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# Aboard the *Sulidae* in the Galapagos

*Another best place in the world*

Dear Fellow Diver,

One minute I was looking into the deep blue and seeing, well, deep blue. Then, suddenly, six or eight bronze and silver ships flew by. I looked up at the sunlit surface and saw a squadron after squadron of backlighted, slowly swishing fuselages and tails, like fleets of aircraft overflying their landing fields. The quieter I became, the closer the sharks approached. Chinked in the V of a rock formation, breathing as slowly as I could, trying to make my air bubbles disappear, I knew I had it right when the massive 12-footers banked within touching distance to learn more about me. . . .

This was what I had come to the Galapagos to see: the top predator in his own back yard. And what a back yard it was -- a place where my lust for wandering and meeting strange and wonderful species could take me in a few minutes from the ocean's depths to the slopes of equatorial volcanoes, where I could see for myself the richness and variety of life that had set Charles Darwin on his course toward scientific revolution.

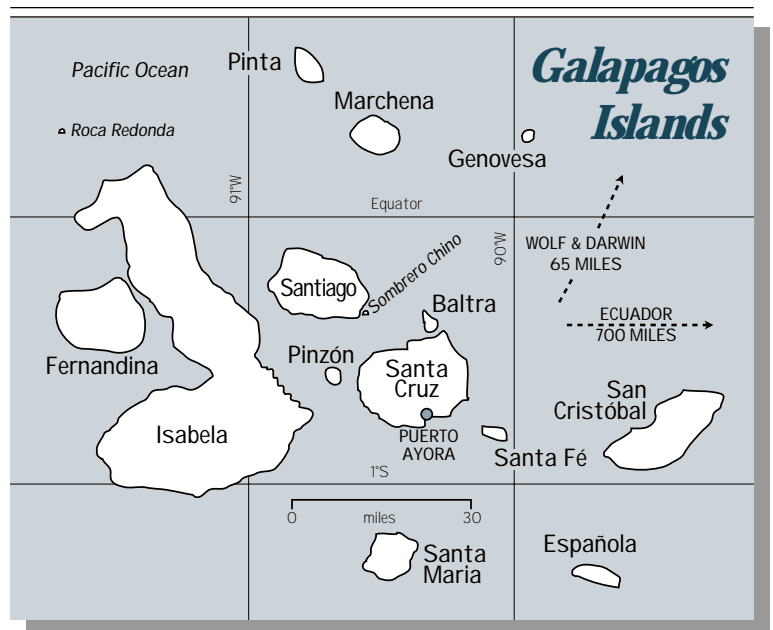
## Greatest Show on Earth, Part II

I had given up hope of topping or even coming close to my previous world-class dive trip, Papua New Guinea, where within the span of a few days I had dived the Bismarck Sea, trekked through the Central Highlands with the Huli Wigmen, and politely declined an offer to share barbecued fruit bat cheeks with tribesmen along the Karawari River. Afterwards, traveling to new hot spots on the global diving map, I found myself wondering, "Now why was it I didn't go back to PNG?"

From now on, I'll know. Move over, Papua New Guinea. It's time to share top billing with the other Greatest Show on Earth: Ecuador's Galapagos Islands. We're talking about a trip-of-a-lifetime, save-your-money, steal-from-the-kid's-college-fund kind of adventure.

My dive buddy and I arrived in Quito several days early to see some spectacular Andean mysteries. Quito, nearly 10,000 feet above sea level and surrounded by deep green and snow-covered peaks, leaves you intensely excited. You can visit haciendas for

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relaxing overnight stays, climb the Cotopaxi volcano, tour the 500-year-old colonial city, or let TAME fly you to any of a dozen rain forest lodges in the Amazon Basin. It's a spectacular country that I'd love to revisit simply as a landlubber.

## A Super Scuba Schooner

We flew from Quito to the Galapagos island of Baltra. The ship's crew met us at the airport, sparing us a three-hour-plus bus ride to the town of Puerto Ayora, where most ships depart. We were scheduled to spend the next 11 days aboard *Sulidae*, a beautiful, 94-year-old, gaff-rigged schooner anchored just five minutes from the airport. The Norwegian-built *Sulidae* is 63 feet long and 15 feet in the beam. She was originally used as a cargo boat in the Baltic Sea before making for Guayaquil in the 1920s. Now she boasts all-new aluminum 80s and a new air compressor that will give you a 3,000-pound fill.

