Field Study – The Galapagos Islands
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Some have called them stark and cheerless but if you pass through any of the Galapagos Islands with 13 biologists the descriptions would not include these words. In late July a group of 16 RWC biology students, alumni, teachers and friends spent 7 golden days sailing around this sun baked archipelago on the yacht Cachalote.

The flight to South America took us to the sea coast city of Guayaquil along Ecuador’s Pacific waterways. The Unipark Hotel where we stayed, sits neatly across from the Iguana Park where crews of maintenance workers nurture and cultivate the park’s namesakes. Hundreds of lazy land iguanas, golden and indolent were perched in trees or scuttling along the walkways, each enduring the attentions of curious Spanish children. We spent a lovely two days trailing through the busy streets and board walks of the city and its pride, the Malacon 2000. But the biologists in the group were eagerly anticipating the flight which would take us to our primary destination 600 miles from the west coast of Ecuador.

We disembarked on the tiny island of Baltra at an open air landing field originally constructed by the U.S. military during World War II as a base to protect the Panama Canal from enemy attack. Our resident naturalist, Sylvia, met us and directed us to a squat bus which bumped along the flat terrain to the small port where we were ferried to the Cachalote, our home for the next seven days. The week that followed holds for most of us some of the most exciting experiences of our lives. The infinite palate of blues and greens, the silver pepper stars, the white froth of water spewing about the sides of the yacht as it cut through the sea, the glitter of Puerto Ayora at black midnight as we bobbed in the soft swells of the kindly sea. These are the indelible pictures in each of our minds. For most of us, though, it was the fearless animals and the matchless variety of brilliant ecosystems which we will replay over and over.

There are 16 main islands, 6 smaller islands, and 10 rocks and islets in the archipelago. We were privileged to disembark on seven of the larger ones. Each morning we rose to clear skies, moderate temperatures and breakfasted, family style, in the cheerful window lined common room of the yacht. Richard, our steward, served varied, generous meals which were intended to satisfy the American tastes but proved to fall just short of the mark as often as not. By mid morning all sixteen of us were meandering across the white or black beaches, the ropey pahoehoe lava beds, the rocky pathways lining the nesting areas of Blue Footed Boobies, Waved Albatrosses, the dusty cuts through the Palo Santo or incense trees. Some days we listened as Sylvia expounded on the animals of the Darwin Research Center, or we poked around the tidal pools rich in anemones, sea cucumbers, tiny hawk fish or blennies, Sally light foot crabs and green ruffled algae and once, even an octopus. Frigates and brown pelicans wheeled above, chased by the barking noises of fearless sea lions casting about our company. Sometimes the two dinghies’s carried us into mangrove swamps where we glided quietly beside
ancient sea turtles or Galapagos penguins, flamingos or Nazca Boobies. Most of the team went snorkeling during the sunny afternoons. I am not much of a swimmer so after a few determined attempts with a leaky face mask, I resigned myself to watching the antics of beach animals as my cohorts stitched through the blue sea. They always returned alight with stories of encounters with sharks, sea turtles, urchins, golden rays, sea lions, and gaudy fish. I sat and enjoyed watching their eyes dance and their animated faces light at the telling.

Evenings brought us together for dinner around the table to recount the afternoons’ pleasures. After a filling meal, Sylvia clarified the next day’s plan, describing what we would see, the geology of the island, its flora and fauna, and indicated whether it would be a dry or a wet landing or if we should prepare for swimming or snorkeling. Each of us would drift off to enjoy a communal game or a wandering conversation up on the top deck, or sit silently on the second deck reveling in the prevailing winds and splendid display of sunset colors. Exhausted, we retired early to each air conditioned cabin to drop off into the night’s oblivion.

Lest the whole experience be considered too idyllic, I need to admit to a prolonged bout of sea sickness for the first two days on the yacht. Truth be told, most of us encountered some until we had each determined what small pill or patch would work. Many of us joined the company of those who hung over the rail for relief and I had the privilege of a 3 am conference with a balde (sp?) rojo (red bucket). I will never conjure up quite the romantic picture of life on a yacht again. That said, the memory of the discomforts fades with each review of the 5000 pictures residing at our joint Snapfish account.

The first light was just new on the last day of our Galapagos adventure when fifteen of us, barely awake, descended into the dinghies for the last trip into the mangrove swamp. Although these small boats are motorized, once they enter the swamp, the motors cease and the leader rows quietly. The hush that followed engulfed all conversation. The early sky was wrinkled with gray as the rhythmic sound of the oars spread over the surface of the swamp’s inlet. Blue Footed Boobies began to wake from their roosting. Each clutch of birds flapped and rose until hundreds filled the air with their graceful wings. They circled round and round. Then as if on some mysterious cue the flock began vortexing as though a drain had opened in the sea. They began rifling into the bay, wings tucked back, like streamlined bullets ripping the surface waters. Hundreds of them dove for breakfast fish. They rose from their plunge and sped off to nests deep into the swamp. The experience was breathtaking, repeated over and over until each Boobie was satisfied.
With reluctance we returned to Guayaquil for the final days of our adventure. The Museo Antropológico y de Arte Contemporáneo was interesting, but uninspiring. The staff of the Museo Municipal de Guayaquil was cordial, helpful and very interesting. The tour we had at the Historical Park was enlightening, colorful, and highly entertaining, but the highlights of the Galapagos overshadowed the offerings of this ancient Spanish city of two and a half million. I wonder if any other excursion we make will ever equal the natural beauty, camaraderie, or joyous entertainment of those seven days.