

*“It is the fate of most voyagers, no sooner have they discovered what is most interesting in any locality, then they are hurried from it. . . .”*  
—Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*

A container ship the size of a prone Chrysler Building slides silently past me, at eye level, close enough to touch. Multicolored intermodal containers, the red blood cells of global commerce, are stacked a hundred feet high on the deck. The freighter slips into the lock with mere inches to spare, kissing the concrete wall with a hollow shriek while the massive steel gates swing closed. The 65,000-ton ship is lowered from Gatún Lake. Sailors wave at the bow, and millions of gallons of water leave the lock chamber. Inch by inch, the giant vessel appears to sink to its gunwales, stately as a coffin put in the ground. The lower gates open like the doors of a cathedral, and the ship is pulled forward by towlines attached to *mulas*, the diesel engines that long ago replaced actual mules in the canal trade. The ship fires up its engines and churns toward the wide blue Pacific. Many of the containers heading in this direction are empty, returning to the factories of Shenzhen and Guangzhou to restock the Wal-Marts of the Eastern Seaboard with flat-panel televisions, adulterated dog food, and Nikes. The majority of the deckhands are Filipinos who have signed on for low pay, and few protections, to live outside the reach of international regulations. Theirs is a world little improved from the difficulties and dangers present when the Panama Canal was built a century ago.

The canal itself is a marvel of engineering, cutting 8,000 miles from the journey between the oceans by carrying ships over the Continental Divide. Fourteen thousand vessels pass through the canal each year, from the toll-paying customers to enormous Panamax ships built to the maximum permissible dimensions of the locks. The canal is physical proof that while water flows downhill, money will climb right the hell over anything that stands in its way. It is a monument to the ingenuity of capitalism and the persuasiveness of gunboat diplomacy. It is as monstrous and wondrous as the Great Wall, and its construction took a similarly grim human toll.

And yet the scene is undeniably romantic. Seabirds wheel and cry in the hazy sunlight. The air smells of salt and diesel. The canal is one of the great loci of modern civilization. The horizon glows with possibility and imagined destinations in far-off ports. There are few places on the planet more suitable for contemplating a sea journey than the bar that overlooks the Miraflores Locks. Which is a fine thing, because that's where I am, a couple pints along, and I have come to Panama to join a boat.

I am not signing on to a tanker or freighter bound for the Far East (which is west of here), but rather to a scuffed-up, forty-eight-foot, two-masted ketch, owned and captained by my old friend Andrew Whyte and his wife, Francesca.

I am going to crew for them on the first leg of their journey across the Pacific to their home in Melbourne. Our primary destination is the Galápagos Islands, a two-week sail to the southwest across a thousand miles of open water, skirting the pirate havens of the Colombian coast and the uncertain winds of the Doldrums, striking for the equator and following it to the islands originally known as Las Encantadas. The Enchanted Islands. And the boat that will get us there is the *Shangri La*. A sailboat named after a mythical Himalayan valley may seem indicative of a romanticism unmoored from reality, but it befits the fantastical existence Andrew and Francesca have created for themselves, working their way around the world for years with scarcely any money but possessed of boundless dreams.

And it is no more unlikely an appellation than the *Beagle*, a ten-gun brig of Her Majesty the Heiress Apparent Victoria's Navy, which sailed for the Galápagos in the late summer of 1835, carrying a perpetually seasick, inexhaustibly curious, unpaid twenty-five-year-old naturalist named Charles Darwin.

In February of 2001, just after the inauguration of George W. Bush, Andrew, two other friends, and I walked across the Mexican border at Agua Prieta with nothing but what we were carrying in our backpacks. Hopping freight trains, hitching rides in the backs of pickups, and camping in fields and on beaches, we traced the Pacific coast clear to Costa Rica, moving almost constantly, adhering to Andrew's dictum that we never pay for a ride. The force of Andrew's personality is such that the best way to enjoy traveling with him (which I have done in many countries over the years) is to let him have it his way. After six weeks, I prepared to go back to New York, having had a reasonably fun lark in Latin America, ready to return to my life despite its recent scuttling by a breakup with my girlfriend and my dismissal from a job as a magazine fact-checker. The journey had been a respite from the familiar, but I was tired of sleeping on hard ground and waiting for rides in the blazing sun. For Andrew, traveling and life were directly equated. There was nothing he cared to return to, and he saw our travels through Central America as his jumping-off point.

On my last night in Costa Rica we sat around a fire on a beach, talking until the night had collapsed to embers. "I've gotten to the point where I start to lose it if I stay in one place for more than a day," he said. It was a relentless way to live, a constant pilgrimage toward the unknown that Andrew had been making for as long as I had known him. Andrew is tall, broad-shouldered, with a roguish grin, boundless charisma, and an indefatigable will with which he tried to coerce the universe into doing things. He had hitchhiked nearly the entire length of the Pan-American Highway—from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego—had busked his way with a guitar through every country in Europe, had

never, he claimed, paid for a ride. Now he seemed unhappy with travel, and hoped the next leg of the journey would release him from his own exhausting restlessness. He seemed to feel born into the wrong era, when the maps are all filled in and the adventures are all circumscribed. The world of cubicles, suits, fluorescent tube lights, morning commutes, and two-week vacations horrified him, and he would rather stay broke for life than submit to such ignominies. And this refusal to serve only compounded his need to push himself further and deepened his frustrations at what the world offered up. When I woke in the morning, the driftwood coals still smoldered in the sand, but Andrew was gone. I wouldn't see him again for years.

