



Sea lions, Española Island

# Where the Wild Things Are

*One is astonished by the amount of creative force displayed on these small, barren and rocky islands—Charles Darwin*

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES & MARY LOVE

Last year marked the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his masterwork, *On the Origin of Species*, inspired, in part, by his journey to the Galápagos Islands in 1835.

What a significant year, we decided, to visit these islands, located some 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador and home to thousands of species of wildlife that exist nowhere else on the planet. (In fact, the Galápagos is the only

oceanic archipelago in the world that retains 95% of its original biodiversity.) Our goal was to view the wildlife, up close and personal, and experience what the youthful Darwin described as a “perfect hurricane of delight and astonishment!”

We flew on LAN Airlines from Miami to Guayaquil, a river port near Ecuador’s Pacific coast. (LAN, a thoroughly modern airline with outstanding service, happened to be celebrating its 80th anniversary.) From there,

it was a 30-minute hop to the island of San Cristóbal, where we and 15 other adventurers boarded the *Eric*, one of four motor yachts owned by family-owned Ecoventura, an Ecuadorian company that has been a leader in protecting the environment and promoting “green” cruising.

The 10-cabin, 83-foot *Eric* proved an excellent home during our eight-day journey—a comfortable ship with a professional, safety-conscious crew and two



Blue-footed boobies



Mating frigate birds



Bartolome Island



Land iguana



Sea lion

knowledgeable naturalist-guides. The air-conditioned, teak-paneled cabins offered private baths and plenty of wall cubbies in which to stash small gear. Closet space was minimal, but on this casual cruise clothes were not the point. A spacious lounge and upper

deck provided space for guests to gather for evening drinks and briefings by our guides. After seeing the wildlife of Africa and Antarctica and scuba diving in the Red Sea, we wondered how the Galápagos would impress us. But it didn’t take long to conclude that

these islands offer more in-your-face drama per square mile than any destination we’d visited.

Pristine beaches provide playgrounds for hundreds of gregarious sea lions: sunbathing, feeding their young, frolicking in the surf.

Snorkeling or scuba diving becomes a new experience when—along with scores of tropical fish—penguins, turtles and flightless cormorants are part of the scene. And *Sex in the City* has nothing on bellowing, 600-pound male tortoises competing aggressively for a female!

The *Eric* took us to eight of the archipelago's 15 major islands, all of which were formed, like Hawaii, from a hotspot in the ocean floor. Over millions of years, the movement of the earth's tectonic plates has carried the islands eastward, as if on a giant conveyor belt, toward South America. Consequently, the western islands of Isabela and Fernandina are volcanically active, while the islands to the east—low, arid and windswept—are dormant.

One of our most visually dramatic landfalls was Punta Espinosa on Fernandina Island. The surrounding waters sparkled as brilliantly as any in the Caribbean. As we approached the anchorage, we could see, on adjacent Isabela

Island, the active Sierra Negra Volcano, whose unbroken caldera is said to be the third largest in the world (after Crater Lake in Oregon and the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania, East Africa).

Fernandina's expansive intertidal zone is a study in contrasting colors and textures. Shiny black lava rock, hardened into undulating rope-like patterns, spread out before us. At first, we didn't notice the heaps of dark grey iguanas, who stacked themselves two to three layers high to keep warm.

Easier to spot were the flashy red-and-yellow Sally Lightfoot crabs. They scurried across the rocks and splashed into a clear tidal pool where large green turtles rested on the bottom. A parade of iguanas jumped in next, winding their way through the water to an algae-covered rock for a snack. Overhead, a Galápagos hawk, at the top of the food chain, circled for prey.

Española, the southernmost island in the

Galápagos archipelago, attracts a circus of pelagic seabirds that nest each season atop the tall, windswept cliffs. Many will leave in December for the open seas, returning in April to breed again.

The grandest of the ocean wanderers, the waved albatross, nests here on open rocky terrain along the edge of the cliffs. These noble birds, who mate for life, perform one of the most graceful mating dances on the planet. Facing each other, they bow, trumpet and preen like 18th-century courtiers. Then, abandoning all decorum, the couples extend their long necks and, with a great clatter, "fence" with their bills.

Also greeting us on Española were blue-footed boobies, one of nature's great clowns. During their courtship ritual, the males whistle and the females honk in return. They ceremoniously present each other with nesting materials (even though they don't make proper nests). The male spreads his

wings and points his beak skyward to impress his mate. Then he displays his electric blue feet, rocking from side to side, picking up one foot then the other, like a youngster showing off a new pair of shoes. Our guide explained that these gentle birds dive into the sea at 60 miles per hour to catch fish at depths up to 30 feet.

On North Seymour Island, the rituals of frigate birds are just as dramatic. The males perch in small trees and, to get attention, inflate their bright red neck pouches and squawk at the females, who swirl overhead. The ladies coyly check out their suitors. When a female finally selects a mate, she lands, leans against him and rests her beak across his inflated throat pouch. The male shows his gratitude by spreading his wings (which can span six feet) around the female to protect her from other suitors.

But all is not well in this natural paradise. In fact, UNESCO has identified the Galápagos

as an endangered World Heritage Site.

