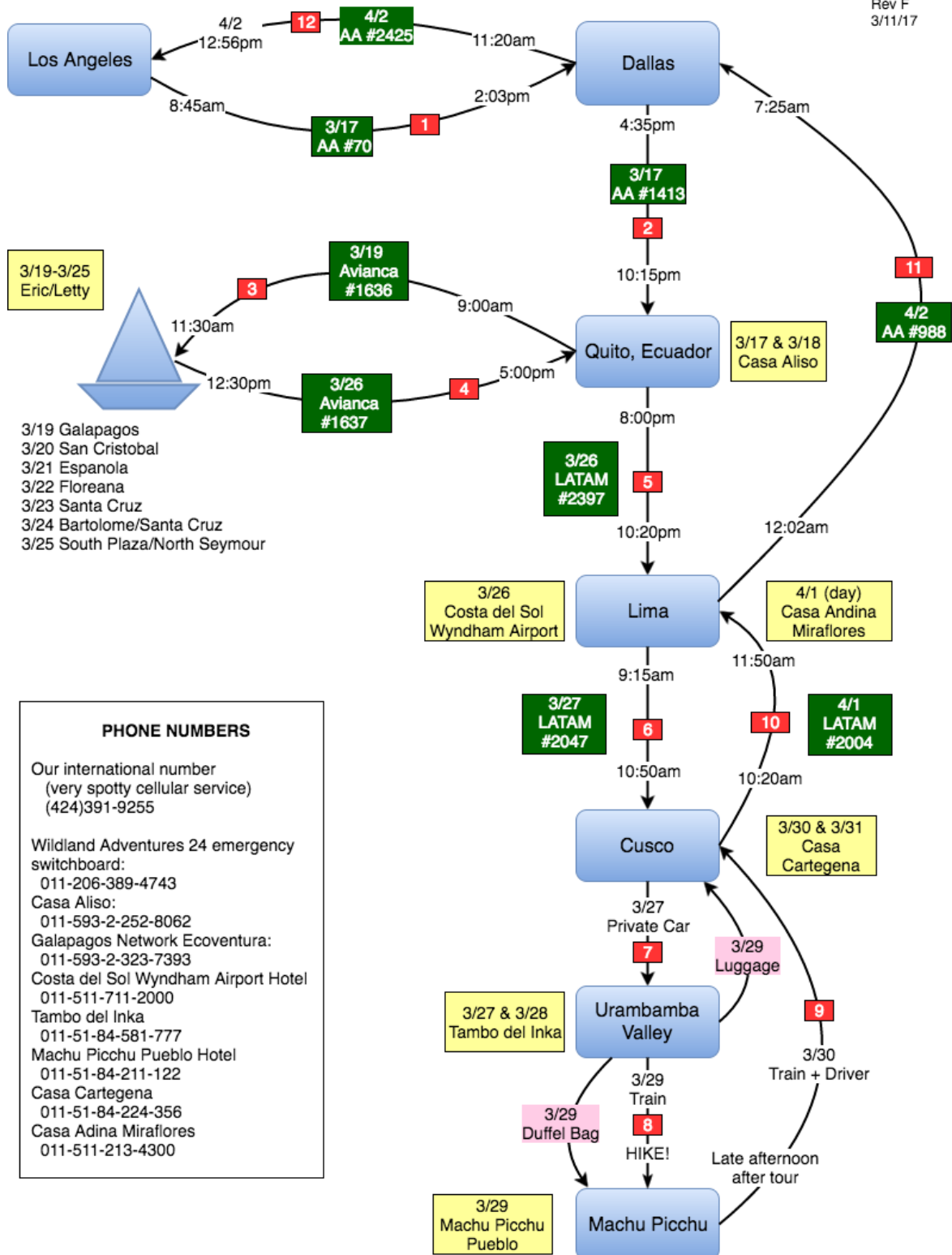


Galapagos Travelogue (Before Peru/Machu Picchu)

Rev F
3/11/17



Galápagos Islands Day 1 - Getting to Quito

Hi everyone!

I usually start with Day 0, getting there but it was pretty uneventful, other than a slight delay getting out of Los Angeles. Here's our classic start of the trip photo from the plane:



We successfully made it Quito, Ecuador last night where we were met by the fabulous Fabien (our tour guide and handler) and our driver Billy (who is also fabulous). Their first victory was finding us at the airport, then they drove us the 45 minutes to our hotel, then they convinced the night manager to get up after midnight to let us into the the Casa Aliso hotel. Having arisen at 4:30am, we collapsed into bed.

