

Patty and Sandy's Excellent Adventure in the Galapagos Islands

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January 4-5, 2008 – Making our Way to the Galapagos

It was a chilly gray Friday on the 4th of January 2008, when we drove to the Rochester airport to embark on our life-changing adventure. Our plane took off around noon and landed in Miami around 5:30 pm, after a stopover in Chicago. We took a shuttle to our modest motel located near the airport and spent a quiet evening preparing for the next day.

It had been a long journey to that time and place. When we first met and began to envision a life together, one of the things that each of us had longed to share with another was travel. We made a list of all the places we hoped to visit in time together. After two short vacations, one to Los Angeles followed by the Central Coast of California around Pismo Beach, and the other to Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, New Mexico, we decided it was time to embark on a major trip overseas. Both of us had long wanted to visit the Galapagos to experience the diversity of animal life to be found in this unique and special place. We moved this destination to the top of our wish list, in part because our friends Karla Merrifield and Roger Weir had taken the same trip the year before and loved every minute of it, but also because we feared that due to increased tourism the islands might not remain as they were for very long.

On January 5, we took the airport shuttle back to Miami International and began to wind our way through the morass that was the international embarkation system. We found this process difficult and aggravating, but we were also too excited about what lay ahead to really complain. Our flight to Guayaquil, Ecuador via American Airlines, which would be the first real leg of our journey outside of the United States, was due to depart about 5:30 pm. The flight ended up being delayed for over two hours. Luckily this was the only scheduling glitch in our entire trip. Finally, we boarded the large plane which contained some of our fellow expedition members. Surprisingly, we were served dinner. (On domestic flights, of course, this absolutely no longer happens.) We landed in Guayaquil at about 11 pm that night; a representative of Lindblad Expeditions, the outfit with which we were taking the trip, met us with a sign at the baggage carousel. We were loaded onto a bus along with our luggage. From this point on, until we arrived back to the Guayaquil airport for departure for Miami one week later, every single detail of our travel was taken care of with enormous efficiency and care. Our comfortable bus took us to the Hilton Colón in Guayaquil; it was almost midnight. The hotel was large and beautiful with extravagant and colorful botanical plantings. Upon entering the lobby that was decorated like an art museum, we were greeted by attentive staff and offered cool cloths from a silver platter with which to wipe our faces. This gesture is certainly welcome in a hot and humid climate, although at midnight, we did not need it nearly as much as we might have at noon. By the time we arrived upstairs to our spacious and beautifully-appointed room, our luggage had already been delivered inside. We had an excellent view of the enormous swimming pool and patio down below. We made a promise to ourselves that on our return to Guayaquil we would take advantage of this swimming pool. From midnight until 2 am we repacked our luggage, since the flight we would be taking the next day to the airport on the Galapagos Islands called Baltra had a weight restriction of 40 pounds per passenger. Plus there were some items that we did not need to take with us to the islands and could leave at the hotel in a separate suitcase.

Sunday, January 6 - Day 1 – Guayaquil, Ecuador to the Galapagos, Baltra, M. S. Islander, and North Seymour

Finally, around 2 am we collapsed into bed. We were able to sleep until 6:30 am at which time our wake-up call came to us on the hotel phone. We had been required to place all of our luggage outside in the hallway, so the staff could send it to the airport (or put it in storage). While this was happening, we were escorted into a beautiful café where a sumptuous buffet breakfast was served and where we began to meet some of the other people we would be traveling with to the islands.

Then we boarded the bus to the airport, embarked onto a small airplane, and took the one and a half hour flight out to the islands that Darwin had visited so many years ago on the ship, the H.M.S. Beagle, and thereby changed the world. We were served a small lunch on the plane; by midmorning we were walking across a dock full of fat, sassy sea lions ready to help us clamber aboard our zodiac boats, also called pangas. We were to come to know these boats very, very well over the next six days. Each one holds about 16 passengers, is powered by an outboard motor and driven by one seaman. These pangas took us to and from the dock and the ship, then after that, two or three times a day from the ship to the various disembarkation points used for our island expeditions.