The primary threat is from humans. Population growth—averaging around 6 percent annually—is driven by Ecuadoreans seeking jobs that don't exist on the mainland. They have brought invasive species — goats, dogs, cats, pigs and insects—that prey on the very life forms that make these islands special. Fishermen, both local and foreign, have disrupted the ecosystem by long-line fishing and catering to foreign appetites for shark fin, sea cucumbers and sea lion penises (perceived as aphrodisiacs in some Asian countries).

Additionally, visitors (roughly 170,000 annually) have presented more challenges. As tourism has grown, developers and tour operators compete with environmentalists, determined to protect the precious wildlife.

In spite of the good efforts of government and private organizations to promote conservation, the islands remain fragile and threatened. Accordingly, Ecuadoreans look to

enlightened tourists to behave responsibly when they visit—and to support organizations like the Galápagos Nature Park, the Galápagos Conservancy and the Charles Darwin Foundation.

After all, who wants a Galápagos we can no longer share with nature's wild creatures? As Tui De Roy, a renowned naturalist, writer and photographer who grew up in these islands, reminds us: "The Galápagos is still a place where the earth is at peace with itself, and man is only a guest." ➤

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Galápagos Network & Ecoventura

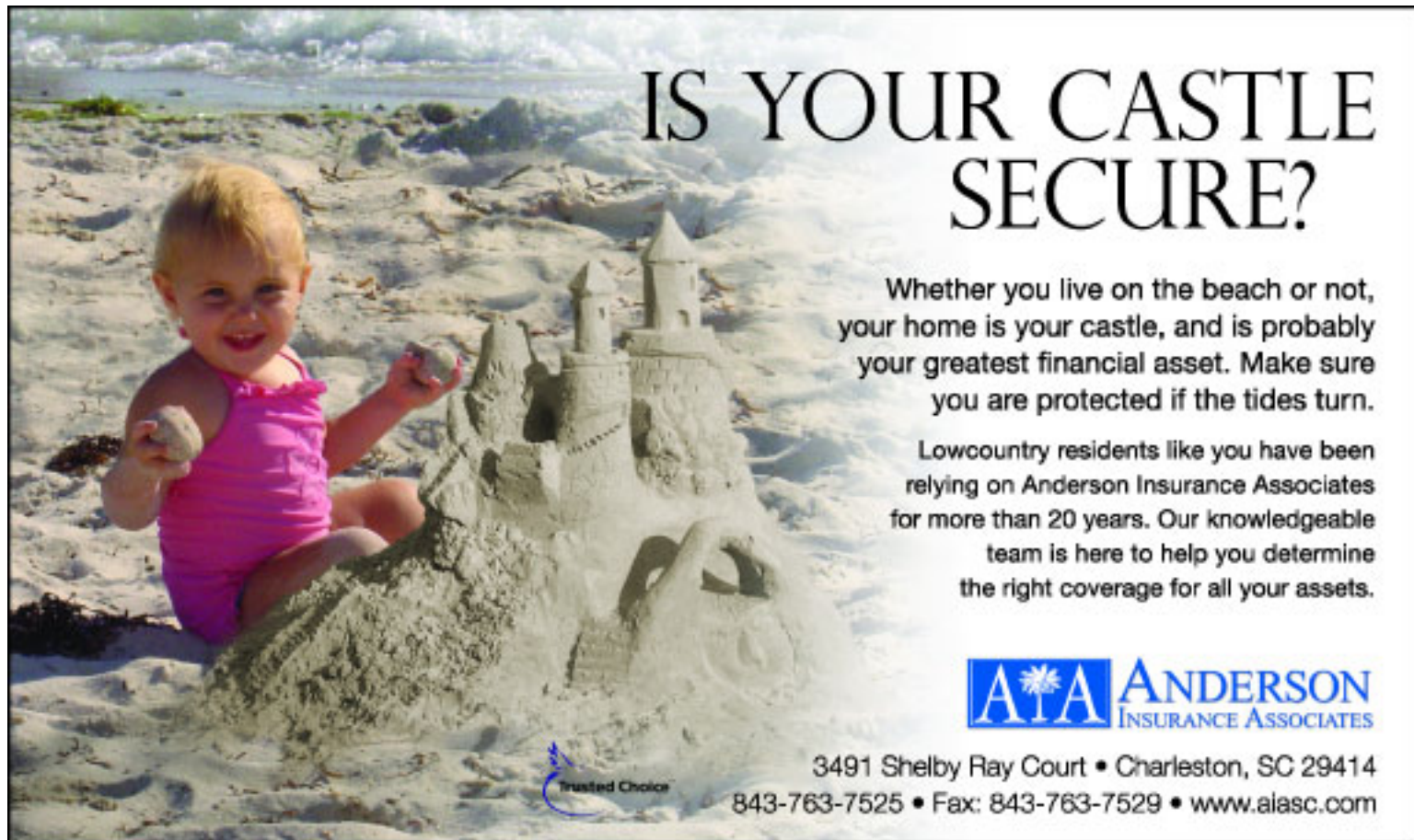
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*Charles and Mary Love are journalists and commercial photographers based in Charlotte, N.C. and West Palm Beach, FL.*



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