They picked us up at the civilized hour of 9am and drove us 45 minutes north to the actual equator. It was pretty touristy but it was still cool to stand with one foot on the Northern Hemisphere and the other on the Southern Hemisphere:





The tour guide did a demo of the Coriolis effect. You know how you're supposed to look at a drain when you're south of the equator and see the water swirl the opposite way of how it does in the northern hemisphere? He put a tank on the equator and it went straight down. Then he put it 15 feet south of the equator and it went clockwise and then north it went counter clockwise.

Both Steve and I were skeptical that this effect would be seen by moving the tank of water such a small distance. We did see it happen but it didn't look like a controlled experiment to us.

They also showed us how they make chocolate which was really cool. We sucked on some raw cacao beans which were like a fruit taste. Needless to say we bought chocolate after that.

We then went to the UNASUR, or Union of South American Nations. This also happens to be on the equator, so another opportunity to pose!



At this site they had a sign saying that the Coriolis effect only effects large systems like hurricanes and cyclones. Oh well, the demo was cool.

We then realized we were there at about 6 minutes after noon, just 3 days before the Equinox. We looked down at our shadows...and could barely see them! Now that was cool.



We went to a bunch of churches and monasteries (they started to blend together) but there were a couple that were completely decorated inside with gold plating. This gold plating was put onto wood by hand by the monks. Here's one of the lesser churches (and yes there was a wedding going on!)



We FINALLY stopped for lunch around 2:00 and had some awesome local food. Steve had lamb rice stew called Seco de Chivo, and I had Tortillón, which was a potato pancake with avocado and more filet steak than I could eat! Oh, and beer.



We got to see the division of the old and new towns of Quito - in the background of this photo.



Oh, you wanted a selfie in front of that? Well here you go!



Observations of Quito:

- Nobody smokes here. I saw one guy and asked our guide about how few people I'd seen smoking and he confirmed that they just don't smoke. He was quick to point out that they drink though...
- Street vendors walk between the cars when you're stuck in traffic selling everything under the sun. I saw a dash mount for a cell phone, toilet paper (which is hard to get here based on its unavailability in restrooms), ski caps, sodas, you name it, you can buy it in the street.

We're off to the Galapagos tomorrow where we expect to have little to no cellular service so you might not hear from us for a week till we get back and on our way to Peru to hike Machu Picchu.

It's not yet 7:30pm and after a fine dinner of Ecuadorian chocolate and an Argentinian Malbec, we're going to sleep!

Galápagos Islands Day 2 - The San Cristobal

The friendly Fabien and his lovely driver Billy picked us up at 6:45 am this morning and drove us to the Quito airport, where Fabien took care of everything. I don't take for granted that I didn't have to figure out how to get there, which line to stand in (the one where they check your luggage for fruit and such as they don't want anything introduced to the Galápagos. Fabien explained that we had already prepaid our taxes and shouldn't be charged for anything, took us through the baggage line and got us our passes to get into the national park. He bid us farewell at the boarding gates.



We flew to San Cristóbal where we were quickly whisked in a bus a short distance to a jetty where we jumped aboard the panga (we call them zodiacs in the US, inflatable outboard motor boats) and came aboard the Eric. Yes, our boat's name is simply called Eric. We think it's lame too, but we suspect she will grow on us.



Lindsay calls her diminutive house, "Tetris House" because of how she has to move 12 things to get to the thing she wants. We have Tetris Cabin on the Eric. This is the ENTIRE cabin. There are 2 little drawers (think MAYBE socks) and a few hooks. Steve doesn't look happy here because we thought our GIANT luggage was going to have to stay in here too (but the lovely Maria hid it away in the bilges).



When we arrived on board, we had the mandatory safety training, followed immediately by lunch (We'd only had 3 meals so far today). Immediately after lunch, we were told to hurry up and get into bathing suits to go pick out our snorkel gear and be fitted for wetsuits. I did not like the experience of donning a wetsuit. I will forever be sympathetic to Vienna sausages. That's all I'm saying.



In the panga, ready to snorkel (still feeling like a sausage):



The snorkeling was pretty fun, not great, but we saw two turtles, which was pretty fun as a warmup snorkel. Water was pretty churned up, but will probably be better in future swims. We did see a turtle head pop out of the water and thought of you, Ron.



And there seems to be a rule that we have to take this picture every trip, right? Steve took it up a notch this year and (perhaps accidentally) did it as a video, but here's a still shot. You're welcome, Linda.



The afternoon briefing was a whirlwind of information. I think what I heard we're going to do tomorrow is snorkel, then hike, then lunch, then a big strenuous hike, and then snorkel. Even for ME, that's a lot of snorkeling!

Here's a shot of us on the deck of the Eric as the sun was setting:



Galápagos Islands Day 2A - The Booby Show

Our faithful naturalists Pépe and Fabo (Fabricio) explained to us upon arrival on our ship (the oddly named Eric) that instead of running the ship on the correct time for the Galapagos (Central), they observe Quito time (Eastern). Fabo told us that they do everything for a reason, and this slight of hand is to manipulate the activities to match better times of day. For example, we would balk at getting up at 6am, but what if they called it 7am? Well that's more civilized, isn't it?

