



Portal Goes to Ecuador!

May 27-June 5, 2016

Participants: John A., Sue, Bonnie, Wynne, Tony, Barbara, Cecelia, Suzie, Pi, Gayle, Fritz, Rolf, Ron, John S., Linda, Caroline, Reed, Zsombor

Guides: Carol Simon, Howard Topoff

Report and photos by Wynne Brown

Friday, May 27, 2016

A looong travel day: Up at 3:15 a.m., to the Tucson airport by 4:20, met Reed, Bonnie & Rolf— easy time through TSA, good flight to Atlanta, brunch at Cafe Intermezzo (a restaurant in a book store!), and several hours to wait until our flight to Quito.

The flight is about five hours, enough to cover much of Jonathon Weiner's *The Beak of the Finch: A Story of Evolution in Our Time*, while thinking, "Am I really on my way to the land of Drs. Rosemary and Peter Grant, Daphne Major, Darwin's finches—and Blue-footed Boobies?!" And how very fun to be doing this with nineteen other people, all with some sort of Portal connection!

So far, the trip wasn't nearly as easy for Carol and Howard ... You have to wonder about an expedition that literally starts on the wrong foot with someone (guess who) wearing mismatched shoes? Followed by a two-hour storm smashing into Houston with so much flooding the captain described the airport as "going into meltdown." Carol kept sending updates listing one cancelled flight after another, her last text to Peg reading: "We need help and don't know if we can get there ..."

In the meantime, the four of us arrived in Quito thirty minutes late, got entangled with church groups on their way to do relief work for the April 16 earthquake, finally got through Customs, and were driven to the Puembo Birding Garden, where Caroline, Tony, Pi and Zsombor, and John and Sue—not to be confused with John and Linda—are already settled in. Mercedes, the owner, greeted us, and my roommate, Caroline, had sweetly left the light on for me.

Saturday, May 28 - Antisana

Despite our 1 a.m. arrival time, we were up at 5:30, and, fueled by a breakfast of coffee, cereal/yoghurt, fresh fruit, and MORE coffee, we were off to the Antisana Ecological Reserve with Manuel, our guide. The impressive two-year-old highway took us through dramatic road cuts that revealed layers of geological and volcanic history, then into up steep highlands, reminiscent of Costa Rica—open emerald-green pastures, delineated by narrow lines of tall trees, all shrouded in clouds. “Blue gums” —Australian eucalypts — are surprisingly prevalent: They were imported many decades ago to control erosion and have now taken over the country.

We stopped near a quarry and walked up the gravel road to bird, seeing a Plainbreasted Hawk and a Great Thrush, then moved up higher and higher with more stops—and rain. The land at this upper elevation is a series of steep hillsides wreathed in clouds, bare of trees, covered with bunch grass, cushion plants (lumps of moss) in shades of soft beige. We saw many Andean Lapwings and scattered Carunculated Caracaras. In the paramo itself, we found Black-faced Ibis, Variable Hawk, American Kestrel, Black-winged Ground Dove, Paramo Pipit, and both the Chestnut-winged Cinclodes and the Stout-billed Cinclodes. A short (wet) stop at Miga Lake provided looks at Silvery Grebes, Slate-colored (Andean) Coots, and—the highlight—a terrific view of Andean Condors!



Next was a wonderful lunch at Tambo Condor with a welcome fire in the big stone hearth, and a chance to warm up while gazing out the picture windows at hummers and more condors. The appetizer was a potato-like vegetable called *malleco*, *havas* beans with chopped tomatoes and onions, followed by potato soup, then fresh trout with salad and a different type of potatoes, all accompanied by *babaco* juice (a kind

of hybrid papaya). Ecuadorians take lunch seriously! Hummingbirds at the restaurant feeders included Giant Hummingbird, Black-tailed Trainbearer, Black Flowerpiercer, and Shining Sunbeam (surely the most joyously evocative bird name!).

Back to the quarry spot for Cinereous Conebill, Tyrian Metaltail, and a Spectacled Whitestart before returning to Puembo before a lively and delicious dinner of potato soup, baked chicken, salad, potatoes, and an Oreo/gelatin dessert.

The day had brought more discouraging text messages from Carol, until this one arrived: “We have seats! They’re on an all-night flight via Mexico City, but we will be there tomorrow morning—about one and half hours before the Galapagos flight!”