What greeted us that first day, as we began to experience our new environment, were temperatures in the 80s with a pleasant sea breeze, beautiful blue skies, and all around us the landscape of the islands we would soon come to know: rocky beaches, volcanic mountains, unusual rock formations, unusual vegetation. The staff who met us was friendly and helpful. Within a few minutes we were coming out of the zodiacs and going aboard our ship, the M.S. Islander, a small catamaran yacht which holds 48 passengers and about twenty crew. The decor and the environment of the ship was absolutely beautiful, in the best of taste. Our cabin, which was one of the least expensive, was nevertheless extremely comfortable and attractive. Soon we were being served a gourmet buffet lunch in the ship's dining room by the charming and attentive wait-staff that would be helping us throughout the trip. When we returned to the cabin, our luggage awaited us within. After a short rest, we were asked to meet in the vestibule of the boat to begin our first expedition. Thus followed a routine that we were to repeat many times during the days ahead: we were asked to bring with us everything we would need, which of course included sun block, hats to shield our eyes from the sun, sunglasses, all possible camera equipment, binoculars, water bottles, and hiking sticks. We needed to be dressed appropriately for hiking in both equatorial sun and conditions that could involve salt spray, splashing waves at our feet, and many other situations that are pleasant enough but could become difficult if we were not prepared. Some of our landings, we soon learned, were “dry,” and some “wet”. Wet meant we would step out into some surf. Carrying our shoes with us, we would put them on higher up on the beach; towels were always provided when we needed to do this. We were asked to wear life jackets while on the zodiacs and to keep our jackets in our rooms. We were also given small identification tags bearing our room numbers and asked to keep them on our persons while we were off the boat, then hang them back on a tag board while on board. This was to make sure that no one would ever be left ashore or unaccounted for.

Each zodiac was staffed by one of the naturalists who work on the boats. These individuals are Ecuadorians who speak excellent English and have been highly trained in their jobs by National Geographic. We found them to be lots of fun and constant sources of wonderful information.

Our first land trip took place on North Seymour Island, a short distance from Baltra. While we had been eating lunch the boat had taken us there. Almost all of our boat's travel was over smooth seas, and seasickness was not usually a factor. A couple of times during the days

ahead we did experience some slightly rough waters, but on this day the sea seemed smooth as glass. As soon as we climbed out of the zodiacs, we became overwhelmed by the astonishing varieties of life on a typical Galapagos Island. We strolled along the seashore past an area of brush and vegetation stretching along the other side of our path in which were many, many nesting birds. At water's edge, playful sea lions frolicked, swam, and in some cases, nursed their young. The birds we saw included frigatebirds, blue-footed boobies, pelicans, gulls, the Galapagos dove, and numerous shore birds.

An astonishing sight was a huge black winged Magnificent frigatebird flying overhead with the bright red pouch underneath the beak of the male fully inflated. The pouch is a feature of mating, designed to attract the female. This was the only time during the entire trip that we witnessed a frigate with the pouch inflated. Luckily we were able to get a couple of good photographs.

After this walk, we took the zodiacs back to the boat, showered and dressed for dinner, which was served again in the dining room, featuring a wide variety of delicious Ecuadorian dishes. We collapsed into our bunks at 9:30 pm that night, having had so little sleep the night before; the gentle rocking motion of the boat helped us to rest well. We knew there would be a 6:30 am wake-up call the next morning (optional), in order to start us on our next expedition. We fell asleep dreaming of the wonders we might see the next day.

Monday, January 7 - Day 2 - Bartolome and Santiago

Arising at 6:00 am, going out before breakfast in a zodiac to disembark at 6:30 am only to climb a wooden staircase of almost 400 steps, may not sound like the ideal vacation activity, but we were lured with the promise of a spectacular view from atop that staircase. The ship had arrived at the tiny volcanic islet of Bartolome, near the larger island Santiago, where we had traveled during the night. Pat decided to brave this morning jaunt while Sandy remained on the ship to take care of her ankle which she had sprained back home. A stalwart group boarded the zodiacs (we were actually fed delicious fruit and bread in the ship's lounge beforehand) to tackle the trek. The climb proved not to be too strenuous; the promised views indeed were lovely. The boardwalk that took us over friable volcanic tuff allows this fragile environment to remain preserved. We saw fabulous lava formations and a lava tunnel with a gaping opening, plus a number of beautiful "spatter cones," many rust-colored, along with sooty-colored lava flows frozen into position many thousands of years ago as the boiling magma abruptly cooled; wind and erosion have created flowing artistic forms in the now-solidified ash. The view from the very top revealed huge crusty black circular rock formations poking up in the surf along the beach; these are the remnants of volcanic bubbles which burst and solidified long, long ago. From the very top we were rewarded with a magnificent vista of sharply pointed volcanic cones, a gently curving shoreline cradling a golden beach accentuated by the rich green of mangroves. Beyond lay the open sea where a few graceful ships, the M.S. Islander amongst them, rested at anchor.

Back on board after this adventure, we joined those who had stayed behind for a sumptuous breakfast buffet. Snorkeling and beach walking back at Bartolome beach followed breakfast, which meant back to the zodiacs. Here is where we first spotted the green sea turtle, catching two on the beach mating. The ship provided full gear for everyone who went snorkeling, including short wet suits, at no extra cost. Pat, who had never snorkeled, opted for the walk, planning to take lessons in Rochester before taking another trip on which snorkeling is offered. Sandy, already somewhat experienced, plunged right in. Just getting to the snorkeling area was an adventure, as we had to walk into the water from the beach, which you may know, is

not easy while wearing flippers. The surf kept knocking her down and getting sand in everything, including her mask. She had “cleverly” brought along her own mask with two lenses from an old pair of glasses taped inside. Unfortunately, the mask was old and leaked and fogged up every minute, and the tape holding the lenses was full of sand, so she didn’t get to see very much.