This change required Steve and me to convince our iPhones and Apple Watches to disobey the network time services. I died a little inside doing it.

Overnight, we motored 6 miles along the shore of San Cristobal. In the morning, we were awakened at 7 am for breakfast, followed by a water landing on the island at a spectacular beach called Cero Brujo.



We had our first Marine Iguana sighting:



And some really cool colorful crabs (being stalked by an American Oyster Catcher):



Steve found something else frolicking about in the water as well:



The snorkeling was disappointing but as we sailed away we were joined by a fleet of frigate birds (the pirates of the bird family):



And I'm not even to the GOOD part of the day yet! In the afternoon we were given the option of a leisurely panga (inflatable dingy) ride around the island coast near Punta Pitt, or a strenuous hike. You know we picked the hike, right? Well don't think we're too amazing. Linda and Karen, both turning 70 this year and their friend Martha, at 78 were also on this hike. They're all AMAZING. Martha has a new knee and is looking forward to getting the 2nd one so she wouldn't be "so slow".

View from the top (not really that high):



This hike was to find the blue and red footed boobies, and the hike did not disappoint. The hardest part of this letter is choosing just a few photos. I present to you, the blue footed booby!



Fabricio explained that you can tell the girl blue-footed boobies from the boys by a bigger pupil, but according to a book a friend had on board, it's actually a dark stain on the iris, not a bigger pupil. I guess the book was right:



We even got to see them during the mating ritual. The blue feet are a result of the type of algae they consume, which causes variation in the color as well.



We thought we'd been pretty lucky already, only to come upon a booby with two eggs. Fabo explained that the boobies will lay multiple eggs from multiple matings, and they lay the eggs within a circle made of guano (poop) and sticks. After the chicks hatch, the strongest one will kick the weaker chicks out of the circle. Mom and dad will only feed the chick remaining in the circle. And I thought MY brothers were tough.



At this point the blue footed boobies were old news (some of them were even in our WAY on the pathways). Now we went on the hunt for the red footed boobies which are more rare. And we were thrilled to find a pair with a chick. The strongest, meanest, surviving chick that is.



Not to be outdone, the blue footed boobies showed off their chicks. But they sat on them.



One last goodbye from a mating pair of boobies (can you tell we just like saying "boobies"?)



From iguanas to boobies it was a glorious day.

Fondly,
Allison & Steve

Galápagos Islands Day 3 - Torrential Downpour

Things are getting hectic on the trip because they keep us doing adventures constantly! We basically have four different activities to do each day. Today's adventures are on the island of Española (good lucky finding it on the globe, Dory!)

We started with an easy walk where the goal was to see the Nazca Boobies, and if we wanted the long walk we'd get to see a blowhole.

As we got off the ship we were greeted by a Galapagos Hawk. He posed for photos for quite some time, which we thought quite nice of him.



The marine iguana are so amazing here - they come in so many colors but all look like dinosaurs. Here's a red one:



And how about a green one?



This bird they call the "tourist bird". See, he's wearing khaki, has blue eyes and sunburned feet:



There are sea lions everywhere (more to come on how awesome they are), here's an intrepid photographer catching them in their element:



Wait, another iguana!



But then as we continued on our track, a torrential downpour dumped on us. I mean 40 days and nights kind of rain. Luckily Steve just happened to have two ziplock bags in his backpack so we quickly put my good camera into one. I'm sooooo glad he did because other people were not so lucky. One woman is still waiting to see if her camera will awaken while in a bag of rice.

We continued to walk and did see the Nazca boobies. I tried to see if I could maybe point the open end of the ziplock at them while keeping the camera inside but it didn't work.

At that point, the walking on rocks got so treacherous that our guide Fabo told us we couldn't continue onto the blowhole. He got no argument from any of us.

Later in the day the weather cleared up and we did do another spot of snorkeling.



Fabo told us that if we saw sea lions, we should try to play with them. Specifically, he said to roll around in the water like they do. I take this kind of direction quite seriously, so I rolled my little heart out. This picture was taken while I was actually upside down!



This is a short letter but there's more adventure coming soon!

Galápagos Islands Day 4 - Swim with Sea Lions, Sharks & Turtles

If you've been reading these letters for a while, you'll know that a long standing tradition is my complete and utter inability to keep track of which day it is. I'm pretty sure I ended up with two different "Day 2" emails, so it's good to see that my processes are in tact.

I haven't talked yet about how tightly scheduled our days are on the ill-named but delightful Eric. At 7 am, Pépe quietly starts to say good morning to us. He croons his morning ritual and always makes us giggle as he gets louder and louder and finely ends with a breathless "Enjoooooyyyyyy it!".