*Sulidae* is owned, operated, and guided through the islands by Pepe, a.k.a. Jose Miguel Salcedo, a PADI divemaster who added diving to his itinerary about 12 years ago and has become an expert on local fauna and flora of both land and sea. Some ships are merely run well by competent captains; *Sulidae* and Pepe are a positive exception. They work as a single entity much of the time. Pepe is a very big, very jolly man who, I thought often as the voyage progressed, became more like *Sulidae* every day.

Having avoided the bus crunch, I was aboard within minutes, meeting our crew of six, stashing gear in my stateroom (smallish and quaint, but hey, this ship is 100 years old!), ogling the beauty of *Sulidae*, and suddenly hearing the lunch bell. From the first meal to the last, our chef kept us full of the best cuisine I've ever had on a dive boat; instead of "Eat, dive, sleep," it was "Savor, dive, sleep." In a galley the size of a refrigerator delivery box, the cook turned out platter after

## Variations on a Theme

My first trip to the Galapagos, four years ago, was during an El Niño year. Water temperatures were in the high 70s in the southern islands, low 80s in the north. The ocean surface was glass, visibility great, the above-water heat sweltering. Hammerhead

sharks were few, but sea lions and dolphins were abundant.

Two years later I returned believing I knew what to expect. But I found water temperatures ten degrees cooler (mid-60s in the south, mid-70s north) and hammerheads out in force but hard to photograph in the poor, 30- to 60-foot visibility.

By trip three, this April, I figured I was starting to get the hang of it. Doing two 10-day trips back to back proved my new theory right — that there's no way to predict what you'll find. On the first 10 days, water temps in the south were in the bone-chilling low 60s, a record-breaking 58°F at the northern island of Wolf. Air temps climbed only to the mid-60s on some days. Water visibility was as low as a miserable 3 feet (averaging 20 to 30) on one dive in the south but hit a fantastic 200 feet in the cold waters around Wolf. Big-creature activity was moderate, but there were sharks and big turtles on most dives in the north.

Just 10 days later, starting out from the south again, we found water temperatures had risen to the low 70s and visibility to 100 feet. By the time I made it back to Wolf, hammerheads were so common that I polished off two rolls of film per dive on six consecutive dives shooting only sharks. Wave after wave of hammerheads surrounded me, and on three occasions we spotted a whale shark. I swam with bottle-nosed dolphins twice and was approached by pilot whales. Two Sei whales hung around long enough for everyone to get in the water with them. A pod of dolphins provided nightly entertainment at sunset with an hour-long jumping show.

Ten days apart, two very different trips. I won't offer any advice on Galapagos weather, other than to say expect the expected. But I do have one tip on the diving: Be in good shape, because you'll be diving in some of the strongest currents I've ever experienced — and I dive regularly in Puget Sound and off Vancouver Island, where 12-foot tides are common. And remember your safety sausage and emergency dive strobe.

I. C.

platter of fresh seafood, lamb, chicken, and beef dishes along with beautifully spiced local veggies. I ate fresh salad at nearly every meal and always enjoyed a great dessert. I could rave on about the food, but let it stand that I've told you: you'll love to eat on the *Sulidae*.

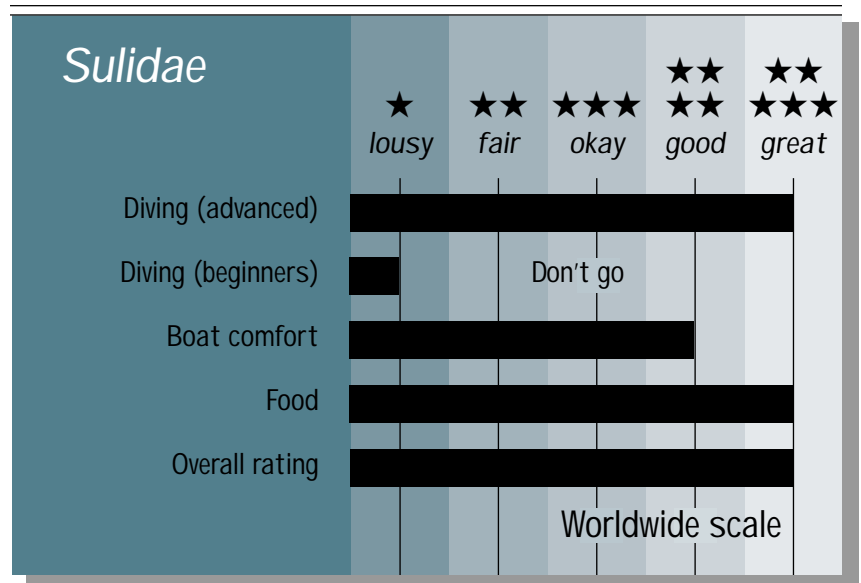
There's an infinite variety of itineraries among the dozens of islands, islets, jutting rocks, and seamounts called the Galapagos, but within two hours after lunch, with just a few travel-weary grunts, we were anchored off Santa Cruz at Daphne Minor, ready for a checkout dive. I'd done a weight and buoyancy check in port (a necessity, given the potential variations in water temps and dive suits), and energy was beginning to reenter my weary bod. It was my kind of checkout dive -- cavorting sea lions, morays, turtles, and schools of surgeon fish.

