



Where the Big Things Are
Galápagos

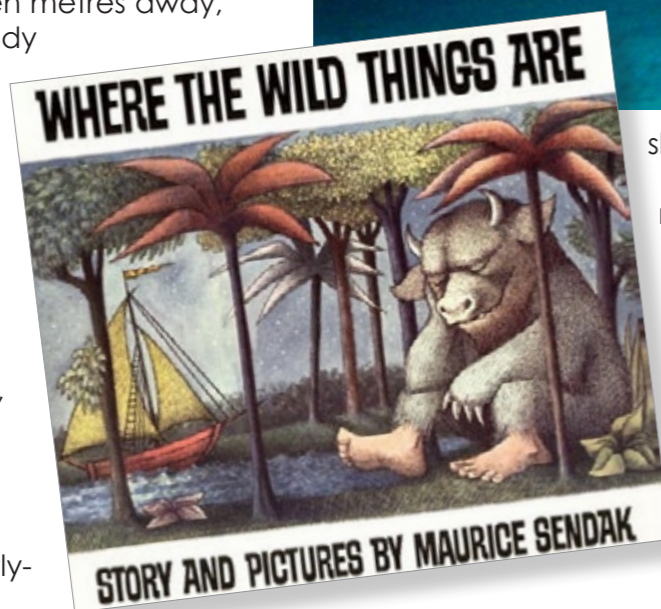
Text and photos by Christopher Bartlett

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Unlike Max in the children's book by Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, I hadn't worn my wolf suit, or made mischief of one kind or another. I hadn't been sent to my room before it transformed into an island of magical monsters only reachable after a year of sailing. I wouldn't want to spend that long on a boat, so I behaved(ish) and looked forward to being on Galapagos and spending my nights tucked up on dry land.

My dive buddy Simon's left arm shot out, index finger extended, and he clenched his right fist and stuck it on the side of his head. I quickly scanned left and right, peering through my mask into the milky blue water. "Where?! Where?!" my brain implored. "There!!!" my eyes answered. "At last," I smiled to myself with relief, bringing my camera up to eye level, as the school of scalloped hammerhead sharks cruised past ten metres away, swaying over the sandy bottom of the underwater caldera in the middle of the site called Gordon Rocks off Santa Cruz Island in the Galapagos archipelago.

I now knew what Gordon certainly did, providing me and many other divers over the years with their first sightings of this oddly but brilliantly-

