

Boobies, Wet Landings, and Finally Enjoying a Real Vacation in Darwin's Islands

Ecuadorian Redemption - Quito and the Galapagos



Left to Right: (top) Quito and colonial district, Allison's first response to cabin; (middle) Santa Fe, Gardner seals, blue-footed booby napping; (bottom) Punta Suarez, Allison napping, algae-grazing marine iguana

Introduction

After last winter's disappointing to South America (Futaleufu, December 2006), I wasn't sure I was going to do any more traveling over the short and typically stressful Christmas break. But, as long as Allison was still in school, we decided we had to take advantage of common vacation times together. At first, we were determined to do a full-break trip back to southern Patagonia – because, after all, it had been 10 years since Sara and my infamous trip there. But then one of Allison's friends announced a huge wedding, interrupting said itinerary, and so we decided that a shorter sailing trip around the Galapagos finally sounded appealing (I say "finally" because I'd reserved the Galapagos a couple times in the past but ultimately canceled because the trip sounded cushy and prone to being kid-dominated). Because I really liked my trip to Italy, we went with Wilderness Travel again. Although the Galapagos are, indeed, cushy in terms of physical/activity demands, we did luck out by winding up on the adults-only boat (in contrast with all other family-oriented parties we ran into). Also, there are elements of small-boat travel that some people would not find comfortable. Initially, Allison and I had hoped to spend 5 days before the Galapagos touring mainland Ecuador (staying in Quito) - visiting places like Cotopaxi and Otavalo - but, alas, I began the "genome project" (which consumed all of my fall term) and we forfeited. Just over a week before leaving, though, I did get this bee in my bonnet to buy a "real" camera and, given the state kicker/tax rebate check and an early Christmas present from my mother, I bought a lovely digital SLR Nikon with a medium-range lens (plus a cleaning kit and a hardy Pelican case for transport). Although I remain generally pleased with the camera, it is a lot more responsibility and - of course - my home computer is too slow to store and manipulate the images quickly... which means I will have to invest in upgrading my system next year (given that I just officially began a one-year sabbatical and will be managing a payout).

Quito - December 17-18, 2007

After briefly visiting our mom (who would be completely alone for Christmas this year), we headed to a hotel in Sea-Tac the night before our 5 a.m. trip to the airport (with an 8:30 take-off). Allison and I sustained a fairly heated argument about her decision to go out with a new boyfriend that evening that evening; consequently, my mother – in particular – was not sure we'd survive 8 nights in a small cabin without killing one another. Not only did we get along smashing, I think Allison leaving the country was probably a wise idea in the grand scheme of her funky relationship history this year. On 5 hours sleep, we flew Continental to Houston (which seemed peaceful in comparison with other experiences at Dallas) and then on to Quito. Like I've said to all Continental rep's I've spoken with the last couple weeks (while joining their frequent flyer program and retroactively claiming these miles): best flights and service I've had in 5 years. Our 90-minute layover seemed to pass in no time, and the 9-10 hours total in-air miles to Ecuador seemed like a cakewalk in comparison to the grueling overnight flights that accompany any trip to Chile or Argentina. We even enjoyed our on-flight movie (Hairspray) immensely. Unfortunately, bad weather in Quito - in conjunction with some main radar system being out (hit by an Iberian jet a couple weeks before, I

was told) - delayed our landing time by about 30 minutes. There was brief talk we'd have to backtrack to and land in coastal Guayaquil – but this was not the case. In contrast with friends' warnings, the descent/landing was not unusually scary (although our return flight from the Galapagos was). Unfortunately, weather delays simultaneously landed 3 international flights at once, causing a massive customs line to develop. In the end, we emerged from the baggage claim area around 11:30 p.m. There, Willem (our city guide/contact in Quito) was waiting, sign in hand, with the van. For Allison, who has only done fairly rigorous camping/river trips with me, Wilderness Travel's level of service, food, and accommodation was shocking (in the good sense of the word). Although Allison often called this a totally "bourg-y" trip, she agreed it was the perfect vacation, in the sense of being able to relax, have a great time, and not think about anything related to school or boys. After waiting for 2 other parties, we drove 20 minutes through the rain to the Hotel Colon (a.k.a. Hilton) and our plush room. The only bad news: if we wanted to do the half-day city tour tomorrow, we'd need to be ready to go at 9 a.m.



Left to Right (top): hotel room view of Quito, Basilica del Voto Nacional & iguanas; (bottom) colonial district, Plaza Grande

After a good sleep, we enjoyed the fine breakfast buffet and then all met in the lobby. The passenger component of our group was 11 in number – with everyone but Allison and I 50-65 years old, and a high number of professional writers/journalists. The aforementioned city guide Willem, a local Ecuadorian, peppered his fascinating presentations with many “please my friends...” Our Galapagos leader (Biti) was also present. Originally, I thought we were close enough to the “old town” (i.e. the UNESCO World Heritage-designated colonial area) to walk. But, no – we all amassed in a full-on tour bus (with a driver) – mostly because of Quito’s 9400-foot altitude (which I had been feeling since we stepped off the plane – and was still feeling come morning). Anyway – our tour was excellent, albeit brief. We began at the Basilica del Voto Nacional (the equivalent of the National Cathedral), a gothic-style building a few blocks outside the colonial district. Built relatively recently (1926), the building featured exterior sculptures of major Ecuador-associated animals (including Galapagos iguanas) and one of the only examples (in the country) of a “Mestizo Christ” in the stained glass window art. Although the cathedral was impressive from the outside, the interior seemed empty and plain (as compared with other churches we saw) – save the almost-tacky nativity, surrounded by long strings of Christmas lights strung from wires between the giant pillars. Outside the basilica, indigenous women wearing felt hats and multi-layered skirts readily approached us selling armfuls of woven scarves and blankets. Less elaborate-looking men also attempted to hawk handfuls of postcards and cheap sunglasses, among other things. We generally experienced more of this kind of behavior in Quito than I felt existed in Buenos Argentina (indifferent) and Santiago (more prone to outright begging). We then hopped back on the bus and drove 5-7 blocks to the colonial district boundary. From here, we proceeded 4-6 blocks on foot over the next couple of hours. This section of Quito was far more colorful and well-kept (on all levels) than the rest of the city (which we only gleaned while driving). There was also a visibly more active police presence. Walking along the Avenue Garcia Moreno, we soon arrived at Plaza Grande, which was surrounded by the Palacio de Gobierno (the main government palace) and the Cathedral (which we didn't go inside - perhaps because it was the only church we passed that required an entrance fee). Afterward and down the block, we did tour 2 other churches (the Church of El Sagrario and the very baroque La Compania de Jesus), both completed in the 18th century and internally covered with ornate paintings and lots of gold (which, yes, pretty much represented melted down Aztec relics). Both were also en par with churches I visited in Italy – which means I was impressed. As in Italy, however, there was a lot of renovation (i.e. young Ecuadorians with bottles of alcohol and Q-tips swabbing the sooty gold facades). In some churches, we were allowed to take photographs – albeit under the watchful eyes of mystery men who (once they saw our flash) quickly approached to ask for a “donation.” One was particularly aggressive, unwilling to believe I had no cash, and suggested I give “something else” instead. None bore official uniforms and so I suspect they were not actually begging on behalf of the church. Notably, Italy charged \$15-20 just to enter most comparably famous churches and so I think Ecuador would be wise to adopt part of this practice because their churches were just as good. After a brief walk, we arrived at the Plaza de San Francisco, which surrounds Quito’s oldest and most popular church (of the same name). Pictures were not allowed inside and the interior was dark and used - in the dirty sense of the word. Given a service was in progress, we couldn't go far - although I don't remember

seeing any gaudy alter or much in the way of gold or murals. But the plaza was scenic - overlooking colorful buildings and interesting people. A snack stop was enjoyed at this cafe just outside the church; in addition to food, they sold locally-produced fair-trade products (and, in contrast with many places, accepted plastic). Stupidly, Allison and I only bought desserts (ice cream and a sweet tamale with corn and raisins); we really should have bought the empanadas platter and fully eaten lunch. I also put away a load on souvenirs, including a gorgeous woven tapestry of lizards, a crazy lizard figurine, and a picture book of Quito.



Left to Right: (top) palace guards, Church of El Sagrario, La Compania de Jesus; (bottom) Plaza de San Francisco, Allison and her sweet tamale, Catholic girls in the square

Finally, we boarded the bus for a moderate ride up to the 10,000-foot high hill with the Panecillo, the winged Virgin who overlooks the city (this site also supposedly corresponds with the Aztec's regional Temple of the Sun). I actually thought the Virgin looked better from down in the colonial district; nevertheless, the views from here over Quito were superb, despite the fact that clouds hid all the volcanoes (the existence of which we were beginning to doubt). In contrast with comparably hilly American cities, Quito's obvious shanty slums were located on the hillsides - off the power, water, and waste grids. Although we were given time for shopping at the ample number of tourist-oriented gift booths, I found the offerings poor - especially in comparison to what I'd just bought at the fair-trade place.



Left to Right: Biti's pictures of women in Quito (note live chickens in middle shot), looking up at Panecillo's winged virgin

We returned to the hotel by 2:30 where Allison found her second wind (i.e. wanted to go out and do some shopping) and I was exhausted (i.e. wanted to take a 2-hour nap). And so we separated to accomplish respective goals. Unfortunately, I didn't get much continuous sleep - mostly because I grew increasingly hungry and occasionally nervous that Quito wasn't the safest city for Allison to be running around on her own in. Indeed, most information we read about Quito was scary - including the Lonely Planet, the State Department travel advisory, and personal accounts by friends (2 of whom said they felt their lives were in danger - albeit after dark). But Allison stayed within 5 blocks, returning eventually with a felt hat (like the indigenous women wore), a big sweater, and a bag of potato chips for me (as I said I'd been craving that item). At 6:30, we regrouped again in the hotel lobby for our dinner excursion - which required a 20-minute van-ride through town, culminating - I believe - at the Teatro Sucre, the main opera house with adjoined restaurant/wine bar (half of us felt underdressed given how incredibly posh

everything was). Outside, in a large plaza, a religious-oriented Christmas show was being broadcast from a big stage. Our final couple had just arrived, their flight (scheduled to land yesterday) having been canceled due to mechanical problems. Our meal was one of the most spectacular and stunning I've enjoyed: in my case, some kind of pear/endive salad with nuts, grilled duck, and phyllo-wrapped banana tamales with some kind of rum-chocolate dipping sauce. Allison, though, definitely ordered the most interesting desert: "Exotic Fruits of Ecuador In Different Ideas." They even provided a stylish handout describing each fruit (with paintings and scientific names) presentation on the long platter, each of which she let me sample: guanabana froth, babaco compote, guyaba jam, naranjilla sorbet, and chirimoya ice cream. Again, Allison - who suffered tremendously through the Fu trip - was beside herself with the level of decadence. At the time, I joked with her: well - they're probably trying to butter us up because the boat cabins are going to be SO small.



