

AN EVOLUTIONARY JOURNEY

The birthplace of Darwin's theory of evolution, the Galápagos Islands are home to a wide and fascinating array of endemic animals and unique volcanic landscapes. Journey through the pristine islands to uncover Mother Nature's best-kept secrets and experience an evolution of your own

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JUSTIN BALLE/AURORA PHOTOS/ORBIS



grace, the first one I spot turns out to be as old as the Panama Canal I traversed on my way to South America: a cool century. They look strangely familiar, too, like a distant memory from childhood. My guide sees me struggling to figure it out and explains the answer with a laugh: Steven Spielberg. The filmmaker used the head of the giant tortoise as inspiration for one of cinema's most enduring creations, *ET the Extra-Terrestrial*.

DAY 2: SANTIAGO ISLAND

Morning comes early. Too early. A 6:45am wake-up call echoes throughout the ship. The voice is gentle but the imperative is not: breakfast begins in 15 minutes and soon thereafter staggered launches to visit Santiago will depart according to pre-assigned groups. (For the rest of my time on board I will be linked in solidarity with 12 other 'Albatross'.) A striking beach of black volcanic sand fronts the layered terrace of Santiago's waiting shore. It's home to a dizzying array of feathered friends: mockingbirds, doves, fly catchers and lava herons, as well as 13 species of Darwin's



THIS PAGE: A curious Galápagos sea lion; two young brown pelicans on Santiago Island. OPPOSITE PAGE: Take the summit trail on Bartolomé Island for a breathtaking view of the stately Pinnacle Rock

Is it me or are we a culture obsessed with our own personal evolution? My local bookstore is bursting with floor-to-ceiling shelves devoted to inner growth and spiritual fulfilment; a whole cadre of television shows barrages me daily with the tantalising promise of 'breaking through' and attaining the next, stronger, higher level of my potential. And don't even get me started on the Internet and the flurry of suspect emails that continually flood my inbox.

I blame Charles Darwin.

The English naturalist put forth his theories on the evolution of species a little more than 150 years ago after an enlightening cruise around a clutch of islands off the coast of Ecuador. The Galápagos archipelago has since become a watchword for both pristine biodiversity and the need for plants and animals to either adapt to a changing environment or die. To an unsuspecting world, Darwin's ideas were startling, because he took God out of the equation and dumped the responsibility for survival onto individuals.

I think we've embraced it a bit backwards, however, boiling Darwin's ideas down to the easy to market slogan 'survival of the fittest' – which you have to admit looks great on a T-shirt but is a little misleading. Sure, the fittest will survive for a while – don't cancel that gym membership just yet – but it's the flexible, the malleable, the adaptable, those who somehow find a way to roll with the punches, who ultimately come out on top. It's a bit counterintuitive to everything we tell ourselves. We're atop the food chain, after all. We are the masters of our own destiny. We have the power. Sort of. And yet Mother Nature is the great equaliser we all too often forget about – until she inevitably slaps us in the face.

In the Galápagos nature is unavoidable. It's pretty much the only reason to visit these distant, virtually uninhabited islands; which is why as I have grown older and more inquiring of my own ability to thrive – not to mention the news cycle calling into question the ability of our species to survive the self-inflicted wounds to our environment – these islands have held a mystical, almost

edenic allure. As if by accident – or was it? – time recently proved ripe: my evolutionary journey back to where it all started could wait no longer.

DAY 1: SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

On the long road up to the Santa Cruz highlands, I am reminded that it's often the journey and not necessarily the destination that matters most. Getting to the Galápagos was no easy trip: flying from New York City, through Panama, to Ecuador, then a short hop to a landing strip on Baltra – the gateway to the islands – followed by a shuttle bus to the harbour and a wet zodiac ride, I finally arrive at the M/V Galapagos Legend, my floating home base for the next week. When I disembark later in the afternoon at El Chat, a nature reserve where the great tortoises for whom these islands got their name – Galápagos comes from the Spanish for 'saddle' – I quickly come to the conclusion that the ends have justified the means. The name giant tortoise does not do them justice; they are mammoth. Prehistoric in appearance and moving with reptilian

GALEN FOWELL/CORBIS; MICHAEL NASSAR; MICHAEL INGLAN/ROBERT HARDING WORLD IMAGERY/CORBIS





famous finches – all endemic to the archipelago. I am drawn to the crustaceans hovering at the edge of the surf, however. The body of the Sally Lightfoot crab is flame red, with a vivid blue underbelly and yellow streaks around the eyes. They are scattered across the rocks by the hundreds, along with their offspring – small, black juveniles who benefit from an ideal camouflage. How have they evolved, I wonder? Impervious to the crashing waves, they make easy marks – and tasty pickings – for the herons and cormorants. And perhaps that is the point: the adults are the sacrifice, allowing the next generation a chance to mature and spawn.