We all turned in early—tomorrow will be a big day!

Sunday, May 29 (DAY ONE of Galápagos Voyage on species lists)

Breakfast at Puembo Birding Garden consisted of fresh fruit, including *piticaya*, and omelettes made to order by Mercedes—what a fascinating dynamo she is! She and Javier come from two families that owned adjoining properties; at nine years old, they both resolved they would live there forever. The rest of their families didn't want to stay, but "we fought to keep our pieces," she said. When they decided to make the property a hotel in the '90s, they started out with general-interest visitors, "but that didn't work out well—they thought our rooms were too simple because there was no TV, so now we only take birders." She and Javier were instrumental in establishing the Jocoto Foundation, which buys property to protect the habitat of endangered species.

Several of us looked hard for the Red Woodpecker, but it remained elusive ...

Off to the airport, where all twenty of us are together at last! Barbara and Ron, and Gayle and Fritz all joined us from Quito where they'd been touring and museum-hopping.

And, hooray! Carol and Howard, our fearless—and luggage-less—leaders, along with Suzie, Cecelia's husband's cousin (got that?!), arrived from Houston where the extreme flooding had left them stranded, along with thousands of other passengers.

We flew first to Guayaquil, Ecuador's second largest city, then to the town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal Island, one of thirteen major Galápagos Islands. The archipelago, which lies 650 miles off the Ecuador coast, straddles the equator.

On arriving at the San Cristobal airport, we slid through the inspection process easily with each bag being scanned first by machine, then by German Shepherd



noses. Ivan Lopez and Orlando Romero, our EcoVentura naturalist-guides, greeted and shepherded us by bus to the town dock where we donned life jackets, then descended the walkway while trying to not step on the snoring Galapagos Sea Lion! We then divided into two groups to ride in Zodiacs (called *pangas* here) to the Y/A Letty, our floating home for the next week.



After the guides' welcome talk and briefing, it was time for lunch—a lovely buffet of skewered grilled shrimp and a wide selection of fresh vegetables and salads.

The alarm siren shrieked ten minutes after lunch, the signal for us all to scamper to the sun (top) deck with our life jackets for the safety briefing. Fortunately, that was a piece of knowledge we never had to use.

Then back into the *pangas* for the short trip back to the dock past the still-snoozing sea lion for a walk along the shore. Orlando, who

worked for the Galapagos National Park Service for years, and Ivan were our guides as we learned about Palo Santo trees, saw our first Chatham Finch, were able to photograph our first marine iguanas (all females)!

We also met Ivan's wife, his seven-year-old daughter, and nine-year-old son. He lives here in San Cristobal, used to be president of the tourist commission, is now the president of the naturalist guides' association, worked with the UNESCO commission on determining how much tourist pressure the island ecology can bear, and owns a dive shop operation and is a SCUBA instructor.

Much later in the trip, we'd find out he has other talents ...

Then back to the dock where five sea lions now slept, stair-stepped, in the shade, and we *panga'd* (is that really a verb? It is now...) our way back to the Letty for Carol and Howard's lecture, "Introduction to the Galápagos," then another presentation by Ivan, then a welcome by the captain, Peter, and all eleven crew members, including Roberth, the "Keeper of Little Secrets"—i.e., the cabin "boy."

Dinner was a choice of steak or octopus—and we all fell gratefully into our bunks, lulled by the Letty's engines as she motored on to tomorrow's destination.



DAY 2 – Monday, May 30: San Cristobal (formerly known as Chatham Island)

The "romantic" voice of Orlando gave the wake-up call at 6:30 followed by the announcement at 7 for breakfast of fresh fruit, toast, oatmeal, cheese, ham—and Eggs Benedict! By 8 we were all in our life jackets and ready for our expedition to Cerro Brujo (which roughly translates to Mount Warlock or Wizard Hill). After discovering the meaning of a "wet" landing, we ambled through a narrow lava canyon and boulders scattered with brilliantly colored Sally Lightfoot crabs and meandered along an "organic" beach made of broken-up shells. It was easy to be so captivated by the Blue-footed Boobies and Brown Pelicans catapulting themselves into the water while feeding, we nearly stepped on either basking marine iguanas or snoozing sea lions—or in one case a pair of resting Oyster Catchers. Some intrepid souls tried out their snorkeling gear in the cold and choppy water.