He had hitchhiked to Panama City and, despite a complete lack of experience, bluffed his way into a job crewing on a sailboat bound across the Pacific. Several boats and archipelagoes later, he found himself in Fiji aboard the *Shangri La*, crewing for its owner, a Californian named Stu Douglas who had lost his only crewmember the day Stu and Andrew met. They continued their traverse of Oceania, and in a bar in Melbourne Andrew met Francesca, fell in love, and persuaded her to quit her job and join him aboard. To her eternal credit she did, and the three sailed the rest of the way around the world, braving everything from howling storms to engine malfunctions to Somali pirates. He told the story of the Somali pirates at his wedding to point out the precise moment when he had decided that Francesca, who was undaunted by the possibility of being captured and sold into slavery while rounding the Bab el Mandeb, was the girl for him. When Andrew and Francesca were married in 2006, Douglas gave them the best present they could imagine: the *Shangri La*. They would only have to collect it in California and sail it home to Melbourne.

When I arrived in Panama, they had already been sailing for several months, hopping along the hippie surf havens of the Pacific coast and dropping anchor at the Balboa Yacht Club, a low-rent marina at the Pacific mouth of the canal, where the *Shangri La* now bobs in the wakes of passing container ships, her crew arriving and final preparations being made for our imminent departure.

I return by taxi to the marina, with its T.G.I.Friday's and its population of sun-scoured and rum-pickled yachties, traveling one way or another through the canal in their feckless peregrinations. A motor launch chugs me out to the *Shangri La's* mooring, and I swing aboard. Andrew is racing around the boat, monkey wrench in one hand and a mug of wine in the other, trying to fix any number of the things that go wrong with a thirty-year-old sailboat. Their plan is to sail the boat across the Pacific and sell it somewhere, splitting the profits with Stu and setting themselves up in some as yet undiscovered paradise. But

ownership of the *Shangri La*, which now accounts for the near-entirety of his and Francesca's net worth, is not as simple as they had hoped. Not only have they been catapulted into the responsibility of keeping a dog-eared sailboat afloat, now a problem far more complex and significant than fouled spark plugs, torn spinnakers, or burned-out bilge pumps has sprung up. Somewhere off the coast of Mexico, Francesca discovered, to her great surprise, that she is pregnant.

One might think that such a revelation would derail plans to take a months-long sea journey, given the risk of rough weather and the impossibility of reaching medical assistance. One would be mistaken. The *Shangri La* would not be held up by the vagaries of fate or biological happenstance. The only compromise Andrew made to the fact of his looming fatherhood was to call off, at least temporarily, a planned pre-sail expedition: hacking our way through the mangrove swamps and jungles of the Darién Gap. My pleas regarding the likelihood of our drowning in quicksand, being swarmed by killer bees or kidnapped by right- or left-wing paramilitaries or shot by drug smugglers, or taken at arrowpoint by unassimilated tribesmen, seemed to have swayed him, just barely.

Not counting the little creature now bobbing around in its second sea of amniotic fluid, our crew is six. Tucker Thiele is a sweet-natured and wide-eyed twenty-five-year-old hippie from Vermont, with long sun-bleached hair and salt-stung eyes that give him a look of being perpetually yet amiably stoned. His great regret is having been too young to catch Jerry Garcia's last tour, and he will serve as chief cook for the voyage. Jared Grant, a stonemason from Maine, has been traveling on and off with Andrew for years, since a summer they spent working in the Yukon. Jared and Tucker have been crew since California and are easy and comfortable with the workings of the boat. They are also both glad to have newcomers aboard, to shift the dynamics of life under Andrew's often domineering captaincy. The last to come on board is Rhys Hayes, a friend of Andrew and Francesca's from Melbourne whose entrepreneurial savvy and natural charisma have sent him well along the path toward being a millionaire by age thirty, via a text-message viral marketing firm he co-founded. A curious cross section, indicative of nothing in particular except the resistance, by a small demographic, to subscribing to our culture's notions of growing up.

We have all come here because, well, how could we refuse? There was a boat waiting at the Panama Canal, to sail to the Galápagos. All one had to do was show up. For myself, despite a lifelong tendency toward seasickness, carsickness, and once elephantsickness, despite having spent the better part of a two-week sailing trip in college subsisting on saltines and warm water, dry-heaving in my berth, I look at this sea voyage as a litmus test. I want to determine whether I still have the impulse to and stamina for spontaneous

adventure (the source of my life's crucial revelations and discoveries), whether the call of adventure still outweighs the mundane concerns of responsibility and career. A sailing journey no longer has any practical purpose. There are quicker ways to get almost anywhere. We are not going to discover any new archipelagoes or spice routes. We are certainly not going to lay the groundwork for a new theory of the origins of life. It is instead a test of something more vital, anarchic, and romantic: a willingness to push out beyond the margins of ordinary life. And I have brought enough Dramamine to dull myself into a reptilian torpor should I prove unequal to the task.