Left to Right: (top) Quito domestic airport, landing at Baltra; (bottom) airport structures, VIP lounge, lining up for bus to harbor

To the Galapagos and Seymour Island - December 19, 2007

Honestly, though, the ship accommodations (while initially somewhat startling) were probably not the source of any butting up. If anything, it was more the uncertainty of our flight situation to the Galapagos - given what seemed like crazy funky weather in Quito. After experiencing both rain and sun, today was shitty: cold, cloudy, and foggy (with less than 1 mile visibility around the airport - inadequate given the radar issues). After regrouping in the hotel lobby at 7:30 (following a hasty breakfast), we drove to the airport and basically sat on the floor waiting for just over 2 hours - the main room becoming packed with at least a dozen planeloads of backed-up travelers (a lot given how small Quito's domestic terminal is). Eventually, though, the sound of a jet landing caused the room to explode in applause. It was maybe another hour before we were through security, into the final gate, and onto our plane. Unfortunately, our flight was interrupted by a scheduled landing and pick-up in Guayaquil, the largest city in Ecuador (i.e. flying southwest to get there represented a moderate detour, adding 90 minutes to our transit time). After completing this task, our total flying time over the Pacific was 2 hours - the ride not too bumpy, the views mostly obstructed by very low clouds. Three jets landed sequentially, crowding the tiny airport on Baltra. We dumped out onto the tarmac, the temperatures in the 80's with light sea breezes. In contrast with most others, though, we were whisked into the VIP lounge where ice tea was waiting - and all necessary monetary transactions were completed without waiting in any long lines (i.e. each of us were required to pay a \$100 park/island entrance fee). Within an hour, we were taken out to the bus/transit area; here, buses run by the airlines were filled first-come-first-serve, eventually taking us 10 minutes to the main harbor. I cannot say the landscape was beautiful in any traditional sense of the word (i.e. as compared with alpine places I typically visit); rather, the Galapagos (especially in December, the dry season) are austere, desert-like, and unusual. Baltra, a small island in and of itself (just north of Santa Cruz, the most populated of the islands) is 1 of 2 main airport entry-points. Given its military history and status, Baltra (or what we saw of it) seemed particularly littered with metal debris - exacerbating the weird emptiness of the landscape. This sense continued all the way to the main pier, which was adjacent to several small industrial-looking buildings (all of which, strangely, reminded me of the native villages in arctic Alaska). Given that this was a main departure point for boat tours, it felt strange to be with all these people (6-8 groups of high-end tourists) at this nondescript concrete slab. Of course, there were seals and iguanas already - not to mention the fetid smell of their waste products. In the harbor, 6-8 variously sized boats (all upscale) were waiting. Allison and I recognized ours (the Diamante) immediately. Given that our leader (Biti) was really good (particularly with working with/managing her support crew), we were the first group to be picked up, taken out, and un-anchored (i.e. hit the high seas). While most Galapagos tour-boats average 12-20 passengers (and 5-8 days out), increasing numbers are catering to bigger (100-200) groups with shorter itineraries (4-5 days). There is even talk about giant ships that carry 500 and hit 2-3 islands over 1-2 days - but supposedly the Ecuadorian government had the sense to ban anything bigger than 200 (which, in and of itself, seems insane).

Interlude - Life on the Seas: Because much of our time involved boats, I'm going to dispense with the temptation to repetitively describe boat-related things throughout the report - and just lay out what I think are issues people considering a sailing trip in the Galapagos should hear. First of all, my camping and rafting experience was extremely useful for dealing with boats. The Diamante, a 40-something year old, 110-ish foot long motorized sailing ship, is among the fleet belonging to the Angermeyers,

an important family who fled pre-war Germany, established their new home in Puerto Ayora (the largest town in the Galapagos, which we would visit tomorrow), and were among the first to promote small-ship tourism in the islands. Most high-end tour companies (Wilderness Travel and Mountain Travel Sobek being groups I know about) contract ships/crews from this fleet. I am not as familiar with other groups or kinds of boats - although I know there are bigger ones (which I don't support) and I know there are cheaper/lower-end ones (which often can be reserved on a first-come-first-serve basis in Puerto Ayora, reached by bus and then ferry from Baltra). The US State Department and Lonely Planet caution that on-the-spot tours with lower-end boats represent something of a wild west/crapshoot, with many complaints about problematic fee/money negotiating, last-second boat/crew changes (usually for the worse), bad room arrangements - and/or outright safety issues (e.g. food, water, sanitation, rescue features...). If in doubt, consider that 5 ships have sunk during tours in the Galapagos since 1990; indeed, it is wise to remind yourself that you are no longer in the US when sailing around the remote Galapagos - and, for that reason, probably want to use someone reputable. Also - according to our pre-trip literature, an on-demand helicopter evacuation from the islands to the mainland costs about \$16,000 - PAID UPFRONT (i.e. before they agree to come for you) with cash or plastic. Finally, even though the Galapagos Islands look tiny - the total sailing time for our 8-day trip was 600-700 miles (moving, maximally, 8-10 knots/hour) - definitely a LOT of time spent rocking, rolling, and offering the potential for problems (especially if you elect to ride on a sub-standard ship). Had you asked me, before this trip, how many miles I thought we were going to sail, I probably would have guessed 200-300.



Left to Right: (top) Baltra pier, Diamante, panga; (bottom) Allison on deck, so-called dry landing; foot/shoe-washing station

The usual schedule on these trips is to anchor down during the day and move/motor at night - which is extremely wavy, as was the case every night (and, yes, this is typical for December). There also can be short daytime passages (1-3 hours), usually during lunch and/or the siesta. While I never, like, threw up, my brain/inner ear acclimatized so hard to the motion that, by day 4, I was experiencing "dock-rock" every time we hit dry land (i.e. I still felt like I was rolling with the ocean even though we were on terra firma). This continued for 8 days after the trip (actually getting worse and interfering with my sleep) to the point I sought medical advice, and - upon taking high-dose/prescription meclizine (related to Dramamine, which didn't work) for 10 days - I was cured. Consequently, I STRONGLY recommend everyone come prepared. Living on the ocean is VERY intense - nothing like river rafting; indeed, none of my nearly 2000 miles of experience with whitewater remotely suggested I would have this kind of response. Half our group wore patches dispensing anti-motion drugs - although they said they knew from previous experience that they would have been sick if they were not taking med's. When leaving the main boat, all parties don provided PFD's for rides on the dinghy-like panga (ours was a hard-shell long motorboat, no cover) - moving either onto dry land or to snorkeling features. Prior to this trip, I was asked by a colleague (Mike - his mother wants to do this trip as a single traveler) to assess how easy this trip would be for a moderately active older person - adding that she only wanted to do a trip with "dry landings" (i.e. what he/she thought meant pulling up to a well-defined pier and stepping firmly off the panga). Given that information (and my constant question: would MY mother be able or want to do this?), I will say outright that I thought the hardest part of this trip involved getting on/off the panga - no matter from where, to where. The Diamante was probably harder than some other boats we saw because its main deck was so high off the water; accessing the panga meant making your way down a suspended stairwell that ended about 3 feet above the waves. Although the crew was always there to help (forming a line of hands to grab between all points), I would have been unnerved by all the stepping between moving boats if I was older, traveling alone, or had no comparable experience (e.g. rafting). If you asked me which was easier: dry landings, wet landings, or just getting between the panga and the main boat - I would say: (easiest) wet, (moderately difficult) getting between the panga and the main boat, and (hardest) dry (only 1 of which - excluding Baltra - involved a full-on pier). And, NO, my mother would not like any boat transactions - much less having to maintain balance an/oror actively hold onto things on the main ship, like, 90% of the time. While I do think kids probably would enjoy boat life, I'm not convinced they are old enough to truly appreciate the islands and all they represent (i.e. that spending this much to take a little kid is worth it).

In terms of the actual living situation on the main boat, I'm not going to lie: Allison and I were both taken aback at first because our cabin was smaller than expected (based on our impressions of on-line pictures and the fact that this was a higher-end trip).

In terms of space, the bedroom area was comparable to a spacious tent - which is why camping prepared me well. Allison and I were given a cabin at the front of the boat - nice because there was less engine noise. But, as with bow-riding on a raft, the front definitely rises/falls more with the waves. Everyone will, regardless of cabin position, definitely want to bring earplugs - even though NOTHING fully drowns out the sound of the engine or, as we learned, the HUGE sound and feel when the anchor gets dropped (typically between 2 and 5 a.m.). Only near the end of the trip did some of us manage to sleep through the anchor dropping. Some people in the middle of the boat complained of nearly constant sounds at night - usually attributed to stored materials that were sliding back and forth within the stairwell, hitting their cabin walls as the boat roiled. The first night, the smell of fuel in our cabin was frightening (I seriously commented to Allison that I felt we would be taking a couple years off our lifespan if we had to inhale that for 8 days). Fortunately, said smell dissipated within 24 hours. Our cabin had bunk beds, which was fine given Allison's youth and tolerance level - but, again, my comment to Mike would be: is your mother really going to handle climbing - or putting up with an unknown roommate climbing over her - on a regular basis? The beds were comfortable and fairly roomy, which was good because Allison and I both had to store a lot of stuff in them. There was a temperamental air conditioning unit (which we sometimes used) and a fan (which we always used) - mostly because the room easily became stuffy or outright stinky with all kinds of body-related smells. Ironically, we often felt more cold in our rooms (because of the air conditioning) than warm - despite the fact that it was usually comfortably warm outside. Cabin walking space was almost nil: the main door was about 18 inches and, when opened, it touched the edge of my lower bunk. Unlike lower-end ships, there were small private bathrooms. While the showers were amazingly good (high pressure, responsive temperature controls, lots of hot water), the bathroom was VERY cozy, with room for either 1 easily shamed person or 2 shameless sisters (i.e. as long as you were each comfortable using the toilet in another's presence, you both could get a lot done). Indeed, Allison and I were TOO comfortable with one another - there were far TOO many shared naked and/or peeing/pooping moments than I care to admit. For better or worse, I can think of only one other person on earth that I would consider sharing a cabin like this with. Consequently, I would NOT recommend single travelers consider sharing such a living space with an assigned stranger roommate (regardless of the cost!). Even couples I know would probably only survive well if they adopted a one-person-in-the-room policy and stuck with it (except, of course, during the night while sleeping).



