

Galapagos is a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean, 600 miles west off the coast of Ecuador. The 5 largest islands are Isabela, Santa Cruz, San Cristobal, Fernandina, and San Salvador. Volcanoes formed the islands. The oldest ones are to the east, Fernandina in the west is newest.

We took a week long cruise around the Galapagos Archipelago on the ship Polaris with 80 passengers and 40 crew. Small zodiacs brought us onto the islands for hikes and swimming, but we slept and ate on the ship. We visited 6 main islands and a few other islets. It was amazing to see so many animals in their natural habitat and unafraid of people.



On February 12, we flew from Los Angeles to Guayaquil, Ecuador. It took us 10 hours with a stop in Panama City. I didn't sleep much on the flight so I was very tired. Charles Darwin was born on this day in 1809. It is a bicentennial celebration. Abraham Lincoln was also born on the exact same date and year. Happy 200th birthday!



We finally reached Galapagos. We flew into Baltra to board the ship *Polaris*. Our first stop was North Seymour Island. We saw lots of sea lions, iguanas, lava lizards, crabs, and many kinds of birds. 2 blue footed boobies were doing their mating dance. A male frigate had his red pouch inflated.

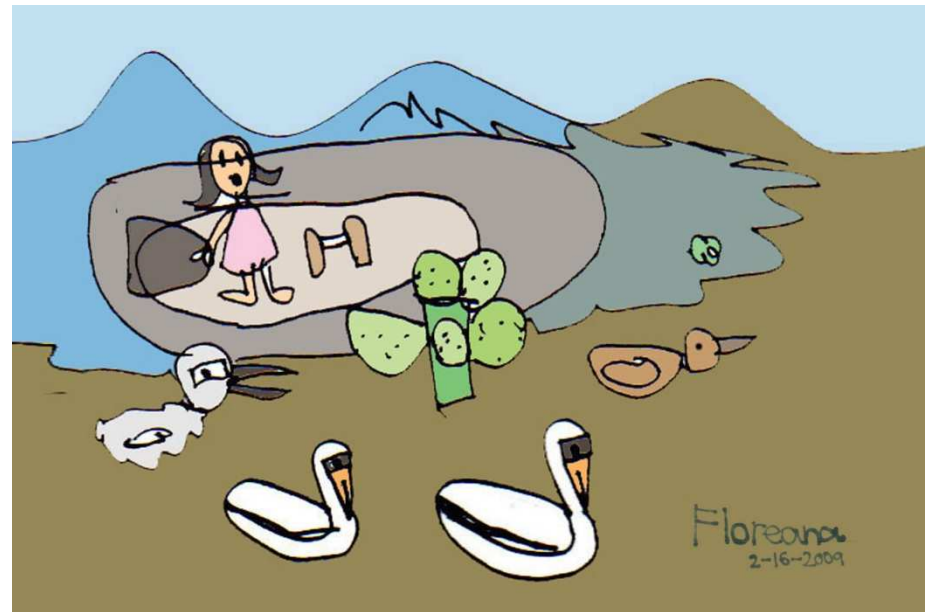
On 2nd day of our cruise, we visited Española, the oldest island. In the morning we took a long hike to see my favorite Nazca boobies and their chicks. The marine iguanas here are bigger with red and green. We also saw sea lions, lava lizards, Sally light-foot crabs, mockingbirds, and a hawk.