We have a few days in port to lay in our stores for the crossing, chiefly diesel fuel, water, and victuals. The boat, built in the early '70s, is white with a faded burgundy trim, the woodwork peeling, the rails and cleats dull with salt corrosion. She certainly shows her years. Among her various character-building deficiencies, the *Shangri La* has a burned-out refrigerator, so everything we bring must be canned, dried, or ready to be eaten in a race against putrefaction. The boat will continue on from the Galápagos across 3,000 miles of open ocean. There won't be anywhere to resupply for several months.

It is difficult to plan a menu that far ahead, and we stock up with scattershot glee. Our crew has little of the knowledge, and none of the discipline, that would have gone into supplying a voyage during the age of exploration. At Panama City's vast outdoor fruit-and-vegetable market we stack hand trucks with huge sacks of potatoes, garlic, onions. Fifty pounds of grapefruit, on a whim, to fend off scurvy. I get lost in the bazaar looking for an entire stem of green bananas, imagining they will last longer this way. We wheel our carts through the aisles of a giant Panama City warehouse store, tossing pallets of stewed tomatoes, sacks of dried beans, rice, and pasta into our carts. And then we round a corner and discover the fantastic bargains awaiting us in the liquor aisle. We fill several carts with dozens of gallons of cheap Nicaraguan rum, cheaper boxed wine, and a few decent bottles of scotch that I plan to squirrel away among my private reserves. The boys, trying to anticipate their drinking months in advance, also entertain fantasies of trading rum for handicrafts (or handmaidens) in Fatu Hiva or Vanuatu.

We return to the *Shangri La* heavily laden, suffering only the minor tragedy of a gallon of rum shattering in transit. The skiff is loaded down to its gunwales with supplies, and we fill all the storage space in the galley and under the map table; we stack crates against the walls of Andrew and Francesca's quarters aft and Tucker and Jared's already-cramped forward berth, which they were obliged to share, sleeping with a guitar case wedged between them to avoid the lonely temptations of the forecastle. Rhys and I, late arrivers and useless

Jonahs beside the more seasoned crew, are consigned to narrow bunks just off the galley, in the center of the boat, where we will be able to sleep fine as long as the boat is on a starboard tack.

One last order of business remains before we depart. Andrew, after some shadowy negotiations at the marina's outdoor bar, calls me over to the back of a van in T.G.I.Friday's parking lot. There we encounter two shifty-looking Panamanians, and after some haggling in Spanish, and a near derailment of negotiations concerning a proposed eleventh-hour price increase, Andrew hands over a stack of \$50 bills, and the van doors are thrown wide for us to collect his bounty: 300 cartons of Marlboros, neatly boxed up, to be sold (barring confiscation by customs agents or their being washed overboard in a storm) for a 500 percent profit in French Polynesia. This is how Andrew plans for the future.

As the hazy pink light of sunrise filters through the porthole above the galley stove, I listen to the anchor chain being wound and the motor being fired up, as the *Shangri La* pushes out into the Pacific. The Bridge of the Americas, spanning high above the mouth of the canal, shrinks with distance, as does the skyline of Panama City, dissolving indistinctly into the smoky rise of land around it. We sail out past dozens of freighters, each waiting its turn through the locks, and soon there is nothing to see to the horizon but the choppy blue waters of the Gulf of Panama. It's just that easy to leave the world behind.

Darwin had left England 170 years earlier, an aspiring clergyman just out of Cambridge, twenty-two years old, never having traveled, invited to pay his own way as a naturalist for a sea journey of indeterminate length. The *Beagle* was going on its second mission, a hydrographic survey of South America, to create detailed charts and measurements for the British Navy. Her captain, a hot-tempered young aristocrat named Robert FitzRoy, had assumed command on the previous voyage when the *Beagle's* captain, Pringle Stokes, shot himself in a fit of melancholy. FitzRoy wanted on the voyage a companion of suitable station and intellect. After casting about and being refused by his first several choices, he settled on the young, privileged, and educated Darwin, despite his being a Whig. FitzRoy, who subscribed to the then fashionable theories of physiognomy, was also gravely concerned that Darwin's protuberant nose indicated a lack of determination.

But Darwin, over his father's initial objections, joined FitzRoy, and had the determination to stay with the voyage for five years, despite violent bouts of seasickness throughout the journey. He wrote his cousin William Darwin Fox: "I hate every wave of the ocean, with a fervour, which you, who have only seen the green waters of the shore, can never understand." And to his sister

Susan Darwin he wrote, “I loathe, I abhor the sea, & all ships which sail on it,” and to his sister Caroline added, “Not even the thrill of geology makes up for the misery and vexation of spirit that comes with seasickness.” His father, an eminent physician, recommended that the youth eat more raisins. Darwin suffered and stayed, “a martyr to confinement and sea-sickness,” as FitzRoy remarked, prostrate in his bunk or spending as much time ashore as possible. The observations he made, and the specimens he collected, would prove crucial, two decades later, to the development of his theory of evolution by natural selection. Darwin had little idea of the full meaning of what he observed on his voyage, but his insatiable curiosity proved the key to his eventual theory.