Back on the *pangas* to the Letty for lunch—another selection of wonderful fresh salads and soup.

Next a siesta before the foray to Pitt Point, stopping at a rock outcrop where we saw Greater Frigate Birds and a small rookery of Nazca Boobies. Another wet landing to an inorganic beach, made from the eroded umber and sepia ash of the surrounding cliffs, and the sea lions who, when they're dry, are a perfect match for the rocks.

Next was a challenging 2-mile hike, clambering intrepidly up the hillside while observing a Chatham Mockingbird, *Opuntia* trees, Lava Lizards, past our first Red-footed Booby busily



building a nest, and then to a rookery of Blue-footed Boobies. These endearing birds dedicate a bare patch of earth to their nest, marking it with a circle of guano. We saw several nesting pairs, some with an egg, others with just one chick, one with twin offspring, and got to watch their whistling and sky-pointing displays. We also (carefully) peered over the cliff to view the nests of no less than ten Red-footed Boobies!

Next our group scabbled back down the trail, and *panga'd* back to the Letty for quick showers and Carol and Howard's presentation on "Seeing Isn't Always Believing" about the adaptations of Galápagos animals.

After dinner (a choice of turkey Roulade or Sea Bass [Corvina] on a bed of mixed

pepper and onion with a flan for dessert), most of us headed out to the top deck to watch the Southern Cross and the swooping flight of the elegant Swallow-tailed Gull, the world's only nocturnal gull.

DAY 3 – Tuesday, May 31: Espanola (Hood)

A cloudy morning with fog and breakers over the reef and the distant raucous racket of a seabird rookery. After the usual sumptuous breakfast, we headed to Punta Suarez where the trail wanders past stacks of basking Marine Iguanas, more nesting and whistling Blue-footed Boobies, and skittering Lava Lizards. The star of the morning was the impressively large and impassive Waved Albatrosses who very cooperatively did their bill-clacking and territorial routine for our cameras. Espanola is the only island where they land and breed; for the rest of the year, they're at sea for months at a time.

Back to the Letty for lunch (two kinds of ceviche!) and siesta/photo download/bird list time before seven of us struggled into our wet suits for a snorkeling expedition, led by



Ivan and his trusty "Ring of Happiness." The large bright orange life preserver's an effective confidence-booster and deep-water resting spot

for rookie snorkelers. We saw trumpet fish, hog fish, a parrot fish, razor surgeon fish, wrasses, damselfish, and more.

The highlight was when two young sea lions emerged from a cave and joined us! Back to the boat where Marcos, bartender extraordinaire, had hot chocolate waiting—oh my, we could get very used to being spoiled like this!

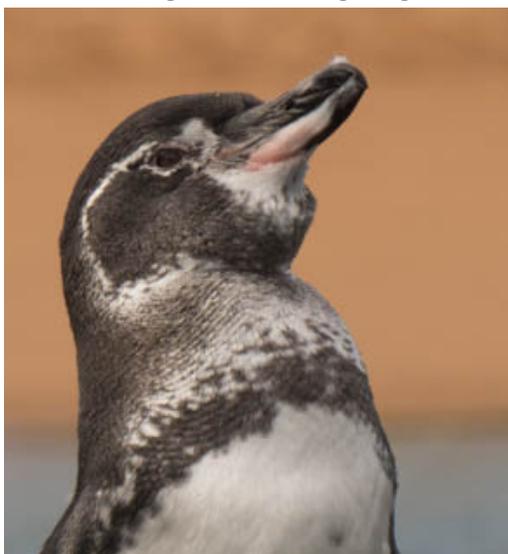
For the next outing, the group split up—some to a beach walk and the discovery of a whale skeleton and watching a Marine Iguana graze on algae. Five others went kayaking, and one brave soul (go, Suzie!) tried out EcoVentura's new paddle board. No lecture tonight—instead we all re-convened on the top deck for the sunset.

Dinner was an appetizer of quinoa and veggies, Mediterranean chick pea soup, choice of shrimp over wild rice or pork medallions with apple, followed by dessert of Opera Cake (similar to tiramisu). Ivan warned us that with the wind, it could be a rocky passage tonight to Isla Floreana and that those sensitive to motion might want to take a Dramamine ...