Breakfast is at 7:30, buffet style, and at 8:30 we get aboard the pangas. These times are the latest you're expected to arrive. If you arrive 15 min early, you're taken care of. We go to land or snorkeling, then come back for lunch precisely at 12 (again a buffet that's super yummy). We usually have relaxation time till 3, at which time we're again whisked away on the pangas for more land or sea adventures. We come back around 5:30, time to shower, and then at 7 we have our debrief of the day plus our briefing for the next day *** and end with a well prepared dinner.

We fall fast asleep by 9 pm. It's quite the agenda every day!

So called Day 4 was probably our most adventurous and fun day of all. Steve got up before Pepe's crooning good morning and caught a spectacular sunrise at the island of Floreana (still with us):



We went on a short hike where Fabo told us really interesting (seriously) facts about the flora and fauna. We were intrigued by his explanation of how succulents grow here. The leaves grow vertically because the sun is generally in a vertical plane.



Our reward for this (very short) walk was to find flamingos in the wild.



My favorite shot:



Haven't given you a selfie in a while. Here we are high above the flamingos (you can see them teeny on the bottom right):



We kept walking to the other side of the island where we were to see the nests for the Galapagos sea turtle eggs. I guess they didn't read the sign:



I have to put this in for Robb - this is our new friend Mark who uses an iPad for all of his photography. He's unapologetic, he says he uses it because his close up vision is bad and he can see the screen. He even has an underwater case for it!



Right after Mark took that shot, Fabo told him to be careful, the reason we were there was to try to see stingrays! I didn't get a photo, but they were the hard-shelled, dome kind. Pretty cool. Unless you step on one of course.

Steve found a sea lion skull on the beach. He named him Yorick.



I mentioned in one of my early posts “unremarkable snorkeling”. We were kind of bummed that it was so bad at the beginning, and that they made us wear full, thick wetsuits. But as time has gone on, the snorkeling has gotten more and more amazing. We will find it difficult to top the snorkeling on Champion Island off the coast of Floreana. First of all, I started a rebellion on the wetsuit topic. Get this: The water was 90 degrees!

This was a vertical shot downward of a deep water dive - look at the drop-off behind the King Angel Fish:



We got to swim with sea lions again, and this time they were REALLY playful! I was spinning around like crazy to get their attention, and they did start to play!



Then something happened that you normally wouldn't see on a water trip. Our guide yelled, "SHARKS!!!" And we all swam TOWARDS him. This was something they had really hoped to show us. Sadly, they were pretty deep, so I hope you're not disappointed that we didn't get a close-up.



Here's Steve trying to get closer.



Back to the sea lions - this little guy really liked to play, came straight at me! (I think I'm upside down again.)



We saw a few turtles here:



And did our obligatory underwater selfie. I think I've never looked better:



You would THINK this was enough adventure for one day, but you'd be wrong. We went to another part of Floreana and took the pangas to shore at Post Office Bay. The "post office" is a small metal can that was used by sailors I think since the 1800s.

Today it's kind of a social post office. The idea is you drop off postcards with no postage, and you pick up some that are near your own home. If you can, it's supposed to be really cool to hand deliver them but if it's too far you add a stamp and pop them into your local post. Neat and fun thing to do. Here's the "post office".



Then we took kayaks out into another bay where we gently glided over baby sharks! They were too fast to capture on our Go Pros but here's how happy we were paddling:



Steve swapped with iPad Mark and tried out paddle boarding. He didn't even fall off!



But that's not enough fun! We rode in the pangas to yet another beach where they promised turtles and they did not disappoint! They were nearly as plentiful as the ones we see in Turtle Cove on Maui with Ron.



In this picture, I'm not actually touching him, but I was only a few feet away as he turned towards me:



One of the hardest things to capture (in a close-up) is a turtle head popping up. Steve took this great shot when we were so close to them:



This guy reminds us of the lead turtle in Finding Nemo:



Needless to say, we were EXHAUSTED at the end of the day, but were 100% happy and delighted to have had such extraordinary adventures.

This might be our last Internets for a while. We're sending this while off the coast of Santa Cruz Island, which is a thriving metropolis of 20,000 people.

Galápagos Islands Day 5 - Giant Tortoises

Rumors of mis-counting appear to be exaggerated, so I think this actually IS day 5. I know it was Thursday but to be honest much of the trip is becoming a blur to us! This was a land day with no snorkeling but I survived nonetheless.

But before we tell you tales of tortoises, Steve captured the sunset from the night before



We traveled overnight to Santa Cruz Island (not to be confused with Santa Cruz off the coast of Southern California).

