



Where the Big Things Are
Galápagos

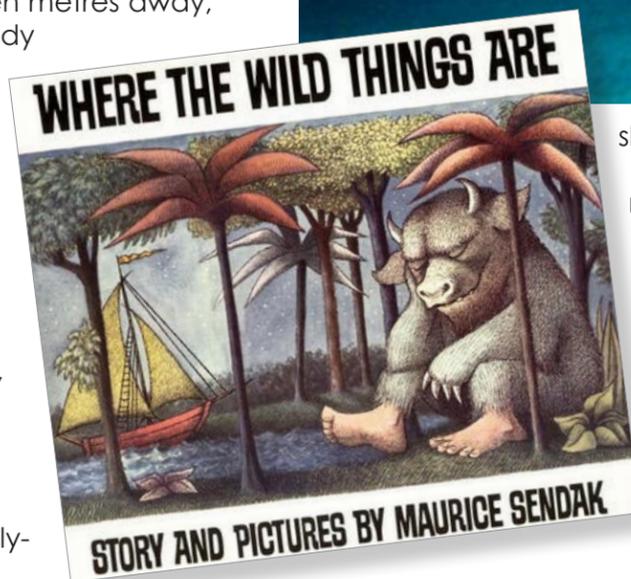
Text and photos by Christopher Bartlett

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Unlike Max in the children's book by Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, I hadn't worn my wolf suit, or made mischief of one kind or another. I hadn't been sent to my room before it transformed into an island of magical monsters only reachable after a year of sailing. I wouldn't want to spend that long on a boat, so I behaved(ish) and looked forward to being on Galápagos and spending my nights tucked up on dry land.

My dive buddy Simon's left arm shot out, index finger extended, and he clenched his right fist and stuck it on the side of his head. I quickly scanned left and right, peering through my mask into the milky blue water. "Where?! Where?!" my brain implored. "There!!!" my eyes answered. "At last," I smiled to myself with relief, bringing my camera up to eye level, as the school of scalloped hammerhead sharks cruised past ten metres away, swaying over the sandy bottom of the underwater caldera in the middle of the site called Gordon Rocks off Santa Cruz Island in the Galápagos archipelago.

I now knew what Gordon certainly did, providing me and many other divers over the years with their first sightings of this oddly but brilliantly-



shaped fish.

In the past, I'd searched for hammerheads in the Red Sea and in South Africa—five blue dives there, with a solitary, faint blur as my sole reward. Upon arrival in the Galápagos, they were on the top of my fish wish list. They are one of the emblematic Galápagos species after all. The T-shirt shops of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz—the most inhabited island of the archipelago—were draped with them, along with the giant

tortoise, which constitutes the logo of the Galápagos National Park.

Yet, I had been on Galápagos for a week now (with Gordon Rocks still to come) investigating land-based diving and nature tours on offer by Red Mangrove's suite of luxury lodges, and all I'd seen were some tacky miniatures and gaudy prints of the elusive hammerhead. In terms of diving, the best had definitely been saved for last—at Gordon Rocks. Not that the rest of the diving had been poor; we'd just been a bit unlucky with the hammerheads.

Numerous hammerhead sharks patrol Gordon Rocks, Santa Cruz Island

Galápagos

On Red Mangrove's land-based island-hopping diving itinerary, Gordon Rocks is normally the first or second dive destination. But due to a last-minute flight cancellation, my partner, Imi, and I missed Gordon Rocks on what should have been our first day of an eight-day tour. Still, we planned to have plenty of days to spare on Santa Cruz later, so we set off to explore diving from Puerto Ayora and arranged to catch up with Gordon Rocks at the end.

At the time, I also thought that I was on a bit of a lucky streak; I was randomly upgraded to first class on the flight to Guayaquil to meet up with Imi, and we were both upgraded for the two-hour A320 Tamé flight to Isla Baltra. Then, we were greeted with cool water and chilled face towels by our escort. This certainly enhanced the good vibe, as did the friendly banter with our guide on the 200m ferry ride and 42km drive across Santa Cruz Island. By the time we had checked into our funky room just metres from Puerto Ayora's gently lapping bay, we had seen marine iguanas basking on the restaurant deck, photographed a sea lion snoozing in the shade



Marine iguanas, *Amblyrhynchus cristatus*, are found only on Galapagos



CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: A welcome lunch of tender calamari and chicken with perfectly steamed veggies at Red Mangrove Lodge, Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island; Sea lion resting on a coffee table at the lodge; Galapagos barracuda at Tortuga Island; Satellite map of Galapagos Islands



on a coffee table, and eaten some tender calamari and chicken with perfectly steamed veggies. Naturally, we were feeling pretty positive.

A post-lunch trip to snorkel with some sea lions resulted in a couple of half-decent shots. Then, a boat ride to the white sands of Tortuga Bay on

Santa Cruz Island and a guided nature walk to see the marine iguanas, Sally Lightfoot crabs and large cacti growing from volcanic rocks kept us happy and did nothing to dampen the feeling that everything would just fall perfectly into place—the late flight cancellation and re-jigged schedule being just a minor blip.

After a brief meeting with our dive guide for the following day and a candlelit dinner, I was rocked to sleep by the wash of the ocean, dreaming about big fish with funny heads.

Diving

Sante Fé Island. The next morn-



Sally lightfoot crabs, Santa Cruz Island

ing, we left the busy cargo ships, numerous moored liveaboards and plentiful small craft of Puerto Ayora behind. On the boat ride out to Sante Fé Island, we were regaled with the previous day's missed sightings at Gordon Rocks of a manta, eagle rays, stingrays, whitetip reef sharks, and of course, hammerhead sharks. Then, a reef manta breached to one side of the boat, as if to say, "Come on, jump in, we're waiting for you!"

Except they weren't. Nature, of course, works on its own schedule. Even so, on our first dive of the trip, there was a six-meter cave swim-through as well as a group of silvery grunts and a school of barracuda in the distance. "Never mind," I thought, "It was fine for a return to the water."

But I was a little disappointed. I had expected the 10-15m visibility and the bare rocky underwater landscapes. (The Galápagos are located on the Equator in the Pacific Ocean, but due to the cold waters of the passing Humboldt current coming up from the south, the water temperature drops to the low 20s, which is too cold for much coral growth.) But, I had also expected more action.

I guess it comes down to individual expectations. Maybe I'd misread the hype. I was expecting the big stuff: sharks, big schools of

fish and classrooms of rays, turtles, sea lions and marine iguanas. Yet, our boat companions—two fellows from Quito doing Discover Scuba dives and their two open water dive buddies—naturally thought the whole experience had been grand.

La Loberia, San Cristobal Island.

During the surface interval, we motored back towards Puerto Ayora and dived at a shallow site called La Loberia (*lobo del mar* is a sea lion in Spanish). The viz was at most ten metres and full of fish poo, but we soon saw why we were here. This was the site of a sea lion colony and nursery.

