

The World Heritage-listed Galapagos Islands are known for their colourful locals – both animal and human. Thomas E Muller gets a glimpse.

The

Enchanted Isles

It must surely qualify as the most charming but least reliable postal service in the world. I press the doorbell button and desperately hope to hear a voice crackling over the intercom. I am surrounded by tall jacaranda trees in full bloom, their countless blossoms splashing a purple glow over the neighbouring houses. But this is not the Galápagos archipelago; I'm on Shirley Street in the Brisbane suburb of Indooroopilly, trying to hand-deliver a postcard that I had collected 19 months earlier from the post office barrel on Floreana Island, inconspicuously nestled on the equator and 13,400 kilometres of splendid isolation away.

In 1792, a barrel was erected at Post Office Bay on Floreana to serve as a primitive post office for whaling crews who would often be at sea for several years. Whalers arriving at the Galápagos Islands from Europe and New England would use the barrel to drop letters to their loved ones, back home. Other whalers on homeward-bound ships would pick up any mail destined for their part of the world and eventually deliver these letters.

Two centuries later, the Barrel Post Office is still functioning. My fifteen shipmates and I gather at this spot and listen attentively. Emptying a plastic bag containing hundreds of addressed postcards left in the barrel by earlier visitors, our expedition leader, Dr. Etienne De Backer, and his Ecuadorian naturalist wife, Elizabeth, call out the country and town names on each card. "Biloxi, Mississippi; anyone going that way?" And as dutiful tourists we agree, upon returning home, to hand-deliver postcards destined for places not too distant from where we live. The cards bear no postage stamps; just the honour of the courier.

I press the doorbell button a fourth time. Alas, the addressee is not at home. I scribble an apologetic note that it had taken a year-and-a-half to do this, and drop the card and note into the resident's mailbox.

Only five of the 33 major islands in the Galápagos archipelago are inhabited, and Floreana is one of them. It began as a hideaway for ruthless pirates and English buccaneers raiding Spanish treasure ships, and later became a penal colony for Ecuadorian soldiers sentenced to death for mutiny, political prisoners and common criminals.

I have never before seen such a density of intimately observable wildlife in so small a patch

But the original settlers who really put Floreana on the map – and made newspaper headlines around the world – arrived in the early 1930s to escape inflation-ravaged Germany and begin an idyllic life. They were Dr. Friedrich Ritter and his ex-patient, the already-married Dore Strauch. Then, Heinz Wittmer and his pregnant wife Margret arrived. Shortly after, the Austrian self-styled "Baroness" Eloise Bosquet-Wagner turned up at Post Office Bay with her two German love-slaves in tow, Rudolf and Robert. Her appearance was distinctly sado-masochistic – riding breeches, black boots, whip and revolver. Her presence created bedlam in this

tiny community of settlers.

Intrigue followed accusations, and broke into open disputes between the inhabitants. Rudolf was repeatedly over-worked, beaten and starved, and

the settlers' hostility against his tormentor, the Baroness, reached a climax. Then, one day in 1934, she and her love-slave Robert vanish without a trace. Were they murdered? That's the Agatha Christie-style mystery that has never been solved and continues to shroud the island of Floreana to this day. Later that year, Dr. Ritter died from eating spoiled chicken and with his dying breath cursed Dore Strauch, who eventually returned to Germany. Margret Wittmer continued to live on Floreana and died in 2000, at the age of 95, no doubt taking many secrets with her to the grave.

On a happier note, in 1933, Margret Wittmer had given birth to a son, Rolf. He is the very first person to be born on the Galápagos Islands.



Prehistoric Marine Iguanas on Fernandina Island



Mail The post office on Floreana



Birds-Eye View Red footed booby chick

And, at age 76, Rolf Wittmer happens to be the owner-operator, and occasional captain, of the motor yacht, *Tip Top IV*, which is taking me and 15 others on an 11-day tour of twelve of the islands.

I had booked this adventure with Wild Earth Travel, based in Christchurch, New Zealand. Hailing from the United States, Canada, Australia and Hong Kong, our group had been flown in from Ecuador's capital, Quito, to the island of Baltra, to start our island-hopping cruise aboard *Tip Top IV*.