Our first stop is Las Perlas, a cluster of mostly uninhabited islands a day’s sail south. The Pearls are archetypal desert islands, with palm fringes and gentle breaks of surf on powdery sand. We drop anchor in a little cove and bring ourselves ashore in the inflatable dinghy. Tucker scurries monkeylike up a palm, machete in his belt, and hacks down several dozen coconuts. Andrew, convinced this is likely his last chance to look for buried treasure, vanishes into the jungle. Buried treasure to him is not a romantic abstraction but something he believes is out there and that he is meant to find. He knows we are on the wrong side of the isthmus to get lucky, that the vast majority of pirates and privateers operated in the Caribbean. But still, just one piece of eight. Or perhaps two, to rub together. Baby is going to need a new pair of shoes. He is clearly anxious about the prospect of fatherhood, about how it will limit his choices in life, and he still doesn’t know how to balance his love of adventure with the new demands of a family. Treasure hunting is as central to his worldview as travel itself. Andrew is above all a dreamer, to the simultaneous admiration and frustration of almost everyone who loves him. Francesca seems less troubled by the prospect of motherhood, or has at least taken the shock with a measure of grace and humor. Andrew returns empty-handed after several hours, which I have spent lying in the shade of a palm tree, chain-smoking and using as a pillow *The Voyage of the Beagle*. I had hoped to quit smoking on the voyage, but it’s not easy with several thousand packs of cigarettes aboard and everyone but Francesca—who can’t—constantly lighting up

We continue on from Las Perlas, out into the deep water off the continental shelf, sailing south toward the equator before we will turn and head west to the Galápagos. We soon fall into the rhythm of life at sea. The work of sailing is easy enough, particularly in the light breezes off the coast, the sails luffing and tugging us slowly along. There are six of us, so we set up round-the-clock shifts

to pilot the boat. I have charge of the wheel from two to four in the afternoon, and again from two to four in the morning. If the sails are trimmed properly, and the wind doesn't shift, steering is almost effortless, with just an occasional adjustment to keep the compass in its binnacle dialed to our heading.

Having cut ourselves from the umbilical cord of cell phones, of the twenty-four-hour news feed, of checking e-mail a dozen times an hour, life has become instantly more simple, pared down to its essence and slowed to a strange new pace. It is an uncomfortable withdrawal at first, particularly for Rhys and me, who both have deeply wired lives. He feels it perhaps more acutely than I do, until he turns the junk-sick energy of his media jones toward meticulously stitching a leather iPod case for his girlfriend. Stooped over the map table, he pushes each stitch through the heavy leather with an archaic device called a sailmakers palm. Andrew and Tucker have invented a game that combines Risk and cribbage, and they play marathon sessions, tallying up cribbage points and converting them to armies to sweep across Kamchatka or Madagascar.

We don't have a satellite phone, or a radio to listen to shortwave BBC, let alone anything like Google or Wikipedia to serve as oracle to our questions, so in the absence of instant information, political debates take on a new character, the provability of any argument based on fuzzy recollection, improvised statistics, and perhaps a dog-eared magazine article dug from beneath the chart table. This is particularly difficult when I find myself arguing about George W. Bush's foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks with three people who happened to have recently watched the conspiracy-theory documentary *Loose Change* on YouTube. We talk about dinner all day long, and then Tucker clangs around in the kitchen, improvising all manner of thrown-together delights. Boredom and restlessness cease to be acute sensations, and fade into a sort of baseline hum. As does my constant low-level nausea of motion sickness, nowhere near as severe as Darwin's, held at bay with excessive doses of Dramamine which give me the constant sense of being drunk. As a result, I don't bother to crack open my scotch. There is nothing to do but keep moving forward. The *Shangri La* edges into the intermittent winds of the Doldrums, at the center of a watery horizon.

Rare shouts of excitement rise when the trolling line hooks a small yellowfin, and we drag the flopping, glittering catch aboard. Jared dispatches it with a quick whack of a wooden club, and Andrew fillets it on the spot, a wash of brilliant crimson covering the deck. They gut it, and Andrew holds the still-beating, plum-sized heart toward me in his palm. Jared, without hesitation, pops it into his mouth, trying to grin and chew simultaneously. The rest of the tuna is of greater culinary interest: sushi, ceviche, fritters, chowder, all from a single fish.

Petrels rest on the rails and shrouds, and pods of pilot whales breach and

spout in the distance. A migrating leatherback, likely on the way to the Galápagos archipelago itself, wings with balletic grace through the water alongside us and fetches up by the port rail. It is probably 400 pounds, but as delicate in its movements as a synchronized swimmer. Andrew immediately begins hitching a noose to try to lasso it, proclaiming that turtle soup is delicious. He would have tried, had not the entire crew, his wife included, threatened mutiny if he touched the turtle. Andrew is a sea libertarian, without much respect for international treaties or environmental protocols. Darwin was little different, in fact; he ate many of the creatures he documented, from roast armadillo to Galápagos tortoise soup. To argue with Andrew that times have changed is futile. But it is of no matter, because the leatherback, with a flap of its great sea-wings, rolls over and vanishes into the depths.

There are, too, the delights and mysteries of life at sea. On the night watch, after I am shaken from half-sleep by Tucker and stumble up the ladder to the wheel, the boat rises and falls on the light swells. I am alone in the midst of a vast black silence. We are a few hundred miles off the coast of Colombia, with not a trace of another vessel's light on the ocean. A veil of stars slides overhead, and I shut off the lighted compass and try to steer toward the spot where the long axis of the Southern Cross points, the constellation held just to the left of the mast. The bow wake throws up a green glow of disturbed bioluminescent zooplankton, and at instants the silhouetted forms of dolphins appear through the glowing water like ghosts. These are lonesome hours, before the first intimations of dawn, with all the boat asleep, and it is easy to forget I ever had another life ashore. For Darwin, gone for five years to the far reaches of the globe, it must have been an overwhelming relinquishment of life, of family, of the familiar world, and an enormous act of bravery. In a mere handful of unanchored days, I feel shadows of that loneliness.

