, fluttering wings aloft with just enough pressure to keep their feet dappling the water. Small "tubenoses" allow them to excrete the excess salt they accumulate. Boarding the *pangas*, we slowly made our way along the rugged and ragged shoreline of Rabida, searching for Southern Fur Sea Lions. These smaller sea mammals feed nocturnally and thereby do not compete with the diurnal Galapagos Sea Lions. During the day, they hide in caves or crevices in the rocks. As the waves swept in and out, a beautiful red sea star was revealed. Brown Noddies roosted in the same crevices and swiftly shot by our slow moving craft. We made a wet landing on an intensely red sand beach. After a short walk around the island, we enjoyed some incredible snorkeling from the beach before returning to the ship for lunch. At China Hat, we prowled around a bit in the *pangas* before landing and found our first Galapagos Penguins! These are the second smallest penguins in the world and the only ones to live on the Equator. Also small in total numbers, these diminutive denizens survive here because of the very cold, nutrient rich waters that support numerous fish for penguin food. Our walk on the island was very hot and the only ones who reveled in basking in the strong sunlight were the Marine Iguanas. One group of them looked like they were watching a 3-D movie with special glasses. As testimony to the harsh environment, a fully articulated sea lion skeleton lay on the sand, apparently right where the creature breathed its last.

While enjoying another fine dinner aboard, we motored over to Bartolome' Island and dropped the hook for the night. El Capitan must have known what he was doing, because shortly after dark, a full moon rose over tallest peak on the island. We awoke in front of Pinnacle Rock, a tall spire that dominates the water view. In the distance, we saw multiple Manta Rays leaping from the sea and crashing back with huge splashes. Our *panga* ride to the dry dock landing brought us close to a number of penguins on the rocks. One happy couple was mating, another

was braying like a donkey and some just jumped into the water to get away from it all! Then came the hard work - the ascent of Bartolome'! Climbing up innumerable wooden steps, we slowly made our way to the peak, where the classic and most photographed view in all the islands is found. On a beautiful sunny morning, with the light at our backs, it couldn't have been prettier. Group photos, couples photos, individual photos - everyone had their picture taken, even Juan Carlos with 15 cameras wrapped around his neck! We spent the afternoon snorkeling all around Pinnacle Rock and the bay beneath it. Pacific Green Sea Turtles were abundant, as were playful sea lions. In an underwater lava tube, the non-business end of a White-tipped Reef Shark stuck out several feet. It must have been making a phone call.

After lunch, while traveling to our next destination, the sea was alive with hundreds of Dark-rumped/Galapagos/Hawaiian Petrels. This species was previously endangered but must be making a strong comeback in the Galapagos. This probably is due to recent introduced predator eradication programs in the island breeding grounds. We arrived at *Caleta Tortuga Negra* (Black Turtle Cove), and enjoyed a leisurely *panga* ride through the mangroves. Brown Pelicans crashed into the shallow water in search of fish, followed quickly by Brown Noddies that would even perch on the pelican's head trying to pilfer a puffer. Many green turtles leisurely swam through the lagoon, as did numbers of Black-tipped Reef Sharks. When the shadows lengthened on the lagoon, we headed back to the *Yolita* for our last night on board. The Captain was kind enough to let us take turns driving the boat to our final night's anchor. The sunset over Daphne Major could not have been more beautiful as we traveled to North Seymour Island for our final day's excursion.

After a farewell cocktail with the crew and a delicious dinner, one of the most exciting events of the trip occurred. A school of about eight Galapagos Sharks, each about eight feet long, began swimming around the ship. The crew decided to bait them with chunks of fish and meat and the result was a frenetic feeding frenzy! One even leaped over the rope towing the *panga*! One of our delightful crew members even offered to remove his shipmate's finger so we could continue the fun.

For our final morning's activities, we arose at dawn and before breakfast, rode the *pangas* to a dry landing on North Seymour. The early light was gorgeous as we walked a circular trail through the flat island's scrubby vegetation. Along the beach we found the usual suspects - oystercatchers, yellow warblers, finches, but the showstoppers were the frigates and the boobies. Both nest here and were carrying on in fine fashion. Great and Magnificent Frigatebirds were on nests and the males were displaying their brilliant crimson gular sacs, calling out to overflying females, "I have a red balloon!" Courting males were also flying around. Talk about advertising your INFLATED ego! Blue-footed Boobies were dancing to their own drummers, honking, whistling and smacking beaks. Our time had come to a close, however, and we had to get back to the ship to ready for final departure. After breakfast on board, we motored to the dock at Baltra and transferred to the airport to await our flight back to Guayaquil on the mainland.

In Guayaquil, we had a couple of hours for an interesting guided tour of downtown and the waterfront. We even saw some new birds - Pacific Hornero, Pacific Parrotlet, Ecuadorian Ground-dove, Scrub Blackbird and Large-tailed Grackle. We retired to the Grand Hotel Guayaquil for an entertaining farewell dinner, sharing stories and favorite moments from our

Galapagos odyssey. In the morning we all had early departures with some participants going home and the others continuing on to Peru for our Machu Picchu extension.

Thanks to everyone for making this another wonderful Flights of Fancy Adventure!
Hope to see you again soon on another great trip.

Best wishes,

Sam

Sam.Fried@live.com

860-690-8599