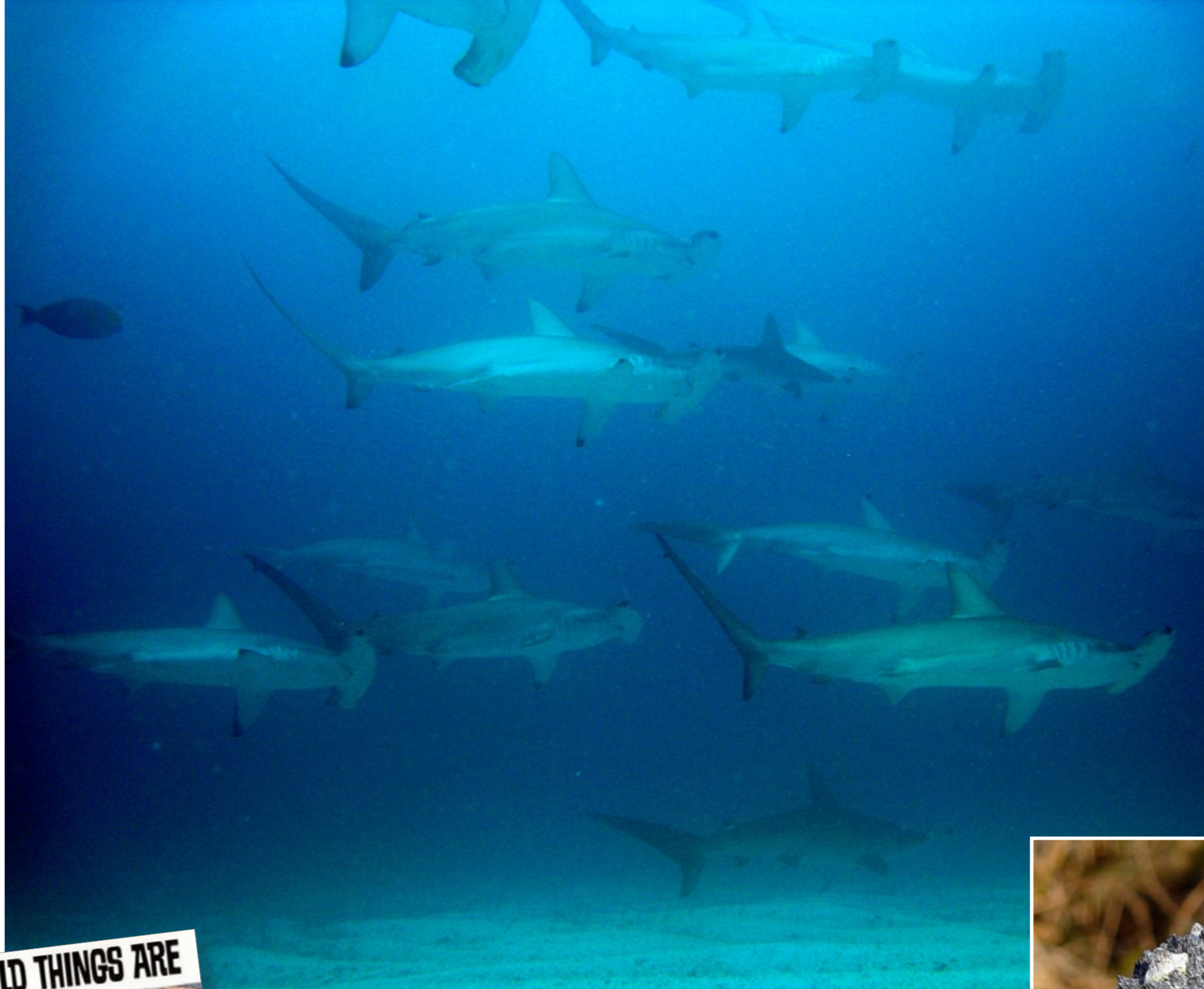


shaped fish.

In the past, I'd searched for hammerheads in the Red Sea and in South Africa—five blue dives there, with a solitary, faint blur as my sole reward. Upon arrival in the Galapagos, they were on the top of my fish wish list. They are one of the emblematic Galapagan species after all. The T-shirt shops of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz—the most inhabited island of the archipelago—were draped with them, along with the giant

tortoise, which constitutes the logo of the Galapagos National Park.

Yet, I had been on Galapagos for a week now (with Gordon Rocks still to come) investigating land-based diving and nature tours on offer by Red Mangrove's suite of luxury lodges, and all I'd seen were some tacky miniatures and gaudy prints of the elusive hammerhead. In terms of diving, the best had definitely been saved for last—at Gordon Rocks. Not that the rest of the diving had been poor; we'd just been a bit unlucky with the hammerheads.



Numerous hammerhead sharks patrol Gordon Rocks, Santa Cruz Island

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On Red Mangrove's land-based island-hopping diving itinerary, Gordon Rocks is normally the first or second dive destination. But due to a last-minute flight cancellation, my partner, Imi, and I missed Gordon Rocks on what should have been our first day of an eight-day tour. Still, we planned to have plenty of days to spare on Santa Cruz later, so we set off to explore diving from Puerto Ayora and arranged to catch up with Gordon Rocks at the end.

At the time, I also thought that I was on a bit of a lucky streak; I was randomly upgraded to first class on the flight to Guayaquil to meet up with Imi, and we were both upgraded for the two-hour A320 Tamé flight to Isla Baltra. Then, we were greeted with cool water and chilled face towels by our escort. This certainly enhanced the good vibe, as did the friendly banter with our guide on the 200m ferry ride and 42km drive across Santa Cruz Island. By the time we had checked into our funky room just metres from Puerto Ayora's gently lapping bay, we had seen marine iguanas basking on the restaurant deck, photographed a sea lion snoozing in the shade



Marine iguanas, *Amblyrhynchus cristatus*, are found only on Galapagos



CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: A welcome lunch of tender calamari and chicken with perfectly steamed veggies at Red Mangrove Lodge, Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island; Sea lion resting on a coffee table at the lodge; Galapagos barracuda at Tortuga Island; Satellite map of Galapagos Islands



on a coffee table, and eaten some tender calamari and chicken with perfectly steamed veggies. Naturally, we were feeling pretty positive.