Time comes unmoored and drifts into a single enormous day, and any recollection of the day of the week, of the date, of responsibilities beyond the boat fade away. Our arrival at San Cristobal, the easternmost island of the archipelago, is up to the winds. It could be ten days, it could be fourteen. The Doldrums, less poetically known as the Intertropical Convergence Zone, form a belt of low pressure that circles the earth around the equator. We cross them, motoring at times in the absence of any wind, and somewhere in a long night we cross the equator and turn west with the trade winds toward the Galápagos.

One morning, after a fortnight under sail, I wake up to shouts from the top deck, and a thin light filters through the hatchway. Scrambling up the ladder, I see above the glassy waters the smoke gray pinnacle of Leon Dormido, a huge, split volcanic tuff cone standing 500 feet out of the ocean, looking for all the world like the sleeping lion of its name. Behind it rises the soft green slope of

San Cristobal, called Chatham Island when Darwin arrived on the *Beagle* in September 1835. We are silent, all of us, sitting on the rail. A hundred yards off, a humpback breaks the surface, its skin a slick black with a constellation of barnacles, and the white line of surf becomes visible against the black rocks of the shore. The island, ancient and pristine from this angle, offers no sign of human habitation. This is the spectacle as Darwin witnessed it, when it was the unlikely progenitor of an epiphany, upon which he would later remark:

Considering the small size of the islands, we feel the more astonished at the number of their aboriginal beings, and at their confined range. . . . [W]e are led to believe that within a period geologically recent the unbroken ocean was here spread out. Hence, both in space and time, we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact—that mystery of mysteries—the first appearance of new beings on this earth.

Rounding a headland and motoring slowly, we pull at last into the small harbor of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, the administrative capital of the archipelago, with a population of about 5,000 and a collection of whitewashed buildings hugging the harbor front. The port, called Wreck Bay, is scattered with several dozen private yachts: catamarans and sloops stopping over for fuel and water before making the long crossing westward. Nearer to shore are moored several rust-bucket fishing vessels, seeming barely afloat and serving now as sunbathing platforms for a sizable colony of plump, fearless, dissolute sea lions. Farther out are anchored the enormous cruise ships that ply the islands, bringing some 75,000 tourists a year to gawk at boobies, iguanas, and giant tortoises.

Darwin's initial impressions of Chatham Island were not the stuff of tourist brochures:

Nothing could be less inviting than the first appearance. A broken field of black basaltic lava, thrown into the most rugged waves, and crossed by great fissures, is everywhere covered by stunted, sun-burnt brushwood, which shows little signs of life. The dry and parched surface, being heated by the noon-day sun, gave to the air a close and sultry feeling, like that from a stove: we fancied even that the bushes smelt unpleasantly.

We are not swayed by Darwin's dismissal of the island's aesthetics. It is glorious land, and we are ready to get off the *Shangri La*, good as she's been to us. We flag down a water taxi, and within minutes of dropping anchor we are clambering onto the dock, stepping over the corpulent forms of sleeping sea lions and heading directly for a bar by the town's wharf, where we have

our first cold beer in two weeks, a miracle by any standard. But why talk of miracles, in this place where life has been shown to defy the very notion of miracles, to work its ends for so many millennia without concern for human interpretation or sentiment? But the beer is so welcome. We are deeply thankful, if only to the bartender.

We recall some fragmentary version of the story from tenth-grade biology class, perhaps a slideshow with some titters at the word *booby*. The Galápagos first gurgled above the waves as volcanic lava-vent eruptions between three and five million years ago. And there they grew and grow still, steaming and spitting at the ragged edge of creation, waiting for life to find them. And it did: wind-carried seeds, or seabirds' droppings, or slow-metabolism reptiles drifting on mats of vegetable matter washed down rivers and out to sea from the Central American coast, bumping up against the first land encountered. And there life underwent its usual processes, testing out possibilities, failing spectacularly or quietly, expanding to fill whatever space it was allocated. Tortoises, which on the mainland might have been 30 centimeters long, grew in their niches to the size of picnic tables, weighing as much as 600 pounds and living two centuries. Iguanas learned to swim. The wings of cormorants shrank to vestigial stubs. Finches evolved to use tools, or wielded beaks custom-designed to their most specific interests. The islands were filled with strange life that was indifferent to its own strangeness, and unconcerned about what, exactly, it meant in the grand scheme of things. It was an enormous drama played on a tiny stage; as Darwin would later remark, "The archipelago is a little world within itself." That life on the Galápagos ever meant anything to anyone was happenstance.

