**Galapagos 2013**

We had been looking for an interesting trip to the Galapagos for several years, and finally found a trip that met our desires for "not quite the usual". We recruited three other friends and signed up for an October trip with Row Adventures.

**Day 1**

We started with the usual early departure from Medford, heading for a connection in LAX. Because Alaska and Copa Airlines aren't in the same confederacy, we had to book the flights as separate tickets, meaning we wouldn't be protected if the first flight caused problems. Very weird marketing! Anyway, Alaska got us to LAX in plenty of time, and much to my surprise, our international departure was from the gate next door. So all the time I had set aside for hoofing it between terminals was spend reading *The Beak of the Finch* instead of exercising. Being tall and gifted with crappy knees, I took the surprisingly low cost upgrade to First Class on Copa Airlines (less than a 30% fare increase). We departed LAX on time, had a very relaxing flight to Panama City, arriving early, and made the planned tight connection to Guayaquil with ease. The Panama airport has terrible signs about where gates are, so luckily we had the extra time to wander around trying to deduce which way to go. The flight to Guayaquil was early, as well, and having only carry-on bags, we popped out of immigration and customs so quickly that our courtesy van host almost missed us. Immigration was just watching the agent stamp our passports, and customs was non-existent. There was a place to get in line and inspectors, but the agent just waved us through to the exit. For the record, we had expected to have a 22 pound carry-on limit with Copa, but we never saw a scale and everyone around us was toting a huge carry-on and a large personal item. We had spent a lot of time trying to reduce our luggage to meet the goal, and it turned out for naught. We were also told there was a 35 pound limit on internal flights, and although they did weigh everything, I don't think there were any penalties for those that were over. Anyway, we arrived in Guayaquil at 11pm, hopping in the shuttle for the **Hilton Colon**. Except for failing to realize our room keycard was necessary to get the elevator to work, we got to our comfortable room and fell into bed.

**Day 2 Guayaquil**

We had planned to arrive a day early to guard against travel problems, so we had a leisurely morning before we stumbled on one of our friends, who had been in Quito for a few days, and had arrived from another hotel on the **Malacon**. Our other friends showed up shortly afterwards, and we took a taxi to the Malacon to hunt up dinner. After climbing to the top of the hill, we ended up selecting a spot at the very bottom, where we had a light meal and headed back to the Hilton for an early departure.

**Day 3 San Cristobal**

We met our guide Sebastian the next morning at an early breakfast, and after leaving some luggage behind at the hotel, we took the shuttle to the airport. The sixth member of our group joined us as well. Sebastian handled the entire airport process, taking care of checking bags, getting boarding passes, and steering us to a place to wait for our flight. After a hour wait, which had been designed to compensate for snafus, we boarded our Airbus A320 and took off for San Cristobal Island.

Just before landing, the cabin crew opened all the overhead compartments, and marched down the aisle spray the entire plane with a garden sprayer, supposedly dispensing a pyrithione spray, in an effort to stop the importation of critters.

While waiting to clear the immigration process, we immediately starting spotting the various finches made famous by the book. The book didn’t mention that they seemed to be very human friendly – little beggars, actually. We paid our $100 entry fee, then shuttled to a nice house, where we had lunch and beers while waiting for our carry-on bags to be fumigated.

We took a walk into town, to acquire some snorkel gear for two of us, plus look at how the sea lions had taken over the benches and sidewalks along the shore. We also met our Naturalist Ramiro, a National Park approved guide that must accompany all Galapagos visiting.

We then got on a speedboat, which took us about 20 miles up the shoreline, to where our camp was already set up, with private tents, shade cloth covered dining area and kitchen, and our kayaks were lined up on the beach. We geared up somewhat, adjusted the kayaks, and headed off to practice wet escapes and prove our skills to Sebastian. We had a few hours to kill wandering the beach before the guides and some friendly helpers cooked up a great dinner. Our campsite is the only legal campsite on the entire chain, and ROW is the only operator to bother with all the effort required to use the site. As we turned in, we could hear cries of baby sealines whose mothers had failed to return froom the days hunt, dooming them to a starvation death. Very sad!

**Day 4 San Cristobal**

Our next morning, after a nice breakfast on the beach, we boarded our kayaks and headed further up the coast. After about four hours of paddling, we went ashore, where the speed boat met us, delivering lunch. We abandoned the kayaks and boarded the speedboat for a trip out to **Kicker Rock** for snorkeling, where the sharks, sea turtles, sea lions, and reef fish were plentiful. We speedboat-ed back to the campsite, for a leisurely afternoon of beach combing, eating good food, and packing for the early morning departure.