DAY 3: BARTOLOMÉ ISLAND

The promised dry landing on Bartolomé is a bit of a misnomer. The sea today is choppy, the zodiac launch has difficulty reaching the rocks, and every Albatross on board gets wet. It's the price you pay for 'going native' and not taking one of the bigger cruise lines. An occasionally damp bottom seems worth it, however, for the authenticity that comes with having local guides who know these islands like their own backyards and a ship that is comfortably spacious, if not luxurious, yet makes a significant impact on the local economy. When I finally hit dry land, it's like stepping out onto a moonscape of volcanic

lava bombs, cinder cones and spatter – all the result of an eruption a few million years ago. Untouched by erosion, every lava ripple has been preserved, giving the impression that the surface is still bubbling with hot molten lava. There is very little greenery, save a scattering of pioneering plants, like delicate *Tiquilia*, that is a testament to nature's resilience in an inhospitable environment. Life has come to Bartolomé slowly: first the small plants, carried in the guano of migratory birds, then the lava lizards and snakes and marine iguanas – each a small step forward of the food chain that keeps the ecosystem here in a state of austere balance. A highlight is the summit trail, which takes you up to the highest point on the island for a breathtaking panorama of the stately Pinnacle Rock and the surrounding azure waters. The small beach is also home to some of the best snorkelling in the islands: calm waters home to schools of colourful parrotfish, trigger fish, yellow-tailed damsels, grey mickeys, cortex chubs and the majestic king angelfish. If you're lucky you might even spot a rogue sea turtle or two. They're smaller than the giant land tortoise, yet infinitely more agile – if just a bit camera shy.

DAY 4: SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

A morning hike on Santa Cruz starts with an unexpected treat: a lone flamingo, pink as boiled shrimp, silently preening in the reflective pool of a brackish lagoon. I'd

TIM LAMAN/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY/CORBIS; JUSTIN BAILE/AURORA PHOTOS/CORBIS; MICHAEL NASSAR

THIS PAGE: Sea lions are sleek, swift and playful in the water; incredible panoramic view from the caldera above Darwin Lake on Isabela Island. OPPOSITE PAGE: A school of fish swimming over a rocky sea floor





always assumed they were highly social animals but I guess when you get the lagoon all to yourself, you take it. The trail continues up toward Dragon Hill, through the nesting sites of land iguanas. These large reptiles look like miniature dinosaurs, either bathing in the sun or walking with steady determination towards a feast of fallen prickly pears. Nature has given them the perfect camouflage: patches of dark yellow, brown and green cover their scaly backs and legs like army commandos on a secret mission. They blend seamlessly into the landscape, making it difficult to fall prey to their only natural predator: the Galápagos hawk. In fact, I need to watch my step when I get distracted watching the finches: more than once I found an iguana underfoot. I wonder how many generations it took these creatures to evolve such ideal protection.

DAY 5: NORTH SEYMOUR ISLAND

From the deck of the ship, North Seymour Island looks like a bit of a bust: flat, with no beach to speak of – and once you beach snorkel in the Galápagos you are ever eager to get back into the water – and scrubby, barren forest. I ponder a relaxing post-breakfast nap with my book at the pool instead of gearing up for yet another early morning excursion, but I am quickly talked out of it by a crew member who cryptically promises me that looks can be deceiving. Of course, he was right: as the zodiac grows closer, I realise the trees aren't scrubby,

they're barren – and filled with colonies of nesting birds, like the arch, black frigates which have been trailing the ship since we first started out in Baltra. Mating season is in full swing and curious avian rituals are on display everywhere. The male frigate bird has a small patch of scarlet at the base of his throat – a distinctive mark that makes it easily identifiable to even the most amateur bird watcher. In the courtship between males and females however, it serves an even greater purpose: the patch inflates

like a great big red balloon. It's a sign to the females that the male is ready to settle down – even if only for the season. The males don't caw or preen or make a big show of their engorgement. They sit there idly nonchalant, showing off their big necks just as so many teenagers have posed beside their shiny muscle cars, as if to say there's a good time to be had over here in this neck of the woods.