Two sea lions dived down from



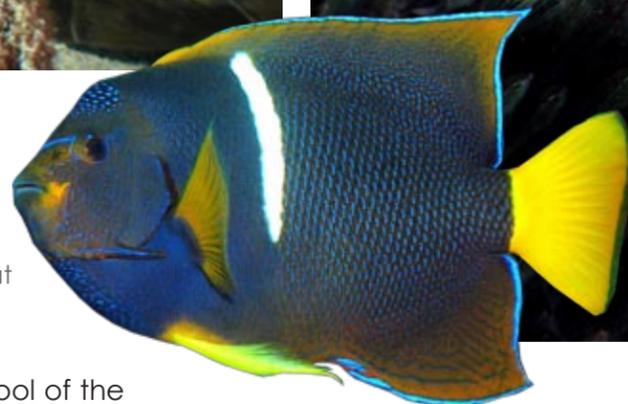
Galápagos



SATELLITE IMAGE: NASA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Puerto Villamil, Isabel Island; Pacific green sea turtle resting at Elfinado, Isabela Island; King angelfish (inset); School of black-striped salemas with diver at La Loberia, Santa Cruz Island



that it was in fact a huge school of the endemic black-striped salemas, a species of bream.

Where was everybody? I moved forward. The fish parted a little, but stayed inches from me. I went in some more, and it got dark. I looked around and saw that the fish had surrounded me; I was engulfed in a giant, amorphous blob of fish.

I could hear the dive master rattling his shaker, trying to guide me to him. I tapped back on my strobe arm. I swam on, and we met up—four divers in a zillion sardine-sized fish. Incredible. When we emerged back into daylight, more sea lions came to play briefly, then sped off—no doubt to get a stripy snack.

Puerto

In the afternoon, we were escorted to a small cruiser and sped off towards Isabela Island—the largest of the four inhabited islands. As the cabin looked pretty full with 16 passengers, we asked to sit on the flybridge with some cargo. We chatted to the skipper in dodgy Spanish, as he opened up the twin 300HP four-stroke engines for the two-hour crossing.

Villamil, Isabela Island.

Approaching Puerto Villamil, we slowed to little more than an idle, as the skipper skirted the boat around the inside of the bay formed by lava rocks. The contrast with Puerto Ayora was considerable. With little more than 3,000



Isla Tortuga, the uninhabited remains of a volcanic crater

the surface, spinning and turning with incredible agility, zipping around us like underwater break-dancers, as we approached a dark shadow in front of us.

The other divers were ahead and, as I turned to take a shot, went into the shadow and disappeared. As I approached, I saw





CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Largebanded blenny; Razor surgeonfish, Santa Fé; Pacific green sea turtle

guide for the morrow, Paco, seemed to think so. "There's a 95 percent chance of

were plenty of king angelfish (which are partial to cleaning sharks), eagle rays and stingrays on the second dive (more shark food), four green turtles and three schools of razor surgeonfish.

The current was fun, and the diving was good despite mediocre viz, and back in the aquamarine bay, we saw more turtles and stingrays, and the world's smallest and only tropical penguin—the cute Galápagos penguin.

Los Tuneles, Isabela Island. After a dry day spent walking up Sierra Negra on Isabela Island—the world's largest active volcano crater, spanning an impressive 11 kilometres from side to side—we set off along the coast for Los Tuneles. As we bumped along in the boat dodging the sea swells, we passed more than 20 turtles and five mantas on the 30-minute ride. Skipper



Spotted eagle ray at Los Tuneles, Isabela Island

inhabitants, our home for the next four days was sleepy and quiet under the afternoon sun. Our small boat was the largest in the port. As soon as our feet hit the wooden pontoon of the port, we were guided to a *panga*—a narrow speedboat—and taken out for a snorkel dive in the shallow lagoon. The tide was going out, lifting up the silt of the sandy bottom, but not enough to obscure a spotted eagle ray and a small whitetip reef shark. I thought the tide of my luck might be swinging back the other way.

Over a gourmet dinner, our dive

hammerheads at Isla Tortuga," he stated confidently before drawing a map of the dive site. It would be a fast drift dive around the outside edge of a crescent-shaped island that was once a volcano. There would be a few interludes in the dive, hiding behind outcrops of cooled lava, to hopefully watch the hammerheads go by, breaking my streak of bad luck. Alas, it didn't.

However, we were accompanied by a huge school of Galápagos barracuda (which are good food for sharks) for most of the first dive. There





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Los Tuneles, Isabela Island; Sea lion; Whitetip sharks, Elfinado, Isabella Island; Frigate bird roosting, San Cristobal Island

San Cristobal Island

After a fun 90-minute flight on a 10-seater Norman Britten Islander to San Cristobal Island, we dropped our bags off and were whisked away for a short walk up to a water-filled crater to learn more about frigate birds and then down to another beach popular with sea lions, before sorting out our gear at the dive centre for the next day's diving with dive master Jimbo.

Over dinner, he told us about Kicker Rock (a.k.a. El Leon Endormido—The Sleeping Lion), talking up our chances of seeing hammerheads and the endemic Galápagos shark.

Kicker Rock. On the way to Kicker Rock off San Cristobal Island, we stopped at Lobos Island for a quick check dive, as Imi had decided to put on some additional neoprene. While we suited up, a rather cheeky

sea lion hopped onto the boat and started checking out my gear for me. He followed us into the water for a quick play around on the sandy bottom of the bay.

The next stop was Kicker Rock. Alongside the lion-shaped rock, we rolled in and entered the channel formed by a 20-metre gap towards its western tip. Sheltered from the sun's rays, the sea was grey, as we



Julio displayed admirable skill getting us through some rough surf before threading us through the treacherous lava rock formations to an astonishing haven.

Los Tuneles is a maze of arches formed by lava tunnels in some of the most beautiful water I have seen. There were turtles galore to snorkel with, as well as juvenile eagle rays, stingrays and the odd barracuda. By the time we were done, we estimated that we had seen at least 50 sea turtles either from the boat or in the water.

Julio's prowess wasn't just limited to tricky boat manoeuvres. At the Elfinado dive site, he donned mask and fins and found two arches occupied by close to a dozen whitetips and then led us to the mangroves to show us his secret seahorse. Tail wrapped around

a branch, with the sunlight filtering through the film-covered surface, the view was ethereal. Just below, a turtle snoozed, half-under a ledge on a bed of leaves in an almost autumnal composition.

To cap a great day, he pointed us to a narrow, shallow channel close to the port and told us to snorkel carefully along the top. The incoming tide made the water murky, but a couple of metres below us, we made out first one, then two, then another now familiar whitetip shark. As we pulled ourselves along the sides of the 100-metre-long, one-metre wide channel, we could see that the bottom was carpeted with sharks. My notes said, "Photography value zero, thrill value high." On a slack tide with some viz, it would have been amazing.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Hawkfish at Kicker Rock; Gringos, or Pacific Creolefish; The Sleeping Lion or El Leon Endormido is what the locals call Kicker Rock; This cheeky sea lion played with a dive torch and then gave it to me, Lobos Island



hovered above the sand, peering ahead into the gloom. A couple of stingrays were resting on the bottom, and a third flitted past.

We kneeled in the sand and waited. Shortly, three Galápagos sharks swam through the 25-metre deep channel. A first, they seemed quite small, but then I saw that they were beautifully-shaped creatures, which moved with natural predatory grace. I couldn't help wondering whether they would be followed by hammerheads. A couple more Galápagos sharks swam by, followed by a couple of blacktip sharks. "Martillo, martillo, aqui martillo," I sang in my head, but none came.

The vertical wall along the outside flank of the rock was madly mottled with blue and orange sponges,



Galapagos shark is not big but has graceful lines



pencil urchins resting wherever they found a nook, often with a small hawkfish or a stunning blue and red endemic whitetailed damselfish juvenile. The sea was full of fish; king angelfish were in abundance as well as streamer hogfish and gringos (Pacific creolefish).