Steve met a little friend as we landed on the docks:



We took an air-conditioned bus ride to see the giant tortoises. Thought it might be interesting to see what the shops and houses look like along the way:



The giant tortoises are allowed to go anywhere they like, but they tend to congregate on local farms. At first, the farmers didn't like it till they realized the tourists would come along with the tortoises, and now they get some compensation for their troubles.

They warned us that there very likely could be fire ants so we were more than agreeable to don the fashionable footwear they offered us:



Bring on the tortoise shots already!



Hey buddy - you've got something in your teeth!



We were treated to a slow-speed fight by two, fairly evenly matched giant tortoises (the one on the right won).



So cool looking:



How about one in water?



Dinosaur feet!



Just to give you an idea of how giant the area is and how lush their food supply on the farm is:



They showed us how to sneak around to the back of the tortoises for a photo op. The hand motions were a mandatory part of our training:



Our fearless guide, Pépe agreed to pose for a silly photo:



They had a little visitor center, and Steve couldn't resist trying on a giant tortoise shell (how would Darwin explain this hybrid?):



After our lunch aboard and our 3-hour quiet time (which is when I write these letters, no napping for me!) we went ashore again, this time to the Darwin Center. The Darwin Center is where they're repopulating the giant tortoises. At one time there were 200,000 giant tortoises but that had dwindled to 8000 in 1967.

In this area they had 11 females and 2 males left, but the males were uninterested in mating. They searched the world for another male of the same species, and found one at the San Diego Zoo and brought him to the Galapagos. This male was quite the ladies man. As soon as they opened his crate, he began chasing the ladies down and mated with every one of them. This aggressive male behavior woke up the other two males' libidos and they went to town with the ladies as well. The new tortoise was perfect. They named him Diego in honor of San Diego.

At the Darwin Center they keep the baby tortoises for 5 years, until their shells are tough enough that they can't be eaten, and then release them into the wild. But get this. The temperature at which they keep the eggs determines the gender of the babies! As Fabo explained to us, 28°C gives you a male, and 29.5°C gives you a female. That's pretty much the weirdest fact I've heard.



By the way, the giant tortoise population is now around 30,000. I don't think Diego did this all by himself, but he helped a lot!

It's hard to call this little guy a "giant" tortoise, but he's only a few months old and a few inches long:



Diego was a Saddle Back tortoise (unlike the ones we saw earlier). He was hiding from us when we went to see him, but here's another saddleback:



They had other animals there that appeared to be dinosaurs:



And the extremely rare Galapagos Bunny Cactus:



When we got off of the boat, there were about 15 rays swimming next to the dock. Steve quickly grabbed his (waterproof) GoPro camera, laid down on the dock, shoved the camera underwater and started clicking away in hopes of capturing a shot of them.



We were given the choice to eat on the boat or stay in town. Fabo explained that Ecuador was playing in a qualifying match for the Soccer World Cup and that perhaps we'd like to have a margarita or two at a local bar/restaurant and a Slipper Lobster tail with garlic butter while we watched the match. What do you think Allison and Steve decided to do?

Our friend Jeff may have also had a margarita or two:



We managed to stumble back aboard the Eric, perhaps with a tad more assistance than usual. We stayed up looking at the stars. I couldn't capture the stars but it was really cool to see the Big Dipper and Orion upside down and to see the Southern Cross in the same setting.

When I started pointing out the Big Dipper, Fabo came over and started laughing. He explained that while he's very knowledgeable in many things about the Galapagos, he has very little knowledge of astronomy. About the Big Dipper, he said, "I've been telling people for SIXTEEN YEARS that that's the Southern Cross!"

It made his knowledge of everything else more believable than ever since he was willing to admit that. (He had loosened up a bit with a couple of margaritas of his own.)

I'll close this out with a shot of the Santa Rosa town lights. Pretty pleased with how this came out. Shot at 1/5th of a second exposure, ISO 1600 and manual focus ... from a moving boat!



Galápagos Islands Day 6 - Penguins

Ok, so the title is a teaser, but we'll get to the penguins soon enough, Ron.

We really thought two days ago was the peak of the trip, but Day 6 may have beat it. We started with a walk along Bachas Beach. Bachas is so named because of the bacha, or pier, that floated over from a US base on a nearby island and planted itself on the beach.



We were greeted by marine iguanas who seemed quite friendly with the local colorful crabs. By the way, the baby crabs are black but the adults are this crazy orange/yellow combo. I asked Fabo how on earth they evolved to be such easy targets with such color contrast against their black lava homes. He said that while some percentage will be picked off, that sacrifice is necessary because the color is how they attract a mate. I suggested to Fabo that he's obsessed with sex, as every story seems to be about increasing the population.



Steve and an iguana:



Check out the wicked spiny crest on this one. I think I've seen that hairdo in Hollywood.