These islands, a string of active volcanoes, are fed by several major cool-to-cold currents. The landscape is rocky and rugged, yet full of life of greater variety and numbers than almost any other place on earth.

Like New Guinea, this is one of the rare places on earth where even fanatical divers beg to miss a dive to go hiking. The animals have no serious misgivings about humans. Some islands have volcanoes thousands of feet tall (Isabella has five); others are just little nubbins like Sombrero Chino ("Chinese Hat"). No matter, above and below the surface of the sea, every one of the dozen islands I visited could easily have been a week's destination in itself.

### A Moveable Diver's Feast

Not only does every dive boat have its own itinerary, but each captain chooses his own way north depending on the weather, currents, moods, and probably someone's dreams. Because *Sulidae* accommodates small groups (comfortable for seven passengers, can handle eight), it's usually easy to reach consensus on where to go



**Why the *Sulidae*?** It's slow, probably twice as slow as the *Aggressor*; the dive boats are tricky to get into, and cabins are small; but the *Sulidae* is magic. Small groups can choose where and when to dive, the boat is comfortable, and the salon accommodates all the happy divers aboard. When both *Aggressors* pulled up to our dive site, the first thing I noticed (besides the herd of 20+ divers disrupting our dive) was that everyone on those cruisers was below metal decks, hiding out in their air-conditioned cocoons. I, on the other hand, was lounging topside on a 100-year-old schooner, experiencing the Galapagos with a small group of friends. Given the same choice, I would trade the luxury of the big boats and do it this way again — put together a small group and book the *Sulidae*. Want more privacy, need a larger group, or crave a hot tub after the dive? The *Aggressor* has two to choose from, with rumors of a third. Call 800-348-2628 or 504-385-2416.

### Small and Friendly

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and what to do -- that is, after considering the fickle weather and currents.

. . . I had come primarily to dive with the schooling hammerhead sharks of the far northern islands of the chain, Wolf and Darwin. If the gods saw fit to throw in a whale shark or two, or even a few thousand dolphins and a couple of Galapagos penguins, I wasn't in a complaining mood.

When we did make a choice, we dived from an aluminum panga outboard or a larger Zodiac, both of which were always in the water and expertly handled by Raphael, Carlos, Pepe, and others. Loading into these from the *Sulidae* was a long step down, so crew members were always there in force to help. But even with help it was difficult in rough seas.

Diving the Galapagos is not for the unskilled, the faint-hearted, or the thermally challenged. You'd think that the Galapagos, planted solidly across the Equator, would be, well, hot as hell. Not always so. Actually, temperatures above and below the surface varied enough to produce good odds for a betting pool. Water temperatures ranged from 48 to 82°F (no, this is not a typo), mostly due to thermoclines, and visibility was as unpredictable as a Las Vegas slot machine. I found that layering to simulate a 1/4-inch neoprene suit served me well, starting with whatever thermal skin seemed right and adding 3-mil suits over 5-mil hooded vests as necessary. Using this system, I was never uncomfortable.

### Galapagos Fish and Critters

With the exception of one dive at Tagus Cove near Isabella, where it was "snowing" under water harder than a Minnesota winter (we were there to photograph the red-lipped batfish), I found something to be totally stoked about on every dive. True, we were mostly on the lookout for flying hammerheads,

but the enormous numbers and varieties of animals never let me down. At every site I could count on finding schools of yellow-tailed surgeonfish or a dozen or so moray eels, too many green sea turtles to make photography easy, or, at places like Gordon Rocks and Roca Redonda, rare and beautiful fur seals with their pups, whose giant eyes could make a guy cry.