We returned to the wall for a second dive after going to the far end to look for hammerheads (Obsessed? Me?) in the current, and were rewarded with more fish soup and five green sea turtles, no less. Despite being hammerless that morning, The Sleeping Lion was certainly awake underwater.

After lunch back in the sheltered waters of Lobos Island, Jimbo took us for a snorkel dive along the rocky edge to look for marine iguanas. We weren't disappointed. In addition to more damselfish and razor surgeonfish, we quickly found an iguana trying to escape the playful attentions of a sea lion, which was pulling its tail in what seemed to be a slapstick wrestling contest. Once that act was





Galápagos

Diver (left) in school of pompanos, Sante Fé Island; Hammerhead shark (above) at Gordon Rocks, Santa Cruz Island; Juvenile southern white-tail damselfish, Kicker Rock (lower left)

bird hill for more great views and wildlife information before a quick dinner with our host, Daniella, and a deep sleep.

did nothing to make me think that I'd come away with much.

How wrong I was. More than a dozen hammerheads cruised past just above the sandy crater bottom as soon as we had

San Cristobal Island had been pretty action-packed, so the next day, we chilled out firstly on the boat transfer back to Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island, and then by walking around the Charles Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora, attempting to slow down to the same pace as the Galápagos giant tortoise—the most



Sea lion plays with a dive torch, Lobos Island

over, a pair of sea lions popped up, darting and whirling in random directions like a fireworks display run by delinquent kids.

As a finale, yet another smooth, brown underwater puppy whizzed into view, a black object with a shiny end in its mouth. Like a Covent Garden juggler, it tossed it up, watched it sink a few metres, flitted down to catch it, before doing it again. But what was it juggling? After a few minutes, our entertainer swam right up to my

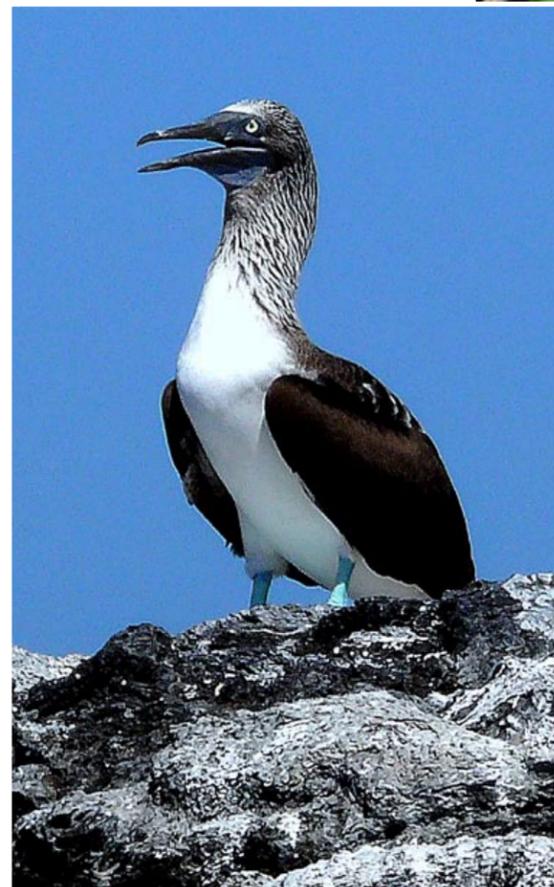
lens, looked at me and placed the object on the sand below me before swimming off. I dived down and picked up an immaculate, but battery-less, \$120 dive torch. Amazing. Was this the same curious and cheeky chap from this morning who had borrowed a toy from another diver?

That wasn't the end to the day, though. No sooner back on shore, we were greeted by our guide who took us to the island's visitor centre and up to a frigate

well-known of them being the century-old, Lonesome George, the last survivor of a species decimated by human activity.

Gordon Rocks. And so, we finally found ourselves doing day one on day eight, about to roll into the small volcanic crater that makes up Gordon Rocks off Santa Cruz Island. The overcast day and choppy seas





COCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pelican on Isabela Island; Endemic blue-footed booby; Galapagos giant tortoise, this one close to 100 years old and 200kg; Endemic marine iguanas on Santa Cruz Island



descended the 28-odd metres to get there. BINGO!

As we did a circuit around the inside of the crater (through some crazy thermoclines that went from 21°C to 17°C) there were whitetip reef sharks and turtles, as well as large schools of king angelfish and razor surgeonfish again, basslets and butterflyfish—all good cleaner fish for large species.

Gordon Rocks really did rock. It was a fitting finale to a most excellent first week.

For the final six days of our trip, we

moved into budget accommodation in the centre of town, a street back from the sea. For US\$35 a night, we got a double room with air-conditioning of sorts (it was either on freezing or warm), private bathroom and breakfast. There were plenty of restaurants serving main courses from \$8, small stores selling fruit and snacks, a small supermarket down by the port, and lunch is provided on dive boats.

The following day, we returned to Gordon Rocks and saw more hammerheads, whitetips, friendly turtles and

even a sea lion.

The vertical currents and surge can definitely be quite a challenge for inexperienced divers, and the cold currents can be core-chilling. It's quite common for divers to come up after 30 minutes, as the combination of the temperature challenges and going down to 30 metres sucks up their air. One fellow diver—an out-of-practice yet ex-commercial diver with 2,000+ dives—was done in 19 minutes.

For those who can hang around and check out the outside walls of the

Galápagos

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ful creatures also put in a brief appearance on another visit to Santa Fé Island, as did a massive school of pompanos [ed.—a species of *Carangidae*, which includes jacks and trevally], which encircled us in a silvery, fishy cylinder. And then, there were yet more Galápagos barracuda.

North Seymour. We managed to get to North Seymour with Galápagos Sub-Aqua dive centre. There, we found more stingrays, marbled rays, eagle rays, a manta silhouetted above us in the gloom, and several pairs of whitetip sharks resting under overhangs. It all culminated in some exciting, fast drift dives over shallow water during the safety stops.

Afterthoughts

Whenever I think about Gordon Rocks, my mouth curls into a smile. It epitomises the Galápagos for me. Even on a gloomy day, it reflects the unique and enchanting nature



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crater, the rewards are excellent. Although my camera had already fogged up, I got to marvel at a huge, slow-moving school of countless one-metre-long snapper, at ten metres. Then, I saw a wahoo—or scombrid fish, prized in game fishing—as we surfaced.

On another safety stop, I saw over a hundred golden cownose rays cruise past. These beauti-



of the archipelago's diverse nature, its strong currents symbolising the challenges ahead, and its diverse life reminding us of what we have to lose. ■

Christopher Bartlett is a dive writer and underwater photographer of British and French descent. He is based in France and coordinates excursions to various dive destinations around the world. For more information, visit: www.bartlettimages.com

Chocolate chip sea star

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Julio's secret seahorse in the mangroves at Elfinado; Whitetip reef sharks resting at North Seymour; Blue sea star





Galápagos'

Isabela Island

Text and photos by Pierre Constant

The Last Mirage



Text and photos by Pierre Constant

Seen from space, Isabela Island—the largest island of the Galápagos archipelago—reminds me of a giant sea-horse facing the great blue yonder of the Pacific Ocean. As one approaches land, the cap of thin white clouds dissipates. Isabela's majestic landscape is a perfect alignment of shield volcanoes, rising above 1,000 metres, which stretches from the southeast to the northwest. Among them, Wolf Volcano reaches 1,700

metres. Straddling the Equator, it is the highest summit of the Galápagos group. Over the last 700,000 years, the six volcanoes of Isabela Island—Cerro Azul, Sierra Negra, Alcedo, Darwin, Wolf and Ecuador—have evolved into gigantic calderas. Following successive rises and falls of magma, the rim of a volcano collapses into the crater. With a diameter exceeding 10km, Sierra Negra is by far the largest of the island's calderas.