DAY 4 – Wednesday, June 1: Floreana (Santa Maria, Charles)

This entire experience is all incredible—but my favorite part of each day is waking before dawn, throwing on a fleece, clambering sleepily up the ladder to the dining room, pouring a cup of strong Ecuadorian coffee, and joining other early birds on the top deck. This morning was calm and lovely with a pink-brushed sky.

After breakfast, the *pangas* took us to Punta Cormorant where we hiked along a gentle trail past the mangroves, through a grove of Palo Santo trees, and over a hill to a brackish lagoon.



Floreana is famous for being the only place to see flamingos and penguins on the same island. We were lucky enough to see eight American Flamingos on the far side of the lagoon, ranging from fairly pale to dark pink, a Galápagos (Large-billed) Flycatcher, Smooth-billed Anis, and lots of what we eventually decided were Small Ground Finches. We slowly ambled over the hill to the beach on the other side of the island to view a dozen Pacific Green Turtle nests before leisurely heading back to our launch site.

And—just as if it read the trip itinerary—there was a Galápagos Penguin cruising along next to the beach as we waited for the *pangas*!

Back to the Letty before the usual seven snorkelers headed out again—underwater here is Paradise indeed! The water was calmer today with brighter, more consistent light that illuminated the fish brilliantly. Soon after Ivan pointed out a Whitetip Reef Shark, a young sea lion showed up to check us out for several minutes, swirling around and through our group. We snorkeled more past schools of charcoal-gray, lemon-tailed surgeon fish, chubby and luminescent parrot fish, and many more—until here came another young sea lion, even more curious than the first. What a joyful creature! Swooping, plunging down to grab a rock in his teeth, tossing it up, catching it, flinging it again just so he could chase it, twisting and jackknifing to the surface, mouth open so close we could see its red lining and sharp white teeth, still holding on to the rock, then dropping it, and swishing close enough to touch, almost bumping my face mask as we peered at each other.

I was torn between involuntarily patting him as he brushed by and cautiously pulling back, remembering this IS a wild animal after all.

What a totally magical experience ...

Back to the *panga* and to the Letty for a welcome hot shower and lunch of salads, hot soup, hominy, seafood and rice, and Ecuadorian *puerco carnitas*.

As short siesta/bird work before Carol and Howard's "Trouble in Paradise" presentation on the ecological challenges in the Galapagos, then a scramble to load up for the *panga* tour or kayaking. Three people chose to kayak and reported seeing one sand shark, one ray, and one HUGE male turtle (the difference between males and females is that the males have a MUCH larger tail.) The *panga* folk were lucky enough to see three Galápagos Penguins: a pair and their youngster!

Next we all met up at the Post Office Bay beach and read many of the hundreds of postcards left in zip-lock bags in a tall wooden barrel. "Post office" is a bit of a misnomer since no postal service is involved: Instead, visitors pick up cards destined for their own home towns and hand-deliver them. The system works! At least some of the time: Within five weeks of our being there, three of our postcards were delivered! On the other hand, Howard says they're still waiting for the one they put in the box 23 years ago ...

We watched and cheered the crew member soccer game: No one kept score, but our Captain Peter did score an impressive goal. (It came with a price: He arrived at dinner with an ice bag on his ankle ...)

Drinks and sunset-watching before dinner of beef roulade and portobellos vs salmon with dill sauce ... As Ivan would say: Another "WUNNERFUL" day in Paradise!

DAY 5 – Thursday, June 2: Santa Cruz (Indefatigable)

Today is Giant Tortoise Day!

We got to sleep in an extra thirty minutes, then off in the *pangas* through the busy harbor to Punta Aroyo, the economic center of the Galápagos. Onto a bus, through



town, on up to the highlands to Los Gemenos, the Twins—matching craters rimmed by Scalesia trees, coffee plants, guava trees—and ferns, which make up 35 percent of the plants in the highlands.

Then to the Lava Tunnel, a rock tube, 15 feet tall, formed when the outside of a lava flow cools faster than the interior. The resulting walls are valuable in that they hold records of animals and plants that have long since gone extinct.