After our return, lunch followed—another scrumptious buffet—then siesta. By this time it felt to some of us as if it were 5 pm—yet it was really only 2 pm, and still another expedition awaited us!!

One of our naturalists, Gilda, offered an informative presentation accompanied by slides about Darwin. Then we had the option of going back yet again at 3:30 pm via the trusty zodiacs to enjoy a wet landing on Santiago Island, to which the boat had travelled during the early afternoon. Santiago lies almost central within the Galapagos archipelago. The ship had anchored at Puerto Egas on the western end of the island, once the site of two doomed salt mining enterprises in the 1920s and 1960s. After putting on our shoes (towels had been brought with which to dry our feet), we strolled along a black volcanic beach, viewing many coastal birds on the one and one half mile loop trail. Within the deeply carved grottoes of this landscape we also spied great numbers of marine iguanas plus playful sea lions.

After a dinner that surpassed even the meals we had so far had, the evening offered cocktails on the Sky Deck for us to enjoy along with the sunset.

Tuesday, January 8 - Day 3 – Santa Cruz

Once again in the night, our intrepid ship had been traveling. We awoke on Tuesday anchored on Santa Cruz in Academy Bay alongside the busy port of Puerto Ayora, the largest settlement in the islands (pop.15,000.) Most of the Galapagos Islands remain virtually uninhabited except for the wild creatures, so this visit allowed us to see a bit of Ecuadorian life here in its most outlying territory. The island of Santa Cruz contains a highland zone with a different microclimate than its seacoast, so that in only one day we were to experience a variety of landscapes and conditions. After landing in our zodiacs on the main dock of the busy little town, we observed a frantic scene at the local open air dockside fish market, where workers wielding enormous knives were slicing open huge fresh-caught fish surrounded by a hungry horde of birds, all screeching and jostling for a share. Sandy shot some video footage of frigatebirds, pelicans, and even one heron, all attempting to monopolize this feast.

Then we boarded buses which took us a short way to the entrance of the National Park. We walked the next quarter of a mile to the Charles Darwin Research Center where we learned about the way the giant land tortoises are being preserved. Thousands of baby tortoises are hatched and raised in the Center’s breeding program until able to live on their own, when the Center will return them to the islands of their origins. Our naturalist, Graciela, took us on a narrated tour through the Center grounds where she used to work as a volunteer early in her career. Seeing the huge beasts for the first time outside of a movie or TV was extraordinary. We met Diego, a hundred year old “stud,” who has fathered more babies than any other known male tortoise in captivity. We met a group of female tortoises, all rescued from various islands, some having been kept in the past as pets, all happy together now with a wading pool and plenty of fresh vegetation to eat. Then we met the famous Lonesome George, a huge tortoise of over 100 years, who is the last living example of his particular species. George, a discerning gentleman, refuses to mate no matter what enticements have been offered. He spends his days sharing a

large shady compound with a nice pool with several “younger” females (100 years old each to his even older age). Nothing doing. George's only interaction with the “girls” is to drive them away from the pool when he wants to go in!

Next we walked back to town to board a cushy tour bus which took us up into the highlands, where we passed small banana plantations, tiny family farms complete with chickens and gardens, and children waiting for the school bus in their uniforms. As we climbed up into the cooler, wetter highlands, the day grew mistier with a light drizzle. Everything was green and lush, with a sense of the tropics not as evident on the rocky volcanic stretches we had been hiking over the past two days. Our drive ended at a mountaintop restaurant where a delicious buffet was served to us on a veranda under an ample roof, allowing us to enjoy the fresh air while keeping out any rain. Beyond the porch stretched hilly green fields where a few horses grazed and mist-shrouded mountain peaks rose in the distance.

After lunch we put on large rubber boots that had been brought for us from the ship in order to venture out into the giant tortoise preserve called El Chato, a short bus ride away. This is a large area, again tropically lush, full of mosses spilling from branches, ferns sprouting from fallen trunks, wide open green areas dotted with pools of water where the tortoises dunk themselves. The tortoises in this area roam at will. We had no trouble finding many of them. When we approached, some would draw back into their huge shells with a frightening hissing noise; it turns out this is the sound of the shell being entered by the rest of the body, not a menacing sound made by the tortoise to scare us away! We were able to take several now cherished photographs of ourselves with these magnificent beasts, whom we observed moving down a dirt road, relaxing out in the wide open areas, slipping into their pools, or moving off into the woods. Although these creatures certainly do move slowly, they have no problem lumbering along at a fair clip when they want to.

