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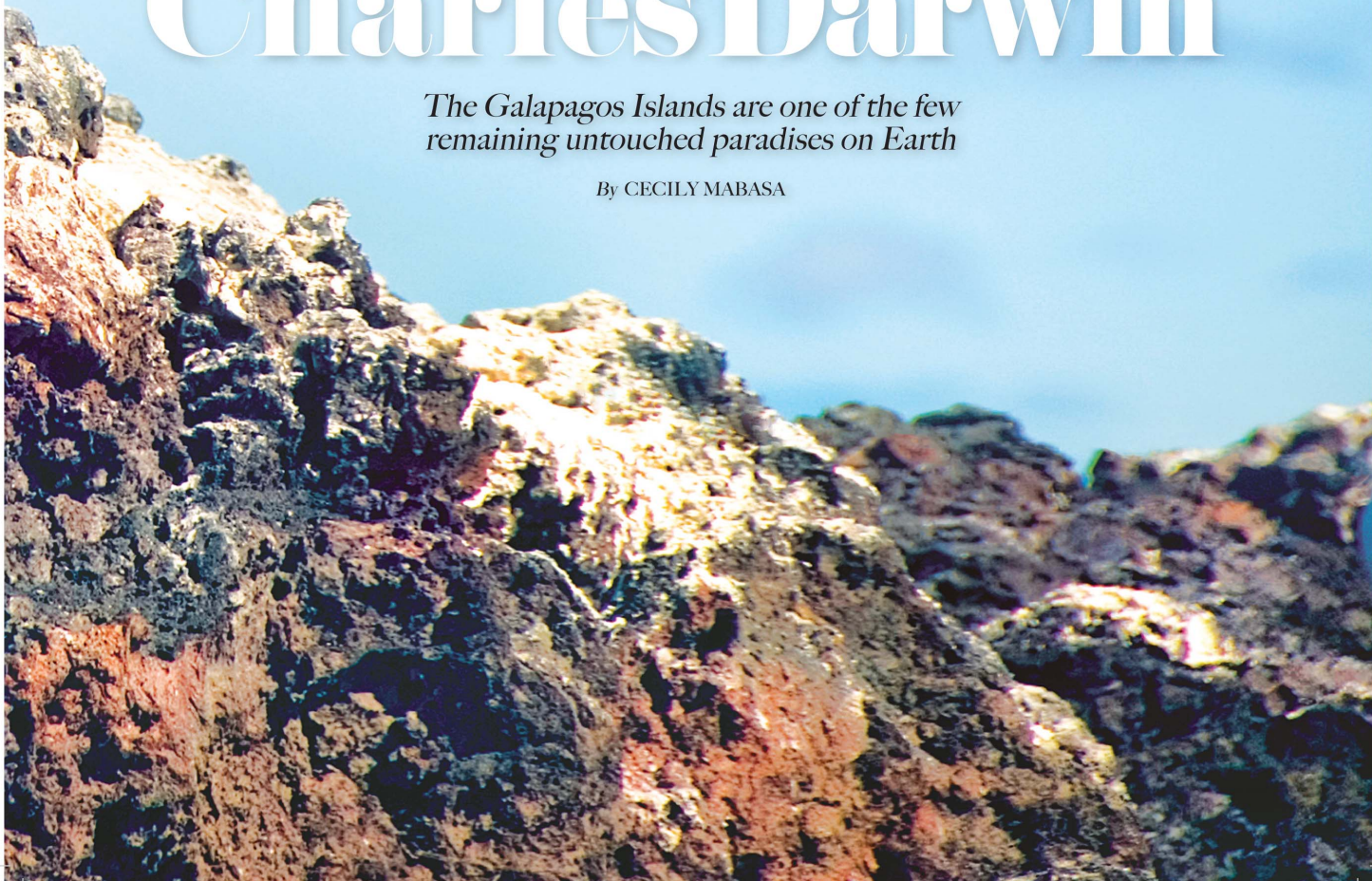
A Galapagos
pelican prepares to
take flight



In the Footsteps of Charles Darwin

*The Galapagos Islands are one of the few
remaining untouched paradises on Earth*

By CECILY MABASA





Tourists and explorers on top of the ridge of Tintoreras island come to observe the wildlife