Humans discovered the archipelago with much the same blind luck as had the tortoises. Three centuries before Darwin's arrival, the Bishop of Panama was becalmed and drifted off course while crossing the Doldrums to meet with Francisco Pizarro and survey the conquest of the Incas. He stumbled across the islands, losing men and horses to thirst, but claiming the islands for Spain. It was so dry and desolate, he remarked, that it seemed "for a time that God had rained down stones"; the birds were like those from Spain, but "so silly they didn't know how to flee, and many were caught by hand." Humans had finally arrived, and went about their business after their fashion, the first—and most difficult to eradicate—of the introduced species that would swarm over the archipelago in the coming centuries. The Spanish called the islands *Las Encantadas* initially, and eventually called them the Galápagos, after the Spanish word for saddle, of which they said the giant, slow-moving saddleback tortoises reminded them. A 1956 study by Thor Heyerdahl claimed various artifacts and pottery fragments as evidence of pre-Columbian presence, but as far as is known for certain, the islands had been isolated from humankind since

they congealed above sea level. An unremarkable event, among the constant geological changes on the surface of the earth, but it made the Galápagos one of the best places on earth to witness the process by which life unfolds and inserts itself on the world.

The islands, nearly devoid of freshwater, were not very useful for settlement, but as a way station for whalers and a hideout for pirates they were adequate. It has often been said that had the islands possessed much freshwater, they would have been stripped bare and developed almost immediately. As it was, they were sufficiently inhospitable so as to be left relatively alone. Humans introduced rats, and cats, and goats—none of which cared much for the previously established order of things or the uniqueness of the local fauna—which soon spread out into the landscape, happily eating native plants and birds' eggs and baby tortoises and reproducing without apology. By the time the *Beagle* landed here, the islands were already heavily impacted (though not as nearly as heavily as they would soon be). But there was still enough of their original solitary strangeness that a few windblown seeds of observation lodged in the crevices of Darwin's mind, occupied the margins of his notebooks, and eventually sprouted his revolutionary notion.

As for the crew of the *Shangri La*, our first revolutionary notion is to get drunk. Late the first night, we are sitting around a table scattered with dozens of empty bottles. Tucker stumbles back from the bar holding a half-dozen shots of caña, the burning white-cane liquor that accelerates drunkenness to hangover as fast as it is consumed. We fall in with the other ragged yachties who have washed up here, Kiwis and Brits and Americans shoestringing their way to the South Pacific. One describes for me, at length, the delights of Colombian prostitutes, more beautiful than any in the world, and the purity of the cocaine there, so uncut that it formed a kind of paste that one could pack inside the nose like caulk—and pilot a sailboat twenty-four hours a day. The local cocaine, a sort of yellowish cracklike substance that comes wrapped in newsprint, is offered to us, but we pass. In the early hours we stumble back toward the dock. Andrew, balancing himself on the seawall, contemplates aloud what would happen if he sprinted, Heisman-like, through the snoring colony of sea lions sprawled across the beach. Miraculously, he thinks better of it.

In the days that follow, we set out to explore the island. A private vessel, *Shangri La* is banned from anchoring elsewhere in the archipelago, 97 percent of which is preserved as a national park, so we decide to explore as much of San Cristobal as we can. Most of the tourists travel by cruise ships, and are taken to sanctioned sites within the park by motor launch. They come to shore, whole families immaculate in their broad-brimmed sun hats and pants that unzip

to shorts. They shop along the waterfront for all manner of Galápagos kitsch: Darwin T-shirts, tortoise paperweights, stuffed plush boobies. They have spent vast sums to come here, and it would probably seem strange to the buccaneers and whalers of the island's earlier eras that the wealthy would want to spend their leisure time traveling halfway around the world to visit a desolate volcanic outcrop. We are doing things the low-budget way, and feel a little superior for this fact.

Rhys and I swim with baby sea lions at their colony at the beach of La Loberia. Picking our way through forests of saltbush and candelabra cactus, we watch male frigate birds puff out their bright-red neck pouches like balloons, hoping to attract females. As the boys cut through the local naval base to find a surf break, I linger behind, scrambling over the scorching basaltic lava, seeking specimens of Darwin's "hideous-looking creature," the scabrous black marine iguanas that waddle over the rocks and expel salt water from their nostrils. I'm trying only to get a good picture, a bit more ethical than Darwin, who recalled: "I threw one several times as far as I could, into a deep pool left by the retiring tide; but it invariably returned in a direct line to the spot where I stood." There's something blackly comic about the image of the great man, now forever associated with our notions of conservation and respect for living things, iguana-tossing in the name of scientific inquiry.

Darwin's methods very often involved killing the animals he wished to understand better. He found the birds so tame that he could dispatch them with a stick, or even with his hat. Guns he deemed "almost superfluous" and found that he could push a Galápagos hawk off the branch of a tree with a gun's muzzle. He remarked on this curious tameness in his journals, under the heading "Fear of Man, an acquired Instinct." That lack of fear would become a considerable evolutionary disadvantage, but there was still plenty of life to go round in 1835, particularly for the advancement of knowledge. But over the following century, the depredations of humans and the ravages of species that they introduced brought untold destruction on the creatures of the Galápagos. All species on the islands are introduced, of course, and the new arrivals out-competed the original ones at every turn.