Left to Right: (top) bunk beds, bathroom, lunch area; (bottom) indoor lounge, lunch in progress (with tarp up), fruit - mmm

Although the cabins were small, the rest of the boat felt large enough for people to spread out if they wanted space/privacy. There was a fully-indoor lounge, which we enjoyed snacks/cocktails in while watching our leader's nightly presentations (full-on PowerPoint slideshows) and - at least twice - had to use for dinner because of windy weather. Near the lounge, there was fresh/filtered water (with both cold and nearly-boiling taps), cookies/crackers, and tea/coffee bags always available. There was also a refrigerator with soda and alcoholic drinks - these items for sale via an honor system. Most hard-core drinkers (Allison and I were NOT among these) bought their own liquor in Puerto Ayora, however. In contrast, Allison would remark that she behaved in a most Mormon manner on this trip: no alcohol or caffeine most of the week. We ate most meals (dinners did include a couple bottles of free wine per night) at the outdoor dining table in the back of the boat. While the temperatures were never too hot or cold for eating outside, the level of sun or wind could make or break a meal; fortunately, they usually put up a tarp for the former. A single cook (and his very small kitchen) was in charge of all meals, and 2 other crewmembers (who were also in charge of maintaining cabins and helping with the panga) helped with serving and clean-up. There was also the captain and his chief engineer - totaling 5 (all male) crewmembers - in addition to Biti, our trip leader/guide. None of the ship crew was involved with on-land hikes - although most did partake in crew soccer games (which competed with other crews) at a couple designated places, and a few went snorkeling with us. In total, then, there were 11 passengers, Biti, and 5 crewmembers. Biti, a 30-something Ecuadorian from Puerto Ayora, commanded full respect by all. By decree from Ecuador's national park service equivalent, all tourist ships operating in the Galapagos are required to have a licensed guide who is in charge of educating the passengers and keeping them in line during the trip (including physically keeping them together on well-defined paths and within certain water boundaries). The Lonely Planet suggested that previous guide

licensure required some level of education/exam proficiency but that these policies have, more recently, gotten watered down (leaving some lower-end boats with less educated guides). Biti, however, was definitely experienced and well-educated, holding degrees in natural history and tourism from mainland Ecuador. She was also extremely competent and serious, whether hiking, giving a detailed lecture, or snorkeling with us. As such, she is the best female guide I've ever had - and stands equal with stunning Alsek Brian and crazy Chilko Mark as the best leaders I've worked with. While she doesn't work exclusively for Wilderness Travel, she is one of their main rotating guides for this trip and - if I were going to do this trip again - I would seek her out and recommend others do so as well.



Left to Right: Seymour trail, coastal zone with red succulent Sesuvium plants, Sagitta and Daphne Major just after sunset

Back to the Linear Narrative: Given that introduction, I will now attempt to return to the trip report where I left off. Again, we were the first group on our panga, on our ship, and heading out to sea. Given all the airport delays, it was late (about 2, the Galapagos being an hour behind the mainland), and the crew definitely wasted no time in trying to catch us up (our goal being a late afternoon visit to Seymour Island, just north of Baltra). This meant we had 30 minutes to prepare for lunch (i.e. little time to consider our feelings about the small cabin - particularly given that the anchor was up almost instantly and we were definitely cruising). I didn't record all our meals and so I cannot recall what, specifically, we enjoyed that day. In general, lunches included 5-7 oval casserole dishes full of food. In contrast with my expectations, there were more people who did not eat a lot of fish... although I don't know if that explained our meat/fish-balanced menu's. Most dishes were well-cooked (probably for health-sanitation reasons), although there was always a fresh vegetable salad (with some combination of lettuce, tomatoes, cabbage, cucumbers, and pickled vegetables) and usually a plate of freshly cut-up fruit. I especially enjoyed the diverse fresh fruit beverages, all of which seemed to have been made from scratch; plus, Allison will tell you, they kept me enviously regular. After lunch, we sailed another 60-90 minutes - during which time Allison and I began to more carefully organize the cabin. I would say we disembarked the ship between 4-5 p.m. for Seymour. As with all spots on this trip, there were at least 3 other boats anchored nearby. While a couple people found this upsetting because it indicated too-high levels of impact, I - frankly - found it somewhat welcome because it seemed like a good safety net. This reality also meant that we were usually near another boat/tour group on all the trails, while this was more problematic to me, I simply accepted it.

The seas around Seymour seemed especially choppy as we descended to the panga (which was rising and falling 1-2 feet with each wave) and made our way to a naked low wall of black lava. Indeed, THIS was a typical dry landing. As we got closer, though, you could see these vague steps that had been chopped into the rock (even at the time, these reminded me of so-called steps that had been chipped into the granite between Snow Lake and the Enchantments). That the rock was wet from the surf did not help - although most rocks near landing sites were not slimy. Where we pulled in, the incoming surf raised and lowered the boat 1-3 feet with each swell, meaning most people (once it was their turn to disembark) were standing (hand-in-hand with the guides) and trying to keep their balance while waiting for the right moment to jump to the rock. All the while, the buzz of the motor churned to hold us in place against the rock. In contrast with my usual Chaco loyalties, I preferred wearing my low-ankle Keen boots (yes, full-on boots) during all dry landings and hikes on this trip. My single attempt to wear Chaco's was really painful - both in terms of sand issues and sunburn. Arriving that first day at Seymour, I was the first one off the panga (with Allison right behind); all I remember is being completely blown away because - within 20 feet - there were baby seals, crabs, boobies, and lizards that you actively had to avoid stepping on (and, other than the crabs, they didn't move as you approached). In general, Allison had to tell me not to step on something I didn't see on the trail 2-3 times a day. Developed in the 1960's, the Galapagos trail system is (for better) extremely limited. Visitors are only allowed to anchor and disembark at certain locations - and, once on land, they must stay on the trail. Trails are obviously marked by low black and white posts that define 2-8 foot sections of walking space. The longest trail we walked was 2-3 miles - so nobody should go to the Galapagos expecting to do any extensive hikes. But, on each day, we typically did 3 activities, which included 1-2 trail hikes and something in the water... so we were occupied well. One big hiking disappointment, though, is that you can no longer ascend any volcanoes; they used to allow climbs into some crater with giant tortoises (including camping en route) but then some major goat-killing campaign was initiated and they closed the route. Anyway - immediately after disembarking, another tour/panga was on our heels (the family-dominated Wilderness Travel/Sagitta ship party, who generally shadowed us the whole way around). Fortunately, this was a loop route and so they went counterclockwise and we went clockwise. Although I am typically not a big fan of megafauna, I did enjoy all the fascinating land animals on this trip (probably because they didn't include any human-eating predators). As a scientist (and a microbiologist with a brand new camera), though, I was not as into listening to all the talks about the animals while in their presence. While Biti excelled at discussing everything in great detail, I (maybe because I lecture so much for my own work) was more into watching things or trying to photograph things quietly on my own. I'm sure there are other people who would feel likewise - and so it is safe to say that, in contrast with some of my preconceptions about this trip, our group (well-behaved and fairly quiet adults) were given plenty of space during land walks to enjoy things at our own pace and in our own way. I just hope Biti didn't take it personally that I didn't hang on/listen to her every word. Interestingly, her detailed on-ship presentations were things I completely savored - probably because there wasn't competing sensory overload in terms of live animals doing interesting things. Also, I enjoyed reading

Jackson's Galapagos. A Natural History after the trip a great deal - which greatly assisted my writing of this report. After scrambling through basking seals up the lava coastal zone, we hit basically flat, arid land. Although there were low cacti (mostly small prickly pear) and trees (mostly palo santo, a relative of frankincense), none of the latter had leaves given that it was the dry season. Here, the whistling male and honking female blue-footed boobies (BFB's, from here on out) were stunning - half nesting on the ground within obvious/distinctive guano rings, and the rest seeking mates via the aforementioned sounds and posing (the males do this crazy sky-pointing thing and definitely display their feet). BFB's were on most islands we visited and never ceased to fascinate me.



Left to Right: (top) seal pup napping 20 feet from landing, arid zone palo santo and prickly pear, BFB; (bottom) frigate birds - male in flight, mixed, including inflated male, adolescent female

Entering a brushy area, we then came to the frigate birds. Seymour was the only island we visited with grounded/nesting frigate birds - unfortunate because I was so overwhelmed, not to mention intimidated with my camera because I didn't have a good sense of its vast memory or battery capacity. Few of the males (famous for their red inflatable pouches) were displaying - the most dramatic example being a LONG way off. This was the ONLY occasion where I wished I had a longer lens. After returning home, though, I discovered that the HUGE image resolution allowed me to zoom in and crop out detailed sections - which is why the frigate pictures look more impressive than they felt at the time. From the frigate colony, we descended through rocky terrain to the coastal zone, where a fall-like carpet of red succulent sesuvium defined the transition to the beach. BFB's, seals, and more frigate birds were everywhere. We walked along a sandy trail as the sun set alongside Daphne Major, the setting for the Grant's contemporary studies of finch evolution (summarized in Beak of the Finch). Even though we were not visiting Daphne, sources suggest that some groups can request a landing in advance (although it is said to be one of the hardest - with always-rough seas and a high, nearly vertical lava shelf to scramble). After what were impressively long days in Chile last winter, our days along the equator seemed short - the sun setting between 6-7 (albeit staying warm). Thus, we returned to the waiting panga and made our way back for dinner and a presentation about tomorrow. All shoes worn on land were cleaned between hikes and we were required to immediately store them in a deck bin to avoid contaminating them with anything on the rest of the boat (like junk in our cabin or food, which contained seeds).