A post-lunch trip to snorkel with some sea lions resulted in a couple of half-decent shots. Then, a boat ride to the white sands of Tortuga Bay on

Santa Cruz Island and a guided nature walk to see the marine iguanas, Sally Lightfoot crabs and large cacti growing from volcanic rocks kept us happy and did nothing to dampen the feeling that everything would just fall perfectly into place—the late flight cancellation and re-jigged schedule being just a minor blip.

After a brief meeting with our dive guide for the following day and a candlelit dinner, I was rocked to sleep by the wash of the ocean, dreaming about big fish with funny heads.

Diving

Sante Fé Island. The next morn-



Sally lightfoot crabs, Santa Cruz Island

ing, we left the busy cargo ships, numerous moored liveaboards and plentiful small craft of Puerto Ayora behind. On the boat ride out to Sante Fé Island, we were regaled with the previous day's missed sightings at Gordon Rocks of a manta, eagle rays, stingrays, whitetip reef sharks, and of course, hammerhead sharks. Then, a reef manta breached to one side of the boat, as if to say, "Come on, jump in, we're waiting for you!"

Except they weren't. Nature, of course, works on its own schedule. Even so, on our first dive of the trip, there was a six-meter cave swim-through as well as a group of silvery grunts and a school of barracuda in the distance. "Never mind," I thought, "It was fine for a return to the water."

But I was a little disappointed. I had expected the 10-15m visibility and the bare rocky underwater landscapes. (The Galapagos are located on the Equator in the Pacific Ocean, but due to the cold waters of the passing Humboldt current coming up from the south, the water temperature drops to the low 20s, which is too cold for much coral growth.) But, I had also expected more action.

I guess it comes down to individual expectations. Maybe I'd misread the hype. I was expecting the big stuff: sharks, big schools of

fish and classrooms of rays, turtles, sea lions and marine iguanas. Yet, our boat companions—two fellows from Quito doing Discover Scuba dives and their two open water dive buddies—naturally thought the whole experience had been grand.

La Loberia, San Cristobal Island.

During the surface interval, we motored back towards Puerto Ayora and dived at a shallow site called La Loberia (*lobo del mar* is a sea lion in Spanish). The viz was at most ten metres and full of fish poo, but we soon saw why we were here. This was the site of a sea lion colony and nursery.

Two sea lions dived down from



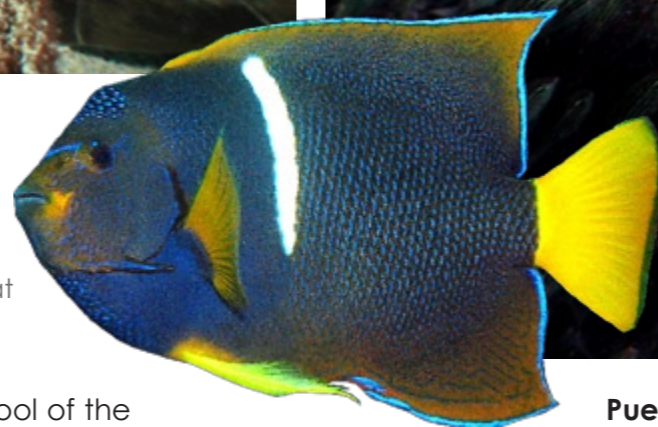
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SATELLITE IMAGE: NASA



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Puerto Villamil, Isabel Island; Pacific green sea turtle resting at Elfinado, Isabela Island; King angelfish (inset); School of black-striped salemas with diver at La Loberia, San Cristobal Island



that it was in fact a huge school of the endemic black-striped salemas.

Where was everybody? I moved forward. The fish parted a little, but stayed inches from me. I went in some more, and it got dark. I looked around and saw that the fish had surrounded me; I was engulfed in a giant, amorphous blob of fish.

I could hear the dive master rattling his shaker, trying to guide me to him. I tapped back on my strobe arm. I swam on, and we met up—four divers in a zillion sardine-sized fish. Incredible. When we emerged back into daylight, more sea lions came to play briefly, then sped off—no doubt to get a stripy snack.

Puerto Villamil, Isabela Island.