Not that life was easy for the newcomers; humans often fared poorly as they attempted to impose their will on the unforgiving landscape. The Galápagos have been, in the past 150 years, the site of numerous failed utopian and correctional experiments. Manuel Cobo, a wealthy businessman, started a farming colony called El Progreso on San Cristobal. He ruled with bloody cruelty, using summary execution, torture, and banishment to desert islands to keep the population under control. He minted his own currency (called, naturally, the Cobo), and used it to create lifelong debtors of the people of El Progreso. Until they mutinied and killed him, of course. In the 1920s over two

thousand Norwegians migrated to the islands, lured by promises of a tropical paradise on the far side of the world. Their cannery failed, they found no sources of freshwater, and several died in the first year of the settlement. Within a few years the vast majority, spiritually broken and financially ruined, returned to Norway. A brutal penal colony established by the Ecuadorian government on Isabela Island also ended in an uprising, with a group of prisoners commandeering a passing pleasure yacht and sailing it to the mainland.

But the disasters and hard luck that struck humans were nothing compared to the damage they visited upon the natural environment of the islands, and the tortoises in particular. One morning (which happens to be Easter, though none of us are paying attention) we walk up from the waterfront and enter the Franciscan mission. We shuffle down the hushed rows, past the votive candles and the bloody, suffering representations of the Savior, and out into a rear courtyard. A sister of the order is there with a small girl, and we give her a donation of a smooth, polished Sacagawea dollar (the Galápagos, as part of Ecuador, uses American currency). She turns a key in a locked gate, which swings open, and we file silently in. Out of the shade in the corner of this inner courtyard, Pepe enters the sunlight, the dull green scales and dusty boulderlike shell moving slowly and deliberately toward us. He is an enormous Galápagos tortoise, looked after by the sisters of the mission. Everything about him seems ancient, except the twinkling obsidian of his eyes, deeply set in his alien face.

There was a population of perhaps a quarter-million tortoises before human contact, broken up into at least thirteen subspecies around the archipelago. Having evolved no defenses besides their huge shells, they were easily exploited. A tortoise, turned on its back, has a metabolism so slow that it can be kept alive in the hold of a ship, without food or water, for years—until hauled on deck and slaughtered for fresh meat. Whalers soon discovered that the fat deposits the tortoises kept inside their shells, which provided them with water during the dry season, could be melted into oil as fine as that made from whale blubber. For a time the streetlamps of Guayaquil were lit with tortoise oil.

Darwin first came across a pair of giant tortoises on Chatham, the “cyclopean” landscape of which reminded him of the foundries of Staffordshire: burnt, stark, merciless. “These huge reptiles,” he wrote, “surrounded by the black lava, the leafless shrubs, and large cacti, seemed to my fancy like some antediluvian animals.” If the word “antediluvian” was meant with any irony at that point, given that these slow-moving creatures would help, in some small way, to nudge the whole of human understanding off a cliff, the young Darwin gave no indication. Nor did such considerations prevent him from clambering on top and riding them, at the glacial pace of 360 yards an hour. He stayed

with a camp of Spanish fishermen, subsisting entirely on tortoise meat for days; “the breast-plate roasted . . . with the flesh on it, is very good,” he remarked, “and the young tortoises make excellent soup.”

There are tortoises that were hatchlings when Darwin came to this island. Of the thirteen subspecies of tortoise that evolved here, eleven survive. Their total population is estimated at 15,000, maybe 5 percent of their original number. One of them, known as Lonesome George, is the last known Pinta Island tortoise on earth. George lives at the Charles Darwin Research Station on Santa Cruz, where all attempts to have him mate have ended in failure. (They are usually more eager: frustrated male Galápagos tortoises have been observed trying to mate with other males, and on occasion with tortoise-shaped boulders.) George made world headlines in the spring of 2007, when researchers announced they may have discovered a genetic match for him in a few tortoises that might have been shifted to another island in the last century by whalers or pirates.

We feed Pepe bananas, which he devours, skin and all, stretching his long neck forward from his dusty shell, black eyes catching the sunlight, pointed beak tearing through the fruit. He is nearly a century old, and I know there is no human intelligence there, that he does not perceive the passing of history in any way I can comprehend, that he is not self-aware. He is like a living stone in this sunbaked wilderness. What I see in his eyes is only a reflection of my own wish to understand life and its mysteries. Darwin wished the same thing, of course, and unlocked its mechanisms in a way so far advanced for his time that it still stuns the imagination. Pepe, for his part, is well fed by the kindly creationists. If this shuffling incarnation of the ideas that rendered the Church forever opposed to the principles of science feels any conflict about his guardians, he isn't saying.

The Galápagos Islands, no longer a lonesome outpost of life evolving in isolation, are today a laboratory of conservation, where humans' fraught relationship with the natural world can be studied and, hopefully, repaired. In 1959, the centenary of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, the Ecuadorian government declared the archipelago a national park. Today, 97 percent of the Galápagos is preserved, along with the 40,000 square miles of surrounding ocean that was preserved in 2001. Working with the Galápagos National Park Service, nonprofits such as the Charles Darwin Foundation fund conservation programs, education, and scientific research. “Voluntourism” has caught on as well. I meet several volunteers who have decided to spend their vacations tearing up invasive raspberry plants in the national park.

There is much goodwill here, but problems still abound, and both

commercial depredations and invasive species are difficult to hold in check. Illegal fishing is still rampant within the Galápagos Marine Reserve, with an estimated 300,000 sharks a year being slaughtered for the Asian shark-fin market. Raspberry and guava spread through the native forests, and cats, dogs, and goats play havoc with native species. Distemper has been found in dogs on Isabela Island, and there's a fear it could wipe out the population of sea lions. There are small victories: The director of an introduced-species control program tells me that they've managed to eradicate pigeons from San Cristobal. In April, Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, will declare that the Galápagos is in a state of environmental crisis, and in June UNESCO placed the islands on the World Heritage in Danger List.