The Galapagos are a renowned hotspot of the east Pacific, and Isabela is the most active volcanic island. The last eruption dates back to 2005. An incandescent lava flow filled the crater and turned into a fascinating experience for the locals, who witnessed the show at sundown.

Daily flights on EMETEBE's Twin Otters from Baltra to Puerto Villamil take only 30 minutes. Upon final descent, the small propeller airplane flies over Los Islotes Cuatro Hermanos—aka The Four Brothers. These tuff cones of pale brick red color have been eroded by wave action of both the South Equatorial Current and the Cromwell Current. Two of the islets have been chiseled into moon crescents gaping towards the south. Easily accessible by boat from

View of Puerto Villamil from the air

Gargonians. PREVIOUS PAGE: Los Islotes Cuatro Hermanos (The Four Brothers) and Isabela Island



Puerto Villamil, the '4 Hermanos' islands—as they are called locally—offer a number of good dive sites.

On the port side, one marvels at another huge crescent fringed by a ring of white surf. Tortuga Island, also known as 'Brattle', is a refuge for seabirds. Nazca boobies, tropicbirds [ed.— family of tropical pelagic seabirds of the *Phaethon* genus!] and large frigate birds nest on the outer slopes of the crater.

A stone's throw away to the north, La Viuda (The Widow) juts out of the ocean like a grim stoney finger pointing to the sky. That is all that is left of a tuff cone totally destroyed by the elements. In its formidable solitude, it doesn't look like much, but somehow, it is one of the best dive sites—only 20 minutes away from port. A resting place for blue-footed boobies, it also attracts a few sea lions basking lazily in the golden light of the afternoon sun.

1 SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA

As the *avioneta*, or light aircraft, does its final loop above the bay of Puerto Villamil, one is thrilled by the pastel green and emerald colors of the waters, fringed by the black lava. Successive trains of waves come towards the shore only to fall apart into snow white foam upon this tormented coastline. A long sandy beach stretches west towards the dark hills, once the site of an infamous penal colony (1946-59). This is an arid, hostile landscape where the vegetation is composed of palo santos trees, opuntia and candelabra cacti, and spiny shrubs.

Everything here forecasts extreme conditions, a sharp contrast with the idyllic *cliché* found on Isabela Island. Welcome to the 'Enchanted Islands' where the hidden side of paradise reminds one of the ruthless reality a world apart and its fabled history.

History

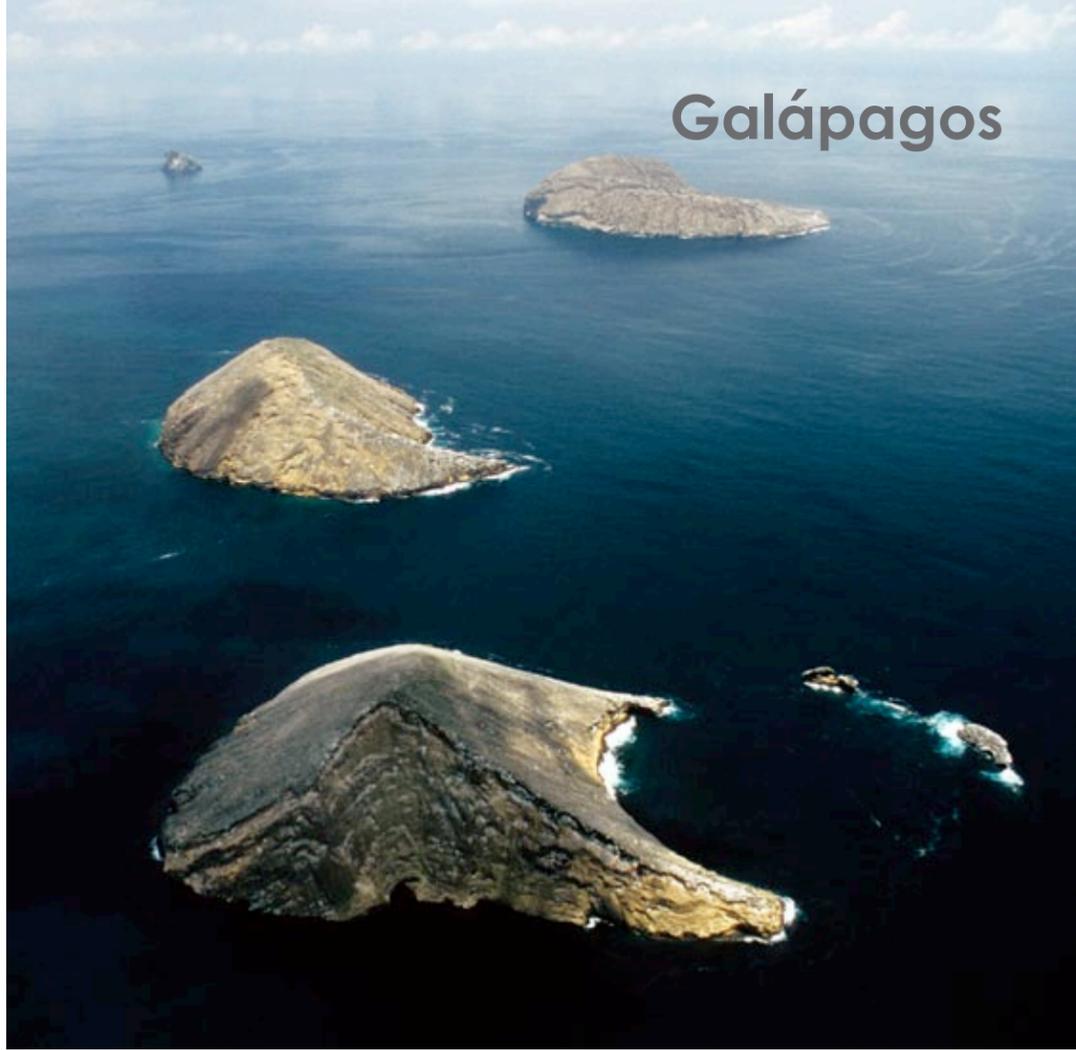
In 1897, Don Antonio Gil Quezada built

a hacienda in Santo Tomas in the highlands of Isabela Island. He had earlier made the unfruitful attempt to establish a colony on Floreana, an island further south, which had the advantage of a freshwater spring. In the old days, sulphur deposits of the Sierra Negra Volcano were exploited and brought to the coast on the back of donkeys.

