I traveled to the Galápagos Islands expecting to be amazed. After all, these dry volcanic islands are the well-known locus of Darwinian legends. Yet on my recent visit to this archipelago where sea lions rule the coast, marine iguanas and crabs congregate on shoreline rocks, birds display oddly colored feet and amusing faces, and the hotel rooms (where they exist) face away from the sea (if there are windows at all), I found that despite the many peculiarities, I initially couldn't pinpoint precisely what makes the Galápagos so special.

While in Australia last year, I was constantly struck by how different the vegetation was from any place I'd ever seen, how much brighter and more beautiful the birds were, and how all the mammals looked and acted differently—possessing pouches and moving via hops, among other peculiarities. I expected the Galápagos's fauna and flora to be even stranger, but that was not really the case. I began to understand why Darwin's book was entitled *The Origin of Species* and not, say, * Entirely Out-of-the-Blue Creatures*. Species differentiate among plants and animals, but not necessarily in a very striking way. Much of what I saw was peculiar, but not so different from what you might find on the South American continent or on other tropical islands. But, of course, that had been essential to Darwin's insightful observations.

That's not to say that the Galápagos are not unique and intriguing. The islands are notable for their distance from the Ecuadorian mainland and for their arid volcanic terrain, which produced the Galápagos's most striking and fortuitous distinction: the relative absence of people (and other predators). The Polynesians didn't settle there as they did on many Pacific islands, since there was nowhere to grow food or build the settlements they were accustomed to. The islands are occupied mainly by plants, reptiles, and birds, with only sea lions and a few thousand human residents—currently living in the 3 percent of the region that isn't protected national parkland—to represent the mammals. Given the long absence of predators, creatures here are totally unafraid. If anything, they're curious and approach closely to check you out. I had sharks swim up to my feet and a finch hop from one knee to the other, not to mention tons of sea lions who kept coming out to play when I was in the water. Even snorkeling, I had a...
Fur seals were almost driven to extinction by hunters and now exist only in this archipelago. These two doze in the sun, typically unfazed by the camera-toting human nearby.

A crab scuttles across the black Galapagos rock.

That occupies a good part of the coast near the town and the posting advertising the local "armada." However, as I shifted my focus to nature and learned to ignore the ugly architecture, I realized I was, in fact, in a spectacular location.