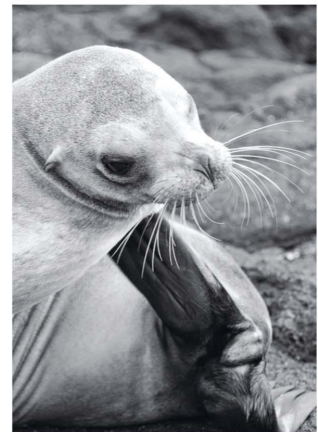
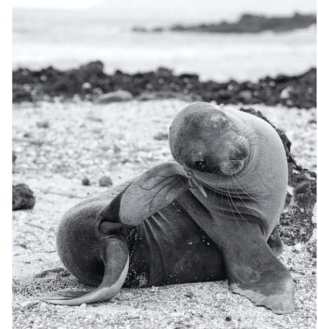


Lonely George, the famous Galapagos giant turtle, passed away a few months after this picture was taken



A naturalist guide leads visitors on lava terra ferma

Baby seals lazing about in the Galapagos



THE GALAPAGOS JOURNEY STARTED WITH A SHORT, UNEVENTFUL FLIGHT TO THE SMALL ISLAND OF BALTRA. A naturalist guide led the group to a chartered yacht and gave a briefing on how to behave around the islands, which is home to different animal species. In this part of the world, the guide explained, humans are the visitors and should, therefore, always be respectful of the animals' natural habitat.

It was a newly refurbished yacht which combined luxury, privacy and comfort. The cabin was spacious and fitted with couches and flatscreen TVs. There was a large

solarium with shaded and open areas, two Jacuzzis and comfortable sun loungers. The afternoon was spent at the Charles Darwin Research Station in Sta. Cruz Island. A majority of visitors to the Galapagos come to see the sights. There were also those who were interested to learn more about the preservation and protection of the islands. Wooden bridges and decks in the research station allowed guests to understand the inner workings of the biological research center.

LUXURY IN THE ISLANDS

It was an early start the next day to avoid the rush of tourist boats. The yacht

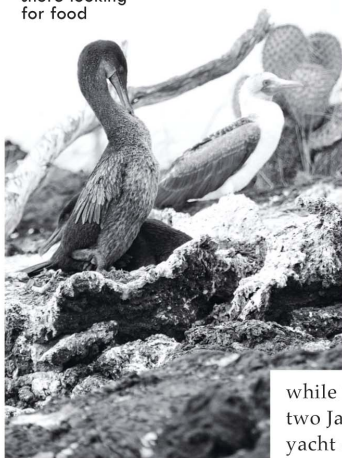
docked at one of the small islands called Tintoreras, right at the coast of Puerto Villamil. Flamingos and other migrant birds flocked around the coves in the area. The afternoon's destination was the Sierra Negra Volcano in Isabela Island, the largest in the Galapagos. The volcano is said to have the world's second widest crater, which was visible during the short hike to the rim. Sierra Negra is one of the six volcanic summits in Isabela Island.

There were days when the most stressful activity was choosing between a cup of hot chocolate or the assortment of cocktails



The author communing with hundreds of iguanas, a typical sight in the Galapagos Islands, at Espumilla Beach

Pelicans line the shore looking for food



The Galapagos is home to a variety of endemic bird species



while lounging in one of the two Jacuzzi pools atop the yacht during sunset. There was a spread consisting of international cuisine with a Latin twist. Each meal was complete with appetizers and two main courses, including a juicy turkey, different kinds of pasta, steak, fish, grilled lamb and vegan dishes. When there was a craving for something not available, ship crew would knock on the door of neighboring ships to find ingredients.

AMAZING UNDERWATER LIFE

Visits to specific areas around the Galapagos archipelago happened

during the latter days of the expedition. There was a tour around Elizabeth Bay, where penguins were sighted at the Marielas islets and red mangroves at the coves. Sea turtles played about while Galapagos hawks soared far overhead. Punta Espinoza in Fernandina Island boasts of unique species, including the very rare flightless cormorant, a bird native to the islands.

Visitors also had the opportunity to go snorkeling. Because of the Humboldt current that passes through the Galapagos from South America from June to November, the weather

and waters off the islands are much cooler. There was an initial shock after plunging into the icy ocean but the rich marine life took attention away from the cold. There were giant turtles, sea lions, penguins, stingrays and marine iguanas, which only live in the Galapagos Islands. It was easy to forget the world back on dry land just watching the astounding underwater creatures. □

The experience was arranged by the luxury adventure group Sea to Summit Explorations on its Chartered Galapagos Odyssey. For more information, phone (917) 8687971 visit <seatosummitadv.net> or email <ces@seatosummitadv.net>