After WWII, the Ecuadorians retrieved the installations of the U.S. Army, who had created a radar base behind Cerro Orchilla. One morning in 1946, the penal colony, Colonial Penal de Isabela, opened its gates to 300 convicts who disembarked from the *BAE Abdon Calderon* of the Ecuadorian Navy, escorted by 20 policemen and ten officers. These men were sentenced to hard labour under the hot sun in what would become known as the harshest prison of the Galápagos. Criminals, political prisoners, petty thieves and other unwanted citizens assembled under the unforgiving

Nudibranchs, orange spotted doris (above) La Viuda (top right)



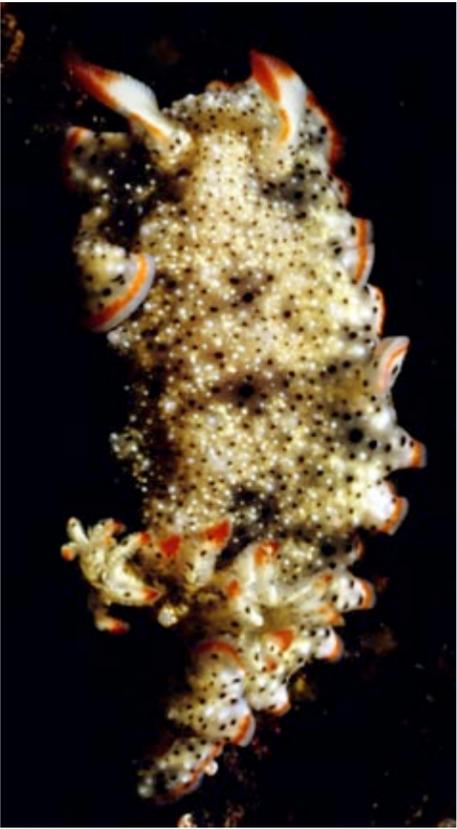


Galápagos

Los 4 Hermanos (The Four Brothers)

from diving Santa Cruz or San Cristobal islands. Isabela is the 'far west' of the archipelago in every sense of the word. The islets south of Puerto Villamil are at the crossroads of two major currents, meeting each other head on. The South Equatorial Current (also known as the Humboldt Current) moves from east to west during the dry season, with the help of the southeast trade winds, which blow from May to December. These cool waters have mean temperatures ranging from 18°C to 22°C.

Originating from the Central Pacific, the Cromwell Current flows along the Equator, from west to east, at a depth of 300 metres. With a core temperature of 13°C, it creates an upwelling on the west and south coasts of Isabela and Fernandina islands. Nutrient-rich waters come up from the deep to the surface attracting a profusion of fish and gorgonians, 66 percent of which are endemic



Nudibranch, *Glossodoris*

whip of the guards. The convicts were forced to build a stone wall of volcanic dry blocks, which grew to 80 metres long, 8m wide and 8m high. It would eventually close the perimeter of their confinement. Many were said to have died in the building of this wall. Later, two camps were established in the highlands.

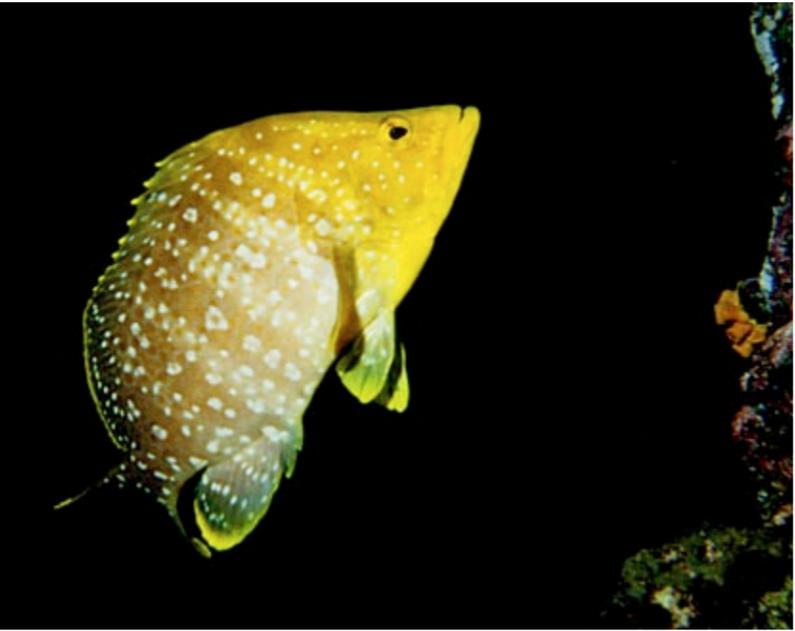
One morning on 9 February 1958, 22 convicts, who were bringing supplies to Camp Alemania on the slopes of the Sierra Negra Volcano, fooled the guards, getting them intoxicated with sugar cane alcohol. They took their guns and then attacked Camp Alemania and Camp Santo Tomas. They did the same at Camp de la Playa.

The mutineers were under the com-

mand of Pate Cucu who had declared: "I want an escape with no death." Nevertheless, they did commit a number of rapes on their way to Puerto Villamil. "All that we want is to be free and leave these infamous islands and this dreadful prison," the convicts said.

Finally, they seized two fishing boats and went on to James Bay on Santiago Island where they hijacked the American sailing vessel, *Valinda*. From there, they sailed to Esmeraldas on the Ecuadorian mainland. The penal colony was closed in 1959 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Charles Darwin's publication, *Origin of Species*.

Diving
Diving Isabela is a different experience



Leather bass (above); Diver with school of surgeonfish (top)



THIS PAGE: Endemic species. CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Galápagos hornshark; Harlequin wrasse; Tigris; Galápagos sheephead wrasse

species. Consequently, the area is a playground for whales, mantas and orcas.

The Cromwell Current comes around the northern and southern tips of Isabela and meets the South Equatorial Current in the centre of the archipelago, triggering another upwelling. This current is responsible for the introduction

of the giant freshwater eel (*Anguila marmorata*), which has established itself in the lagoons of Puerto Villamil.

A notable amount of endemic marine fauna is found west of the archipelago, with unique species such as the small Galapagos hornshark, which is cream-coloured

with black blotches, and the harlequin wrasse (*Bodianus eclancheri*), which displays a chromatic variation from orange to white and black.

Discovered by Darwin in 1835, the Galápagos sheephead



wrasse (*Semi-ossyphus darwini*) is recognized by a brown to purple color with a yellow blotch on the sides. Deep and compressed, the white-spotted black tigris (*Oplegnathus insigne*) belongs to a unique family. Marlins, spade-fish and sawfish are common pelagics in the area. In addition, the south of Isabela Island is an important nesting ground for the Pacific green sea turtle, which frequents a number of lagoons and beaches.

Los Islotes Cuatro Hermanos, or The Four Brothers, are tuff cones vigorously weathered by wave action. Three of them have been

carved into moon crescents. It takes 45 minutes by *fibra* (short for Fishermen's Fibrafort boat) to get there from Puerto Villamil.

Pyramid Island has a conical shape, with two rocks emerging southwards, left over from the original crater rim. A wall drops

vertically on the outer slope, which is covered with brown gorgonians, yellow bushes of black coral and soft corals. At times,





here—just 25cm tall—which swam near the bottom. In the shallows, hidden under an overhang bedecked with light brown and purple gorgonians, 15 spiny lobsters were

on patrol with antennae fully deployed. A mouth-watering dish for sure, however, fishing with a scuba tank is strictly prohibited in the Galápagos!