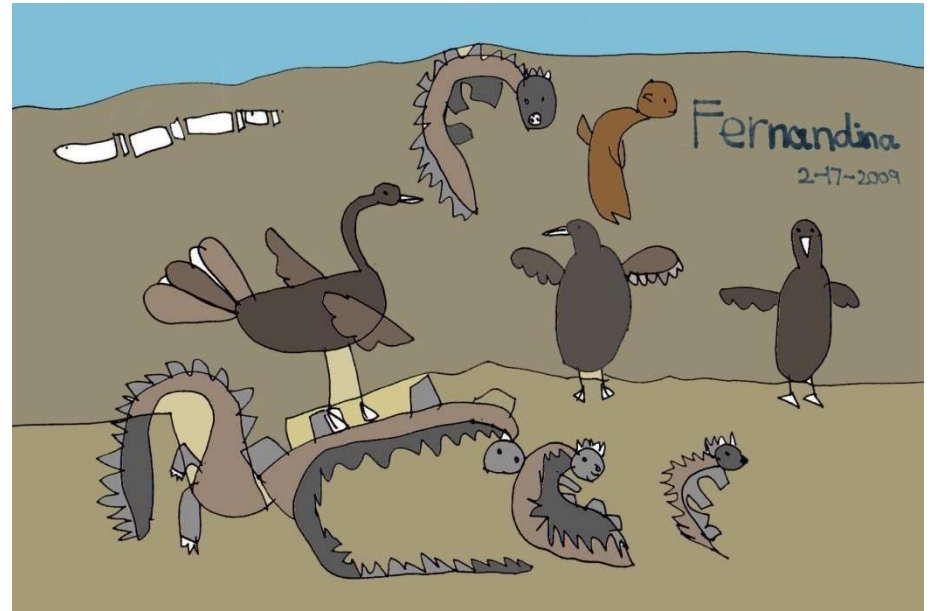


On the 3rd day, we visited Floreana Island. In the morning, we took a zodiac ride around Champion Islet looking for rare mockingbirds and finches. After a nice long nap, I went swimming in kelp with Olivia. Then we took a hike to see pink flamingos and other wildlife.

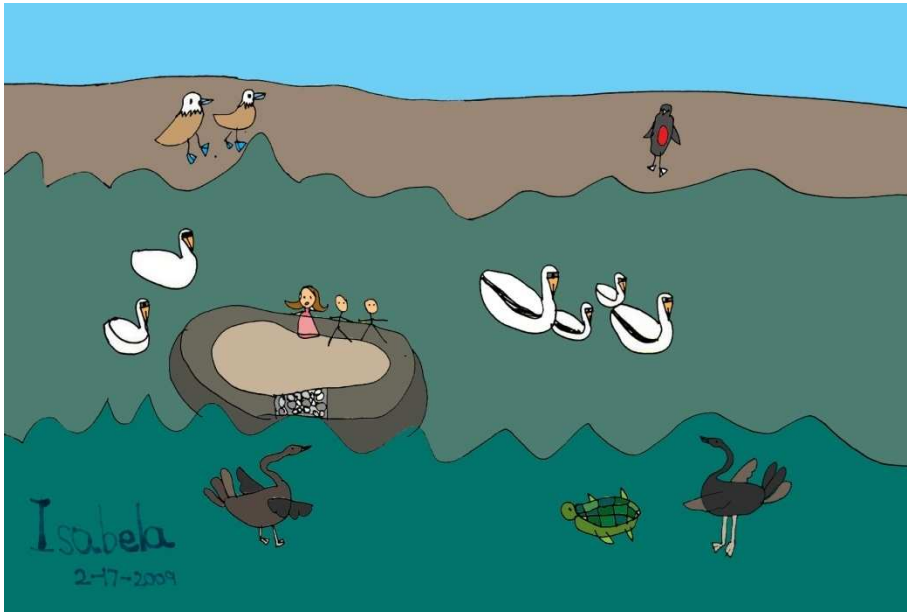
There was an Ecuadorian feast lunch. In the afternoon, we took a glass bottom boat ride. We saw sea stars, urchins, king angelfish, yellow tail sturgeon, Mexican hogfish, blowfish, and other sea creatures. Later we swam and played on a white sandy beach of ground coral, parrot fish poop. A large school of golden rays swam by. Some sea lions played nearby.



On the 4th morning, we took a long zodiac ride around northwestern Isabela, the largest island. This area is rich in marine life because of the cold water current. The water is green with bubbles from the nutrients. There were many green sea turtles, some flightless cormorants, and 3 penguins. We also saw sea birds, iguanas and crabs.



In the afternoon, we visited Fernandina the youngest island. We landed on rope lava pahoehoe. Marine iguanas were everywhere, swimming, sneezing, and sunning themselves. Many female iguanas were digging nests on the sandy beach. Very few plants live here, just lava cactus and some mangroves. We also saw flightless cormorants drying out their wings and sealions playing.