In the afternoon, we were escorted to a small cruiser and sped off towards Isabela Island—the largest of the four inhabited islands. As the cabin looked pretty full with 16 passengers, we asked to sit on the flybridge with some cargo. We chatted to the skipper in dodgy Spanish, as he opened up the twin 300HP four-stroke engines for the two-hour crossing.

Approaching Puerto Villamil, we slowed to little more than an idle, as the skipper skirted the boat around the inside of the bay formed by lava rocks. The contrast with Puerto Ayora was considerable. With little more than 3,000



Isla Tortuga, the uninhabited remains of a volcanic crater

the surface, spinning and turning with incredible agility, zipping around us like underwater break-dancers, as we approached a dark shadow in front of us.

The other divers were ahead and, as I turned to take a shot, went into the shadow and disappeared. As I approached, I saw





CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Largebanded blenny; Razor surgeonfish, Santa Fé; Pacific green sea turtle

guide for the morrow, Paco, seemed to think so. "There's a 95 percent chance of

were plenty of king angelfish (which are partial to cleaning sharks), eagle rays and stingrays on the second dive (more shark food), four green turtles and three schools of razor surgeonfish.

The current was fun, and the diving was good despite mediocre viz, and back in the aquamarine bay, we saw more turtles and stingrays, and the world's smallest and only tropical penguin—the cute Galapagos penguin.

Los Tuneles, Isabela Island. After a dry day spent walking up Sierra Negra on Isabela Island—the world's largest active volcano crater, spanning an impressive 11 kilometres from side to side—we set off along the coast for Los Tuneles. As we bumped along in the boat dodging the sea swells, we passed more than 20 turtles and five mantas on the 30-minute ride. Skipper



Spotted eagle ray at Los Tuneles, Isabela Island

inhabitants, our home for the next four days was sleepy and quiet under the afternoon sun. Our small boat was the largest in the port. As soon as our feet hit the wooden pontoon of the port, we were guided to a *panga*—a narrow speedboat—and taken out for a snorkel dive in the shallow lagoon. The tide was going out, lifting up the silt of the sandy bottom, but not enough to obscure a spotted eagle ray and a small whitetip reef shark. I thought the tide of my luck might be swinging back the other way.

Over a gourmet dinner, our dive

hammerheads at Isla Tortuga," he stated confidently before drawing a map of the dive site. It would be a fast drift dive around the outside edge of a crescent-shaped island that was once a volcano. There would be a few interludes in the dive, hiding behind outcrops of cooled lava, to hopefully watch the hammerheads go by, breaking my streak of bad luck. Alas, it didn't.

However, we were accompanied by a huge school of Galapagos barracuda (which are good food for sharks) for most of the first dive. There





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Los Tuneles, Isabela Island; Sea lion; Whitetip sharks, Elfinado, Isabella Island; Frigate bird roosting, San Cristobal Island

San Cristobal Island

After a fun 90-minute flight on a 10-seater Norman Britten Islander to San Cristobal Island, we dropped our bags off and were whisked away for a short walk up to a water-filled crater to learn more about frigate birds and then down to another beach popular with sea lions, before sorting out our gear at the dive centre for the next day's diving with dive master Jimbo.

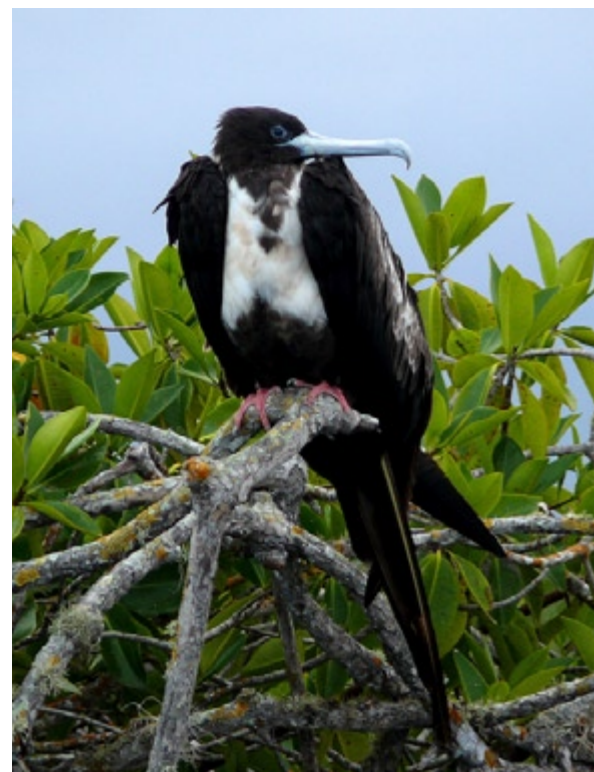
Over dinner, he told us about Kicker Rock (a.k.a. El Leon Endormido—The Sleeping Lion), talking up our chances of seeing hammerheads and the endemic Galapagos shark.

