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JOURNAL OF THE FARTHEST PLACES

The Trip That Changed Our Lives

by Don George

In 30 years as a travel writer and editor, I've been blessed with the opportunity to take my wife and two children around the world. We've journeyed from Japan to Jamaica, France to Fiji, Australia to Yosemite. Of all the destinations we've been to and all the adventures we've shared, one continues to stand out as the place that changed our collective lives: the Galápagos.

We traveled there a decade ago. My daughter was turning 17 and my son 12, and my wife, Kuniko, and I thought this might be our last chance to put together one grand family fling before Jenny went off to college and Jeremy eschewed all travel with the folks. And what, we reasoned, could be more climactic than the Galápagos?

Our voyage began late on a Saturday afternoon. After settling into cabins aboard our comfortable ship, meeting our guides, and hearing the first of our daily natural history lectures, 70 of us passengers and 6 naturalists piled into *pangas* (motorized Zodiacs) and headed for Isla Santa Cruz. As we cut through the waves, the warm wind scrubbed away my jet lag and the salt water on my lips awakened my senses. Jeremy took in his surroundings and, upon spotting a great black frigate bird soaring over us, wondered aloud at its wingspan.

"Up to seven feet," answered naturalist Paul McFarling.

"Wow!" said my son, reaching for his camera.

"You know what it's looking for?" Paul asked.

Jeremy shook his head.

"A booby," Paul continued. "Frigate birds are the pirates of the skies. They snatch food from other birds, especially boobies. I've even seen them reach down the neck of a baby booby and take out the fish a mom or dad just fed it."

Jeremy swallowed hard.

"Look!" Jenny cried, pointing to eight bright yellow, platter-size leaves under the water, their edges gently flapping in the current. When the leaves began to swim, I thought my eyes were playing tricks.

"Golden rays," Paul explained. They moved along with exhilarating ease, undulating in formation like oceanic Blue Angels. Jenny grabbed her camera. *Click, click, click.*

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MARCH

2014

MARVELOUS MARKETS
Spending time at local markets is a wonderful way to unlock the flavors of a culture. Our staff regularly reminisces about their favorite markets and experiences. (And, in the last side note, we invite you to do some similar recalling.)

◆ **MARVELOUS MARKETS ONE**

Jean-Paul Tennant:

The bazaars in Iran are among the most vibrant in the world. Many are centuries old and filled with vendors whose families have been at it for generations. Highly skilled craftsmen split their time between creating and selling. Most memorable was the miniaturist who I watched paint an impossibly detailed portrait using a cat-hair brush on a one-inch-by-one-inch piece of camel bone. It was a masterpiece, done in less than five minutes.



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In two hours we motored past a spectacular succession of wildlife: pelicans up there, sea turtles over there, sea lions and sharks, two kinds of iguanas, three kinds of mangroves, hundreds of Sally Lightfoot crabs. Overwhelmed, all we could say was “Look! Look! Look!” as if the world were being reinvented before our eyes.

The discoveries continued, day after day. One morning on a walking excursion on Isla Española, Jenny and I had lagged a little behind the others. Suddenly, on the path right in front of us, a female blue-footed booby lifted herself to reveal a bright white egg.

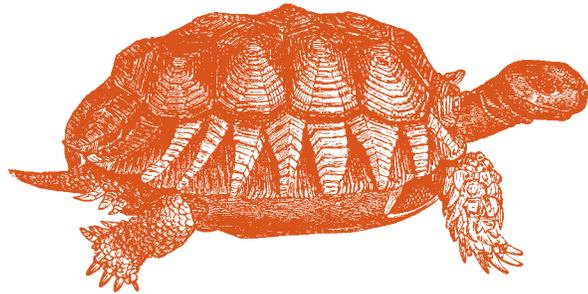
“Dad!” Jenny cried, gripping my arm and pointing. The shell cracked and a new, wet chick appeared. We watched, stunned, as it struggled into the world and its mother plopped protectively over it.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Jenny said.