Left to Right: Santa Fe - first sea turtle during panga ride, great wet landing, various hiking shots in the cactus forest

Sante Fe and Santa Cruz (Puerto Ayora/National Park/Darwin Center) - December 20, 2007

After a fairly full night of motoring and a moderately good sleep (I have vague recollections of the anchor dropping around 4 a.m.), we anchored down in a stunning blue bay. Biti said this area used to be a prime snorkeling/diving area but, sadly, shark attacks (possibly facilitated by illegal chumming) had closed water-touring. A private group of divers, however, was seen disobeying the rules (including swimming in the boat lanes), and so our crew talked with them and alerted the authorities. Today was a wonderful wet landing. Barefoot but carrying boots, we motored across the bay - witnessing the first of MANY sea turtles. Over time, we could spot them almost everywhere: dark things always near the surface, regularly breaching their

distinctly shaped heads. We pulled up in the sand and disembarked into the ankle-to-knee deep waves. Pairs were given fresh towels for wiping down and drying feet before putting on socks and shoes. As Allison learned, it was good to carry 1-2 L of water and sunscreen for all land trips. Although I shared said things from my fanny pack, I increased my water carriage over time because you really needed it. Biti recommended a rain jacket (perhaps because she seemed colder than the rest of us), but I only carried a midweight top. Indeed, it NEVER rained. Even so, I mostly wore full-length nylon pants (which could be easily rolled up) - because of sunburn issues.



Left to Right: (top) Allison and tree cactus, dried cactus pad, land iguana; (bottom) lava lizard, Sally lightfoot crab, baby seals

The morning's hike was no more than 1.5 miles, but did have more elevation change than Seymour. While the zones covered were the same (coastal and arid), today's hike featured tree cacti (same prickly pear but 8-10 feet tall and barky), lava lizards, and land iguanas, which were not as prevalent or numerous as the marine form. The former, apparent from the main ship, gave the land a Dr. Seuss-like feel. The coastal area provided more active seals and our first chance to take close-ups of the striking Sally lightfoot crabs (a close second for my favorite Galapagos animal). A stinging marine fire-worm (which looked like a little, spiky sea cucumber) was floating near the boat during our wet embarkation, making for some mild excitement. Given early wake-up calls (breakfast was typically served at 7), we were back to the boat by around 10, with plans to put the sails up (mostly to amuse us tourists) and motor a couple hours to Puerto Ayora, the largest and primary town, on nearby Santa Cruz. Although I didn't realize it at the time, today was a diversion from the published itinerary; at least 1 person seemed slightly upset by this (mostly because we were to have spent the day at San Cristobal, including snorkeling). I liked the itinerary at the time and don't regret not making the HUGE sail to Cristobal - because our days were plenty busy and scenic.



Left to Right: (top) Capitan, Puerto Ayora harbor, main pier with freight; (bottom) waterfront scenes, cemetery

Even though Puerto Ayora was busy (20-40 boats in the harbor), I liked the opportunity to fully visit the park headquarters and to be able to explore the town with a couple hours on our own. It also gave Biti, who lived there and would be spending Christmas with us on the boat, to visit her kids (who were staying with their grandparents). After pulling into the busy harbor,

we squeezed in between the Angermeyer complex and another boat (who didn't seem to appreciate our efforts) before heading, in our panga, to the official pier (the only real pier we encountered beyond Baltra) where several other pangas as well as freight was being unloaded. We split into several cars for a taxi-ride to the park headquarters (just over a mile away). In contrast with the other island areas we'd seen, the coastal area around town was thick with this transition zone of tangled shrubs interspersed with trees and cacti. I cannot say the park entrance was impressive; there was hardly a spot for a car to park (much less 4). Aside from a big map and a small labeled building, it felt like we were in the middle of nowhere.



Left to Right: (top) park entrance, typical trail (note candelabra cacti), decked trails; (middle) giant tortoise center; (bottom) fecund female turtles Allison and I affectionately called Slutty Georgette, lava lizard

Had we not been with a guide, I don't think we would have learned much. While there were self-guided exhibits at certain points, I remained a little mystified much of our time walking around the complex. The major focus of the park was conservation - with the biggest emphases being land tortoises (Galapagos actually means tortoise) and indigenous plants. Obviously, the former is sexier and, as most people probably know, the tortoise population was nearly wiped out by human impact (buccaneers and fishermen being top culprits). Darwin's own journals describe - in grizzly detail - the plundering of turtles (dozens to hundreds often removed daily) because they were easy to catch and survived for months without food and water (i.e. could be stored on the ship and harvested for long periods of time). Although the park has successfully developed a tortoise breeding program (i.e. eggs are incubated and young are reared until they are large enough to not be picked off by birds) and reintroduced tortoises to some islands, we NEVER saw a single tortoise except in the reserve (i.e. there is a LONG way to go with this project). Even though humans no longer hunt turtles, human-created impacts (like introduced pigs and goats) continue to negatively affect the turtle population, usually by destroying eggs or young. One of the lighter (but still dark/sad) stories we saw/heard was that of Lonesome George (who was mostly hiding from us in some bushes), the last surviving male from Pinta (a small northern island we did not visit). Evolutionarily, most turtles from different islands are genetically distinct enough that they can no longer interbreed. There is an entire book about George, who is estimated to be about 70 years old (out of a 100-year lifespan) and the fascinating search for a genetically suitable mate - either on Pinta or through in vitro fertilization techniques (which involve a couple female animal behavior/husbandry experts - the only people who have ever been able to coax sperm from George). Alas, though, George's sperm appears weak, suggesting that - even if there were females on Pinta during George's time there - he is likely impotent... and will remain forever Lonesome. Anyway - after visiting the turtle breeding/rearing areas, we visited some captive-bred land iguanas and then Biti dropped us off at the gift shop - where MUCH money was spent by all (mostly on park T-shirts). Before leaving to visit her family, she said we were on our own until 6, including finding out way back to town. En route, Allison and I finally stumbled into the official Charles Darwin Research Station and passed the impressive botany/greenhouse facilities. I think it goes without saying that, as a scientist, I was most interested in visiting the Galapagos because of their pivotal relationship with Darwin and evolution. Disturbingly, Biti - at some point (upon being asked... and NOT just by me) - did say that guides were typically advised to focus on the historical side of Darwin and evolution... obviously to avoid upsetting any fundamentalist bible-thumpers, typically drawn to the islands because they represented some kind of eden. As a scientist, I found all this wrong - and the park and

government should be ashamed if it is promoting this kind of propaganda (frankly, though, the US is no better - given recent clashes over park materials at the Grand Canyon). Leading our mostly liberal group, Biti always seemed exact and thorough in her discussions of geologic time, speciation, and natural selection - although she probably would not have gone into that kind of detail if we hadn't asked, or if she believed the group was not going to be receptive. After hiking down the brush-sided main road, Allison and I did a little more shopping and then explored the small waterfront area - some kind of holiday pageant taking place on a big stage by the beach. But we were on a mission: thanks to exchanging oral microbes with her new boyfriend, Allison had picked up a WICKED throat infection that was growing more painful with every passing hour. While I advocated picking up full-on antibiotics (yes - available over-the-counter), she insisted that more ibuprofen and lozenges were all she was willing to take. We also stopped in a weirdly-stocked grocery store for throat-soothing lemon juice and tea. After regrouping at the pier, we headed back to the boat for dinner. With plans to depart at 10, Biti gave folks the option of heading into town for after-dinner nightlife (which Allison and I were not interested in). Amusingly, the one couple who did go ashore again searched fruitless for someplace to dance - eventually giving up, getting their hair trimmed, and returning.



Left to Right: greenhouse for propagating native plants, Allison and Darwin research facility, ground finch

Espanola (Gardner Bay/Island and Suarez Point) - December 21, 2007

After a fairly full night of motoring (and a very good sleep), we anchored down near small Gardner Island by Espanola (I have vague recollections of the anchor dropping around 5 a.m.). Unfortunately, Allison had developed a likely case of Strep throat that was moving into her ears. Biti was able to call a larger neighboring ship (with a medical doctor on board) and obtain erythromycin, a broad-spectrum antibiotic (Allison is allergic to penicillin/derivatives, which I was carrying). Consequently, we put her back to bed most of the day. Perhaps these things (traveling without a doctor on board, receiving prescriptions without officially being checked out...) come across as questionable to many Americans; if they do, then this trip is not for you. I felt we were in great hands and thought Allison's care was better than could have been provided on most US wilderness trips. Today's pre-lunch activities (a panga tour/kayak option, our first snorkeling trip, and a short hike) were a little awkward and stressful - not only because Allison was sick but also because we were trying to cram in a lot of stuff. First on the agenda was a panga-tour around Gardner. Its sheer, vertical lava cliffs were threatening and dark - moreso because I knew this was also where we were going to be snorkeling. A few years ago, Allison and I were really gung-ho about a so-called kayaking-focused Galapagos trip run by a rafting company (i.e. each pair had a kayak and there were 1-2 short kayak trips each day). Our trip (like most) offered the potential to kayak a little - meaning 2 double-kayaks total would be available a couple times. At first, Allison and I were not sure this was going to satisfy us because it didn't sound like we'd be doing much (indeed, each person spent 30-40 minutes total on the water during this entire trip). However, having seen the islands - and understanding the level of regulation - Allison and I did not regret having more kayaks or more time on the water during this trip. The only places you are allowed to kayak are in major bays, always near big boats and landing sites. The water was always rough and choppy, offering little near-the-land time because of big surf (and even if you got close to the rocks, everything was dark). Perhaps it would have been cool to kayak through the mangrove swamps (to be described later) - but, honestly, what we did in terms of panga-touring was completely satisfying - and we probably saw more because Biti could easily talk with us and keep things quiet as we approached wildlife that we wouldn't have seen without her. My opinion is that kayaking on this trip was more about amusing a few passengers and trying and look competitive with a couple companies who tout this activity.



Left to Right: Gardner activities - kayaking, lava heron, returning to the boat after our dark snorkel along the wall

After breakfast, we all (minus Allison) headed into the panga. Two couples kayaked 30 minutes while we motored around the rocky island wall - Biti's talk focused on geology, marine biology, and the interesting birds - like the lava heron, a foot-tall heron I'd never heard of before. After catching up with the kayakers, 2 other couples traded in as the rest of us motored back. That morning, a solo woman traveler and I did not get to kayak at all (we had our turn later, with Allison and Biti). We then headed back to the Diamante and got suited up for snorkeling. Despite requests to do so, I never found time to practice snorkeling at/near home. For \$80, I did buy short travel flippers, a good breathing tube, and a stock prescription mask (analogous to

reading glasses - that only corrected distance, not astigmatism) from a great on-line company called SnorkelMart.com; they answered questions well over the phone and included a fortune cookie that read "There will be snorkeling in your future" (that cracked me up) in the delivered package. Allison and I did have the sense to bring our farmer-john wetsuits (those provided by the ship were shorties). Biti and another guy both wore full-body suits, which seemed the smartest given jellyfish at the Devil's Crown. Part of the reason I hadn't prepared before the trip was because Allison had snorkeled before and so I was counting on her as my guide. And so I nervously joined the panga group, actively telling Biti I would be shadowing her - which was fine. Before I knew it, we were over the side. I had been told (and many resources suggest) that snorkeling in the Galapagos is harder and less satisfying than doing so in, say, the South Pacific. Although I cannot make direct comparisons, things did seem somewhat challenging and the views were not astounding much of the time. Indeed, choppy seas make for LOTS of cloudy, churning water. The typical backdrop of dark lava also does not provide a lot of contrast. Although I was happy with what snorkeling I accomplished, I have not returned from this trip with any great interest in more snorkeling. This morning's experience was the least appealing: we began in a shallow section (and did see a sea turtle almost immediately) but quickly began hugging the deepening edges along the cliffs. Because the rocky walls were so dark, you couldn't see much - and what I mostly felt was this sense of deep darkness just beyond the lava... the bottom quickly vanishing into nothingness. One playful seal followed us a bit - but mostly, I felt moderately terrified of giant things like sharks or rays emerging from the darkness. While the snorkeling gear performed fairly well, I occasionally fought a few slow leaks and/or breaches down the tube. Thus, the other thing that surprised me was how salty the water was (it's easily been 20 years since I swam in the ocean). After 20-30 minutes, Biti summoned us to the panga, which always drifted within 30 feet of the crowd, awaiting signals for pick-up requests. As I hoisted myself awkwardly into the panga (aided by a wood ladder), I was surprised to find 3 others had gotten out early, unable to sustain the cold. This situation repeated throughout the trip - although, in my opinion, the water was not THAT cold (especially by comparison with North American rivers). We then returned to the Diamante and Biti said we had 20 minutes to get ready for our next activity, a wet landing and short hike along Espanola's beach. This gave me the chance to enjoy a quick shower - although, over time, Biti seemed less thrilled we were all showering so much (likely because a few people took longer than she asked). As I bombed through the cabin, Allison was lying in bed - fairly out of it.



Left to Right: beach at Gardner Bay - various shots of seals and mockingbird

While satisfying, our beach trip entailed the shortest total walk (a quarter mile along the white sand). Nevertheless, it was highly scenic, offering amazing views of the brilliant blue bay, the contrasting blue-white sky, the largest seal colony we'd see, and inquisitive mockingbirds (prevalent on all islands). Given a clearly-luscious wet landing, I decided to go fully barefoot. Well - all my sunscreen washed off and I ended up with a big burn across the top of both feet. Fortunately, I had full-on aloe gel and most of the pain was gone over the next 24 hours. Even so, putting on my boots was not pleasant. The other thing that was unpleasant given bare feet was seal waste, both obvious shit and invisible pee. Fortunately, after many of us (including me) stepped in seal shit during our hike at Santa Fe (and spent a LOT of time scrubbing those lug soles), we were far more observant on this beach. Like most others, I took 2-3 dozen photographs - but only included a few here. After 60-90 minutes, we made our way back. Once we were back on board, lunch was served within an hour - and we enjoyed a 2-hour siesta while motoring to the other end of Espanola, a rocky point called Punta Suarez.



Left to Right: another so-called dry landing with seals, colorful marine iguana, cute baby seal near BFB nesting area

In retrospect, this was my second favorite hike on the whole trip - and, not surprisingly, it was both longer (2-3 miles) and rougher/rockier. We set out in the panga around 3:30, the sun low and the light interesting. Puente Suarez was the only place we ever saw 2 key birds: waved albatross and Nazca boobies. The dry landing was along a natural rock jetty, a portion of which had been modified with a few dollops of semi-smooth concrete (notably occupied by seals when we arrived). All over the rocks were marine iguanas displaying classic Christmas colors (supposedly just the males, signifying mating season). For 20 minutes, our group was dumbfounded trying to admire and photograph all this stuff. Eventually, we moved on to another BFB nesting area - this time complete with baby BFB (downy with white puffy feathers). From here, we scrambled through

rocks, gradually ascending to this flat rocky plain where adult albatrosses were nesting and showing some signs of their beaky dancing. Although many of us wanted bigger camera lenses at this point, we soon came upon an adolescent albatross right on the trail. Today's hike was crowded - with us timing our movements against 4-5 other parties behind or in front of us, or coming around the opposite direction. After watching the albatross for quite awhile, we proceeded down this rocky gully where we saw Nazca boobies. We then climbed through the bird/guano-festooned rocks before climbing up again - greeted, at the top, by the aforementioned adolescent albatross AND a spectacular vista over the impressive cliffs and an amazing blowhole.



Left to Right: (top) dancing male BFB, BFB mother and chick, albatross beak dancing; (middle) hiking into gully, Nazca booby, cliff edge; (bottom) young albatross, blowhole, rocky plateau

Biti then asked whether we wanted to take the short or long way back (I think she wanted to do the former, given that it was definitely getting late). But we wanted the latter - and so we danced across a really rocky plateau, between the skeletal branches of the leafless shrubbery. I hung considerably behind the group, fascinated with all the rustling sounds of small birds. In addition to many finches, I finally saw a Galapagos dove (which others had seen on Seymour). Within 20 minutes, we were back near the landing jetty - a lovely oystercatcher bedding down by the trail for the night. As the sun set, we boarded the panga - the surf seeming especially large and ferocious. Allison, who managed to join us, said the hike had done her well; she was already feeling much improved - and would only continue to do so.



Left to Right: Galapagos dove, oystercatcher, sunset from jetty - note lighthouse

Floreana (Devil's Crown, Punta Cormorant, and Post Office Bay) - December 22, 2007

After a light night of motoring, we anchored down (at around 2 a.m.) near the threatening black rocks of the Devil's Crown, an off-shore volcanic crater remnant (our first activity for the morning). Although Devil's Crown is said to offer some of the best snorkeling in the islands, it is not an easy or guaranteed feature - given that high tides, big winds, and strong currents can all shut down touring for safety reasons. Once Biti declared it was safe enough, we suited up (Allison's energy back up to the 90% level) and headed out. At least 2 other snorkeling groups were making their way around the circular formation - with

etiquette and/or safety dictating that everyone go counterclockwise (starting at what I would call the 4 o'clock position, where noon is the highest from Floreana proper). The water was clearer than yesterday, with less of an elevation drop along the highly decorated lava flanks. While we saw many obvious, colorful fish, invertebrates, and a few ominous-looking rays, there were no seals or turtles. Unfortunately, the water was thick with small jellyfish (the body was the size of a plum but the tendrils hung down 12-18 inches). Not surprisingly, 3 of us were stung - including me. Unbeknownst to me (before I was stung), 4-5 people had already pulled out because of stings, cold, or being nervous about the current (which, as you rounded the crown to 11 o'clock, became fierce and very pushy against the sharp lava). Immediately after I was stung (a tendril wrapping in a spiral manner down the length of my bare arm), I calmly signaled Biti and she pulled everyone out of the water. Once we were all on board, Biti distributed an ammonia bite stick to those of us who were stung. Although my red welts were gone within a few hours, other people seemed to remain inflamed longer.



Left to Right: all shots from the Devil's Crown snorkeling trip - note ray and Chocolate Chip sea star

After quick showers, we set out by panga to the main island's Punta Cormorant (although we saw no cormorants) and its green/olivine beach. Owing to a fixed hot spot and plate tectonics, volcanoes become younger and more cone-like as you proceed east. Today was the first time we saw traditional cones. This was also our first opportunity to see flamingoes. Just inland, there are vast depressions that occasionally fill with seawater during large tide or storm events - becoming salt lakes for many months. First, we hiked to the edge of one such lake and, indeed, there were half a dozen distant flamingoes. In general, the scenery - both the land and the eerie brown/green water - reminded me of funky thermal lakes in Yellowstone, albeit with pink flamingoes. After climbing to a saddle and admiring the impressive view, we dropped to a white sand beach unofficially known as flower beach (why, I don't know); a portion was cordoned off because it was obviously used for turtle nesting (i.e. it bore digging patterns). After exploring some tide pools, we returned to the boat, ate lunch, and sailed 1-2 hours to another part of the island, Post Office Bay. Here, those of us who hadn't kayaked yesterday went for a short paddle: to the far end of the landing beach, along the beach, back out into the bay, around other anchored ships, and back to our boat.



Left to Right: succulent Sesuvium plants, volcano and salt lake - flamingo, Allison at flower beach

Post Office Bay, like much of Floreana, is obviously impacted by early settlers. Consequently, ship crews have developed a soccer area (likely against park rules). After watching the in-progress game for 30 minutes, we hiked to the official post office. Whalers/fishermen used this spot as the common place to share mail. As was the case, there is/was barrel for letters - and a bunch of relics that people have left there. As was the custom, you check the barrel for letters to places you can hand-deliver (NO using regular mail); you can also leave a letter. I was surprised how few letters to Washington or Oregon there were - particularly given the "Pacific Lutheran U" (my parents' alma mater) license bracket nailed up amidst the junk. Farther up, some concrete foundation pieces were all that remained from a 1920's Norwegian fishing establishment. Above that, we explored a lava tube cave, which involved scrambling to the point I did not to take my camera (a picture from Biti was included inside the cavern). Amazingly, we descended to where tidewater flowed in, forming this spooky underground lagoon. Other notable inhabitants from Floreana (which confers its haunted reputation) include an Ecuadorian penal colony from the 1800's and these crazy Europeans who sought island life during the early 1900's for reasons of escape, utopia, and/or self-promotion - but ultimately hated each other to the point there is strong speculation (and some evidence) that some of them resorted to

murdering cohabitants. The most intriguing characters among these groups include the Baroness and her 3 lovers, and Dr. Ritter (and his mistress) who yanked out their own teeth to avoid dental problems and claimed to be vegetarians (even though Ritter ultimately died from eating poisoned or rancid chicken). Perhaps not surprisingly, our only accident happened on Floreana: one person took a fall coming down some lava rocks, drawing blood from a couple spots. She was ultimately fine - but, again, I had to ask myself whether my (or Mike's) mom would be able to easily do the hikes. Once we arrived back to the Diamante, we immediately started motoring (it was 4 p.m.) because today/tonight's route was one of the longest, a 12-hour passage to Isabela (the largest island), around to Punta Moreno on her west side (with an anchor drop between 3-4 a.m.).



Left to Right: (top) soccer field, post office, me and Allison posing as BFB's; (bottom) Norwegian structures, lava tube cave

Isabela, Part One (Punta Moreno, Elizabeth Bay) - December 23, 2007

After a long night of moving, we anchored down under Volcan St. Thomas/Sierra Negra. The morning hike remains Allison and my most favorite of the trip: a one-way hike across amazing lava fields, which we entered and exited via mangrove swamps (a dominant feature until the end of the trip). Our panga ride took us into a maze of black lava and green plants, many dotted with pelican nests. Eventually, we arrived at an undeveloped dry landing of black ropy lava. The technical term for this was pahoehoe (pronounced pa-hoy-hoy), derived from a Hawaiian term meaning intestinal or feces. After a brief walk through the mangroves, we entered this incredible open field of lava that went on for miles, ultimately climbing up the volcano. Cutting inland 1 mile, we passed unusual lava formations and occasional tufts of native plants, the most distinctive being lava cactus and this pink thing Biti said was called coral something.



Left to Right: (top) landing, pelican, pahoehoe and mangrove, Biti; (bottom) lava cacti and coral plant, Allison, crater oasis

Although the hiking was not difficult, it was not traditional (i.e. everyone made up their own way on the uneven rocks within the wide boundaries of the trailmarkers). Sadly, however, Biti said that larger ships she'd guided for often objected to this hike, claiming it was horrible. Consequently, it was just us and the Sagitta group out there - all enthusiastically. Anyway - as we

began crossing more in the middle of the giant lava field, we encountered these funky depressions, each more or less filled with water and, hence, a lot of greenery. As with the Punta Cormorant area, these habitats supported flamingoes - as well as other birds such as the black-necked stilt. We took 20-30 minute stops at a couple of these craters, quietly watching and listening to the clicking siphoning being carried out by the out-of-place-looking pink flamingoes.



Left to Right: (top) flamingo shots, black-necked stilt; (bottom) heading to the sea, shark pool, white-tipped reef sharks

We then began to cut back to the sea, via a different route that was more to the west. As we neared the shore, we came to several marine pools that transiently filled during typical high tides. Remarkably, one was teeming with white-tipped reef sharks, the dominant shark in the islands. A dozen circled the pool in what seemed like an agitated manner - alongside turtles and brightly colored fish. After watching them for awhile, we found the waiting panga and headed back to the Diamante. Within the hour, we were motoring and enjoying lunch - moving a couple hours north to Elizabeth Bay. By now, I was savoring the 2-hour siestas that accompanied daytime moves. At Elizabeth, we briefly (like, under 30 minutes) snorkeled along an exposed section of rocky coastline. Biti warned us it was going to be cold - and even I found it more bracing than our other sites. Given limited views, I did not include any pictures - although there were beautiful gardens of algae, as well as stunning urchin colonies. After showering and warming up, we all climbed into the panga for a tour of the extensive mangrove swamps before taking a LONG and wavy ride around the penguin colonies at Isla Mariela (a very small, off-shore rocky island).



Left to Right: (top) setting out, flightless cormorant, quiet paddling in mangroves; (bottom) trees on stilts, red and green turtles

Our first sighting - actually somewhat before the mangroves proper - was a flightless cormorant (notably behind a curious great blue heron, which kept washing out in my attempts to photograph it). The Galapagos are the only place where cormorants have, like penguins, lost their ability to fly; the primary function of their greatly diminished wings (again, like penguins) is swimming. It is thought that the lack of predators, in combination with a rich feeding habitat, has selected for these unique cormorants. Once we were sufficiently inside the circuitous mangroves, we turned off the motor and the crew

quietly used an oar to move us slowly up and down a few narrow, dead-end channels. Sea turtles seemed like they were everywhere here, including the more obscure red variety. Biti talked about the plants and was able to identify some fancier birds by their calls - but we didn't see many of them in the thick brushy flora. In all, we spent 90 minutes exploring the swamps before heading back out. This evening felt like the most "out-there" we ever got in the tiny panga - particularly given that the seas were rough and we were a LONG way from the main island, suitable landing areas, and the Diamante. But the goal was to see the Galapagos penguin (another endemic species) and this was one of the few places they spent much time. Needless to say, there was MUCH excitement... but I'll let the pictures speak for themselves. With a nearly full moon rising, we returned for dinner and what would be a very short motor north along Isabela to Urbina Bay.



Left to Right: leaving the dusky mangroves, first sight of the penguins... more penguins; a nearly full moon rising

Isabela, Part Two (Urbina Bay) and Fernandina - December 24, 2007

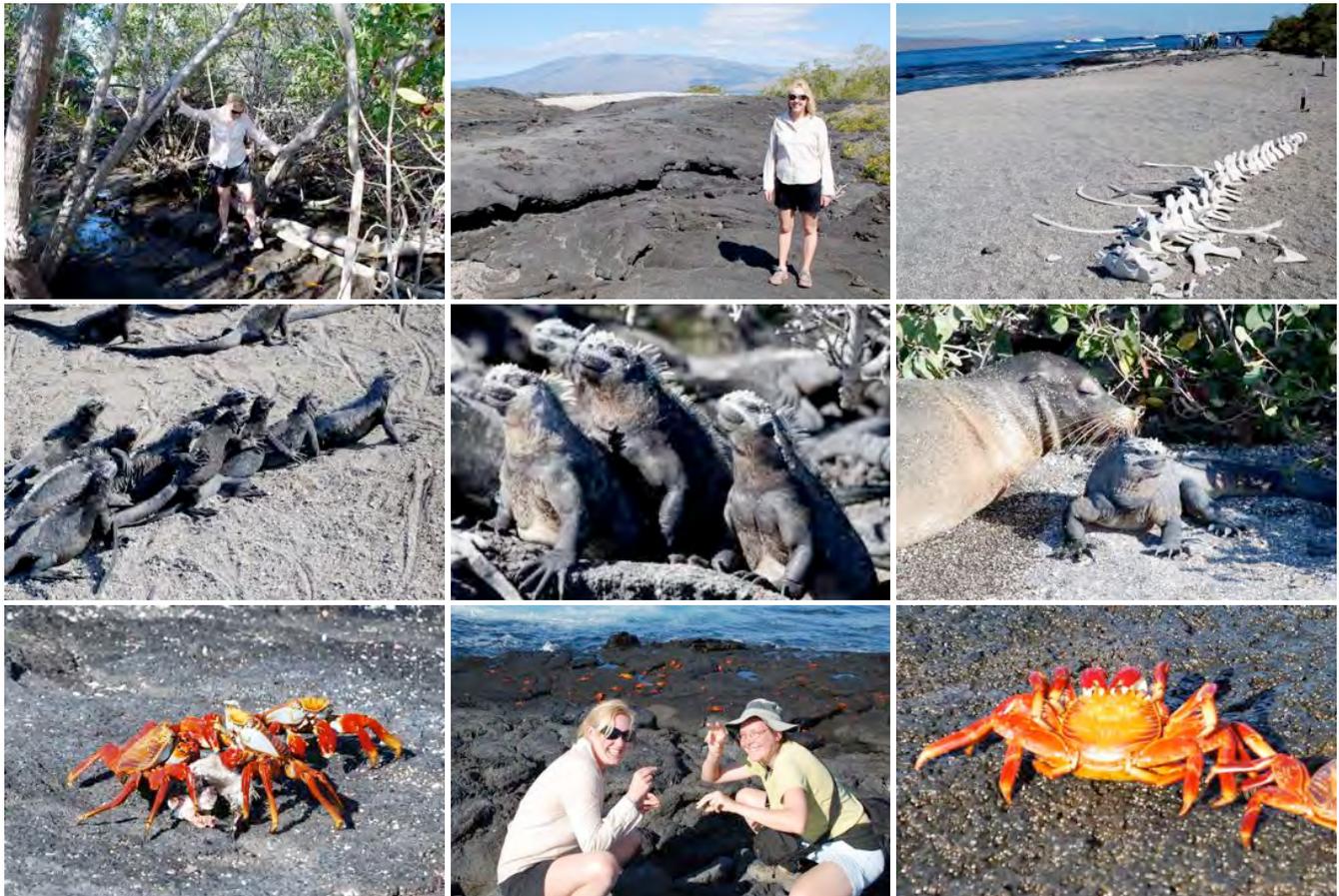
I think we anchored down in Urbina around midnight, leaving a mostly calm night in terms of sleeping. Although Urbina was my least favorite hike on this trip (mostly owing to the severe heat and so-so scenery/animal sightings), I probably would have appreciated it more had I been fully cognizant of the history: namely, that the whole former bay uplifted 15 feet over a short period in 1954 - leaving the entire marine ecosystem high and dry. Given said uplift, the approach to Urbina was definitely our most dicey, with especially large waves (4-6 foot swells) breaking near the shore - and a fairly narrow and abrupt strip of sandy beach. Looking at the waves from the Diamante, I was actually surprised our trip in went smoothly.



Left to Right: (top) insane wet landing, turtle mounds; (bottom) hiking the grassy uplift, warbler, flycatcher

Once on land, we hiked less than a mile through surprisingly thick flora - from coastal grasses and shrubs up to more arid trees, including the poison apple (which is toxic to most animals - except for a few like the giant tortoise). Biti did her best to explain the uplift, pointing out corresponding geological features - but, like I said, the heat was staggering. We climbed to a small saddle, hoping to find some tortoises - but all we saw were half a dozen land iguanas and 3 dead cats (actively poisoned by park in their ongoing efforts to eradicate non-native species), Given the abundance of so much other food, most carcasses

we saw - in general - just dried up whole in the sun, rotting into leathery mummies. We also saw some interesting smaller birds, including the yellow warbler and the female flycatcher (unfortunately her red male mate was nowhere to be found). We returned to the beach and took a little stroll along the rocky right side, admiring the tide pools and iguanas. As we walked, the Sagitta group/panga was heading out and we watched in awe as they hit, in the words of Allison, a class III wave (alas, my shot above was the next wave - only a class I). Owing to the heat, most of us took a little swim to about 20 feet out - and then just floated with the incoming waves. After 30 minutes, we headed back, our panga ride not nearly so exciting (incidentally, I fully packed my camera in the hard Pelican case for this trip - at Biti's insistence). After lunch and some motoring (with a little siesta), we arrived at Fernandina. Sadly, we only spent a couple hours on Fernandina; I say that because retired colleague Lowell spent several weeks here on a research trip during the 1970's. Even though I wanted to do this island more justice, I was feeling less motivated (not to mention the fact that my dock rock had definitely kicked in). Pressing our time further, tonight's itinerary to Santiago - like the night between Floreana and Punta Moreno - required a comparably long passage; thus, we needed to start motoring between 4-5... not to mention the fact that it was Christmas Eve and we would be enjoying a fine dinner as we officially crossed the equator (south to north).



Left to Right: (top) Allison - in the middle of the wet part of the landing, and Darwin Volcano, whale skeleton; (middle) iguanas; (bottom) crabs eating, Allison and my impression of crabs eating (note all the crabs behind us), crab sex

Given all those facts, we only hiked at Fernandina's Punta Espinosa - under the shadow of both Volcan Fernandina and Darwin. The landing was a first-dry, then-wet, then-dry thing - although you could finesse the wet part with a little balancing on rocks and roots. Hiking a short loop that took us along the coastline, we crossed lots of cool lava - all teeming with marine iguanas. Indeed, if we thought we'd seen marine iguanas before, we were wrong. Fernandina was THE place to see MASSIVE colonies - all admiring the sun (in the exact words of Biti). Nearing a section of half-exposed tidal pools, we saw more flightless cormorants and - finally - marine iguanas actually swimming in the ocean. Unfortunately, there was not enough exposed algae to see any of them foraging, something I longed to see on this trip. We also saw cute baby marine iguanas (although I kept scaring them away trying to take pictures). Their survival strategy (presumably to avoid getting picked off by birds) was to stay close to cracks in the lava such that they could dive rapidly therein if anything (like predators or me) got too close. Finally, Allison and I - while hiking somewhat behind the group - walked into 2 novel crabbie sightings: the first involved two crabs fighting over some dead fish-like object. While they both fundamentally shared the object (picking at it with their pincers and delicately placing pieces into their mouthparts), there was this interesting tug-of-war going on that was amusing - and moreso when a third crab party showed up. Within 15 minutes, we then came upon a couple of crabs who initially looked like they were battling over something - but then basically united, belly to belly (with one crab actively holding over/onto the other with his main pincers). This went on for a couple minutes - during which time we surmised that this was crab sex - before the pair came apart (and we noted an obvious underbelly "flap" unclasping - likely a crab genital). Biti, for the record, did confirm all our suspicions. Heading back, we began motoring by 4:30. Unfortunately for all of us (including the chef, who sustained several equipment crashes in his kitchen), the seas (despite not ever looking THAT rough) were something else. At some point (while in the back waiting to watch the sunset), I estimated that we were listing 20°, all the while churning forward

with a massive roll (i.e. up/down 6-10 feet). At some points, we rocked so far to the side that - from the inside lounge area - you could see waves hitting the windows - impressive given how high the main deck was above the waterline; at least one passenger went out to take a picture and came back fully drenched. And this went on for several hours, ironically lulling around the time we crossed into the northern hemisphere and ate dinner (i.e. around 8).



Left to Right: Christmas Eve on the equator - dinner preparations, chef carving the roast turkey

Dinner, a major production, featured several raised breads (savory and sweet), a fancy turkey, innumerable side dishes (including an odd attempt at stuffing that seemed more Indian than American - north or south), and baskets of chocolates (an Ecuadorian tradition, we were told). An hour or so after dinner, as Allison and I were preparing for bed, the seas became rough again - and stayed that way much of the night (perhaps corresponding to our re-crossing of the equator and reaching the more open/current-prone area between Isabela and Santiago).

Santiago and Bartolome - December 25, 2007

I don't recall when we anchored down in James Bay, a notable place where Darwin spent a lot of time. I came into our morning hike with low expectations because I was doubtful there could be any MORE new and exciting things to see. But the tide was extremely low and our walk thus focused on tide-pooling - which meant we finally got to see marine iguanas grazing on algae. But I digress. James Bay (being close to Santa Cruz and part of the "short trip" circuit) was more busy than the last 3 days (which you can only visit if you take a longer trip); indeed, we were vying with probably 4 other groups during the hike. Landing (another fine wet one) at the busy beach - complete with a seals and a spectacular tufa/lava arch - we put on our shoes and climbed over a small saddle before descending to this long beach.



Left to Right: (top) tufa and seals, dropping to beach, trail-hiking; (bottom) dried white-tipped reef shark, seal pups, tide pools

We hiked at the lava-sand interface awhile - but then took to the tide pools along this circuitous lava shelf. Said stone made for incredible water shows: toilet bowl/waterfall formations that filled and emptied, creating little Niagaras as the water emptied against the circular walls. There were also blowhole cracks and outright lava arches/bridges that we crossed. While algae were plentiful, I can't say there was as much marine life as I was expecting in the pools... yes, there were some anemones but no sea stars or much in the way of chitin etc. (not like what I've seen, say, along the Olympic coast). But seeing the iguanas munching totally made my Christmas Day - and the geology and water dynamics were like nothing I've ever seen. After half a mile, we followed the trail up onto the desert-like plateau, hiking back through the cacti and down to the landing beach. Today's snorkel proceeded straight from the beach (indeed, we'd left our stuff in an obvious pile on the front deck so the crew could haul it out by panga while we were hiking). Even though the area looked nondescript, today was the best snorkeling because: (1) you didn't have to do any crazy moves off the panga - you just ambled into the water at your leisure; (2) it was a pleasant temperature (in contrast with some peoples' opinions); and (3) we saw the coolest stuff close-up and through the clearest and calmest water: a small ray, the brightest colored algae, something called a chocolate chip sea star (which Allison

managed to take a decent photograph of), and this stunning sea turtle that just floated up before Allison and my eyes. Given that, I figured I'd seen it all and so I returned to the beach - completely satisfied. Meanwhile, Allison stayed in and actually saw a marine iguana swimming in the water - being chased by a seal no less. Oh well.



Left to Right: (top) foraging marine iguana and toilet bowel/waterfalls; (bottom) various shots from best trip snorkel (!)

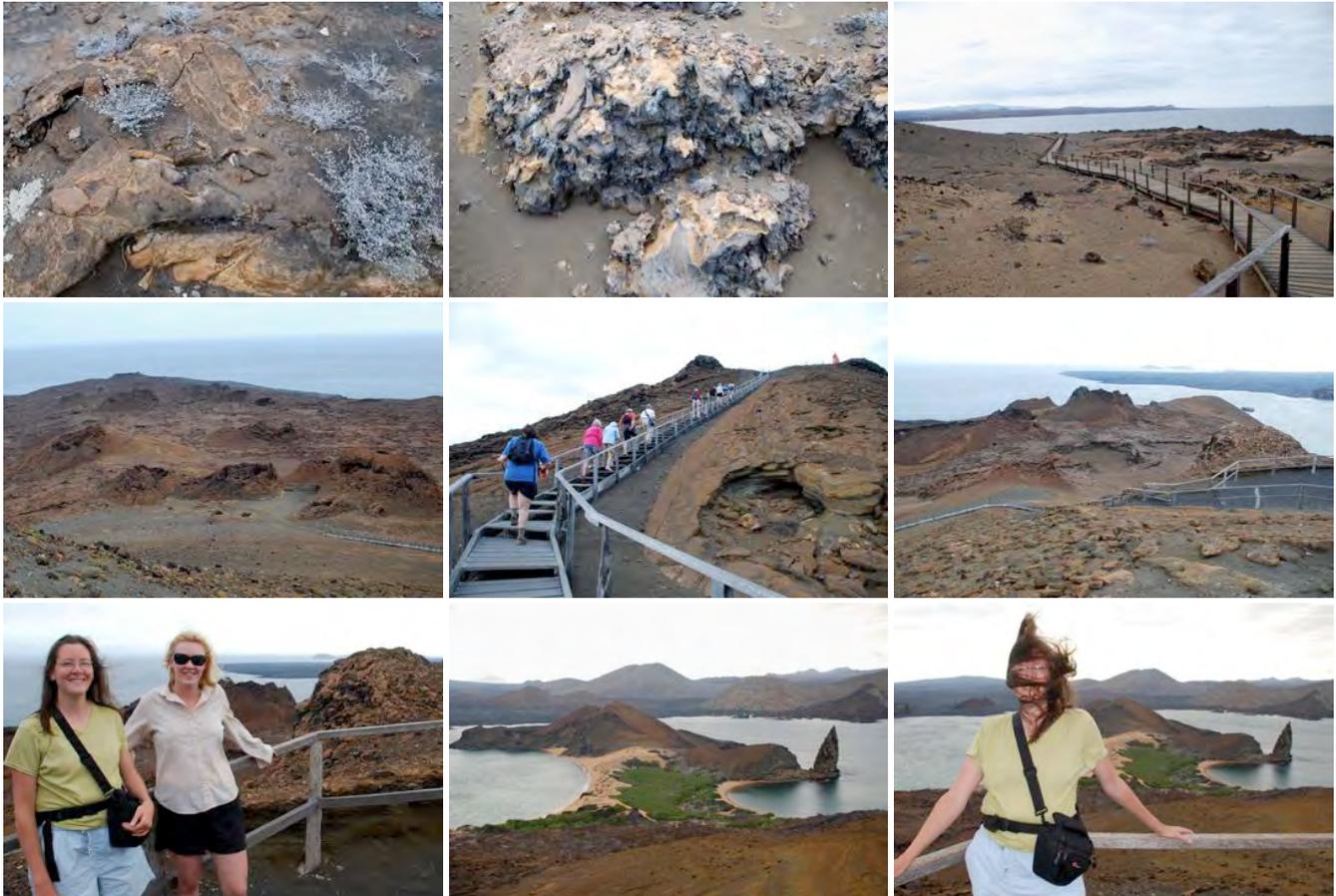
After getting back on the Diamante, we set sail for small but highly-photographed Bartolome. This scenic trip took us by several famous coastline features, including Buccaneer Cove and Pope Rock. Like James, Bartolome's main bay was crowded. Biti had planned a final snorkeling trip but, after this morning, I decided to enjoy some sitting/staring time. Also, I felt Allison and I should be even - given that she had bowed out of the first snorkel. And so everyone else headed out on the panga - with most people swimming around famous Pinnacle Rock (which Allison described as cold, challenging given strong currents, and not nearly as scenic as the last snorkel). A couple folks did sit out the trip, electing to explore the sandy beach from which the snorkelers departed. I cannot remember whether we had lunch before or after the snorkel, however. Staying on the boat, though, gave me the chance to photograph our chef preparing our final meal centerpiece - the highly decorated grouper below.