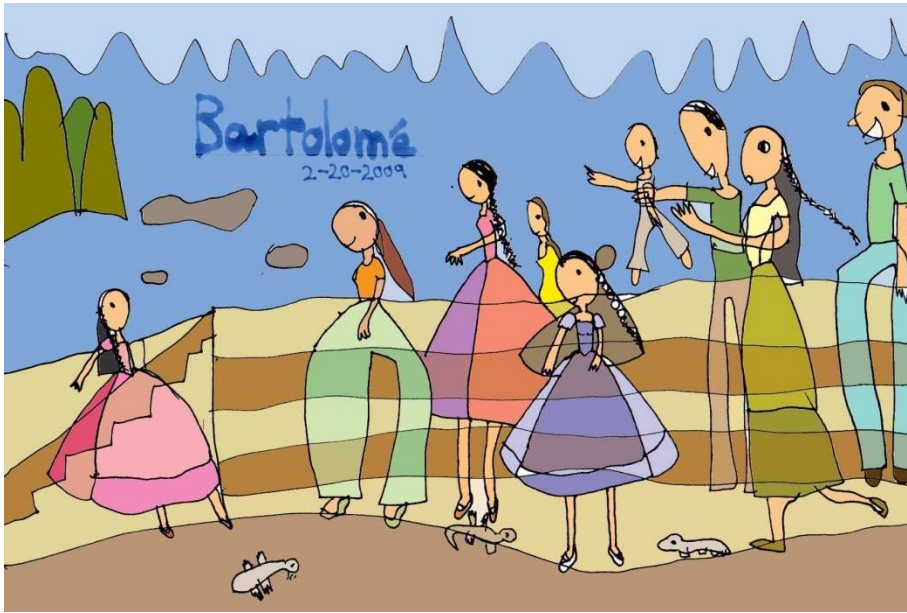
We spent the 5th day in the town of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island. At the Charles Darwin Research Station, we learned how scientists are protecting the endemic or native life on Galapagos. We arrived at feeding time and saw Lonesome George & Diego who are part of the tortoise breeding program. We bought souvenir gifts in town, before going to the high lands for lunch.

The highlands are covered with lush, overgrown vegetation. We hiked around two sunken craters and climbed in a lava tube. Finally, we went searching for wild giant tortoises in the fields. We found five!

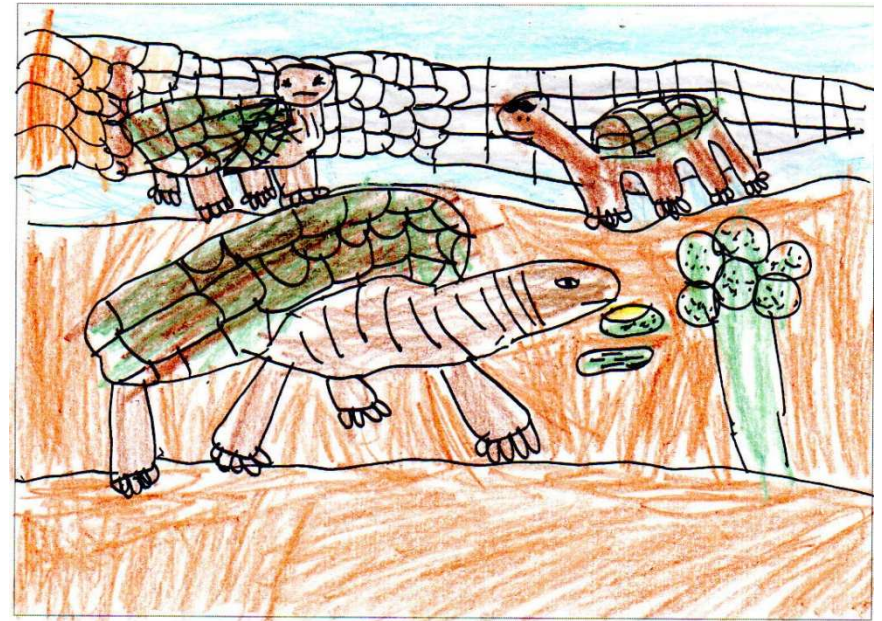


On the sixth morning, we went to a beach that had many biting horse flies. This was on the north western corner in Santa Cruz Island. In the afternoon we took a long and fun zodiac ride near Santiago Island. We saw several groups of penguins.





On our last full day in Galapagos, we woke up early at 6:30 am to climb to the top of Bartolomé Island. It was a long 372 steps, but we saw the amazing and famous view with 2 white sandy beaches in the middle and a tuff pinnacle on the side. Finally, we took a sunset hike on black lava sand and palmchae tidepools of Santiago, to say goodbye.



There is a giant tortoise from Pinta Island named Lonesome George. He is a saddleback which have long necks and shells arching upward in front. Pirates and sailors took many tortoise to eat on ships. The goats ate all the grass and most of the tortoise's food. Scientists think George is the last of his kind. They take to Charles Darwin Research Station to protect him.