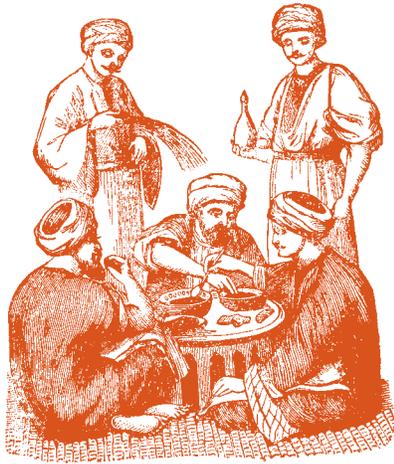
Another day, at the Charles Darwin Research Station in the main town of Puerto Ayora on Isla Santa Cruz, we learned about one of the victories in the ongoing struggle to manage the effects of human presence in the Galápagos: some 2,500 tortoises have been successfully raised and repatriated on their native islands after being rendered nearly extinct by human predation and goats.

That afternoon, in a highland landscape of spindly evergreens, moss-draped cat’s-claw brush, and lush, broccoli-like *scalesia* trees, we came upon a field where a group of these giant tortoises had paused on their laborious migration to the ocean. With their thick-ringed carapaces, scaly, bent-in legs, long, leathery necks, and squat, wrinkled heads, they seemed survivors of another age. Jenny recalled the previous evening’s lecture: “Fossils show that tortoises—or at least mammals a lot like tortoises—were alive when dinosaurs lived.” I squatted in front of one tortoise and tried to imagine the weight of the shell on my back, the slow, plodding journey over mud and rock and sand.

In ensuing days, we witnessed a bloody, head-butting battle between land iguanas, walked over ropy flows of *pahoehoe* lava, followed a zigzagging school of leaping dolphins, spied vermilion flycatchers and Galápagos penguins, explored moonscapes of rust-colored volcanic spatter cones, and contemplated repeatedly the sheer miracle that life had ever taken root on these distant, bleak, and barren islands. While snorkeling, Jeremy encountered a shark that was bigger than him, and on another day, a couple of frisky sea lions singled Jenny out for an unforgettable 20-minute, somersaulting play date. Kuniko went from amazement at not having to use a zoom lens to enchantment at the way so many different species live together in raucous harmony.



Now, ten years later, that trip weaves inside us and around us still. Jenny has become a marine biologist. Jeremy is studying in Japan, nurturing the wanderlust that first took shape among those Ecuadorian islands. Our Thanksgiving conversations are still enlivened by sharks and sea lions, boobies, and iguanas. And as I recall the singular lessons of that enchanted place, it occurs to me that maybe we are unwitting accomplices in a greater evolution than even Darwin knew, one designed to bring back seeds of peace and wonder to plant in the hard rock of our larger world.



Market Musings

Much can be gleaned about a place by spending a little time at its local market. Seeing the layout and what's for sale. Observing the colors, sounds, and aromas. Noticing how the vendors hawk their goods and who is doing the buying. We make a point of introducing our travelers to our favorite markets around the world and never miss the chance to chat about them, as we did not so long ago with celebrated food writer Ruth Reichl. She explained:

Markets are for me the most important part of any trip; I love them. I think you learn so much about a culture from markets. Asian markets tend to be really wonderful. . . . It's where you learn the culture. . . . Probably the most interesting market that I ever went to (other than maybe Tsukiji, the fish market in Tokyo) is the market in Luang Prabang in Laos. That culture eats everything. I saw things in the market that I've never seen anywhere else: every part of the water buffalo from the bile—there are bags of bile—to the skin (both with and without the hair). . . . Everything is eaten, and every kind of insect, spider, bark (tree bark is an important part of one of their national stews). A million different kinds of chilies. It's a real insight into how wasteful we are. I came back from Laos a different kind of cook.

To read more of our conversation with Ruth, visit GeoEx.com/Ruth. And to browse some of our favorite trips that involve markets, see GeoEx.com/Food.

◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS TWO

Scott Montgomery: *The Tolkuchka Bazaar in Ashgabat — an amazing mix of absolutely everything for sale, from camels to jewelry to auto parts, with some of the most beautiful (and least expensive) carpets I have ever seen. And the people-watching can't be beat.*



◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS THREE

Alysa Pakkidis: *A favorite market of mine is in Chichicastenango, Guatemala. The bright colors of all the fresh fruits and vegetables, combined with the traditional dress of the people, is sensational to see.*

GeoEx Events:

Fall Successes and What's to Come

◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS FOUR

Kai Roath: *I will never forget strolling through the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, sampling coconut-pistachio Turkish delights from as many vendors as I could, while looking for shoes to replace my old, duct-taped Chuck Taylor All Stars, soggy from walking in the rain.*

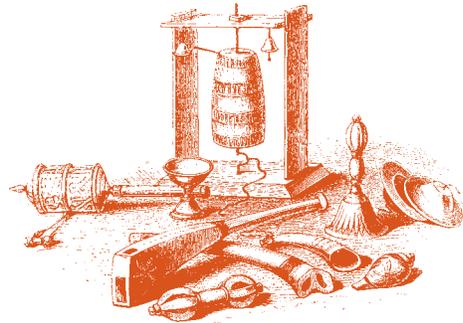


◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS FIVE

Michael Steigerwald: *Once in Chengdu I went shopping in a market with a local chef who wanted to prepare phoenix and dragon soup for me. The "phoenix" is chicken, the "dragon" is snake, and the soup is said to have aphrodisiacal properties. At the snake shop, they killed a snake for us, skinned it, and drained its blood into a ceramic bowl, which they handed to me. I was expected to drink it, which of course I did without hesitation. After dinner, the same chef took me to a disco. All I remember is being dragged up onstage by a bevy of local beauties and dancing with abandon 'til the wee hours. I may have been singled out because I was the only Westerner among thousands of gyrating Chinese, but who knows, maybe the soup had some effect as well.*

Thanks to all who made our events and fundraising efforts this past fall such a success. With your help, our evening with Buddhist scholar Dr. Robert Thurman raised \$11,000 for Tibet House, an organization dedicated to preserving Tibet's unique culture. We're also pleased that the Bhutan Custom Trip we donated to a Tibet House auction was won by a very generous bidder, soon winging his way to the Land of the Thunder Dragon. Finally, our sold-out event featuring conservationist Kris Tompkins not only raised funds for Conservación Patagónica, it also boosted awareness of the nearly complete Patagonia National Park — Kris' sensational slide show inspired many of us to plan a visit.

Looking ahead, we're counting down the minutes to Don George's conversation with acclaimed travel author Carl Hoffman (March 28 in the Bay Area) and to hearing blind climber Erik Weihenmayer speak about his adventures on some of the world's toughest ascents (April in Seattle, benefiting No Barriers, a boundary-pushing nonprofit). We hope you'll join us. Please stay tuned to GeoEx.com/Events for details.



Notes

EVERYBODY IS TALKING ABOUT IRAN

It lifts our already high spirits to hear the recent positive buzz about Iran, a place GeoEx has taken travelers since 1993. The *Financial Times* named the country one of 2014's hottest new travel destinations for Americans (hot for us, too: GeoEx departures are filling quickly). It's a place for life-long learners who want to know more about an unfamiliar culture, our CEO Jean-Paul Tennant explained during a recent *Huffington Post Live* interview. He went on to share that GeoEx travelers (he among them) return from Iran saying it's "a wonderful place, and that they've met some of the friendliest and warmest people that they've experienced anywhere in the world."

Geopoliticians we're not. We consider it more of our business to connect our guests with amazing, culturally rich, and often astonishingly different places that open our minds. Our warm people-to-people encounters in Iran remind us that we made the right career choice.

