

Galapagos!

Day 2



Monday, June 23, 2014

We requested a 5:30AM wakeup call since our clock was not working (later Fairy discovered that it was not plugged in); they called us right on time. We both had been awake for a while with sounds of another alarm as well. Crowing rooster calls faintly penetrated our walls and reminded us of an early morning about to begin.

We showered, packed, and then went to the morning breakfast buffet to join our friends. A delightful meal awaited, and we dined, visited a while, then headed to the lobby for our ride to the airport. But we had no ride to the airport! The concession that had been contracted to pick us up at 7:50 AM had some sort of mix up and they were not coming. After our “okole squeezer” ride to the hotel the night before, we were not surprised. (Okole is a Hawaiian term for one’s backside.)

Maggie took charge and negotiated with the hotel and in short order they loaded all 12 of us into a small van with not a single seat to spare. The luggage was loaded into a rack on the top of the van with nary a strap to hold it in place, and we headed through the gate onto the rutted paved road that soon turned to pothole-pocked dirt and gravel. With wary eye to the back to watch for ejected luggage, we rocked, jolted and rolled past houses in various states of disrepair or construction,

many with high walls topped with broken glass to keep out the uninvited. This was certainly not Mr. Roger's neighborhood.

Several minutes later we returned to the pavement, and then to four lane highway and left the impoverished area behind. A young lady greeted us at the airport as we unloaded and expressed our thanks to our very kind and helpful driver who did not challenge the speed limit like our taxi driver the night before. We blundered our way again through security and the process of gaining permission to enter the Galapagos, then went to the lower gates to await our flight.



Announcements were made in Spanish and then in English, and we soon learned that our flight was departing a different gate on the second level. Somewhat confused, we none-the-less made it to the proper gate and before long boarded our flight to Guayaquil and then on to San Cristobal Island, Galapagos. The flight went smoothly with snacks and later a meal served by sharp-looking

and very courteous flight attendants. We were a bit surprised, however, when they announced our initial descent and then opened the overhead bins. What were they thinking? Oh, they were spraying the compartments one by one from front to back and then reclosing them. What they were spraying for was never announced, but obviously they wanted only approved, two-legged visitors to their islands.

We filled out forms as detailed as the ones for customs to gain entrance to the Galapagos Islands, and then we picked up our bags which had been carefully unloaded onto the ground. Next, we followed our guide, Cesibel, to the bus that took us to the "Majestic" cruise boat. The bus carried us along the streets lined with buildings in various states of order and completion to the pier, where sea lions lined the margins of the dock. We donned life jackets and marched down the steps past the sleeping sea lions to the pangas (rigid-bottomed inflatable, outboard-powered watercraft) which carried us to the Majestic. The driver idled past various derelict fishing boats with decks and gunnels covered with more sea lions and teased us by saying that each was to be our boat for the night. Finally, he stopped at the real Majestic and we left the tender for our floating home for the next seven days.

The Majestic gleamed as white as the fluffy clouds above the azure ocean, lightly rocking in the rippled sea. It stretched to 117 feet long with a 23-foot beam and had eight cabins with a capacity for 16 passengers in addition to the crew. The low fantail at the stern allowed boarding and a short flight of steps on either side of the fantail led to the main deck level, which had a small outdoor area with a table and settee. Just forward of the settee, sliding doors led to the interior of the main level. On the starboard side, more steps led to the top deck where more built-in tables and settees

lined the sides, and a few lounge chairs on the wooden deck floor awaited occupants. The bridge lay forward, and seats lined the deck beside and just in front of the bridge for observing over the bow. At the aft end, a low platform surrounded a hot tub that would be enjoyed by many during the trip. The pangas rode on davits extending from either side of the boat just forward of the hot tub area and proved the resting point for many hitchhiking birds.

Many other fishing boats and a few other tour boats rested in the rocky bay along with the Majestic. Storefronts lined the street on the bay's edge for a few blocks in both directions, and other curious buildings rose upward with the landscape that rose inland. Sea lions splashed about in the water while frigate birds soared overhead.