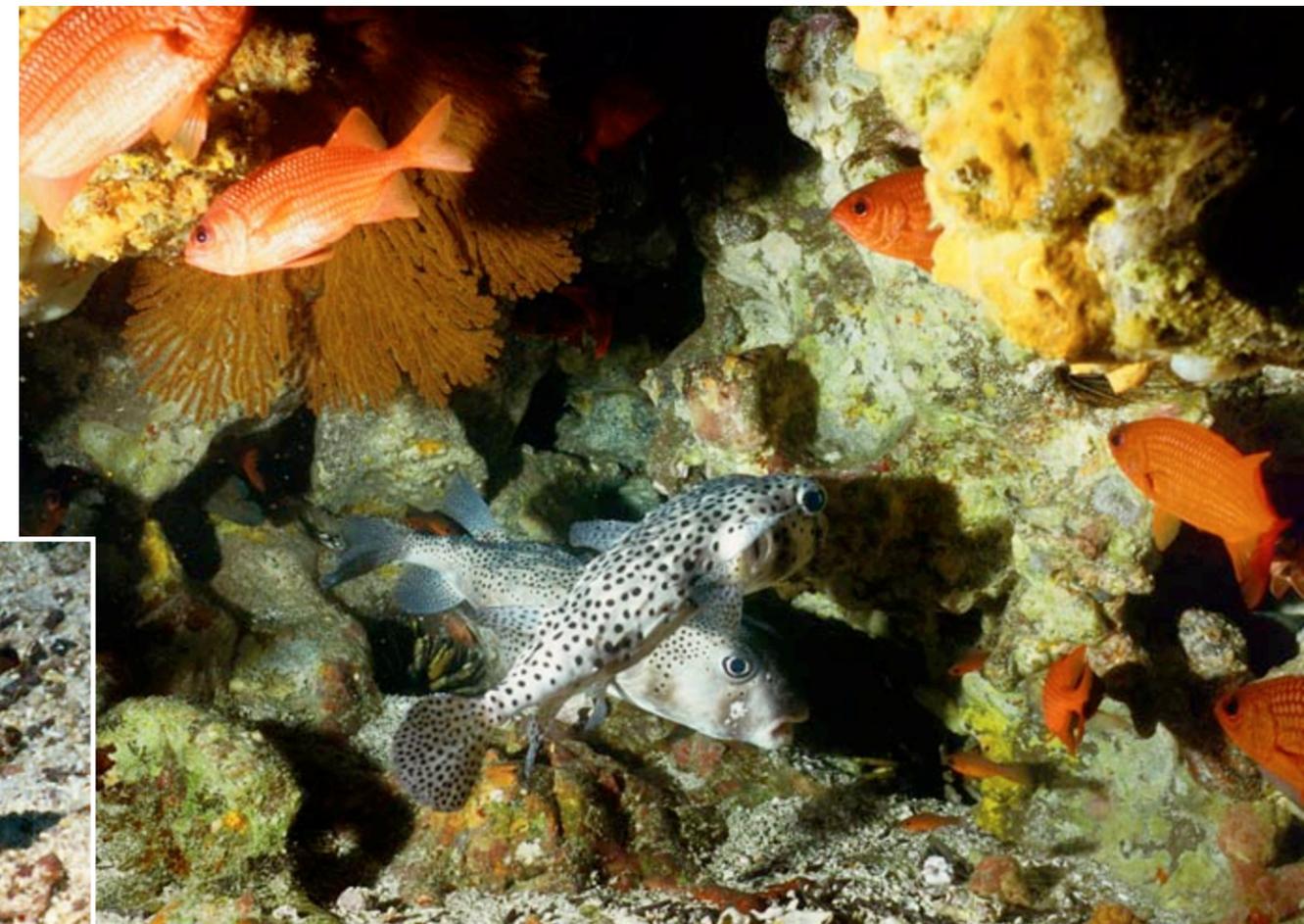
In July 2001, I attempted a dive at Moon Island's east point. The ocean was rather choppy, and the cape was wrapped in a cloud of bubbles. The current did not look too ominous, so I jumped into the water at a respectful distance.

The vertical wall was carved by a number of holes, which served as homes for sea urchins. The colorful site was dotted with blue and red sponges, black coral, soft corals, gorgonians and orange cup coral—the ideal biota for the blue-eyed damselfish,



grunts and Galapagos grunts (silvery with a yellow eye) roam the area. Sea turtles and sea lions are rather active, and the Galápagos blue porcupinefish is common. A school of steel pompnos (diamond-shaped fish with a swallow tail) often engulfs divers during decompression stops.

The two horns of Moon Island define a little bay, washed by surf. Underwater, the site evolves around a pinnacle, with a whirlpool of life—harlequin wrasse, spotted eagle rays, blue and gold snappers. I was thrilled to spot an orange Pacific seahorse



Galápagos blue porcupinefish (above); Slipper lobster with cleaner shrimp (top right); Red-lip batfish (left inset); School of grey grunts surround a Mexican hogfish male (far left)

manta rays come to feed in the current. Hornsharks rest on ridges or hide under overhangs.

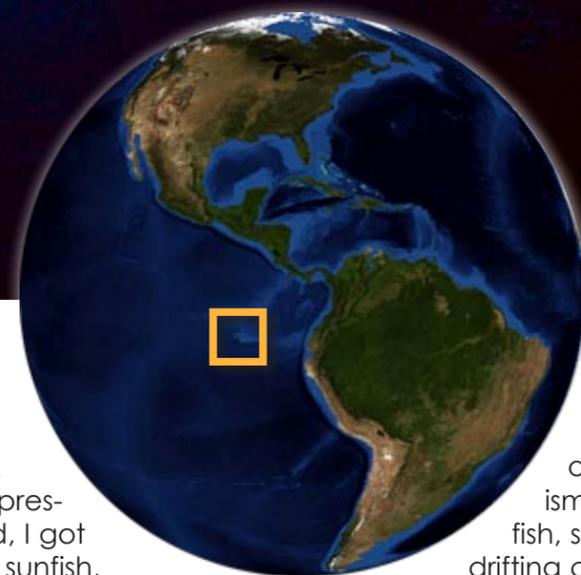
On the west side, the outline of the crater rim heads north at a depth of 28m, with a white sandy bottom on

the right hand side and a drop off on the left side. Marble rays are often at play. Here, an old stem of black coral is covered with leopard anemones. Mixed schools of metallic grey Peruvian





Galápagos



Cortez rainbow wrasse, large-banded blenny and a few species of gobies and octopus.

I was busy taking a photo of a long-nose hawkfish on a black coral when I suddenly sensed a presence behind me. Turning around, I got a real shock—a two-metre-wide sunfish, wide-eyed and bewildered, was staring at me as if I were from another planet. Stunned, I acted likewise!

This unusual fish looks like a giant triggerfish with dorsal and anal fins in the vertical axis moving sideways like a pendulum. It has a big head without a tail. The leather-like, silver skin has numerous dark blotches. Also known as the mola mola, the creature fixed a big, round, black eye on me. The mouth drew a perfect circle, mimicking pure astonishment.

This deepwater species belongs to the continental shelf, in the 200m depth

zone. It feeds on benthic organisms, jellyfish, salp and drifting ctenarians.

The mola mola comes up to the shallows (20m), when it needs to be cleaned by wrasses. It is even seen at the surface where seabirds also do the job. It prefers areas of upwellings and converging currents, as is also the case in Bali.