The ground is flat and strewn with holy stick trees – a type of sandalwood noted for its pungent aroma – gray saltbush and white-splashed rocks. There are hundreds of birds. Maybe even thousands. And they are utterly oblivious to the visitors ogling them a few feet from their nests. In the more open areas, the blue-footed boobies – yes, their feet really are blue; like the colour of toothpaste – perform their flirtatious and highly theatrical courtship dance. I spot a newborn frigate chick huddling between the legs of a male patiently waiting for the return of the female and a fluffy white boobie chick taking shade behind a rock with the help of its parent. They're curious, tentative and so close that I could sit here contentedly for hours.

DAY 6: RÁBIDA ISLAND

Rábida is one of the most diverse islands



OPPOSITE PAGE: The Galápagos giant tortoise has inspired the famous alien in *ET the Extra-Terrestrial*. THIS PAGE: A marine iguana with a distinctive spiky crown of regurgitated salt; the MV Galapagos Legend Luxury Cruise



Thousands of them, tangled together in what can only be described as an enormous clump. Cold-blooded reptiles, they are huddled together for warmth after a morning in the shallows feasting on seaweed. What's even more curious is the fact that they are all spitting on each other. Iguanas don't sweat like mammals – their skin is too thick. Hence there's no way for them to excrete excess salt except by spitting it up and out. It gets even stranger: the menacing-looking spiky crowns on their heads are not horns or bone, but an accumulation of regurgitated sodium. If you have to spend your days vomiting up salt, is there a better lesson in adaptation than turning it to your advantage in a defensive display?

As I make my way back to Santa Cruz – and the start of a long journey home – I wonder how on earth an entire week has rushed by. There's still so much to tell:

about the pod of golden rays that swam alongside me in formation as I snorkelled with sea turtles in Black Turtle Cove, the curious sight of flightless cormorants airing out their vestigial wings in the windy lee of Urbina Bay, the school of freakish-looking giant mola mola that I mistakenly took for predatory sharks, the *mojujo* berries found on Isabela Island – and my guide teaching me how to turn them into an emergency hair gel. I haven't *done* anything. Nor have I put to paper all the 'not done' things I've done: I haven't seen any television, or read a newspaper, or had email access, or Internet, or cell phone service. I haven't been anywhere but in the here and now, disconnected from the rest of the world. It was a bit of a panic at the start – how could it not be? – but as I reluctantly get ready to depart I'm contentedly shocked at how quickly I've evolved to adapt. 🌿

OPPOSITE PAGE: The yellow spine of a marine iguana; the lava ripples have been preserved, untouched by erosion. THIS PAGE: A mature Sally Lightfoot crab found on Santiago Island

in terms of volcanic geology as it lies at the very heart of the archipelagos volcanic origins. It's comprised entirely of lava rich in iron oxide which, when exposed, rusts and gives the island its unearthly reddish beach. Surrounded by cliffs and the steep slopes of volcanic cinder cones is a colony of noisy, nosy sea lions. On land, sea lions lack a certain grace, to be kind. They are ungainly animals, lumbering up onto the beach and plopping down wherever they see fit. In the water it's another story entirely: sleek, swift and all too eager to play, I'm unsure if I should abandon my snorkelling for the pup whose need for attention involves repeated attempts at knocking off my dive mask. Everything within the archipelago is protected, so I think better of it and swim away. The thrill-seeker in me dies a little, but the respectful tourist in me understands quite clearly: do not interfere; bring nothing to these islands and take nothing away. It's a mantra that is reinforced on



THIA KONG/AURORA PHOTOS; CORBIS; FRANS LANTING/CORBIS; JUSTIN BAULE/AURORA PHOTOS; CORBIS

every return to the ship as legs and feet get hosed off before boarding. After all, I'm functioning like one of those migratory birds, hopping from island to island. It would be all too easy to accidentally upend a fragile ecosystem.

DAY 7: FERNANDINA ISLAND

My final port of call is at Espinosa Point on Fernandina, the youngest of the islands – and recently the most geologically active, too. (A burst of activity in 2009 generated a series of lava flows.) It's also one of the most pristine islands in the world, with no invasive species noted to date. Flat, jet-black lava is a defining feature of the stark and barren landscape here. It's also home to the largest, most-primitive looking colony of marine iguanas. Approaching from the sea, it looks like little more than the rocky volcanic coast I've seen across many of the islands, but as I draw nearer I notice the rocks are flows of lava covered in iguanas.