Kicker Rock. On the way to Kicker Rock off San Cristobal Island, we stopped at Lobos Island for a quick check dive, as Imi had decided to put on some additional neoprene. While we suited up, a rather cheeky



sea lion hopped onto the boat and started checking out my gear for me. He followed us into the water for a quick play around on the sandy bottom of the bay.

The next stop was Kicker Rock. Alongside the lion-shaped rock, we rolled in and entered the channel formed by a 20-metre gap towards its western tip. Sheltered from the sun's rays, the sea was grey, as we



Julio displayed admirable skill getting us through some rough surf before threading us through the treacherous lava rock formations to an astonishing haven.

Los Tuneles is a maze of arches formed by lava tunnels in some of the most beautiful water I have seen. There were turtles galore to snorkel with, as well as juvenile eagle rays, stingrays and the odd barracuda. By the time we were done, we estimated that we had seen at least 50 sea turtles either from the boat or in the water.

Julio's prowess wasn't just limited to tricky boat manoeuvres. At the Elfinado dive site, he donned mask and fins and found two arches occupied by close to a dozen whitetips and then led us to the mangroves to show us his secret seahorse. Tail wrapped around

a branch, with the sunlight filtering through the film-covered surface, the view was ethereal. Just below, a turtle snoozed, half-under a ledge on a bed of leaves in an almost autumnal composition.

To cap a great day, he pointed us to a narrow, shallow channel close to the port and told us to snorkel carefully along the top. The incoming tide made the water murky, but a couple of metres below us, we made out first one, then two, then another now familiar whitetip shark. As we pulled ourselves along the sides of the 100-metre-long, one-metre wide channel, we could see that the bottom was carpeted with sharks. My notes said, "Photography value zero, thrill value high." On a slack tide with some viz, it would have been amazing.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Hawkfish at Kicker Rock; Gringos, or Pacific Creolefish; The Sleeping Lion or El Leon Endormido is what the locals call Kicker Rock; This cheeky sea lion played with a dive torch and then gave it to me, Lobos Island



hovered above the sand, peering ahead into the gloom. A couple of stingrays were resting on the bottom, and a third flitted past.

We kneeled in the sand and waited. Shortly, three Galapagos sharks swam through the 25-metre deep channel. A first, they seemed quite small, but then I saw that they were beautifully-shaped creatures, which moved with natural predatory grace. I couldn't help wondering whether they would be followed by hammerheads. A couple more Galapagos sharks swam by, followed by a couple of blacktip sharks. "Martillo, martillo, aqui martillo," I sang in my head, but none came.

The vertical wall along the outside flank of the rock was madly mottled with blue and orange sponges,