Back on the bus, we drove a short distance further to a hike around a unique area spotted with deep, steep-sided volcanic pit craters called Los Gemelos. The trail we took, which was quite rugged, wound past a series of these craters, shrouded beguilingly in mist (the day never really turned fully rainy). We were surrounded by a verdant forest full of bromeliads, ferns, mosses, and huge dew-bejeweled spider webs, as well as yellow-flowered trees called Scalesias. Many, many of Darwin's finches flitted about.

Next, our bus took us back to town, where some chose to hop a zodiac back to the ship. Other of us stayed behind for a couple of hours of browsing in the small shops. This was especially enjoyable as it gave us a chance to catch a glimpse of life in this busy little settlement. Shops seemed to be run by families, with toddlers playing outside or napping inside. One solemn little boy was industriously penciling his lessons into a workbook while his mother waited on customers. We found prices low compared to the States and the goods offered attractive.

Finally we topped into a zodiac at 5 pm exhausted and overwhelmed by the wide variety of experiences packed into one day. Dinner on the ship was served at 7:30 pm, and an early bed time became quite appealing.

Wednesday, January 9 - Day 4 – Isabela & Fernandina

Our night passage toward Isabela Island was a bumpy one; we used seasick remedies, and Sandy actually felt somewhat ill during the night. Luckily, morning brought relief. We had

crossed the Equator! Later in the day we crossed it again, and a humorous ceremony was held on deck. We all received a certificate placed in our cabins proclaiming us “shellbacks” (those who have now crossed the Equator).

This Wednesday morning found our ship navigating the westernmost realm of the Galapagos. This area is cooled by the frigid waters of the Cromwell current—sometimes cold temperature, thick fogs, and cold waters result. Happily for us, this did not prove to be the case today. We received an early morning call to come to the Sky Deck to find a huge school of common dolphins leaping all around us as they fed. Sandy was able to get some good video of these graceful, playful creatures. We followed them for quite sometime before veering off back on course toward Isabella, the largest island in Galapagos, created from the fusion of six enormous volcanic shields into its present seahorse-like shape.

After breakfast, we piled into our now familiar pangas for a ride around a rocky area called Punta Vicente Roca, in the vicinity of Volcan Ecuador, a spectacular volcanic shield which bisects Isabela. The rugged dark volcanic rock of this landscape crops up out of the surf all along the shore, its surfaces covered with plenty of sea lions, some lounging, some frolicking, plus (no surprise!) numerous marine iguanas. Keeping them company as well, we saw flocks of the small-sized, absolutely precious Galapagos penguins wearing their little tuxedo shirts, along with flocks of flightless cormorants who spread their stubby vestigial wings to dry after coming out of the water. These long-necked birds feed in the ocean the way diving waterfowl do.

After we returned, snorkeling was offered. Sandy had swapped out her mask for one belonging to the ship (luckily she had thought ahead to bring more tape), and this time with the help of some anti-fog drops, the experience was much improved. Right after jumping off of the zodiac (this was a deep water entry – no sand!), something shot by her in the water so fast, it made her heart thump. This turned out to be one of those playful sea lions. It was so much fun being so close to them! She then spied many huge sea turtles, and swam above them for some time, following them as they went about their business of feeding.

After lunch and a siesta at 3:30 pm both of us took another panga ride to the nearby small, pristine island of Fernandina. The peak of its imposing volcanic cone called Punta Espinosa rises into the cloud layer at 5000 ft above sea level. We made a dry landing onto a field of irregular, “ropy” lava flow, where we took a long hike through the intriguing formations of this frozen magma, along an area where the shoreline forms many photogenic small lagoons and inlets. We witnessed a group of sea lions claiming space under huge branches of driftwood, reminding us of the lions in the Serengeti under their trees. Birds spied on this walk included the American Oystercatcher with its delicate long legs and red beak, flocks of boobies diving into the water after the small fish that frequent the shore (again Sandy shot some great video). Many shorebirds were sighted, including plovers; scuttling all over the deep rocky crevasses were the same colorful Sally lightfoot crabs we had seen before, plus the usual hordes of marine iguanas we had learned to love despite their ferocious visages.

A type of vegetation not found on the other islands we had seen so far was lava cactus, looking much as it would in the American southwestern desert. Here the cactus wait, on lava rock, not sand, for the rainy season, during which their somewhat dry appearance will green up and flower. Thankfully, this walk was an easy one, mostly along the beach, the falling day filling the surface of the shoreline and its tidal pools with the delicate hues of shimmering light.

And so we left to return to the ship for sunset drinks on the Sky Deck, dinner, and bed.