On *Treasures of Persia*, after visiting some of Tehran's glittering grandeur, including Golestan Palace and the National Jewels Museum, we drive

southwest to Hamadan and north via Soltanieh and Takht-e-Suleiman, to the great bazaar city of Tabriz. We fly to Shiraz, onward to Persepolis, and then to Esfahan, where we end the day at an enormous market with many handicrafts sold by merchants skilled at the art of bargaining. Here we learn to negotiate with equal parts humor and gumption. Call Piper Christian or Starla Estrada to learn more about our fall journey (October 13–31)—sooner is better, due to lead time for visas.



MOVED BY THE HIMALAYA

Dreaming of the Himalaya is commonplace—but actually traveling there is extraordinary. Our *Himalayan Kingdoms* (September 14–29 and October 19–November 3) is a 16-day introduction to Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan, the three humble powerhouses of this magnificent Buddhist center. In these rugged locations, we travel in a level of style and comfort unknown to this land’s first explorers.

Based from impressively luxurious lodgings and supported every step of the way, we revel in Lhasa (which means “country of the gods”) at the powerful yet inviting Potala Palace. We soak up markedly different Kathmandu, a bustling, madly colorful city and a fascinating juxtaposition of medieval and modern. And we hear legends of the Divine Madman along our hike through the stunning Punakha Valley. Beijing is our gateway city, and we take advantage by visiting the Temple of Heaven, the grandest of its four great temples, and strolling atmospheric *hutongs* (small, centuries-old alleyways that were the center of life for citizens living outside the Imperial Palace).

If you’re bewitched by Bhutan (it’s one of our favorite places) and would rather make it the sole focus of your journey, consider *Essence of Bhutan*, a great 14-day cultural overview; *A Hiker’s Paradise*, a 12-day journey with splendid day hiking; and *Sacred Festivals of Bhutan*, perfect for fall departures this year. Michael Steigerwald or Simon Krejcik will happily talk you through the many Himalaya options.

A DYNAMIC DUO: GALÁPAGOS AND MACHU PICCHU

If the Galápagos Islands are on your bucket list, but you also have designs on Machu Picchu, you’ll be glad to know that our Latin America aficionada Natalie Crow has designed a customizable journey that seamlessly weaves them together. “*Machu Picchu e’s the Galápagos*,” she says, “is an adventure that packs in the most satisfying combination of cultural and natural history of any trip on our roster of South American ramblings.”

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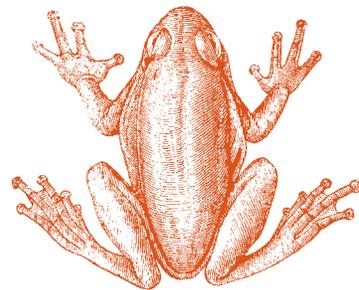
For more literary travel musings, visit our blog at GeoEx.com/Blog.

◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS SIX

Jennine Cohen: *In Salta’s charming alleys and small markets, you can find textiles that have the vivid colors one would expect in Peru or Bolivia, but with a sophisticated, European design, thanks to the Buenos Aires influence. Every time I go, I bring an extra duffle bag, which comes home filled to the brim with gorgeous treasures.*

◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS SEVEN

Alice Howell: *Visiting a market stand in Hanoi that had big bull frogs and other slimy, slithering creatures. Then being tricked into eating a bull frog’s leg by my wily, grinning Vietnamese guide. I have to say, it was tasty.*





To reach the travel wizards
noted here, please call
888-733-9019.

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The landlubber portion takes place in Peru, where you pause for a night in Cusco, described by Jan Morris as “a little city of such supreme interest and historical symbolism, of such variety and punch, that it combines the compulsions of Stonehenge, a small Barcelona, and a Kathmandu.” But Machu Picchu is naturally the showstopper: you’ll marvel at its stonework so staggeringly precise that there’s no need for mortar. We’ll tailor this Peruvian portion to your interests; if you love active outdoor activities, for example, we can arrange rafting, kayaking, and mountain biking. Then on to the Enchanted Islands, where home is a ship large enough to provide great comfort and amenities, yet small enough to offer an intimate sense of sailing on the high seas. For eight great days (or fewer, if you have less time), you’ll cruise, snorkel, walk, and meet the archipelago’s friendly, eccentric residents.