Then partway down the mountain to Rancho Primicias, a local ranch (complete with restaurant, bar, and gift shop) where Giant Galápagos Tortoises are the reptile out of their resident stars. How do ranchers keep a 900-pound cow pastures? They don't. The tortoises go where they please, and the ranchers just fix the fences. These animals are indeed impressive lumbering creatures, munching guavas slowly and thoughtfully, resting in puddles, plowing along and pulling their stump-like legs out of the mud holes. These were all males as the females and young hang out in lower elevations. It takes the males three months to make the trek down the mountain to find and mate with the females, then find their way back up the the highlands, taking another three months.



After lunch we toured the Charles Darwin Research Station and observed the Mangrove Finch Recovery Project, Giant Tortoise breeding and restoration project, Exhibit Hall, native garden, and gift shop.

We then walked into town to savor a local parade (hundreds of kids on bikes along with a couple of floats celebrating the end of school and Ecuador's qualifying for the Copa America Centenario soccer tournament), time in an Internet cafe, and dinner in town for several. The rest of the group returned to the boat—and to the thrilling news that Carol and Howard's luggage was waiting in their room!! Plastered with huge "RUSH!" labels, their suitcases had been flown from Quito to Balta (the former US Air Force base on the north face of Santa Cruz, now an arrival point for 1,000 people a day) and brought by barge, then a bus to Punta Aroyo, then by water taxi or *panga* to the Letty.

We all wondered if we'd recognize Team Simon-Topoff in their own clothes instead of our borrowed ones ...

Dinner was Tuna Teriyaki with Rice Noodles or Chicken Roulade and Apple Strudel for dessert. Each night four guests are invited to dine at the Captain's table, amid much hilarity as he's a lively storyteller with tales of piracy, Coast Guard heroism, jungle survival, proud-Papa stories of his three children (his daughter, at 14, wants to be an electrical engineer, which means the family will need to move to Quito)—and the evening usually ends with an invitation to visit the bridge the next day, including a chance to steer the boat!

DAY 6 – Friday, June 3: Bartolome/Black Tortuga (north side, Santa Cruz)



Almost every travel brochure for the Galápagos includes an image of Pinnacle Rock on the tiny volcanic islet of Bartolome, the setting we woke up to this morning. Our goal? To see penguins—mission accomplished!—before hiking up 378 wooden steps past several impressive examples of Lava Cactus (*Brachycereus nesioticus*, the only species in the genus) to the peak for the view overlooking young black lava and red cinder cones and the iconic rock tower. We then hustled back to the Letty, where Marcos had hot pizza waiting on the mid-deck, and wrangled our well-fed selves into wetsuits to snorkel at the base of Pinnacle Rock—with a penguin! Like all the animals here, it was unfazed by these odd swimmers and paddled and bobbed right next to us, gazing curiously into our masks. We also watched a feeding frenzy of surgeon fish with several male and female parrot fish, all gnashing at something scrumptious on the sandy sea floor.

Back to the boat, and after lunch a visit from Charles Darwin himself (in Crocs) who described his life and what it was like on the HMS Beagle. (And a reminder to watch "Master and Commander" with Russell Crowe since it was filmed right here...) Then a serene late afternoon *panga* tour of the mangroves of Black Tortuga Cove

where we saw Whitetip Reef Sharks, mullets, lots of sea turtles, Great Blue Herons, and several Striated Herons.

Back to the Letty in time for the sunset on the top deck before a dinner of Chicken Fettucine with Pesto Sauce or Beef Roulade with Dried Fruits followed by a dessert custard with kiwi.

DAY 7 – Saturday, June 4: South Plaza/North Seymour

By now we've got the routine down: Orlando's wake-up call, a hearty and delicious breakfast, and then our twice-daily Panga Hop. Today was a dry landing onto South Plaza Island—and immediate gratification with our first Land Iguanas lying languidly among the reddish trunks of the *Opuntia* trees and the even redder *Sesuvium*! Lava Lizards were out as well as the usual sea lions lounging all over the trail ("watch out for that squishy rock—" cautioned Ivan.) One group even got to see a hybrid Marine/Land Iguana, characterized by a flat rather than a round tail, a pointier snout, and zebra striping on the side of its neck.