We then went to Bartolome Island for a deep water snorkel. (Ok, Ron, time to start getting excited):



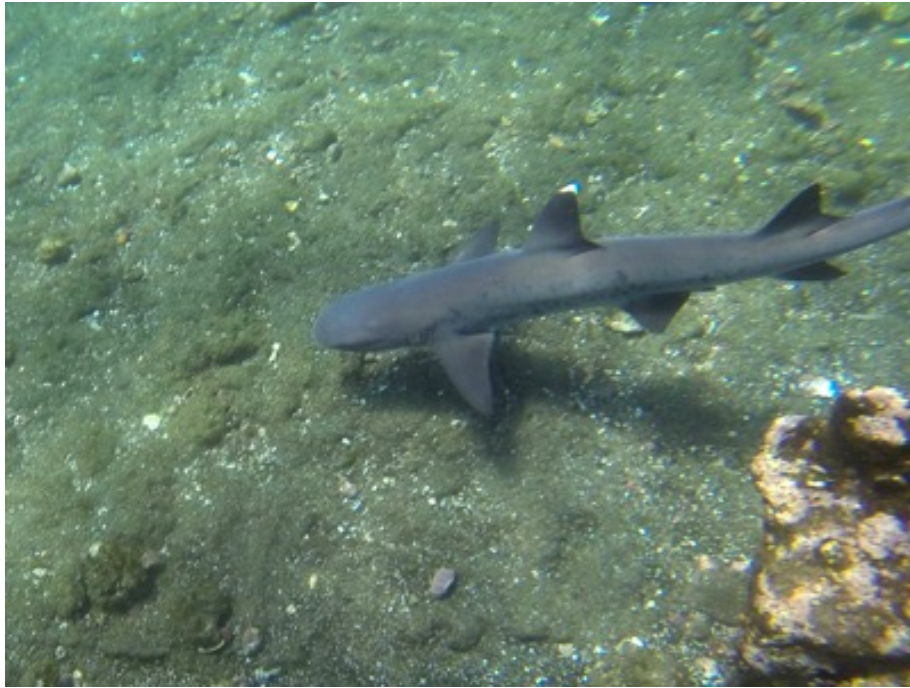
Well I didn't say penguins YET. Our first in-water view of a ray:



Steve decided he needed to sit in this underwater throne:



And then we intentionally swam down to greet a white-tipped shark!

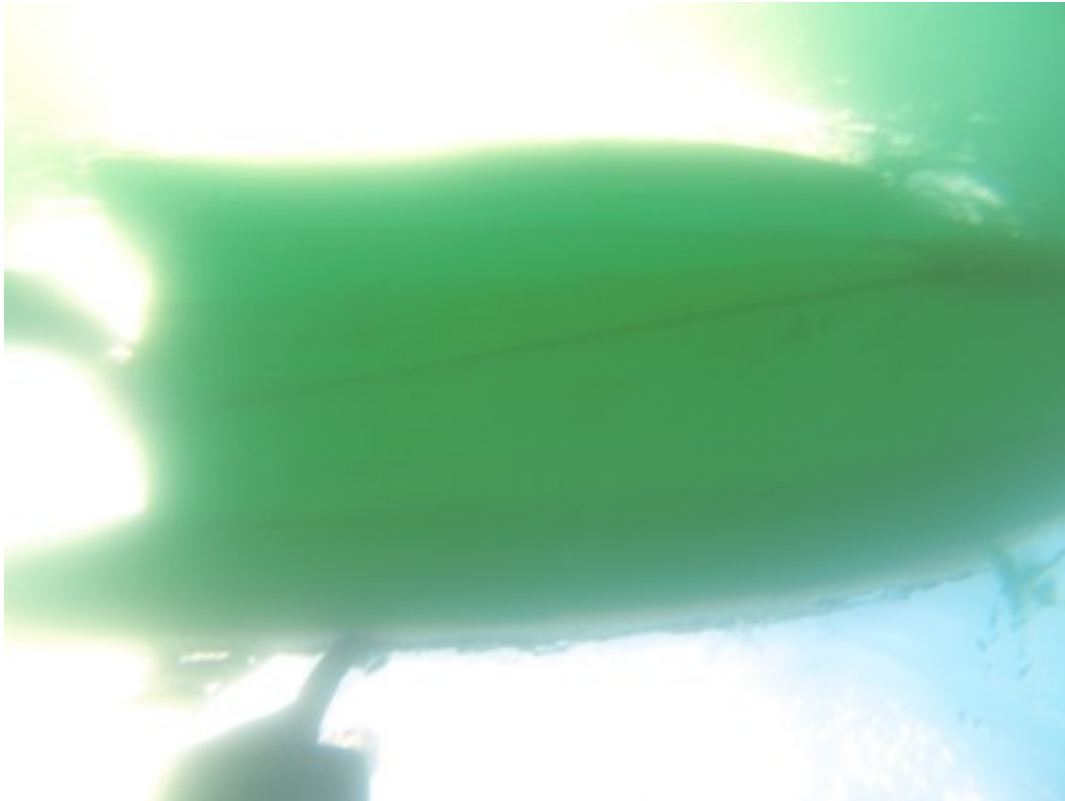


Fabo swears that they eat crustaceans, not people.

