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with
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April 29, 1997

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SUNRISE TRAVEL

On April 29 to May 9, 1997, I accompanied Norbert Wu, a professional wildlife photographer, on a photographer's trip he led to the Galapagos Islands. Thanks, Norb! Travel was arranged by the Galapagos Network and Ecoventura; they were extremely professional and courteous.

The Galapagos Islands comprise over 60 islands, lie on the Equator, and are part of Ecuador. The total land area is just over 3,000 square miles and most of the islands are small and rather barren at low elevations -- desert islands. The largest island, Isabela, is 75 miles long and makes up half the land area of the Galapagos. The climate of the Galapagos is modified by the cold Humboldt Current though when I was there, the

guides said the water was unusually warm for May: about 76 degrees F.

On the way to the Galapagos Islands, I spent one day/two nights in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, which is at 9200 feet; walking up a few flights in the hotel made me gasp for breath. I took it very easy since I have never done well at altitude. Quito was very pretty with surrounding mountains. The group did a tour of the old part of the city of Quito which dates back to Spanish times and saw old churches, squares and the old part of town as well as some great view points including the Virgin of Quito.

I flew to San Cristobal Island on Saeta Airlines on an older jet that was incredibly spacious with tons of leg room; the food was very good and service was great. I wish Saeta served the air routes I travel frequently in the US.

After landing, I boarded the M/V Letty, a luxurious and comfortable boat with individual bathrooms in the cabins. The chef and food were great and the captain and staff were attentive and courteous. This operation really had its act together.

The time spent onboard in the Galapagos was six complete days bracketed by the afternoon after arrival and the morning before departure. I traveled 520 miles to several islands crossing the Equator four times; here's the major stops: Darwin Bay/Genovesa (Tower) Island; Sullivan Bay/Bartolome Island; Puerto Egas-James Bay/Santiago (James) Island; Punta Espinoza/Fernandina Island; Tagus Cove/Isabela

Island; Puerto Ayora/Santa Cruz Island; Punta Suarez and Gardner's Bay/Espanola (Hood) Island; and, Punta Pitt, Ochos Beach, Cerro Brujo Beach, and La Loberia/San Cristobal Island.

Genovesa (Tower) Island



I went up a flight of steps cut into the lava cliff of Darwin Bay, a sunken volcanic crater. Walking along the trail, I saw adult and juvenile frigatebirds, adult and juvenile red footed boobies, and adult and juvenile masked boobies. The masked booby nests on the ground and its nest is a few pebbles and feathers (shown here). The red footed boobie and frigatebird nest in bushes/trees; their nests are comprised of twigs and branches.

Juveniles hang around in or near the nest waiting for parents to come back with food. You could stand very close to these birds; there were unafraid.



The male frigatebirds would spread their wings, call out, and puff out their red throat pouches attracting females flying overhead (shown here). A pair of frigatebirds in a nest would comprise a male sheltering the female it attracted under its wing.

It was the wet season and everything was green with puddles on the ground. As I neared the coastline, I saw a large pod of dolphins cruising by. The surface of the lava flow near the coast was cracked slabs.

Petrels were flitting about in great numbers. The shorteared owl hunts these petrels which nest under the slabs; the owl corners them and eats them.



I saw the colorful Galapagos dove (shown here), lava cactus growing on the lava slabs, a solitary marine iguana well inland from the ocean, and a nonchalant shorteared owl being tormented on the ground by a mockingbird.

After the hike, I went snorkeling along the lava cliff and saw Galapagos sea lions and southern fur seals both in the water and hauled out. Several of the sea lions cavorted with me as I swam. The fur seals hole up in shaded cracks during the day; the Galapagos sea lions didn't mind laying out in the sun. In the water I saw yellowtail surgeonfish, parrotfish, angelfish and wrasses.



For the afternoon hike, I landed on a beach in Darwin Bay and observed swallowtail gulls nesting and mating (shown here); they hunt at night.

I watched the frigatebirds and red-footed boobies for a long time; there was a lot of mating action going on. I saw Galapagos doves, marine iguanas, a night heron fishing in a tidepool, Galapagos sea lions, and Sally Lightfoot crabs.