Galapagos shark is not big but has graceful lines

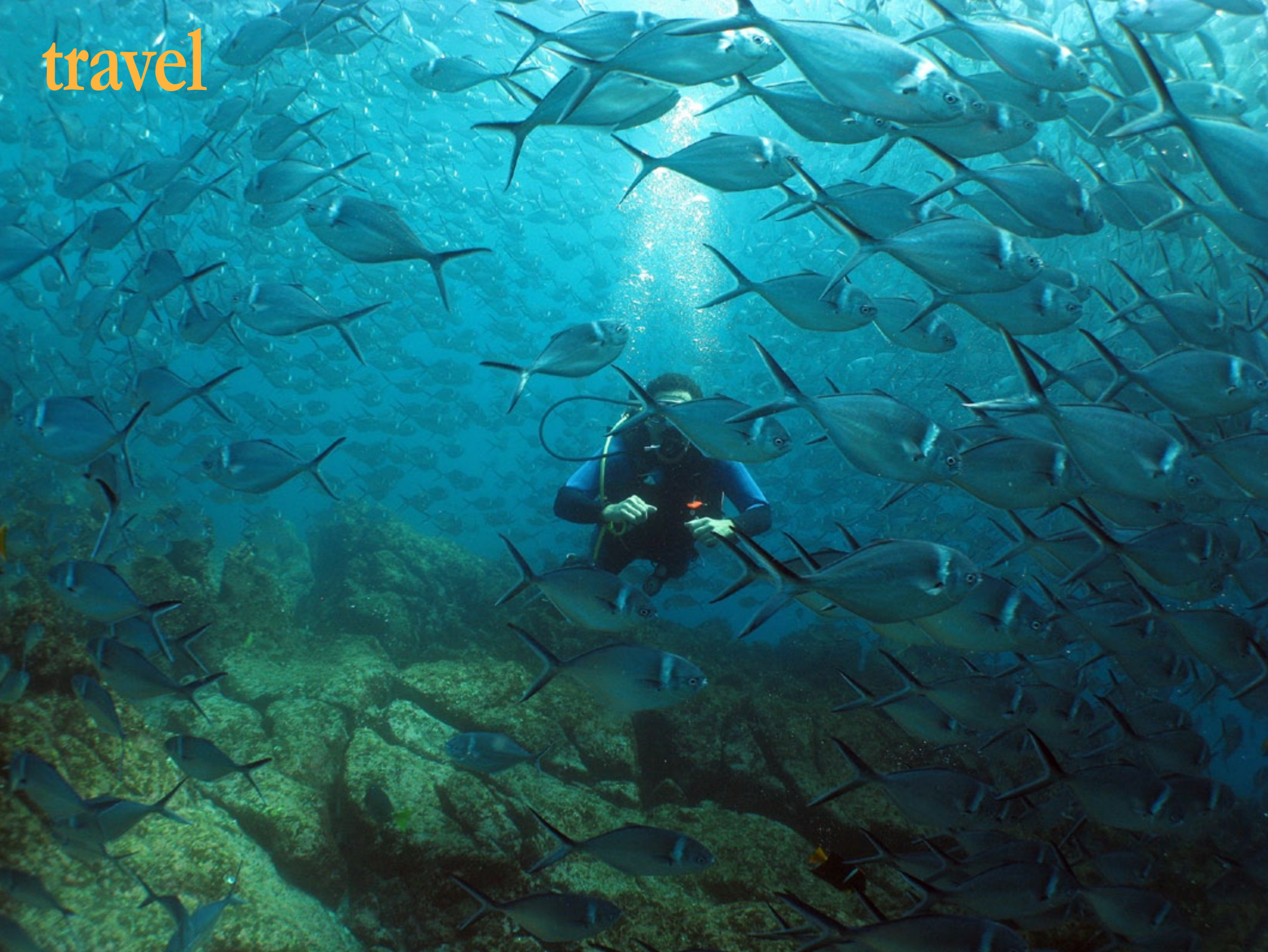


pencil urchins resting wherever they found a nook, often with a small hawkfish or a stunning blue and red endemic whitetailed damselfish juvenile. The sea was full of fish; king angelfish were in abundance as well as streamer hogfish and gringos (Pacific Creole-fish).

We returned to the wall for a second dive after going to the far end to look for hammerheads (Obsessed? Me?) in the current, and were rewarded with more fish soup and five green sea turtles, no less. Despite being hammerless that morning, The Sleeping Lion was certainly awake underwater.

After lunch back in the sheltered waters of Lobos Island, Jimbo took us for a snorkel dive along the rocky edge to look for marine iguanas. We weren't disappointed. In addition to more damselfish and razor surgeonfish, we quickly found an iguana trying to escape the playful attentions of a sea lion, which was pulling its tail in what seemed to be a slapstick wrestling contest. Once that act was





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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver in school of pampano, or jacks, Sante Fé Island; Hammerhead shark at Gordon Rocks, Santa Cruz Island; Sea lion plays with a dive torch, Lobos Island; Juvenile southern white-tail damselfish, Kicker Rock

bird hill for more great views and wildlife information before a quick dinner with our host, Daniella, and a deep sleep.

did nothing to make me think that I'd come away with much.