Two species of sunfish are found in the Galápagos, the other one being *Ranzania levis*. A new *Masturus* species was discovered in April 2008. [See www.expeditions.com/theater17.asp?media=561]

Three weeks later, I did a dive at Crescent Island—the third of the 4 Her-

Sunfish or mola mola (above); Pacific green sea turtle (top left); Location of Galápagos on world map

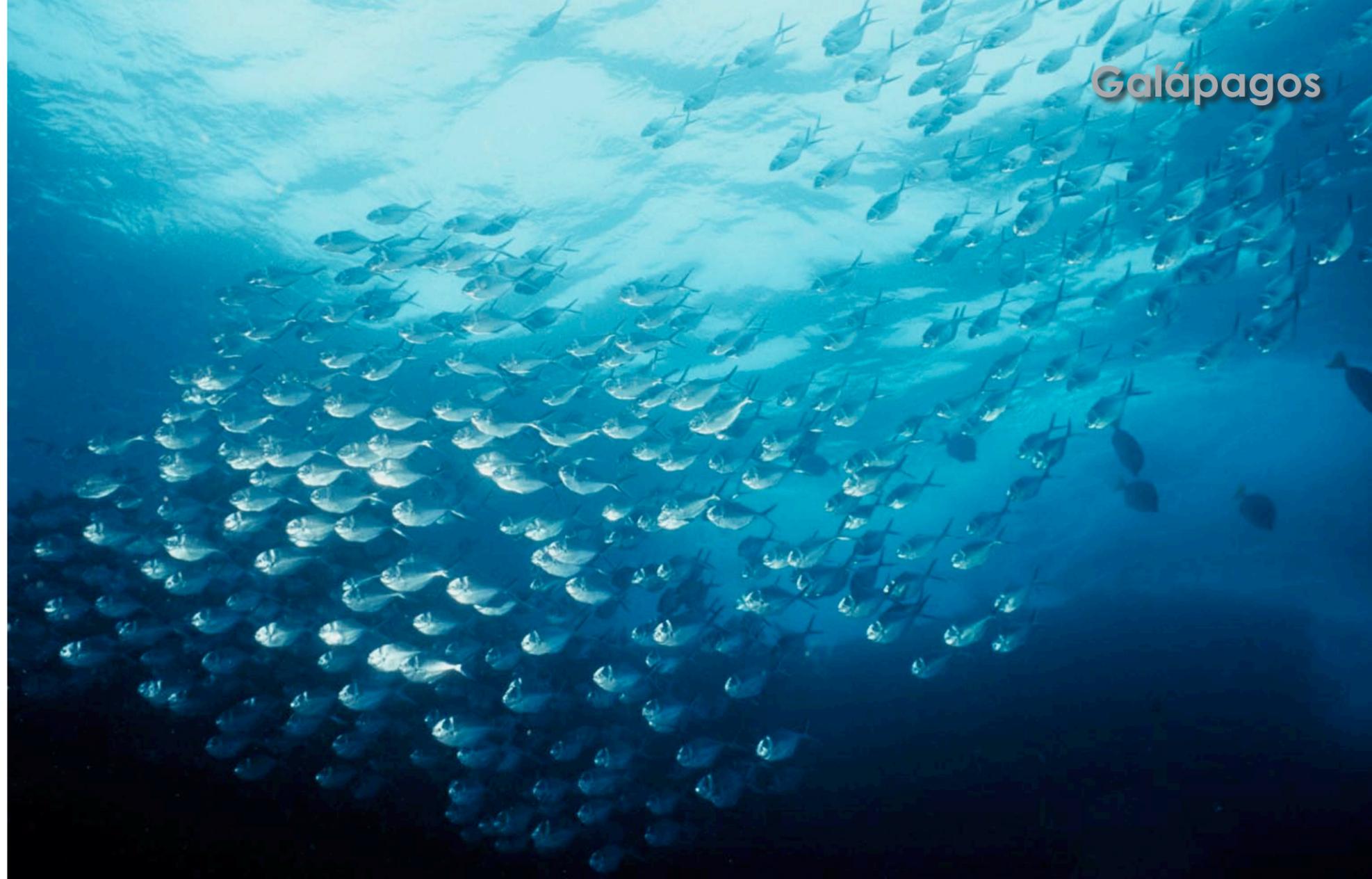
manos group. Once again, I encountered a sunfish at a depth of two metres. The biggest island has on its northern shore a long tunnel that runs into the volcanic tuff. The entrance to the cave

is 13m deep, and the tube finishes in a dead-end after 70 or 80 metres. This is a refuge for lobsters, stingrays, whitetip sharks and sea lions at play. A gentle slope is found outside the cave, with



Sponges on reef





scattered boulders. Mexican hogfish, grey grunts, harlequin wrasse, king angelfish and sea-horses are found there. Even mantas pass by occasionally.

La Viuda

Seen from the sky, Tortuga Island is a visual enchantment. The flooded crater is broken for most of its southern part, with two small islets pounded by the surf. I flew over the island one clear morning in February 2006 and allowed the pilot to take me into a rising spiral to give me “a better view”, as he put it. Tied by a rope around my waist, I was in the luggage hold taking pictures through the open hatch—not the best moment for a drop!

Northeast of Tortuga, La Viuda is barely seen at water level. The inconspicuous, rocky finger

mimics a black thumb covered in bird poop. My favorite dive site, it is a true aquarium bathed in the northeast current. It is definitely not a good choice for novices; the drop-off plummets down to 40 metres on the sandy floor of the crater.

A unique Galapagos species is found at depth—the *blanquillo*, or ocean whitefish (*Caulolatilus princeps*). Squads of golden rays



skim the bottom.

Following the inner slope of the crater, one discovers a series of small pinnacles—remains of the rim—alternating with some passes where the current is felt. Clouds of fish materialize into the blue—a school of barracudas and spotted eagle rays in formation. Sometimes bat eagle

rays join the ballet. They are olive green, dorsally, and white, ventrally, with a very long tail and a rounded head. On other days, schools of tuna, yellowtail scad and Spanish mackerel



COUNTER- CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Stingray on sea floor; Large school of pompanos, or jacks; King angelfish on reef; Tortuga Island



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Nudibranch, *Roboastra sp.*; Selema; Black manta ray casts a looming shadow; School of dusky chubs; Nudibranch, *Discodoris*; Nudibranch, *Carolyn doris*

camivorous nudibranch, *Roboastra sp.*, will reveal itself with black, yellow and blue stripes. It is the predator of the smaller *Tambja mullineri* nudibranch, which is striated black and turquoise blue

for dive courses. Species there include the Galápagos porgy, soldierfish and squirrelfish, guinea-fowl puffer, soapfish, dusky chubs, scorpionfish and the charming Pacific snake eel, with its creamy color and rounded black spots,

foraging among the rocks.

Stimulated by the steady current flowing south, the east coast of Tortuga towards the point is more animated. The underwater scene is rugged with canyons, pinnacles, small drop-offs and boulders. Sea turtles, sea lions and stingrays are the norm here.

The particularity of the site is the presence of a great number of flat, oval-shaped nudibranch, which are whitish with orange spots and gills. This species of *Galápagos doris*

is probably endemic and is yet unidentified. It prefers cool waters, under the thermocline with temperatures of 12°C to 19°C at an optimal depth of 25m. The *Galápagos doris* nudibranch nests itself in cavities carved by sea urchins, on big boulders exposed to the current.