It is all very well intentioned, even if a cynic could see it as another utopian scheme for this arid volcanic pile in the middle of the ocean. The Galápagos are undeniably part of global patrimony, one of the great examples of the diversity of life, but conservation here raises a larger philosophical problem: Life does not care about conservation. Natural selection is an amoral process, and by trying to preserve these islands we are imprinting our values on it. Every species in the islands was introduced at one point or another, and are we not just imposing our arbitrary will by attempting to preserve them, habitats and all, as a museum of isolated curiosities? (I am being ironic, but it is a point worth considering. Especially when you start talking to some of the less politically correct locals.) The Galapagos have always meant what we make them out to mean, and perhaps the only true conservation is to leave them alone, to banish mankind forever from the Enchanted Isles.

But that would be somewhat problematic, given the inconvenient presence of the tourists and the locals. Educating the archipelago's population of 30,000 is proving difficult. On another night at the bar, we talk with a young woman who works for one of the local tour companies. She rails against the big tourist ships, which she claims divert all the tourism money to the mainland. The cruises even sell the same tchotchkes sold by locals, but at even more marked-up prices. The government doesn't care about the people of the Galápagos; they just care about tortoises and iguanas. The Ecuadorian government strictly limits the number of immigrants, having decided that the archipelago's natural heritage will provide a sounder economic future. But for whom?

Several of our new friends, well lubricated at this point, decide to drag us on a field trip to see one of the island's less-renowned species in its natural habitat. A ten-minute ride in the back of a taxi-pickup drops us off at the dimly lit entrance of one of San Cristobal's two brothels. We shuffle in awkwardly and take up residence in a nervous phalanx in a corner, sending an emissary out for beer. Three barely dressed, overweight, glum-looking prostitutes turn their attentions to two of the yachties, who speak little Spanish but are clearly

familiar with the rituals of the place. The crew of the *Shangri La*, not so horrified that we won't finish our beers, watches from the corner. The girls are from Guayaquil, and have come here without residential permits to fill a niche the locals would never allow their own women to fill. Introduced species at \$10 a trick. I find the whole thing depressing, and we slip out the door and stumble in the darkness back to town, back to the dinghy and our berths aboard the *Shangri La*.

Lying in my bunk, I think that there are questions everywhere here, which I imagine is what has so long attracted us to the Galápagos, a place where we can focus in on specifics: about human relationship to nature, about how we can conserve diversity, how well we can create an environmental stewardship that works with local economies, how to foster scientific understanding and a love of nature for its own sake.

Darwin had no eureka moment as he stumbled over the scorching lava rocks of these islands, no world-altering epiphany. He learned as much about the mechanisms of natural selection through his studies of dogs back home in England. The *Voyage of the Beagle*, as his journal of the trip would eventually be called, sold well, and made the young Darwin famous, but it certainly was not revolutionary. That tantalizing notion he expressed in the journals, his approach to that "mystery of mysteries," would not be fully expressed for over twenty years, not until he laid out the principles of natural selection in *The Origin of Species*. But the specimens he collected and the observations he made during the *Beagle's* voyage were invaluable to Darwin's ability to create a coherent argument; the varied examples they provided backed up his claims.

He returned home from his expedition the following year, and never traveled again. Darwin lived largely as a recluse, and suffered horribly from a collection of nervous symptoms for the final fifty years of his life. From a note he sent to a new doctor, seeking medical advice:

Age 56–57. — For 25 years extreme spasmodic daily & nightly flatulence: occasional vomiting, on two occasions prolonged during months. Vomiting preceded by shivering, hysterical crying[,] dying sensations or half-faint. & copious very palid urine.

Some have explained the disorders as the psychosomatic reactions to his great anxiety over his theory put forth in *Origin*. It cost Darwin his friendship with FitzRoy, who would argue for the evidence he had seen of the Great Flood in their travels. The shy and reclusive man's work would put him at the heart of a fierce debate between science and theology which continues to this day. He made a home in Downe, fathered ten children, smoked cigarettes, played billiards, shuffled through the vast notes of his journeys, worked on his books,

and thought often of his circumnavigation of the world, and of those strange islands that straddled the equator where fantastical creatures stood in stark, clarifying relief.

As for our journey, I don't suppose we'll know for some time what it means. The world has changed, and continues to change. Rhys and I will return from here to the mainland and from there homeward; Tucker, Jared, Andrew, and Francesca will make the crossing to the Marquesas. Friends move in and out of all our lives, but for a few weeks we've made a little society together. Andrew is not given to overcontemplation, for worrying about the deeper meanings of things. And whatever fears or uncertainties he faces as he launches into the great journey of fatherhood, he keeps them largely to himself. Travel is still its own end, and he will continue to move until he comes at last to his own understanding of life and his role in it. In four months, he and Francesca, having crossed the South Pacific together, will give birth to a baby girl. At the dock in San Cristobal, with my bags packed, I say goodbye to my friends. Andrew, not one to give in to sentiment, or the melancholy of departure, is nowhere to be found. ■