



# Survival of the fattest

In the Galapagos Islands, it wasn't the weird wildlife that worried Claire Boobbyer. It was her fellow tourists

There were 10 of them, all kept in close proximity for eight days. One was so large, he found it difficult lying down to sleep. And his behaviour seemed to offend the other nine. One was constantly ill, and one had a close encounter with a marine iguana. These creatures – species type *Homo sapiens* – had come to view the wildlife of the Galapagos Islands. And, some of the time, observing the collection of tourists was as interesting as watching the animals we had come to see.

And so it was that 6ft 5in Anthony regaled us with tales of shark-spotting and his sea lion bite. His manner was not to everyone's liking, and the fact that he almost had to double up to get in his bunk was seen as just comeuppance. Beth, an American, was on holiday to escape the pressures of life as a psychologist.

There were two gay men who kept us amused with tales of outrageous fancy-dress parties, three Swiss tourists who hardly said a word, and another American who entered into banter with Anthony. And, finally, there was my sister, who was struggling to get over typhoid, despite having spent a week on the mainland, hospitalised, on a drip.

Eight days on a boat on the ocean with strangers is an integral part of any trip to this part of the world. We had flown from Quito to the island of Baltra. From here we boarded our boat, the *Cachalote*, via a dinghy. We stepped over sleeping sea lions with our luggage, and a young blue-footed booby bird hitched a ride to what was to be our home for the next week. From out of the writhing and twisting black lava covering the volcanic islands of the Galapagos, wander birds with red balloons on their chests and lizards that look as if they belong on the set of *Jurassic Park*.

I set off on my trip to the Galapagos in the belief that the islands were studied with palm trees and that luscious green hills spread inland. But we set foot on unfriendly, jagged outcrops of thick, solidified lava. We had to dodge deep chasms running through this hellish landscape, and constantly see 20 or so large red speckled crabs scuttling loudly across our path.

The archipelago, which straddles the Equator, is a paradise for sea lions and birds. The tourists flock in their thousands to see these remote Pacific outposts. But slaughter and extinction lap at these islands' shores.

Charles Darwin, whose journey here was, after all, so groundbreaking, wrote in his journal: "The natural history of these islands is eminently curious and well deserves attention. Most of the organic productions are aboriginal creations, found nowhere else..."

What is also curious about the Galapagos animals is their fearlessness. Should they be on any of the paths that criss-cross the islands, they will simply sit and stare, preen, eat, mate or do whatever else they happen to be doing. Not one of them ran away in our presence. During our trip visiting nine islands in the chain, we stepped over yellow land iguanas with manes of mini-horns, munching cactus; we stood in the flight path of albatrosses; and our feet were subject to inspection by inquisitive sea lions.

Each morning, it was announced whether it would be a dry or a wet landing. Dry meant boots, wet meant sandals.

Beth got confused one day and ended up missing a walking trip. While lying on the beach she felt something heavy on her stomach. Opening her eyes she found herself eyeballing a marine iguana. She screamed, which she later regretted, and he scampered off.

Watching tiny lava lizards hitching a ride on the backs of the ugly black marine iguanas – the only sea-going lizards in the world – and skirting the nests of busy booby birds, was all part of the entertainment of the islands.

Blue-footed boobies look as though they have stepped in a freshly poured dish of paint, and the red-footed variety seem unnaturally bright with their blue and pink beak and what looks like carefully applied blue eyeliner. In fact, a number of Galapagos birds sport thick eyeliner. The grey gulls wear a vivid orange, the baby frigate birds a dusky grey, and the Galapagos doves a thick line of light blue topped by black.

The sea lions, which do not indulge in eyeliner but have fine sets of whiskers, are quite simply cute. There is no other word for it. They bask in the sun on the white sand beaches like British holiday-makers. Their skin gleams, and they smile at you with their adorable faces. Snorkelling every day from our boat, we found ourselves coming face to face with these fun-loving creatures. They would twist and turn about us as we attempted to follow them in the clear waters.

Being so playful has its disadvantages. We had just landed on South Plaza Island, when we heard a commotion coming from the sea lion colony. We turned around to see the sea awash with blood; three sharks were attacking the sea lions.

One victim had a third of its tail chewed off, and was left to die on the rocks. Three fins glided up and down, parting the bloody waters, but the sea lions dived in and started teasing the sharks. This was no game, though, and another fell victim to the predators. Cries of "Oh, can't we go and rescue them?" were heard as we stood at a safe distance from the unfolding drama.

Giant tortoises have also suffered from predators. The only giant tortoises we saw on the islands were in captivity at the Darwin Research



Island dwellers: a blue-footed booby bird, above, and a marine iguana

Sybil Sassoon/Robert Harding Picture Library



Station on the island of Santa Cruz. In the last century whalers fed on the animals in their hundreds, storing them for months on end on the boats where they survived, unfed, living off their own fat stores. Today, some of the tortoise species that gave their name to the archipelago are extinct.

Meanwhile many dogs and goats that were introduced to the islands had turned feral, eating the iguanas and birds. And we even learnt that wild goats on James Island had adapted to the conditions in less than 100 years, and were now able to drink sea water.

All of which sounds enough to be amazed at. But on top of this there were moments of extreme wonder during our trip to the archipelago – the sight of leaping dolphins that trailed our boat, flamingos tiptoeing about a pond, and Galapagos penguins diving into the ocean.

We watched the sky turn black with birds like some horror movie scenario, and we observed the magnificent male frigate bird puff out his red chest and make a noise like a drum tap to attract the opposite sex.

Some of these curious-looking birds had droppings scattered down their chests. It is like a man trying to woo a woman with gravy down his tie – there is no accounting for taste.