Sullivan Bay and Pinnacle Rock / Bartolome Island



I saw lava lizards and tequila plants.

Bartolome Island is comprised of volcanic cones; Pinnacle Rock (shown here) is a volcanic tuff or ash pinnacle along the shoreline. We saw penguins standing along the shoreline just after dawn; two males were doing ecstatic calls. A few were swimming in the water. I hiked up to the volcanic peak; its slopes were ash covered with some lava tubes, flows and lava bombs.



After the hike, I snorkeled towards the far side of Pinnacle Rock and saw a few penguins along the shoreline. I snorkeled out and joined up with twelve penguins swimming along in deeper water. I swam in their midst and as they neared the shoreline, they attacked a large school of fish and started fishing. A few pelicans started dive bombing the fish as well and one pelican inadvertently scooped a penguin into its bill. A furor erupted as the penguin and its friends furiously attacked the pelican for its error. The pelican lifted off as quickly as it could (without the penguin in its bill of course). Other snorkeling sights were several four foot reef sharks, big

trumpet whelk, bonito, a snail with an orange foot with bright blue dots, sand dollars, and colorful fish.

Puerto Egas - James Bay / Santiago (James) Island



That afternoon I went for a snorkel. I cavorted with sea lions for a long, long time; they wore me out. I saw marine iguanas and Sally Lightfoot crabs along the shoreline from my viewpoint in the water. I saw a juvenile angelfish sheltering in a Diadema longspined sea urchin. There were schools of yellowtail surgeonfish and a three foot Galapagos shark.

A hike later towards sunset was great; the golden glow of the sunset light was magical. A rugged lava coastline was alive with marine iguanas and Sally Lightfoot crabs in profusion. A fur seal was out in the open allowing closer inspection, and there were two Galapagos sea lions laying around.

Punta Espinoza / Fernandina Island



This was my favorite excursion. I landed on lava flows which were edged and occasionally broken inland by mangrove stands. Some mangrove stands were far inland because seawater traveled up to them through lava tubes. This island has the most recent volcanic activity. There were marine iguanas in profusion and

Galapagos sea lions were around; I watched them swimming in the water too. The marine iguanas nested on sandy beaches which were off the trail so that people would not trample them.



Isabela Island and its Volcan Ecuador and Volcan La Cumbre were in the background view across the channel between Fernandina and Isabela. I saw flightless cormorants (shown here) spreading their wings, grooming, and diving into the water. I watched Sally Lightfoot crabs squaring off in a bubble-billowing hostile display, and I also watched them mating. There were Galapagos sea lions tucked into the mangrove roots seeking some shade I suppose. There was lava cactus growing on the lava flows. I saw two ruddy turnstone birds, and a watched a juvenile night heron hunting a crab.

Tagus Cove / Isabela Island



That afternoon, I went on a hike uphill from Tagus Cove to the central ridge of Isabela Island for a stupendous view up and down the island. The peaks of Isabela are well vegetated and it is desert in between them. The peaks host populations of Galapagos tortoises and the deserts between them must isolate those populations from each other. On the way to shore, I could see pelican nests up above the

Tagus Cove shoreline with fluffy white juvenile pelicans in them. On the hike, I was several Darwin's finches including males perched outside their roofed-over nests. On the hike, there was a great view of Darwin Lake which is just inland of Tagus Cove and interconnected with Tagus Cove under a narrow section of land.

Puerto Ayora / Santa Cruz Island



I saw one wild giant tortoise in the highlands of Santa Cruz Island. I saw lots of them being reared in captivity at the Charles Darwin Research Station for release into the wild and some were just a few months old. The Charles Darwin Research Station raises them until they are large enough to fend for themselves against feral cats and dogs. I saw some Darwin's finches and lava lizards

flitting about on the Station grounds. I went for a hike through a long lava tube near the Restaurant Mutiny and enjoyed a nice lunch there. Some overgrown volcanic craters nearby were remarkable for the clarity and totality of all the birdsongs one could hear issuing from the many birds within each crater. Standing at the rim of a crater was enjoyable as a musical concert. Puerto Ayora was an interesting town to walk through as I strolled back towards the boat.

Punta Suarez / Espanola (Hood) Island



Here I saw blue-footed boobies mating and nesting as well as their fluffy chicks. The marine iguanas here were the most colorful with red and green colors splashed over their dark gray coloration. I watched a Galapagos dove gather nesting material. There were lava lizards. I watched a masked booby and a swallowtail gull feeding their offspring. Waved albatross were

sitting on eggs on nests on the ground. Their eggs are left untended at times and may be adopted by another albatross. I saw two Galapagos hawks sitting on a lava ridge far away.

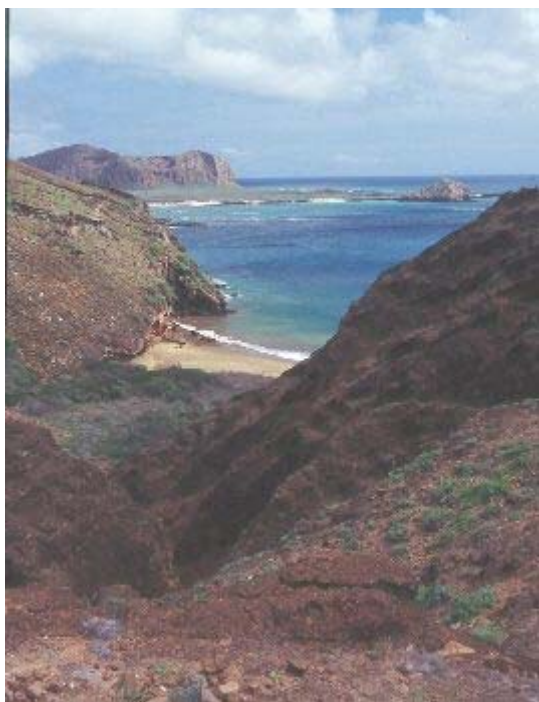
Gardner's Bay / Espanola (Hood) Island



There was a beautiful white sand beach here with Galapagos sea lions on it. Isla Tortuga was in the background. I watched bluefooted boobies fishing just outside the surfline. While scouting out wildlife in the grass back behind the sand beach, I found lots of flies, tall itchy grass, and spotted a Galapagos snake, a rare sighting. I was the only one to see a snake throughout the trip; our guides had never seen one.

Later I went snorkeling around Isla Tortuga. I snorkeled through volcanic boulder channels and grottoes along its shore. I saw schools of fish and a spotted ray.

Punta Pitt / San Cristobal Island



This was another favorite. The cove I landed in had magnificently sculpted sandstone cliffs and Galapagos sea lions laying on the beach. I hiked up and the scenic views of the coastline and hills were wonderful, with the water brightly colored along shore.

I saw bluefooted boobies courting, nesting on eggs and chicks, and tending hatchlings and fluffy white chicks. Male bluefoot boobies have a small black pupil and females have a large black pupil. I watched a redfooted boobie tending its young chick in a nest in a tree. There were lava lizards running about.

Other Stops ...



Additional stops on this trip were on San Cristobal Island at Ochos Beach, Cerro Brujo Beach, Kicker Rock (aka Leon Dormido Rock, shown here), and La Loberia. I watched frigatebirds at Ochos Beach, viewed a pretty coastal lagoon, and had a nice swim. Cerro Brujo Beach had sea turtle tracks and nesting pits in the sand high above the beach; I watched American

oystercatchers walk in the tidepools. I also saw lava lizards and marine iguanas that ran from you; there are feral animals on San Cristobal Island I was told which made the marine iguanas skittish. I watched a bluefooted booby fishing for a long time. Kicker Rock is a famous scenic landmark of the Galapagos and we motored around it several times right before sunset. There were frigatebirds flying high above it and birds were nested on it. La Loberia was a beach piled high and wide with black lava boulders. There were sea lions laying around and cavorting in the water and very large and almost black marine iguanas.



The Galapagos is definitely a must-see for nature enthusiasts as well as wildlife photographers. One can observe many animals up close since many of them don't have fear of predators on land. It is very strange to stand/sit so close to birds carrying on their lives as normal, since we are so used to seeing them fly away when we get close. I had a great time taking photographs and got some really good slides. You can really take your time with animal subjects that don't get nervous, and get good close-up shots, like this bluefooted baby tending its chick.

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