Space is already tight for summer and even winter holidays, so we encourage travelers to lock in plans now. And if you’re not a fan of sleeping on boats, ask about the Galápagos Safari Camp, modeled after Africa’s best permanent luxury tented camps and nestled into the highland cloud forest—we have exclusive holiday departures lined up (December 20–27 and December 25–January 1). Natalie is ready to plan your South America getaway.



THE OKAVANGO: JEWEL OF THE KALAHARI

We think of the Okavango Delta as one of the earth’s most masterful failures. It appeared only when the 1,000-mile-long Okavango River neglected to find an outlet to the sea, melting instead into the Kalahari and creating what looks from the sky like a well-integrated root structure of shallow, jagged streams. The river’s “splendid death,” in the words of photographer and naturalist Frans Lanting, brought to life a happy symbiosis between elements and animals, and one of the planet’s most astounding wildlife bonanzas.

Our *Miraculous Delta* journey (July 3–14, August 14–25, August 29–September 9, September 28–October 9) delves into its wonders. We happily hobnob with pachyderms in the private Linyanti Concession, which is home to more than 80,000 of them. We spot myriad migratory birds, from vibrant kingfishers and vocal cuckoos to colorful bee-eaters, marveling at the fact that they’re just a few of the 380 avian species found in the region. We return to camp to dine sumptuously, sit around a crackling fire listening to a lion roar in the distance, and bed down in well-appointed “tents” with en-suite bathrooms. We go on to explore three other camps and reserves, each more stunning than the last, ending with Chitabe’s brilliant scenery: vast open floodplains, marshes, grasslands, and mopane and acacia woodlands, all humming with the delta’s astonishing denizens. To find out more about this safari—and the easy extension to Victoria Falls—contact Piper Christian, just back from Botswana herself.

◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS EIGHT

Urs Hofmann: *Spending hours with “the keeper of the keys” walking through the souk in Aleppo, exploring hidden treasures and getting invited to tea under the moonlight by the imam of a small mosque near the citadel.*



◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS NINE

Errin Mixon: *Psar Chaa market in Siem Reap is the only place I’ve ever found silk blouses, souvenirs, and pigs’ heads all under one roof.*

THE LURE OF THE 'STANS

Place-names often provide us with the first glint of inspiration for travel. And why shouldn't we let them call us? Our 21-day *Epic of Central Asia* (September 4–24) is a fitting elixir for anyone who tingles with excitement at the sound of Samarkand, Khiva, Bukhara, or the 'Stans. It's all the old-fashioned romance that you would expect from this storied part of the world, and the beautiful absurdity that you might not. To name one example: Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat, was rebuilt with government oil money after total destruction in the 1948 earthquake; the result is a sense of empty grandeur, with its white marble and numerous fountains in a barren landscape, lit up at night by neon.

In addition to the sensational Islamic architecture and history here, we explore riveting markets—like Ashgabat's famed Tolkuchka Bazaar, where one still finds exquisite examples of traditional Turkmen carpets, heavy silver jewelry, finely embroidered *kbalats* (overcoats), and silk scarves. We meander through vivacious Bukhara, an ancient Silk Road trading hub that many believe is still the best place to shop in Uzbekistan. Here three dome-covered markets remain. Kyrgyzstan offers Karakol's bazaar, a livestock market of the most authentic kind. Nomads travel great distances to buy and sell their cows, sheep, and horses in an idyllic setting, where we're warmly hosted. Throughout, we enjoy interactions with local artisans and admire their handiwork, which further our acquaintance with the area's rich history. Sara Barbieri is the one to call.



THE ROMANCE OF TRAIN TRAVEL REVISITED

Little evokes the grand, elegant, romantic notion of travel more than journeying aboard an exquisitely appointed train through a distant, exotic land. Urs Hofmann, our most seasoned train specialist, has our hearts thumping about two rail expeditions in particular, as well as a couple enticing special offers.