We were carefully assisted from our panga onto the low, wood-floored fantail deck at the stern end of the boat. From the very beginning it was quite apparent that the crew was competent, caring, and capable. Any misgivings about being in a strange land, with a language most of us barely understood, quickly melted away.

A short flight of steps took us to the main level where we were directed to our "cabinas." We passed through the sliding glass doors of the main deck and between the two tables that were our dining area. A stairway descended straight away to the lower cabinas, with pathways either side of the stairs allowing passage to the lounge area on the port side, the food area on the starboard. Further forward, a hallway led to the cabinas on the main deck.

After settling into cabina number 5, we gathered for orientation at the lounge provided by our guide, Cesibel, who went by "Cesi." Pleasant, petite, with dark hair and eyes and brown skin, she held command of our attention with her fluent English, thorough understanding of the Galapagos and its natural history, and ability to communicate well to the level of her audience. We later learned that she was native to Ecuador and had part of her schooling in Toronto, Canada. She was fluent in English, Spanish, and I suspect French as well and kindly helped with our attempts to communicate in Spanish.

After the orientation, we had a quick and delicious lunch and then rode pangas back to the docks, side-stepped the sea lions up the gangway, and boarded a bus for a ride over the top of the island to the Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado, the tortoise breeding station. The bus started through the small town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, winding past stores, businesses, and then occupied dwellings, some appearing completed, but many apparently still under construction with lower floors inhabited while upper floors were in various stages of construction. Pillars with rebar stretching skyward adorned most of the homes, awaiting further future vertical expansion.

Under blue skies we ascended a paved road lined by brush and low trees over rocky ground towards a summit scraping an orographic cloud. We cruised or jolted over sections in various stages of construction, some paved, some awaiting pavement with deep cement gutters on either side of the paved sections of the road. Near the summit the road leveled and skirted the largest freshwater lake in the Galapagos Islands. Named Laguna El Junco, it rests in the remnants of an ancient caldera.



The road then descended under the clouds down the slopes of the extinct volcano. As we neared the ocean, a lane appeared on the right. The bus turned and then ground to a halt in a gravel parking lot with an unassuming sign identifying the Galapaguera de Cerro Colorado. We passed through the gate with Cesi gaining admission for the group and proceeded along a

boardwalk past trees, brush, and tortoises. There were many adult tortoises roaming about, but some smaller pens contained young tortoises that were sorted by age.

Birds flitted about or called from various perches, and we gazed both upward and downward to take in the sights while keeping a wary eye on the board walk which had occasional broken or missing boards. Cesi narrated the trek for those who remained with the group, while several stragglers took their time to gaze, chat, or photograph. In the end we made it safely back to the bus, and after it was verified that all were aboard, the bus carried us back over the summit and on down to the port. Along the way Cesi cheerfully answered our questions and filled in gaps in our understanding of our first outing.



Back at the dock, we made our third transit of the sea lion-guarded ramp and landing to board our panga and putt back to the Majestic. We tidied up for dinner and then were treated to a feast that included a complimentary champagne toast by the crew.

Herman and Ivan manned the meals and interacted more directly with the crew than anyone else other than Cesi. Our cook, Raul, was tall and quick to smile and entertain. Bryan and another bright fellow were panga pilots. We also met the ship's engineer, and the captain, Marcello. They all worked together as a team for the wellbeing of the guests and the Galapagos.

Finally, it was time for the lifeboat drill. They sent us to our cabinas to find our life jackets and await the alarm. We did not wait long before the wail of the alarm beckoned us to the fantail for instructions on how to respond in the event of a real emergency at sea. All went well, and we returned to our rooms, stowed our life jackets and prepared for bed.

That night we rested well for the first time in two days. With no misgivings about our boat or crew, we gently rocked to sleep in the quiet bay of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, awaiting another day of pleasant adventure.