Thursday, January 10 - Day 5 – Southern Isabella

We spent the night at anchor at Punta Espinoza of Fernandina. At first light, we traveled a short distance across the Bolivar Channel back to Isabella, at Urbina Bay at the base of Volcano Alcedo. There we visited an area on the western coast of Isabela of great historical and geological interest. In this place, on a fateful day in 1954, 1 1/2 square kilometers of the island's marine reef was suddenly uplifted almost instantaneously by as much as 4 meters. On that day, all the creatures of the sea on that reef were left high and dry.

After breakfast and a wet landing, we undertook a long rigorous walk over rough terrain to observe evidence of this natural disaster, as well as the starkly beautiful landscape and fascinating flora and fauna. The first leg of the trail passed by dense stands of shrubbery, full of finches and warblers; the sea coast trail yielded many leavings of bones and shells, sea lion, shark, spiny lobster, the skulls of boobies and goats (from previous farming, now forbidden), dull green sea urchins, and many, many tiny delicate shells. We also saw live hermit crabs inside their temporary "condos," shells the crabs leave for bigger, better ones as they grow. We were required to clamber over stands of huge boulders, a dangerous and frightening passage. Without the physical assistance of another member of our group, Pat would never have made it. Thankfully, the rest of this hike was easier, smooth gravel trails curving inland through woody areas full of broad shrubs, branches dotted with tiny yellow flowers beside fat clusters of translucent berries. Juan Carlos, our naturalist for the day, told us these berries have been widely used in the islands for both hair gel and glue! Another variety of shrub we encountered sported hard, spiny, painfully sharp needles.

This area is also the habitat of the land iguana, which lives inland and does not go into the sea. We spotted only a few of these beasts, somewhat larger than the prolific marine iguanas on the other islands; instead of the typical gray and black shades of their aquatic cousins, these creatures are colored an ochre yellow. We observed the few we saw sitting placidly in the shade of shrubs by the side of the path, unperturbed by our presence. We also spied a burrow or two of theirs dug in the earth, plus a shallow nest on the beach one had scooped out in which to lay her eggs, the area marked by one of the naturalists by small twigs so passersby would not step on it. Several varieties of lava lizards darted about, plus mockingbirds, which, we learned, are actually fierce carnivores, devouring the umbilical cords of just-born sea lions, thus causing their deaths.

Finally we arrived at the site of what some of us had suffered so much to see: the brain coral. This large stand of ossified coral is the remnant of the land's upheaval from the sea; when that happened the reef died, eventually fossilizing it. The several clusters of these formations are pale grayish-white, their whorls and tiny crevices resembling brains, yet also creating a kind of "ghost coral".

As we walked on, a few tall prickly pear cactus trees appeared along the way. The day was sunny, hot and humid; a few of the hikers were pestered by mosquitoes. This was the only time on the trip we were "bugged" by insects; it was also the hottest hike we took, many of the other walks happening on misty or slightly cloudy days or in the cooler late afternoons.

At journey's end, most of us ran into the ocean as soon as we hit the beach. Some of our company had opted for the shorter, easier hike also offered, and were now waiting for us along the shore; they had missed the treacherous boulders but also the brain coral. No snorkeling is permitted in this area due to the rocks. Although the water was cold, many of our party enjoyed a swim, including Sandy. We had had the option of wearing bathing suits under our hiking clothes or just running in wearing tank tops and shorts. The panga ride back to the ship was fast. The hot showers we immediately jumped into in our cabins afterward seemed as luxurious and welcome as any we'd ever had.

Lunch, siestas, and back once again to the pangas for a 3:30 pm visit to another fantastical area populated by new creatures not seen before on our other expeditions was soon to follow.

That afternoon we had sailed during lunch to the rough lava shore of Punta Moreno, a prominent point equidistant between Volcan Sierra Negra and Volcan Cerro Azul, the final two volcanoes which make up southern Isabela island. These two volcanoes are still active. The last eruption happened in 2005; back on the ship we were shown a video of their smoking peaks. A month after our return to the States, a volcano on mainland Ecuador also erupted, damaging prime farmland and causing many villages to evacuate. These two wide, sloping, slate blue peaks rising up into their misty, flat crowns of clouds dominate the horizon here.

Next we were offered a choice of a zodiac cruise along the seacoast or a long rigorous hike over broken lava to experience rare and remarkable sights. Of course, still aching from previous hikes, we chose the latter. Underfoot as went were nothing but slipping, sliding, thin black lava sheets; a walking stick was mandatory; every step had to be chosen with care. The going was tough, but oh, what we saw!

Amidst this desolate terrain a number of beautiful small lagoons may be found, hidden next to rough rock formations dotted with stands of parched cactus. Shimmering blue-green water filled most of these lagoons, although one was totally grown over with bright green vegetation. In the largest lagoon, which was more like a mid-sized lake, we finally spied a few of the fabled Galapagos flamingoes. These delicately long-legged birds are a true flamingo pink. We observed them either walking, standing on one leg, or dipping, dipping constantly for food.