Caravans & Conquerors (October 16–31) rolls through the southern Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan), dazzling you with mountain landscapes and riveting history, crosses the vast Caspian Sea, and carries you through the glorious and legendary sites of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. *A Taste of the Silk Road* (October 29–November 10) traces one of the world's most celebrated trade routes from Almaty, Kazakhstan, to Moscow, Russia, stopping along the way to explore sublime monuments of the Silk Road in cities such as Bukhara and Merv. Urs is here to help steer you to the right adventure, and he encourages you to start planning soon, as both trips require about three months to prepare visas. Another reason to act fast: **You may be eligible for free**

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◆ MARVELOUS MARKETS TEN

Vassi Koutsaftis: *Negotiating for a carpet for a client in 1986 in Kashgar. It took about 50 minutes and included three cups of awful tea, my sister's hand in marriage, multiple murders, and a green card for this carpet seller's unattractive daughter. We got a good price, but the carpet guy is still waiting for my sister!*



◆ YOUR MARVELOUS MARKET?

We'd love to hear about your favorite market—big, small, anywhere on the planet. Please e-mail us at info@geoex.com with yours, along with a photo, and we'll post our favorites on Facebook. Please give us your name as you'd like it to appear, keep your notes short, and enjoy reminiscing.



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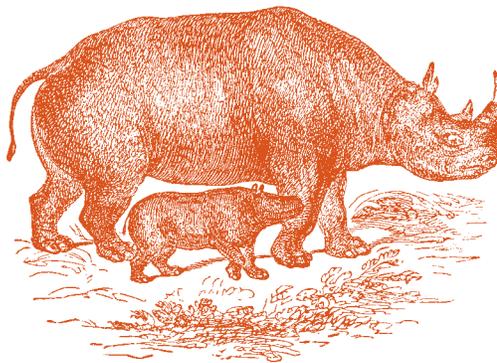
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roundtrip airfare from the US if you book this Silk Road train trip by March 20.

And this just in: If you, with some haste, reserve the May 4–18 or June 1–15 departure of the *Trans-Siberian Express*, a rollicking rail epic from Moscow to Vladivostok, you'll get a complimentary pre-trip extension in Saint Petersburg, including two nights at the classy Astoria Hotel, city touring, and a first-class high-speed train ticket to Moscow. Call Urs for details.



DISCOVER A WHOLE NEW KIND OF WILD IN NAMIBIA

We can't think of a better (or more unusual) way to pack in our lust for safari adventure, our soft spot for endangered wildlife, and our penchant for the finer things than with *Namibia: Red Dunes, Rhinos & Desert Riches*. This small-group Scheduled Trip roams across this vast and luminous country, treating us to three stellar wilderness camps, which range from a little rugged (but still blessed with amenities, including en-suite facilities) to sweetly deluxe.

Through a private gate on the Tsauchab River, we access the stupefying Sossusvlei, an enormous clay pan flanked by skyrocketing, red sand dunes. After chasing daylight for views of desert creatures and traveling through a landscape of sand and rock, we spend an afternoon tucked in an oasis, where a handful of palm trees spring around a secret winery. On to Etosha National Park and Ongava, one of the few private reserves in Africa where sightings are possible of both white and black rhino by vehicle and on foot. Then we fly to Serra Cafema in the incredibly remote, northwest corner of Namibia. Here we stay in one of the most isolated camps in all of southern Africa, encircled by rugged mountains and Namib sand dunes, and get to know the welcoming, semi-nomadic Himba people. Safari specialist Piper Christian is at your service to make the arrangements (departures: June 22–July 3 and September 4–15).



If you'd like more information on any of the trips mentioned in this newsletter, please visit us at GeoEx.com/UT, or call us at 888-733-9019. And if you haven't received our beautiful catalog and would like to, please write or call and we'll have one winging your way immediately.