

GREEN SCENE

The Enchanted Isles

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Tourists step aside to avoid disturbance to the nest of a Nazca Booby, one of the endemic species of the Galapagos. *Bruce Brandhorst photo.*

The Galapagos Islands are, perhaps, most famous for being the place where Charles Darwin collected data, particularly for his eponymous finch species, that led him to eventually propose his theory of evolution.

Once called the Enchanted Isles, this remote group of about 30 islands lies almost a thousand kilometres to the west of Ecuador, the country to which they now belong. In total, they comprise an area about one quarter the size of Vancouver Island.

Straddling the equator, there are about a dozen large islands; of these, only five are inhabited. These islands, which are actually the tips of large, submerged volcanoes, lie over a hotspot between two tectonic plates, which are spreading apart at a rate of one kilometre every 14,000 years.

For the most part, the only plants and animals to reach the isolated Galapagos were ones that drifted by accident to its shores or were blown off course by powerful storms. Thus, the species list for the Galapagos is extremely limited. For example, of the more than 1,500 species of birds found in Ecuador, only about 10% of these reside in the Galapagos.

Over millions of years, many of the plants and animals that survived unintended journeys to the Galapagos evolved into unique species or subspecies. Of the birds found in the Galapagos, about 20% are endemic (i.e., species or subspecies found nowhere else). For example, a few of the small Humboldt penguins from Peru must have been carried northward to the Galapagos, where they eventually evolved into a distinct new species, the Galapagos penguin. These penguins are not only endemic; they are also unique in that they are the only penguin to breed in the northern hemisphere (just barely).

Similarly, California sea lions, carried far south by currents, arrived at the Galapagos at some time in the distant past. They have also now become a new species, the very appealing Galapagos sea lion.

Similarly, it is believed that as few as two members of a single finch species arrived on the islands eons ago and eventually evolved into 13 distinct species.

Because these islands were not discovered by people until 1535, when the Bishop of Panama was blown off course while sailing to Peru, the animals of the Galapagos are famous for their delightful lack of fear around people.

It is, indeed, enchanting to be able to approach within touching distance of huge seabirds such as the magnificent frigate bird or the charming red-footed and blue-footed boobies. I discovered this for myself on a trip to the Galapagos this spring.

We joined a small cruise boat with 14 other passengers on our own week-long voyage of discovery to several of the islands. Since 1959, 97% of the Galapagos Islands have been a National Park, with the remainder of the land set aside for local residents. The Ecuadorian government has done an excellent job ensuring tourists remain on well-marked trails and do not harass or touch the wildlife. Sometimes, even on designated trails, we had to step aside to avoid disturbing a marine iguana, sea lion, swallow-tailed gull or some of the other charismatic species of the Galapagos.

The Galapagos Islands are especially known for their giant land tortoises, which can be up to 1.5 m in height and up to weigh 250 kg. Once, it is thought, there were 15 distinct species.

Sadly, these large tortoises were a favourite food item for long ocean voyages because they could live for months on ships without food or water. In fact, the tortoise population was estimated to be

250,000 prior to human predation. Today, only 10 species remain and their present numbers are less than a 10th of what they once were despite an ongoing and impressive breeding program. On Santa Cruz Island, we enjoyed viewing these lumbering giants at a private farm where they are a welcome draw for tourism dollars.

One of the Galapagos' interesting historical features is its post office barrel on Floreana Island. Since 1793, this barrel has served as an unofficial post office. On multi-year voyages into the vast Pacific Ocean, sailors or whalers would leave messages for their colleagues and families in Europe on their outbound voyage while homeward-bound vessels would stop at the barrel to pick up these messages. Once back in home port, these messages would be delivered by hand to their intended recipient. Darwin himself is believed to have made use of this barrel.

Our group arrived at the barrel with self-addressed post cards to deposit on April 29. We sorted through the several hundred post cards already there and were encouraged to take one from the barrel if the address was close to where we lived. By tradition, all such post cards must be hand-delivered.

You can imagine my surprise when, on June 10, some mysterious person dropped our postcard into our Port Moody mailbox. The Galapagos post office system still works and I was, once more, thoroughly enchanted with these captivating islands.