How wrong I was. More than a dozen hammerheads cruised past just above the sandy crater bottom as soon as we had

San Cristobal Island had been pretty action-packed, so the next day, we chilled out firstly on the boat transfer back to Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island, and then by walking around the Charles Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora, attempting to slow down to the same pace as the Galápagos giant tortoise—the most



well-known of them being the century-old, Lonesome George, the last survivor of a species decimated by human activity.

Gordon Rocks. And so, we finally found ourselves doing day one on day eight, about to roll into the small volcanic crater that makes up Gordon Rocks off Santa Cruz Island. The overcast day and choppy seas

over, a pair of sea lions popped up, darting and whirling in random directions like a fireworks display run by delinquent kids.

As a finale, yet another smooth, brown underwater puppy whizzed into view, a black object with a shiny end in its mouth. Like a Covent Garden juggler, it tossed it up, watched it sink a few metres, flitted down to catch it, before doing it again. But what was it juggling? After a few minutes, our entertainer swam right up to my

lens, looked at me and placed the object on the sand below me before swimming off. I dived down and picked up an immaculate, but battery-less, \$120 dive torch. Amazing. Was this the same curious and cheeky chap from this morning who had borrowed a toy from another diver?

That wasn't the end to the day, though. No sooner back on shore, we were greeted by our guide who took us to the island's visitor centre and up to a frigate





COCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pelican on Isabela Island; Endemic blue-footed booby; Galapagos giant tortoise, this one close to 100 years old and 200kg; Endemic marine iguanas on Santa Cruz Island



descended the 28-odd metres to get there. BINGO!

As we did a circuit around the inside of the crater (through some crazy thermoclines that went from 21°C to 17°C) there were whitetip reef sharks and turtles, as well as large schools of king angelfish and razor surgeonfish again, basslets and butterflyfish—all good cleaner fish for large species.

Gordon Rocks really did rock. It was a fitting finale to a most excellent first week.

For the final six days of our trip, we

moved into budget accommodation in the centre of town, a street back from the sea. For US\$35 a night, we got a double room with air-conditioning of sorts (it was either on freezing or warm), private bathroom and breakfast. There were plenty of restaurants serving main courses from \$8, small stores selling fruit and snacks, a small supermarket down by the port, and lunch is provided on dive boats.

The following day, we returned to Gordon Rocks and saw more hammerheads, whitetips, friendly turtles and

even a sea lion.

The vertical currents and surge can definitely be quite a challenge for inexperienced divers, and the cold currents can be core-chilling. It's quite common for divers to come up after 30 minutes, as the combination of the temperature challenges and going down to 30 metres sucks up their air. One fellow diver—an out-of-practice yet ex-commercial diver with 2000+ dives—was done in 19 minutes.

For those who can hang around and check out the outside walls of the cra-

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Island, as did a massive school of pompano, or jacks, which encircled us in a silvery, fishy cylinder. And then, there were yet more Galapagos barracuda.

North Seymour. We managed to get to North Seymour with Galapagos Sub-Aqua. There, we found more stingrays, marbled rays, eagle rays, a manta silhouetted above us in the gloom, and several pairs of whitetip sharks resting under overhangs. It all culminated in some exciting, fast drift dives over shallow water during the safety stops.

Afterthoughts

Whenever I think about Gordon Rocks, my mouth curls into a smile. It epitomises the Galapagos for me. Even on a gloomy day, it reflected the unique and enchanting



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ter, the rewards are excellent. Although my camera had already fogged up, I got to marvel at a huge, slow-moving school of countless one-metre-long snapper, at ten metres. Then, I saw a wahoo—or scombrid fish, prized in game fishing—as we surfaced.

On another safety stop, I saw over a hundred golden cownose rays cruise past. These beautiful creatures also put in a brief appearance on another visit to Santa Fé

nature of the archipelago's diverse nature, its strong currents symbolising the challenges ahead, and its diverse life reminding us of what we have to lose. ■

Christopher Bartlett is a dive writer and underwater photographer from the United Kingdom who coordinates excursions to various dive destinations around the world. For more information, visit: www.christopherbartlett.com

Chocolate chip sea star



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Julio's secret seahorse in the mangroves at Elfinado; Whitetip reef sharks resting at North Seymour; Blue sea star