Another species of nudibranch divers

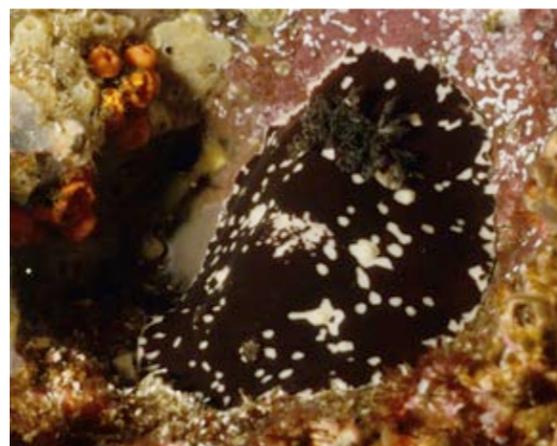
show up. Even Galápagos sharks and hammerheads can be seen. The dark shape of a black manta always comes as a surprise!

Closer to the rocks, yellowtail surgeonfish, king angelfish, barberfish, three-banded butterflyfish, humphead parrotfish, bacalao grouper and myriads of creolefish dot the scene. Various species of sea stars are found at La Viuda. Should you be lucky, the

and is endemic to the Galápagos Islands.

Tortuga

For an easy shallow dive with no current, head for the north coast of Tortuga where one will find gentle slopes, volcanic sandy patches in between ridges of tuff (light, porous rock of consolidated volcanic ash), small drop-offs and overhangs. The site is appropriate





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Flatworm; Orca flashing its white belly; Paulia sea star; Berthellina sea slug; Sea lion

encounter is *Glossodoros dalli*. A large triton—the Panamic horse conch—is also found on rocky substrates. It has red flesh dotted with blue. Some nice specimens of scallops hide under overhangs.

The southeast point ends abruptly with a sheer wall, plunging vertically to 50m. This is a wild spot where anything can turn up—Galápagos sharks, manta rays,

eagle rays and cownose rays, sunfish, dolphins and schooling hammerheads hunting prey.

Back in March 2005, at the heart of the 'Galápagenian' summer, I did a dive at the tip of El Triangulo, the islet south of Tortuga, which is exposed to the swell of the open ocean. On this occasion, I came upon an unusual endemic spe-

cies of nudibranch—the flat, oval *Carolyn doris*, which is brown with white blotches.

As we came out of the water, my companion pointed her finger towards the bay of the crater. "Over there! Dolphins!" she shouted. Somehow, neither the back nor the dorsal fin (which was very tall) coincided with the norm. "Holy (bleep)! These are orcas!" I was stupefied. I couldn't believe my eyes. Luck was smiling upon us. This rare sight put me in a

trance at once. Five killer whales frolicking in the bay is an opportunity not to be missed. "Wait for me!" I yelled. I signaled the boatman to stop the outboard motors and changed the macro lens on my camera for the wide angle lens.

Godfrey Merlen, a specialist on cetaceans and longtime resident in Galápagos, did some research on these fascinating dolphins between 1992 and 1999. Statistics showed that at least 135 sightings had been made; most of these were made while the orcas were hunting at the surface. Common prey of the orca include sea lions, sharks, hammerheads, stingrays, mantas, sunfish, turtles, dolphins, whales and sperm whales—you name it. A top predator, it is known as the hyena of the seas. Man is not on the menu though,

but then again, it's yet to be seen.

Ready for the big jump, I gestured to the *pangero* (fisherman) to move on slowly towards the pod. One killer whale broke away from the group and came straight at the fibra. I swiftly slid into the water, holding my breath, and immersed myself right on the spot.





Octopus resting on reef (above); Yellowtail surgeonfish (right); Galápagos shark (left)



adrenaline!

The orca swung around again, this time displaying a flashy, white abdomen and eyeing me in a comical way. The fur of the orca is so silky that it reflects

the sunlight, creating an eerie blue aura around the animal. I shot various pictures in natural light, then broke the surface, exulting with total joy. Reassured, my friend joined me in the water, and we skin-dived with the orcas.

The dominant female passed under-

neath again, with a companion and a young calf, cruising just in front of us—an awesome, unforgettable moment! Life was simply here and now.

The Marine Reserve

Second in the world only to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, the Galápagos Marine Reserve has a surface of 140,000sq km. First created in May 1986 following a presidential decree by Leon Febres Cordero, it was then labeled the Reserve of Marine Resources of the Galápagos and was half the size it is today.

The Master Plan of 1992 highlighted a number of conflicts of interest. As the years went by, repetitive abuses brought to light the illegal fishing of shark fins.

Pirate camps of fishermen were discovered around Isabela and Fernandina islands.

The Galápagos were declared a Biological Reserve in 1996, but this did not solve the problem. Instead, it just added more fuel to the fire. Seminars organized by the Galápagos National Park, or Parque Nacional Galápagos (PNG), together with the Charles Darwin

Research Station (CDRS) and Grupo Nucleo in 1997 brought the protagonists to the round table—the fishing sector, tourism, PNG, CDRS and the Ecuadorian Navy. As a result, a new master plan and a Special Law for Galápagos saw the light of day in 1998.

But UNESCO threatened to call the Galápagos a World Heritage Site in Danger (and now it is). Hence, came an





TOP TO BOTTOM:
School of golden rays;
Hammerhead shark;
Spotted eagle ray

Galápagos

Involved with politics of the Lista 5 (Demo-cracia Popular), they exerted pressure on the park to have new rights and work alternatives to compensate for the collapse of the *pepino* (sea cucumber) and shark finning industries. Eventually, dive cruises were paralyzed in 2007 (except

eruption dates back to October 2005. Or trek to the Muro de la lagrimas—the Wall of Tears—made of basaltic lava rocks, which is all that is left of the old penal colony. On the way, there are a number of places of interest including the lagoons of Puerto Villamil, Cerro Orchilla hill, the freshwater spring of El Estero, the lava tube and the enchanting beach of Tortuga Bay.

Visitors can also check out the Breeding Centre of Giant Tortoises of the Galápagos National Park or visit the islet of Tintoreras where one can see small whitetip sharks at rest. For snorkelers, there's the marine site of Los Tunneles and the

update of the new marine reserve, which was an extension of 40 nautical miles beyond the extreme points of the archipelago. This was an increase of 70,000sq km to what it was earlier.

Blame evil forces, but the rampant corruption and abuses kept going on. Fishermen went on strike, taking over the installations of the Galápagos National Park Service—or Servicio Parque Nacional Galápagos (SPNG)—in 2004 by sacking the park offices in Isabela Island and continued to demand that recreational diving activities should be handed over to them.



for a few boats), and the diving activity reverted in part to the fishermen with their *fibras*. A new system of *patentes*, or licenses, for dive boats was created in June 2009. All together, 16 licenses were conceded by the Instituto Nacional Galápagos (INGALA). Meanwhile, the number of visitors to the Galápagos National Park approached the 200,000 benchmark.

Other attractions

Go on an excursion to Sierra Negra Volcano and take a horseback ride to Volcan Chico for panoramic views of Isabela Island. The last

lagoon of Concha y Perla not far from Embarcadero, at the end of a boardwalk in the mangrove.

French born Pierre Constant's intimate connection with the Galápagos Islands has thrived over 30 years. With a university background in biology and geology, Constant is a naturalist guide, underwater photographer, lecturer, expedition leader and author of three books on the Galápagos. Having built a lodge on Isabela Island, he's now been a permanent resident of the Galápagos since 2002. For more information, visit: Scubadragongalapagos.com





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