Slipper lobsters were tucked in by the hundreds on some walls. Schools of big-eyed jacks would suddenly show up and include me in their thousands. If I got tired of big stuff, there was always the macro world of

turquoise nudibranchs to focus my bifocals on. Turning around, I might see a swirling mass of silver barracuda just above me, inviting me to join up for a flight. At Roca Redonda there was

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### Ditty Bag

Our group booked this trip with Beth Jaskolski at Travel World (313-882-8190). Cost was \$3,000 for 11 days. Our San Francisco-to-Quito round trip was \$1,248; in-country flight on TAME was \$374. . . . Reach *Sulidae* direct at 011-593-4201376. . . . She's a motor sailer and we were under full sail about a third of the time. . . . All four staterooms are small, with little storage; the port cabin amidships would be the best choice for couples. Ample room in the salon, with camera storage space behind the seating. Two heads with hand showers (and hot water) are shared, and one head/shower on the main deck. . . . Beer and wine were included in my package, but there was talk of that changing. . . . They could use more ID books. . . . The only restriction on diving is your skill, so better have a lot. . . . The nearest chamber is in Guayaquil or Quito. . . . No E-6. If all aboard were photographers, 120-volt outlets for charging would be in demand. . . . I was there on the cusp of the wet season, so weather was variable. Visibility tends to drop during the rainy months of February, March, and April. Best months for diving are December and January, then again in May and June. October is probably the worst month — cold and windy. More whale shark sightings are reported during May and June.

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a frisky group of Galapagos sharks. The meetings with animals were endless.

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Unfortunately, I was just two weeks early for the air breathers. What I did experience, however, during two days of increasing excitement, was diving with the schooling hammerheads at the beautiful Darwin Arch. Separated from Darwin itself by about a mile, this gateway to the Galapagos was magical at sunset, a stunning example of natural architecture. Under water the landscape turned plain and gnarly, but the abundant shark life made me forget about marine scenery. When are there ever too many sharks? I guess when one wants to bite you. Here at the Arch, the hammerheads couldn't have cared less about me. In varying numbers during my six dives, they were ever present, gliding in like symbols of silence.

## See More Next Time

What else did I see? I wish I had time and space to answer. I'd tell you about the island walking tours with Pepe and Rafael; about Galapagos penguins and baby sea lions chasing each other around crystal-clear lagoons; about snorkeling off Pinta

Island late one afternoon amid hundreds of bottle-nosed dolphins. Of course, watching nesting sea birds by the tens of thousands and dozens of species swirling off the sheer vertical cliffs of Darwin Island could be hypnotic enough to make a person skip a shark dive.

It's endless in the Galapagos. Just do it.

E. M.

## *The Man in the Gray Suit*

In the cold waters off Northern California, Column Tinley cruised at 20 feet, searching for abalone. It was a fine August morning. On the surface, in his inflatable boat, were his girlfriend and a pal, watching him begin to surface from his free dive. Then, below them, they saw a heart-stopping sight — an animal as big as the boat, stalking Tinley.

Tinley saw it, too. He watched it circle, then turn quickly. "It came right up underneath me," he said later. "All I had time to do was push myself away from him," Tinley said. "Then I got bit."

Charles Wilson, Tinley's buddy, said, "I saw the shark's tail thrashing, then I saw the shark coming out of the water with him."

A great white shark, somewhere between 12 and 16 feet long, had grabbed Tinley. Tinley fought off the shark, but it clamped onto him a second time. Then, for reasons only the shark knows, it let go and swam away.

Tinley, an emergency room nurse, swam back to the boat, used his own hand-held marine radio to call for help, and, with one arm incapacitated, applied pressure to his injuries. A helicopter met the trio on shore and flew Tinley to a hospital for treatment.

The bites extended from his neck to his lower stomach. In two hours of surgery, surgeons removed bits of teeth and closed 14 puncture wounds with more than 50 stitches. Dr. Jim Harwood said the neck bite was a quarter of an inch from a main artery. "He could have bled to death. He was very, very lucky."

Tinley was diving in the so-called Red Triangle, which extends along the California coast from Monterey, south of San Francisco, to Tomales Bay, north of the city. He had been diving these waters, visited frequently by the great white, for ten years. "I knew the risk," he said, "and assumed it."

Scientists suggest two reasons for great white attacks. They may see a diver as another predator and want chase him off; or they mistake a diver for a sea lion and, after they bite, recognize their error and let go.

No matter. Tinley isn't daunted. He says he'll keep diving — somewhere else.

Ben Davison