There were HUNDREDS of starfish on the bottom of the ocean - here's one closeup.



My father used to challenge us as kids to swim under boats. It always terrified me, but I would do it for the smaller boats (never made it under our 35' sailboat (the keel was 11' deep!). I announced to those who had gotten back into the Panga that I was going to do a party trick. I then dove down deep and swam under the boat:



When I came up and yelled TADA! From the other side of the boat, no one was even watching. I whined to Steve, who was already aboard, and he said no one cared because there was a penguin sighting!

Steve jumped back out of the panga, and we swam like madmen to where the people had found the penguin and were delighted to find him playing around in a circle of people.



What else could I do but swim under him?



As our friend Sonia said, "Well, we've checked EVERYTHING off the list." We actually swam with penguins. By the way, Ron, we told him Rico says "hi."

After our 3-hour break, in the late afternoon, we took off for Pinnacle Rock, the iconic rock I'm sure you've seen in anything about the Galapagos. We hiked up 365 steps with a view of what was apparently the surface of the moon:



The view was worth it:



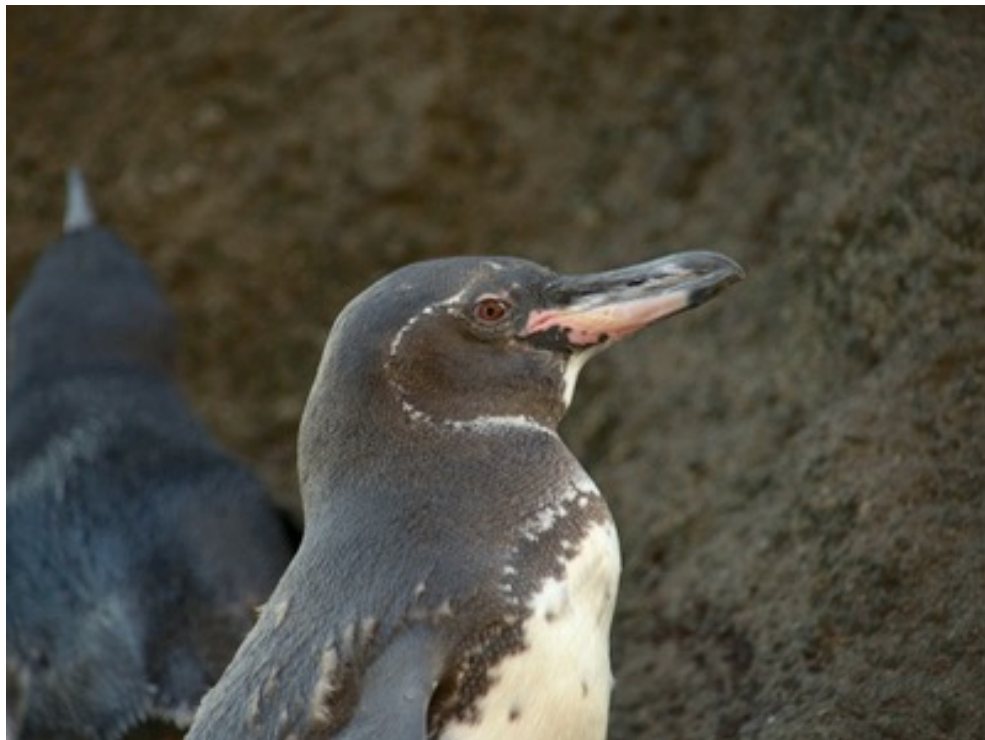
After the hike, we got a close-up look of the spectacular Pinnacle Rock from our Panga:



But then the Panga driver yelled PENGUINS! And we found two on one shore:



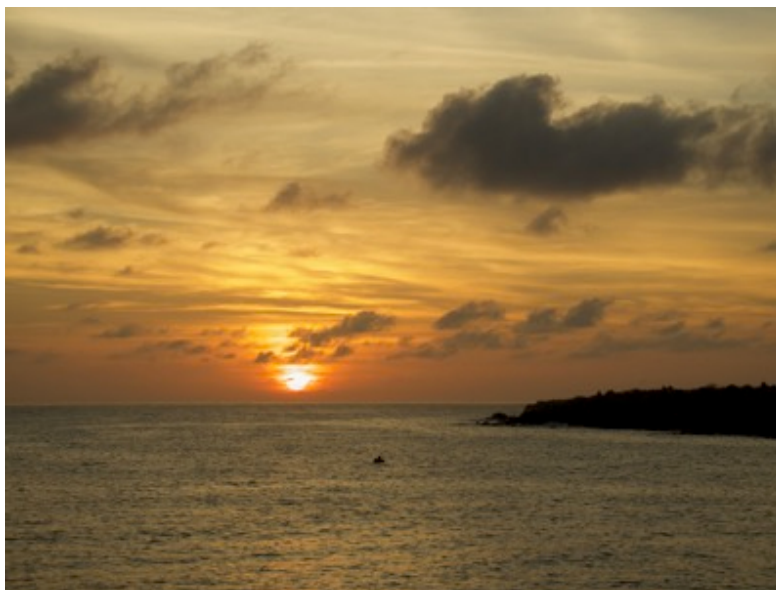
And about four of them on another!



When we arrived back on board, we were given 15 minutes to shower and head up to the covered sun deck for a special party. Not only did they have a fabulous barbecue with some of the best salmon I've ever had and free-flowing sangria, they dressed everyone in pirate garb for no apparent reason and made us dance! Oddly, they did not dress Steve or me (you know I would have loved it), so I'll give you a flavor of the party with this picture of Tony and Jane:



We danced and laughed and ate and drank and had a jolly good time. After everyone else had left, Steve and I stayed up with Sonia and Miles (from Italy and England) and lay out on the deck looking at the upside-down Big Dipper, the Southern Cross, and the spectacular Milky Way.



Galápagos Islands Day 7 - Totally Different Iguana

Day 7 was our last full day on the ill-named but much beloved ship Eric. As usual, our taskmasters, Pépe and Fabo, “dragged” us on many adventures.

First thing in the morning, we started at South Plaza Island. I entitled this day “Totally Different Iguana” because this day we got to see land iguanas, where before we’d been seeing marine iguanas. So, totally different.



And completely glorious.



The vegetation is really interesting on South Plaza. It's a mixture of colorful ice plant, somewhat similar to what we have in California. The prickly pear cactus is gone from one end of the island because the iguana had no natural predators here and ate them. They ate more from one end because of the slope downward, adding more water to those at one end. It's a stark landscape but oddly compelling.

So I posed in my DTNS t-shirt just for Tom and his friends.



We went to a cliff to try and see a bird. It was a really hard bird to find, and they said the name of it about 26 times. Our friend Miles would be screaming at this if he was reading it, but luckily his wife Sonia will enjoy that I can't remember the name. Anyway, we took about 40 pictures, out of focus or of the wrong bird or a tail just going out of frame, but somehow we got one good photo. It might be the wrong bird for all I know! Steve says it has "red bill" and "tropical" and probably Galapagos in the name. Maybe swallowtail gulls?



After I wrote all that, Steve looked it up on Wikipedia and ruined all my fun. It's called the red-billed tropicbird.

This next bird is really cool. It's called a swallow-tailed gull. Notice how huge his eyes are. That's because they're nocturnal. Also much easier to photograph since it was sitting on a nest, maybe 2 feet from our path.



Time for another land iguana!



Because there's no rest for the wicked, we dashed off to North Seymour Island next to do a bit of snorkeling. It wasn't our best day of snorkeling, but we still had a lot of fun. Here's a manta ray we befriended:



And Pépe called this “shark parking”. They were REALLY far down there, so we didn’t get to play with them.



The rare treat of this location was to see hammerhead sharks, but even though one swam past us at one point, it was too fast to capture, so it doesn’t count. But how about some blue starfish?



But we DID have a rare sighting of the blue footed booby:



After the relatively uneventful last snorkel of the trip, we went onto the island of North Seymour. It's hard to believe at this point, but we saw things we'd never seen before.

But before I show you new things, what's better than one land iguana? TWO land iguanas, of course!



We told you about frigatebirds way back at the beginning of this adventure, but on North Seymour, we saw them in their mating rituals. The male gets this huge red balloon under his chin to attract a mate. It's called the "red gular pouch" according to Steve. Here's what it looks like deflated (also notice the iridescent green feathers).



Check out his pouch fully inflated - you can see the veins in it!



The pouch really gets in the way. This guy started trying to scratch an itch:



Oh - and they make a thumping noise banging their beak on it. So cool.

There were tons of other birds on the island, making a wonderful cacophony of sound. There were even blue-footed boobies who whistle when they're trying to attract a mate. And then an iguana blew a raspberry at us.



Right as we got back to the pangas to leave the island, we spotted a baby nocturnal gull:



That winds up phase one of our adventure. The next day, we got on three planes to move to Peru, so we'll see you on Day 9!

p.s. An iguana photobombed this picture of a frigatebird:

