

Galápagos: The Far Side of the World

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The nearest thing to writing a novel is being at sea. Sailing is an act of thought: the sailor must find a way to adapt to each situation, letting the main sail out or in, as it were, to match the changing conditions in a constant effort not to be inundated. Both sailor and writer know that seemingly deep water can hide shallows, that one needs an eye that can focus on happenings both near and far, and patience, and an ability to suffer boredom. And one must have stalwart faith in the journey, at sea as at the writing desk: so often, the paradise island that appears on the horizon is deserted.

Long before I put pen to paper, as a boy on the flat prairie, far from waves and whales and cannon-fire, I found in the novels of maritime derring-do an unattainable dream. Exact and exhaustive, the words of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville came to me from another world. As did Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, Canadian Joshua Slocum's *Sailing Alone Around the World*, and Patrick O'Brian's *Master & Commander*. I was sure I'd never see the breadth of endless water, feel the heat of the doldrums, or the fright as the ship below me pitched in a storm. Like so many boyhood fantasies, it was a dream to be kept, not had.

But life is anything but predictable. I thought of those authors, and that boy, as I stood on the bow of Hurtigruten's MS *Santa Cruz II*, off the Galápagan island of Baltra. A week's sailing the western isles of Galápagos was before me and the

Age of Discovery felt not historical, but personal. Already in the few hours since my arrival, there had been sea turtle, iguana, sea lions, and bright-red Sally Lightfoot crabs. On the horizon, the islets of Genovesa, Marchena, and Pinta, broke the line of polished sea like brown moles. The earth had moved on, and left these few nevi alone.

And I wasn't the only dreamer aboard. As was Chris, from North Wales, who'd dreamed of Galápagos since watching David Attenborough in *Travellers' Tales* some sixty years before. "It's the proximity I love," he said, breathlessly. "You get so close to everything here. Close to the way the world used to be."

Closeness is easy in the Galápagos. Despite centuries of being eaten by, followed by decades of being gawked at by visitors, the animals of the isles have maintained their innocence. As our guide Daniel Moreano explained, we are too the animals "just another creature of life." We are, of course, kinder now than the original visitors. Whereas Moreano ensured we maintained our distance from and touched no living creature, these animals were once measured by their ability to be bludgeoned. English buccaneer William Dampier, who visited Galápagos in 1684, wrote in *A New Voyage Round the World* that iguanas "are so tame that a man may knock down twenty in an hour's time with a club." Seven dozen doves, by comparison, he wrote, could be killed over a morning's walk.

In Chris I also had a fellow bird watcher, and in the mornings, we stood on the forward decking spotting great frigatebirds, blue-footed boobies, and brown pelicans. Looking down, it was sharks—hammerhead, white-tipped reef, and hordes of Galápagos that by night swarmed the ship in the dozens chasing flying fish.

On a ship, *terra firma* moves with you. Barque-captain turned novelist Joseph Conrad, wrote that a ship was "a fragment detached from the earth...lonely and swift like a small planet." The *Santa Cruz II* was a second Earth, with plenty of food and wine, and creature comforts like hot showers and a library. Each night after supper, the anchor would clank up, and the deep-purple sound of the engine would rise through the hull. We moved through the night, rocking on the waves, and, in the morning, the sun burned through a haze of humidity to reveal a new island full of new critters.

The heat was intense, as though the islands lay at the foot of a bottomless pit of sunlight. Islands faded into a tremble of vapour. The islands, austere and scrubby, were covered in places with dried lava like molten rope, in others piled with holey pumice rock, and elsewhere dotted with brackish lagoons. There were

trees as thorny as cacti, and cacti as tall as trees. And animals—inimitable birds peeling off the yellow cliff face, the smooth back of a sea lion breaking the black skin of water, giant tortoises like steel combat helmets scattered across the green field. On Santa Cruz Island, a single flamingo waded in a patch of salty water. Against the grey, ochre, and green of the island, the bright pink bird looked like a mistake, a slip of the painter's brush.

There were no loud noises. The cries of the seals and the birds were plaintive. Even when the great swell of the ocean met the islands, it crashed with a discreteness, the water feathering against the rock. It was as though everything were stifled by the sunshine. Music filled that silence, and became an antidote for the nameless, which so much of the ocean is. To pass the long hours at sea, the heroes of O'Brian's *Master and Commander*, Captain Jack Aubrey and surgeon Stephen Maturin played duets on their violin and cello. Boccherini was Aubrey's choice, and I made it mine, listening, as we rounded the northern cape of Isabela Island, to *La musica notturna delle strade di Madrid*.

Surprising to me, the Galápagos have a significant population—some thirty thousand people live on the islands, with nearly half in the capital Puerto Ayora. So many people in such a sensitive ecosystem requires a strong hand. Across the archipelago, visitations are strictly regulated. Ecologically, the Charles Darwin Research Station advises, while the Parque Nacional Galápagos enacts conservation programs and rigorously monitors tourism. The guides are nearly all Galápageño, and hold to a sincere commitment to protect the fine balance of their home. “Privileged” was a word I often heard used by Moreano, referring not only to us looky-loos but themselves. So was “lucky,” and “rare.” And “sexy”—a kosher reference to the archipelago-wide mating season we were dropping in on. Land birds and iguanas were nesting ashore, the sea turtles made for the beaches, to bury their eggs in sand as soft as muscovado sugar.

Midway through the cruise, February 12th, was Darwin's birthday, and the anniversary of Ecuador's annexation of the Galápagos archipelago. Darwin spent five weeks in the archipelago aboard the *Beagle* in 1835. The Galápagos giant tortoise and the Galápagos mockingbird were the focus of his studies here. The finches weren't his preoccupation; it was British naturalist David Lack who coined the term “Darwin's finches” in 1947.

We spent the day walking on Floreana Island, on paths cut between low, twisting trees that covered the ground like a net. In the 19th century, whaling ships

used Floreana as a post office: letters stored in a wood barrel were collected by passing ships and taken home for delivery. The practice continues, and still no stamps are used—one still leaves an addressed postcard in a barrel for some kind soul to hand-deliver. We sorted through a sizeable stack of cards and letters with addresses as varied as Kenya, Taiwan, Spain, and South Carolina.

The scope of those letters was proof that the Galápagos have become a global emblem of the conflicting parameters of life: ceaseless change and eternal continuity. The archipelago is synonymous with life itself. Close, as Chris said, to the way things used to be. And close to what it may one day become, as in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Galápagos*, in which humans, stranded for a millennium on the archipelago, eventually evolve into sea creatures.

Such change is a part of life. So too was sea turtle in the water, the glass of wine in my hand, the music of Boccherini, the endless swell, and the search for the paradise island just over the horizon line.