That afternoon, we anchored at Seymour Island and made a dry landing after being taken ashore by Zodiac dinghy. This is a low, flat island of uplifted submarine lava and breeding site of blue-footed boobies and the largest colony of Magnificent frigatebirds in the Galápagos. The blue-footed boobies look as though they had stepped into a shallow pan of turquoise-blue acrylic paint, decided they liked the colourful result and allowed the paint to dry on the feet, permanently. It was breeding season for the frigatebirds; the male frigatebird inflates its scarlet throat pouch and lifting its head skywards, tries to attract a female

circling above with a shrill wailing trill; it's quite a show of bare-chested, I'm-the-one-for-you courtship. This is where natural selection occurs, virtually undisturbed – right before your eyes – ensuring that the fittest species go on to survive, thanks to their genetically-clever ancestors.

A full night sailing northward past the equator, and we are at Darwin Bay on Genovesa Island. The most isolated of the main islands, it is the "bird island" of the Galápagos. It was my instant introduction to what had so fascinated Charles Darwin, when he visited the Galápagos archipelago in 1835 as a 26-year-old, unpaid-observer-turned-naturalist on the *HMS Beagle*. And we were seeing exactly what Darwin had seen 174 years earlier! One notices very quickly that the wildlife has no fear of humans. You approach cautiously, camera at the ready, fully expecting them to flee, and they don't. You, not they, are the curiosity. They've never been hunted

it's quite a show of bare-chested,
I'm-the-one-for-you courtship.



Life's Good Sea lion pup suckles on mum

by humans, thus they eye the hominid intruder – wearing funny hat and dark, glassy mask, white legs protruding below shorts – with amusement, not fear.

Here, we encounter the red-footed booby – another case of stepping into a pan of acrylic paint, this time bright red, and loving the flamboyant result to be passed on for generations.

They are nesting now, and the hatched chicks are a fluff-ball of pure white.

Down on the beach, a Galápagos sea lion pup is suckling its mother's rich milk, while the cow lies stretched out on her back, completely oblivious to the photo-shoot around her.

A day-and-a-half later, we have crossed over to the

less-visited and volcanically-active western islands of the archipelago, Isabela and Fernandina. Isabela is huge, its 4,600 sq. km. occupying over half of the total Galápagos land area and featuring its highest peak, 5,600-foot Volcán Wolf.

These islands have a pristine, undisturbed isolation that makes them unique in the archipelago. Landing on Fernandina is like stepping back a million years and walking onto a primordial scene. We encounter hundreds of the iconic marine iguanas – the world's

only sea-going lizard – basking, motionless, in the sun on the black lava outcrops and warming themselves after feeding on algae growing on the cold sea bed.

Packed together and camouflaged against the lava, one has to tread carefully not to step on them.

We clamber over the relatively recent lava flows from earlier eruptions of La Cumbre Volcano looming in the distance. Along the shoreline, we spot flightless cormorants, the Galápagos penguin, sea lions, Sally Lightfoot crabs and lava lizards.

The Galápagos Islands are a living laboratory of life on Earth. They offer an exceptionally strong case of natural selection working as it should and adapting to changing environmental conditions, free from mankind's interference. When I departed the archipelago for less fortunate lands on this Planet, I could not shake off the feeling that I had, ever so briefly, entered a world where the animals and plants are in a kingdom of their own. I have never before seen such a density of intimately observable wildlife in so small a patch of the Planet. It is humanity's patrimony and we should save it for our descendants. Two weeks after my departure, the La Cumbre Volcano exploded into life and poured its hot ashes and lava down into the valley where I had set foot just a short while ago. Once again, the Galápagos Islands were making headlines around the world. ■

50something

NATIONAL SENIORS AUSTRALIA



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Cover: Everald Compton bids farewell, Brisbane, October 2010.
Photo: Vince Long ©

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Call me a traditionalist but I hold history dear. You can't change it. You can't buy it. Marketers might argue that it's not shiny and it's not new. But that's precisely why it's special: in this age of the cheap, quick and disposable, something built brick by brick, that's stood the test of time, is deep, real and very precious.

National Seniors' history, every win and every defeat, is its greatest strength. And it's the people who backed the organisation and believed in its promise – whether they were members, staff or directors – that have made it what it is.

This issue I wandered down memory lane. Riffing through old photos, I came across places that made me smile, and people that I miss. If you've been at National Seniors a while you'll know some of them too: conventions and dinner dances, policy councils and budget announcements; Ruthie and Norma; David and Sandy; Nina and Rae; Robert, Richard and Rex. And that's only in the last few years.

Now it's chairman Everald Compton who's going. Everald who 35 years ago laid the first stone and fought the first fight. Everald who, since then, has audaciously led the charge,

politically and commercially, often taking us where other groups fear to tread.

In 2011 a new chairman will shape National Seniors' history. And, like the people who've gone before, we will all be part of it.

– Sarah Saunders

contributors



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