**Day 5 Isabella**

Sebastian rousted us at 5am for a 6am departure back to the city, where after saying goodbye to Ramiro and the San Cristobal crew, we boarded a small plane (twin Otter) which took us to **Isabella**, the largest of the islands. Our mini-bus dropped our gear off at the Casa Marita, a very nice "bed & breakfast", where we met Julio, our designated guide.

Then we took a trip to the Tortoise Breeding Center, where the National Park is doing its best to expand the tortoise population, in addition to bringing back one variety thought to be extinct. They keep a few breeding pairs of each of the eleven tortoise species, and rear the young until they reach six years of age, which is about a twelve inch tortoise. They don't release the juveniles into their native area unless the area has been cleared of all invasive animals, especially feral cats and goats.

We returned to the hotel to check into our gorgeous beach front rooms, had a great lunch, then left again for a local estuary where we were likely to see the native flamingos. After watching the flamingos feed for a while, we walked back to the hotel via a long boardwalk passing through mangroves and large numbers of birds, especially the omnipresent finches.

We stopped at a beachfront bar and had some beers and Mojitos (for some), before returning to the hotel for a nice dinner.

**Day 6 Isabella**

The next morning after breakfast, we boarded our bus, which drove us up to the trailhead for an eight-mile hike to the Sierra Negro volcano. We were the first group to hit the trail, so we got a very private tour up the rim of the volcano, spying lots of finches and other birds. Once we got to the summit, we ran into other groups of folks that had taken a shorter, less scenic trail, and we leap-frogged each other to the rim of the most recent eruption, walking through areas of various age since the eruption, learning how the recovery process of plants and animals works.

We retraced our steps to a large Soap tree, where we had the lunches we had made for ourselves before we left town. It was a battle to avoid feeding the very friendly finches, and I have to admit, some of us lost the battle of wits. We returned to the hotel for showers and some relax time, then went into town for a private dinner at one of Sebastian’s favorite spots. He had pre-ordered seafood platters, including lobster, octopus, fish, and shrimp, and some things I couldn't recognize.

**Day 7 (10/24) Santa Cruz**

The next morning was a short bus ride to the town dock, where we boarded a speedboat to take us to an area called "The Tunnels" (at least in English). Our captain navigated his boat through the breakers with careful timing, then weaved his way through lava islands into a beautiful lagoon. We got off the boat and spent an hour walking on the tops of lave tubes, watching the sea life circulate under our feet, watched Blue Footed Boobies feeding their young, and admiring the clear water and abundant wildlife. We re-boarded the boat, and roared out through the surf, only to re-enter a few hundred yards down the coast, to another anchorage. We donned our snorkeling gear, and spend an hour or three

Got back on the speedboat and returned to the hotel for a dinner out and relaxation.

**Day 8 (10/25) Santa Cruz**

Everybody back on the bus! We ride out of town, climbing into the hills, to visit what was previously a coffee plantation, but that been transformed into a tortoise sanctuary. Coffee plantations have been a bane to the tortoise population, so the govewrnment had offered incentives to clovert. Visited the “museum” of empty tortoise shells, various skeletal parts, then went on a hike over the grounds, harass the poor tortoises a bit, and looked more closely at the finches and exotic plants.

After a nice lunch at the plantation, we got back on the bus, heading to the northern tip of the island to the ferry terminal to Balta, where kayaks were waiting for us to paddle down the Canal Itabaca as far as Punta Carrion, gunkholing into the shoreline, viewing the many birds nesting on the cliffs, and enjoying the sun.

Back on the bus, returned for dinner and exploring Puerta Aroya.

**Day 8 (10/26) Santa Cruz**

After breakfast boarded another speedboat, this time taking us up to a peninsula where we saw lots of dragons spitting at us, seals, and did more snorkeling. Returning to the hotel in the afternoon, we walked to the Charles Darwin Scientific Station, exploring the exhibits, and returning to the hotel via the many souvenir shops.

**Day 9 (10/27) Departure**

After a nice breakfast on the hotel patio, we were off on a flat bed truck across the island to the Baltra airport. Back on the plane to the mainland, and on to Medford.