Back on the beach we boarded the pangas for the same ride around the rocky coastline which those who had not gone on the hike had already had. We were treated to some fabulous close-up views of surf-pounded craggy black lava outcroppings absolutely covered with marine iguanas and rambunctious, barking sea lions, plus flocks of tiny Galapagos penguins strutting about, their little white shirt fronts gleaming from the water. It amazed us that these different species all get along so well when humans don't seem to be able to co-exist worth beans most of the time!

Our trusty pangas headed back to ship for dinner and a well-deserved night's rest.

Friday, January 11 - Day 6 – Floreana Island

Our ship had by now traveled to Floreana, a quiet island of gently rolling terrain dotted with many volcanic cones (extinct of course) springing up out of scrubby vegetation. Humans have come to Floreana off and on for over two hundred years, engendering a number of outlandish tales of their exploits bordering on legend: convicts, failed colonists, misanthropes who possibly murdered each other—none of it seemed real the day some of us made a pre-breakfast dry landing to visit the famous Post Office Barrel. This is a living tradition begun in the whaling days (c. 1793) as a drop off for mail that passing sailors would bring back to civilization, the process at times taking years. Today travelers leave their mail in a box in an area decorated with whimsical sculptures created out of messages left from all over the globe. Mail delivery works on an honor system in which each tourist who takes a piece of mail addressed to someone in his/her home port is supposed to hand deliver the letter or postcard to the addressee. We placed several postcards in the pile, assuming we might hear about their arrival years from now. Turns out two of our friends from the Rochester area received their cards promptly, but NOT hand delivered! US stamps had been affixed to put them through the regular mail.

Back aboard ship for breakfast, we were taken to Champion Island, one of a few tiny islands where the Floreana mockingbird still exists (extinct on the main island). Our activity this morning at a spot where we could not make a landing was to swim and snorkel. Pat stayed on the ship to enjoy the library, the novel, *Atonement*, and have a terrific talk with a 10 year old from Canada. Sandy had the time of her life snorkeling. Here was the best snorkeling of the trip! It was a beautiful deep tropical reef with so many colorful fish and coral. Of course, there was also the shark that passed by just under her. Whew! But we were told that these sharks are not dangerous. In the end, Sandy was somewhat disappointed that she did not have an underwater camera, although she had really just wanted to enjoy the experience, without focusing on photography. Fortunately, after the trip Linblad sent us a CD with photos taken by the naturalists. One of our guides, Juan Carlos Avila, had the ship's underwater camera. He captured much of what she saw, although not all of it. If only Linblad had labeled the photos with the name of the fish!

After the morning snorkeling, signing up for kayaking was offered. We were taken out in two rounds, each participant having the chance to sign up for one slot. All of the equipment was provided by the ship. We found sea kayaking to be easy and not different from freshwater kayaking at home perhaps only because the waters we paddled in were not at all rough. We were helped into and out of the kayaks directly from the ship's gangplank. It was wonderful to be able to be close to nature this way, instead of only walking in a group or traveling on a bus. Lindblad Expeditions features kayaking wherever possible—in Baha, Arctic Norway, New Zealand, and Alaska. This is the beauty of eco-tourism.

In the late afternoon, we took to the zodiacs again for a wet disembarkation at Punta Cormorant. The path led us out to a large brackish lagoon, which holds one of the biggest populations of flamingoes in Galapagos. The late afternoon light and misty rain created ever-shifting exquisite effects as flamingoes and other shore birds minced their way through these shallow waters, looking for supper—a scene of heart-stopping beauty and serene isolation.

After learning a great deal about flamingoes from Graciela, plus taking time to photograph this area, we started back towards the other trail. As we passed the beach again, we stopped to notice the sea lions out in the water along with sea urchin shells stranded on the beach.

Next we headed up the trail that goes around the east side of the lagoon. About halfway is a viewpoint located on an old cinder cone. There we spotted a jewel-colored brackish pond surrounded by lush vegetation where one brilliant pink flamingo tantalized us by dipping up and down constantly, never letting us shoot a good photograph! As we continued on the cindery trail, we passed several trees spotted with brightly colored lichens.

Finally we emerged onto a small beach of white, fine coral and shell sand, a nesting site for the Pacific black sea turtle. Some of the nests showed signs of recent activity. The shallows were teeming with diamond stingrays.

Before dinner, we were offered a presentation in the lounge about how to preserve these enchanted islands through efforts for which Lindblad Expeditions and National Geographic, along with the Ecuadorian government, give their full support. We were heartened to learn of these programs and wish that the U.S. would take as good care of our own endangered sites. We also viewed the video chronicle our resident videographer, Steve, had been making while following us around all week. It was excellent and available for purchase as a DVD; we obtained one and have not regretted it. His superb equipment and special skills enabled us to now possess close-up views of a great many sights we could not have photographed ourselves.

A special dinner was held this night: a barbeque buffet Ecuadorian style. The cuisine of this nation features a great deal of pork along with chicken and beef, and of course much fish, as well as scrumptious fruits we had never had before, like the tree tomato, or never found to be as delicious, like the white pineapple.

Saturday, January 12 - Day 7 – Espanola

This was our last full day in the Galapagos Islands; we spent it on the southeasternmost island of Espanola. The oldest island in the archipelago, about 4 million years old, Espanola is a small flat island that harbors many endemic species. This morning was relatively relaxing-amazing, as our other days had been so jam-packed. After breakfast, snorkelers had the option of traveling by panga to a small offshore islet of Gardner Bay, where they snorkeled along the calm lee of its cliffs. Sandy had second thoughts after she jumped off of the zodiac in the water. Brrr—it was really cold, much colder than the other locations! But there were playful sea lions, and a huge manta ray to see. Still, she was grateful to climb back in the panga and warm up.

Pat chose to remain on the ship, beginning to pack, and also continuing to enjoy reading her novel in the library. At breakfast the option had been offered to sign up for slots to go kayaking again. For some unknown reason, the 11 am slot Pat had chosen was not taken by any other passengers. She assumed the trip would be canceled. Not so, on Lindblad Expeditions! Pat was helped into her kayak from the ship and escorted out into the bay by a charming seaman named Henry. She was able to paddle alone in her own kayak at will with Henry staying a discreet distance behind in case she needed any assistance. She paddled easily along a rocky shore, amazed at the sense of solitude and wonder offered by this magical landscape. She was able to see and photograph numerous seabirds amidst a rocky outcrop, including boobies and pelicans; she also observed sea lions basking on the rocks. When she finally grew tired, she summoned Henry who hoisted her aboard the panga, tethered her kayak behind it, and then motored back to the ship. If only kayaking journeys at home could end so comfortably!

After lunch and siesta, a 3:30 pm departure took place for a dry landing at Punta Suarez. This proved to be one of the most amazing walks of the entire trip. At first deterred by being warned that hikers would have to take an arduous trail, characterized almost all of the way by boulder hopping, we wondered if we should go. Yet what we were told we would see convinced us that we must brave it, and certainly we were not sorry.

Our way led us on a trail through shrubbery, then along the boulder strewn shore where we came as close to the wildlife as we had on our entire trip. Sea lions, including nursing babies, lay only inches from our feet, showing no fear. Blue footed boobies, again literally only inches from our feet, conducted all phases of their lives without registering our presence at all. These amazing birds were observed dancing their mating dance, which involves clicking their beaks together, whistling, and stamping their sky-blue feet, then actually mating, during which the female appears to sit on the back of the male.

We saw boobies sitting on eggs, sheltering newly hatched fledglings under their bodies in the nest, and feeding larger fledglings via the parents' long beaks. We also saw a large number of other birds and shorebirds as well as experiencing rocky outcroppings unlike any we had quite seen before. A special feature exists where certain tides come right up out under the shoreline cliffs thus creating a powerful blowhole which blasts a misty spray high into the air.

Finally out on a high bluff at the very end of the island, we spied the promised albatrosses. We had been told we were there at the very end of their season in this part of the world, and that although we would hopefully see some, it was not guaranteed. Just as we were about to give up,

these birds, famed in lore and literature, appeared. Although they were smaller than we had thought, their characteristic flight patterns and behavior made them a sight to behold. As they veered way out over the water, then back again, we were able to watch them for awhile, and Sandy obtained some video clips. A juvenile albatross who was apparently trying to reach the cliff's edge in order to plunge over on his very first flight took so long to do this we had to leave him to enter the world of the air undocumented.

Reluctantly we turned to pick our slow way, boulder to boulder, back to the pangas and the ship, where we continued to pack and then dressed to attend our farewell dinner in the dining room.

Pat and Sandy had been selected at random to sit this last night at the Captain's Table where we were served complimentary wine and enjoyed a special feast, although the menu was the same for all of the tables. We got to meet our captain as well as the chief engineer and to learn more about their lives, the special training they undertake in the Merchant Marine to be able to apply for such jobs, and some of their adventures. Our dessert was flaming Baked Alaska; because Pat and Sandy do not eat dairy products, a special dairy-free sorbet dessert had been created for us. After dessert, our headwaiter, Xavier, and one of the younger assistant waiters put on a show for us: coming out to recorded music, they began what appeared to be an erotic dance in which some of their clothing might be removed! To gales of hysterical laughter, the two young men proceeded through the removal of their vests, their bowties, and the unbuttoning of the top buttons of their shirts. Even though this display did not violate good taste, it was certainly entertaining and amusing. Toppling into our bunks after dinner was delayed somewhat by packing everything up in order to have our suitcases ready early in the morning for transport to the airport and then to the mainland.

Sunday, January 13 - Day 8 – On Our Way Home

Sunday morning came early. Our luggage was taken away at 6:45 am. Breakfast was served. To amuse us while we were being taken via the ship to our disembarkation point for the airport, we were shown an excellent video about a husband and wife team of researchers who study Darwin's finches in certain of the islands now; their research conclusively proves that evolution is still taking place and that it can happen within even a short time span. The size for finches' beaks alter within only a few years, depending on the food supply available to them, which is controlled by climatic conditions.

We had to say our goodbyes to our ship and its exceptional crew as we took to the pangas for a final spurt back to the tiny airport of Baltra Island where we had arrived 6 days previously. This time there was time to sample the small shops in outdoor stalls the airport offered and to sit in the VIP lounge we were entitled to enjoy where free non-alcoholic beverages were available. Our small Aerogal Jet reappeared; we boarded for a pleasant flight back to the mainland. Again a lunch was served. We took our chartered bus back to Hilton again where our same Lindblad representative was available to deal with any questions about our rooms, our luggage and our departure plans for the next morning. Another representative was on hand to tell us about the city and help us make evening plans. This was the only part of the trip where we were to be on our own for a meal.

Because we had not been able to take advantage of the pool area on our initial stay, this time we decided that we must. We could have taken a city tour via bus but would have had to forego a siesta (essential due to our early rising that morning) plus the pool. We were not disappointed with our choice. The water was about 80 degrees; the pool enormous and mostly empty. Although we did not order anything from it, the pool had a bar under a thatched roof

built right into the water with submerged bar stools! Gorgeous tropical plantings flanked the pool and patio area, full of chaise lounges and round tables under umbrellas.

It was recommended by the hotel for us to take a taxi to the restaurant we had decided upon. The ride was about 20 minutes long through an undisguised looking industrial city, although we did pass a fancy mall where TGIF was sporting a huge sign. We were glad to have missed that obviously very touristy area.

The restaurant was quite attractive and tropical looking. When we entered it was empty. A young man came out, telling us he was the chef! He then explained that as it was 6 pm, dinner was not ordinarily served yet. We had forgotten that in hot climates where people take afternoon siestas, dinner very well may commence at 9 or 10 pm. We convinced him that we were very hungry and needed to eat, so he showed us to a cozy room with several empty tables. We managed to obtain the English menu which was the same as the Spanish, only readable by us! The chef recommended a few dishes, and told us of his training in Paris, his working for one year in New York City, his dislike of that life, and his return home. Our meal, which included crab cakes, hearts of palm and white asparagus salads, stewed chicken for Sandy and pork with yellow rice for Pat cost a total of \$30.00! The Ecuadorian currency is now U.S. dollars, which made it easy for us. We were given some of the old pesos in change at times, however. We took another taxi back to the Hilton. The taxis cost us \$4 one way and \$3 the other!

January 14-15, 2008 – The Final Chapter

Monday morning we were up early again to have our luggage out into the hall for the transport to the airport. We enjoyed our final breakfast once again at the sumptuous hotel buffet and said goodbye to some of our friends from the ship. Some were to be on our Miami flight but some were going on other flights to NYC or on to Lima and Macchu Pichu. Going through customs and exiting the country happened as speedily, efficiently, and without incident as entering it had been. A treat however was a chance to visit the airports shops which had nice goods at amazingly low prices. We forget sometimes how much lower than our standards of living are world-wide; these prices would be high to Ecuadorians. A favorite purchase by Pat was a carved wooden rain stick with a raised sea turtle design.

Our flight went smoothly, with another lunch served. We got our luggage, now on our own, much harder, (we had been thoroughly spoiled by Lindblad's taking care of all this). We had to wait a long time for the shuttle to our motel, but befriended a fellow traveler, a young man of African heritage from Columbia who had been living and working in London. He is great reader of books like *The Kite Runner* and also loves movies like "Atonement," so Pat naturally had a great talk with him.

Once back at our motel (where the night before we left for Ecuador we had been told was near no restaurants except McDonald's and Wendy's), Sandy found a wonderful Middle Eastern place just past Wendy's. The food we had there was one of the best meals ever, for a low cost. We continued to do more packing, as we had left behind in a tote bag in the motel storage room our winter jackets, hats, and scarves.

The next morning after breakfast provided by the motel we took the shuttle to Miami International and boarded our plane for Chicago, where we had a long layover, explored the fabulous airport which has many good food venues and a terrific bookstore chain; we finally landed in Rochester about 6 pm. Snow and ice, although not overtly bad weather, greeted us. We took the shuttle to our car and drove home at last to be greeted by a wildly excited dog (who had had a live-in dog sitter but sure was glad to see us). And then began the unwinding and the remembering.....