We spent most of the morning meandering around this beautifully spare island, named for its resemblance to a town plaza. More nesting Swallowtail Gulls perched on the edge of the cliff above the waves crashing below with a backdrop of clouds of Shearwaters wheeling and swooping in the spray. On land, infant *Opuntia* seedlings are protected by individual wire fences and plastic funnels, shaped like hubcaps, to capture the dew.



The highest point of the island is the bachelor quarters for the male sea lions who've been unsuccessful in finding a mate. Since there aren't any females to fight over, they all get along amicably. Interestingly, their trails are marked by gleaming rocks: The calcium carbonate in their scat leaches out, and then, as they slide up and down the slope, their bodies buff the stone surface to a sheen that would make any sculptor proud.

Back to the Letty where Marcos had empanadas and juice ready for us, then a quick turnaround for the snorkelers to cram themselves into wetsuits and the others to go look for Galápagos Fur Seals, smaller and much less common than the Galapagos Sea Lions we've been seeing so frequently.

The snorkelers had rinsed their masks, put on their fins, and were all poised to tip into the water when the *panga* driver suddenly stood up, shouting, "Orca!"—and we were off! The whale (easily identifiable as a male with its taller narrower dorsal fin) surfaced, so sleek, elegant, and gleaming, sank, then re-emerged again and again, blowing six or eight times with us speeding and bumping our way close behind, hanging on tightly through two-foot swells. Most of the time he was alone although we glimpsed a female once.

At one point we realized he was chasing a sea turtle—which at the next moment became his lunch.



"Sometimes you can hear when the orcas eat the turtles," Ivan told us. "It sounds like popcorn." Every time we'd decide to turn back, the orca surfaced again, luring us on to have just one more look—until suddenly we realized he was headed our way—and FAST. Before we had a chance to react, he torpedoed straight under the *panga*, so close we could see the contrasting yin/yang black-white pattern of his side. Wow—unbelievable!

And a clear signal it was time for us to retreat ... Ivan said that had the killer whale chosen to hit the *panga* at that speed, we'd have all been thrown out of the boat. Although there's no record of these animals attacking humans in the Galápagos, in our wetsuits we were all dressed like sea lions—which happen to be orcas' main food source ...

Back to Letty again, for a terrific slide show by Ivan, using photos he'd taken during the week, which he generously provided to all of us—and the soundtrack includes "Galápagos Paradise," a song he wrote and sang. Who knew? Our naturalist guide we've been thinking of as Ivan Lopez has an alter ego: that of the pop singer Ilo!

Our last onboard lunch—with the snorkelers, like ancient mariners, still telling whale tales galore to anyone who'd listen—then a start on, sigh, the dreaded packing, before our last adventure: North Seymour Island.

And what a treat to save for last! Howard was so right when he described it as a "gem" ...

Another dry landing, then to be greeted by Blue-footed Boobies, some dancing, others sitting on nests, and one pair even mating, more implacable Land Iguanas, more Marine Iguanas—and the first Galápagos snake (*Alsophis*) Carol's ever seen in fifteen trips here!



Then on along the windward shore to a frigate bird rookery: Both Magnificent and Greater frigates are here, females, chicks on the nest, males with their scarlet puffed-up gular pouch, or—klepto-parasites that they are, swooping in to steal the food literally out of the mouths of the chicks—we got to see it all!



Reluctantly, we straggled back to the *panga* for one last evening ride back to the Letty, where after the Captain's cocktail and re-introduction of the crew members, one more gift awaited us: Bonnie's birthday celebration, complete with balloons, cake and candles carried in by Captain Peter—and music provided by the multi-talented Ilo, accompanied by Orlando and the captain—and a conga line winding through the dining room, around the lounge table, past the bar and back. Howard's accompaniment on chafing dish lids was not to be missed!

DAY 8 – Sunday, June 8: San Cristobal

We'll miss Orlando's dulcet tones of "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is 6:30. Breakfast will be in half an hour." One last sumptuous breakfast as we maneuvered our luggage out into the hallways and prepared for our last *panga* trip through the harbor, then a short bus trip to the Visitor Center on top of the hill. From there, too soon, the bus took us to the airport where our paths diverged: Some to Mindo, some to Cuenca, some back to Quito to head back to Real Life ...

What a trip! And what a place! So many thanks to Naturalist Journeys and to Carol and Howard for putting together such a fabulous trip!



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