

**Click here  
to learn  
more.**

02.24.2007

## Galapagos Reconsidered

**A Harvard physicist finds that the "Enchanted Islands" are not always pretty.**

by Lisa Randall

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.



*Black iguanas blend in against the Galapagos Islands' volcanic rock.*

That's not to say that the Galápagos are not unique and intriguing. The islands are notable for their distance from the Ecuadoran 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



advertisement | article continues below

**1 Sanyo  
eneloop battery  
equals 1000  
regular alkalines**

**Click here to learn more.**

*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.*

whale shark come to swim right under me, and a white-tipped reef shark came so close I had a good look at its smile.

I was in the Galápagos to attend the World Summit on Physics, a four-day conference on theories that go beyond the "standard model" of particles and forces. International academic conferences are a new thing for the village of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno—capital of the Galápagos archipelago and its oldest settlement. We were the second major meeting. The first was on evolution, which certainly seems a more natural fit. Much of the evidence for Darwin's theory came from studying species on the Galápagos, though it's worth noting that Darwin didn't make his famous transition from creationist to evolutionist there, but only later, back in London, when studying his collections. And his published evidence was based on plants, not the famous Galápagos finches, since Darwin had neglected to record which island the different finch species he returned with came from.

The venue was less logical for us than it was for biologists, but we nonetheless had a fascinating and amusing adventure. The University of Ecuador recently realized it can lure distinguished academics to the islands since many people are eager to visit—in this case, 100 prominent theoretical and experimental particle physicists, including two Nobel Prize winners who were repeatedly and almost comically feted by the local politicians. The first evening we were treated to a reception and some speeches in which the local notables took us very seriously—much more seriously than we took ourselves (with perhaps a few exceptions).



*A crab scuttles across the black Galapagos rock.*

Most of us flew into Quito and were shepherded onto an early morning chartered flight to San Cristóbal. This trip was my first visit to South America, so some of the odd cultural features that I encountered upon arrival were probably not specific to this region. There's a strange superposition of an exotic island paradise and a touristed town that is either falling apart or not quite built, not to mention the naval base

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.

[Next Page »](#) [1] [2](#)