Left to Right: (top) Buccaneer's Cove, Pope Rock, rocky coastline; (bottom) snorkelers returning from Pinnacle, chef and fish

Our late afternoon hike was the summit trail to this vantage point that looked over Pinnacle Rock and the bay; this place represents probably the most-used landscape image that is featured when describing the Galapagos. After an interesting dry landing (i.e. seals had fully hijacked what looked like a few concrete stairs, leaving all groups to navigate a slightly-carved but very wet section of lava), we gently ascended starkly beautiful, reddish-brown lava fields, mostly made of pea-sized stones - but often dotted with clumps of highly colorful textured lava blobs and contrasting gray matplants (the dominant flora). Eventually, we reached a boardwalk, which evolved into the famous stairwell that leads to the final summit. Climbing, our views to the east were stunning: over this amazing sloping field of lava splatter cones... 8-10 of them looking like something sent back from the Mars rover. After about 300 steps (we were told), we reached the top - another party there but leaving, and another party 10 minutes behind us. Given ferocious winds, we took the obligatory pictures but did not linger. After returning

to the boat, I don't remember much about our final evening, other than we had ample time to pack, Biti gave her final presentation (a PowerPoint featuring images from our trip - which she gave us each on CD), and Allison said the grouper was superb. Biti called a 6 a.m. meeting time for tomorrow so we could make a sunrise trip to Santa Cruz's Black Turtle Cover. Thus, Allison and I definitely retired early, once we were sufficiently packed.



Left to Right: (top) gray matplants, crazy lava blobs, flat section of boardwalk; (middle) splatter cones, steepest section of boardwalk, final boardwalk; (bottom) summit viewpoint looking east toward cones, down to Pinnacle - windy hair

Leaving the Galapagos, Returning Home, and Closing Thoughts - December 26-7, 2007

Even though we technically did spend 8 days in the Galapagos, the final day really should not be counted because it mostly is about getting out (plus, in our case, we lost more time than usual getting to the islands). But Allison and I were more awake at 6 a.m. than we expected, having enjoyed a good sleep. We headed out just as the sun was rising, silhouetting the brushy tops of the mangroves. I didn't take a lot of pictures - partly because most of what we saw involved quick animals just below the surface of the water and partly because, after taking just under 1000 images, I figured I had enough. We saw the usual birds and sea turtles (including mating, which Biti said was long and difficult for the female - who basically gets held under water while the male rides her around). The coolest things we saw, though, were mother and baby leopard rays side by side (I remarked that the baby looked like a swimming spotted washcloth) and a group of young white-tipped sharks all huddled together along a muddy bank. Zooming back to the Diamante, I got a little teary-eyed because our days in the islands had grown so familiar and peaceful that I wasn't ready to leave. After returning to the boat, we enjoyed a fabulous breakfast as we motored to the familiarly stark Baltra harbor. Our departure to land felt swift - mostly because Biti was (successfully) trying to get us on the earliest flight possible: a direct flight to Quito that left around 12 (losing an hour going back). Given that we had a couple hours to kill, most of us milled around the gift shops and bought silly trinkets. My list included things for Bryan's kids and - after much debate - a couple of hilarious shirts that say "I Love Boobies" (with blue feet drawn under those words). One was for Mike (which I made him promise to wear to school after he makes tenure) and the other was mine (because it's always good to keep the students perplexed and just on the edge of offended). Sadly, though, the rubber marine iguana I bought for Bryan's son was ripped off while I was enjoying a soda at the crowded airport café (I had stuffed the lizard into the side-pocket of my pack - clearly an easy, visible target for any number of kids). So I got him a turtle figurine once we arrived in Quito. Eventually, we proceeded to the VIP area - where we all called respective family members using a satellite phone that another passenger had rented for a potential work emergency (she had pre-paid a few hours but, thankfully, never had to use them). Unfortunately, the phone line was poor and all my mother could initially say was: WHAT HAPPENED?!? (assuming we'd been in some kind of terrible accident). Our return flight was fast and painless - although it did include a rapidly rocketing descent that was memorable. Back at the hotel (we arrived around 3), we were told to plan on a group dinner at 7 - leaving us time to (in Allison and my case) do more shopping, visit the Museo del Banco Central (according to Lonely Planet, the most important museum in Ecuador), repack all our booty, and shower/primp for dinner. Getting to the museum involved navigating about 5 blocks through throngs of people who seemed like they were all returning from work (but it was only 4). Again, though, Quito felt like any other big city and, in terms of what we did, we never felt unsafe. Unfortunately, we only had about 40 minutes at

the museum - enough to quickly admire the massive archaeological collection (some pieces dating back to 12,000 B.C.) and the amazing Sala de Oro - the mostly-Aztec gold room (complete with major security guards). Our group dinner, at the hotel dining room, was not as good as the opera house welcoming dinner had been: the servings were too large, heavy, and salty. Because Allison and I were on a 7 a.m. flight out, we had to be up at 4 a.m. for our shuttle to the airport - and thus we were the first ones to say our goodbyes and retreat for bed. Still rocking hard from the boat, I don't recall sleeping adequately. In contrast with all expectations (given our long morning wait when trying to depart for the Galapagos), every flight home was on time. Although it was foggy and overcast, I'd heard they'd repaired the aforementioned radar - likely explaining said effortless. While ascending, we finally saw some of Ecuador's massive volcanoes, including Cotopaxi and Chimborazo (technically, the highest mountain in the world - if you factor in all the geology and the equatorial bump). I'm not quite sure what season of the year is the best time to regularly see these mountains, though. Allison and I fully gagged over our in-flight movie (No Reservations), which was ridiculously predictable. Aside from a clerical error our customs officer made while writing on our incoming claims form, we proceeded easily through Houston - arriving at our gate just as the news of Bhutto's assassination was hitting CNN. Our flight back to Seattle was more crowded than that from Quito, and we were surprised that we enjoyed our in-flight movie (Stardust). At the airport, Allison's new boyfriend insisted on picking us up - although I probably scared him off (as his stint as boyfriend lasted only a few more weeks). Indeed, I think I was channeling my dad at the time.



Left to Right: last sunrise, last panga ride, Chimborazo from flight out

In general, I would highly recommend the Galapagos to most people I know - although the jury remains out for Mike's mom (MY mom, though, would not enjoy this trip). The experience of being on the ocean, seeing such different landscapes, and being so immersed in wildlife were all radically different from anything I've done before. Even though I'd seen plenty of pictures or presentations about the islands, the reality of being there was truly impressive - probably a hundred times more amazing than I was expecting (seriously). This was also the first trip I've done (probably ever) that felt like a real vacation: totally pleasant weather, plenty of downtime, easy from a hiking standpoint - but jam-packed with daily activities to the point that the trip honestly felt twice as long as it was (in the best sense of the word). In contrast with most places I've visited, though, I was surprised how opinionated some people were about my doing this trip (even though, in most cases, they hadn't been there themselves). Half a dozen were either outright offended that I was going, or they passively said they would never do such a thing because they felt it was environmentally/ecologically wrong. Other people were on the fence about going because they had heard the islands were so crowded and regulated that they didn't want to bother. Having seen the islands, my response is that I did not find the level of tourism (particularly the small-boat style) to be offensive - nor did I feel like I was on some severely regulated trip where my every step was being monitored. While Puerto Ayora was clearly a booming town in need of better planning, the natural places we visited (which all represent established trails since the 1960's) seemed like fairly timeless wilderness areas with plenty of diverse and tame wildlife. Other people I talked with seemed surprised I wasn't, like, traveling with scientists - although one person said she wasn't surprised because a prominent American society who organized Galapagos tours for scientists was apparently famous for not hiring hygienic boats/crews (i.e. everyone wound up with GI illness). Having had Biti as a guide, my response is that I don't believe I could have had a better leader/guide... not to mention the fact that our boat and crew was awesome and keenly aware of sanitation issues. Additionally, I felt fortunate because our group had neither bible-thumpers nor kids - both of whom would have completely changed the feel and dynamic of this trip for me. Finally, I would again point out a couple serious considerations that anyone thinking about the Galapagos should think about: (1) seasickness, on or off the boat; and (2) accommodations and cabin mate. In terms of point (1), a lesser reason I did this trip was because I have had Antarctica on my mind the last couple years (as in sailing there on a 22-day cruise). For some reason, I felt 8 days sailing near the equator would be a useful way to address questions about my seaworthiness. During this trip, I would have said I was ready for Antarctica (mostly because I was never, like, hanging over the edge puking); but during the week after the trip (when I failed to stop moving), I would have said no. Although simple med's fixed that problem, I no longer believe I want to sustain what are TRULY rough seas for that long. Also, like I've said to most of my friends, I no longer think the Galapagos should be your first experience with an ocean trip; probably take a 2-3 night trip with a calmer reputation first... and bring drugs regardless. In terms of point (2), there is NO WAY I would do this (or, frankly, any) boat trip with a stranger as a cabin mate. While higher end companies will promise same-gender pairing for single travelers, Lonely Planet claims cheaper operations will not. Regardless of your ability to get along socially, there is simply too little space to avoid all conflicts or provide any sense of privacy. Although the single supplement cost is somewhat high (an additional \$1K for higher-end trips), it is not as bad as on other boat trips (e.g. Antarctic cruises charge 1.7X the cabin rate for single travelers - that's, like, \$5-7K extra). A couple ships do have single cabins and so solo travelers may want to carefully research this option. And, finally, there is NO EXCUSE in being a weenie and avoiding wet landings!