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a natural selection

One hundred and fifty years after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, an animal-obsessed father and son visit the zoological holy land of the Galápagos Islands.

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My father was a science writer who talked about biology the way I imagine most dads talk about baseball. As a result, I now know nothing about curveballs or batting averages but can remember every detail of his stories about an island filled with creatures that don't fear humans. To a boy who would sit for hours with a handful of birdseed, hoping some jaded suburban cardinal would alight on my arm, the idea of such a place's existence was especially magical.

Thirty-five years later, I finally got to see this wonderland for real when my 11-year-old son, Danny, and I visited the Galápagos Islands. The 19 volcanic islands, which cover a 20,000-square-mile area in the Pacific off the coast of Ecuador, are home to thousands of especially diverse species. Explaining the trip to Danny, I stressed how lucky we were to be seeing the place where Charles Darwin formed his theory of evolution. But Danny could only process it as animals, *lots of animals*—like the Bronx Zoo on steroids.



After a 12-hour flight from New York City to Quito, we were whisked into the genteel world of storied outfitter Abercrombie & Kent, starting with a warm welcome from one of its naturalist guides. Danny was thrilled to learn that seven of our 37 fellow travelers were boys, ranging in age from 5 (the minimum) to 11.

The next day, our group flew to Baltra Island and boarded a 26-cabin ship for a weeklong cruise around the archipelago. When I saw our cabin, I felt a pang of guilt: From the brass-trimmed portholes to the crisp linen, the *MV Eclipse* is the quintessence of luxurious ocean travel and my wife's idea of heaven. (She was staying home with our younger son.) For his part, Danny was more excited by what was happening outside the ship. With Steve Irwin-esque enthusiasm, he started pointing out animals, giving our travel mates—who ranged from CEOs to NYPD—quite a start. Soon, however, even the most reserved were joining in.

Each morning the guides (one for every 10 guests) took us by Zodiac on a different adventure. One day we swam off an idyllic white-sand beach; the next we hiked

1 Danny spotting a hawk. **2** Sally Light-foot crabs. **3** The *MV Eclipse*. **4** Danny snorkeling in James Bay. **5** Nature guide Christina Rivadeneira showing the boys ant-lion traps. **6** A young sea lion on a bench outside the airport.

7 Darwin Lake. **8** A canteen stop at the Charles Darwin Research Center. **9** A cave on Isabela Island. **10** Marine iguanas. **11** Danny with fellow traveler Ridge. **12** Galápagos tortoises. **13** Danny watching a sea lion off Gardner Bay.



a desolate, almost Martian landscape. At midday, we'd return to the ship, sign in (island rules say no tourist can be left unsupervised), and eat lunch—options included Ecuadorian specialties as well as chicken fingers. In the afternoon, we'd venture out for another excursion.

Our guides' encyclopedic knowledge made for fascinating nightly lectures. At our astronomy lesson—held in inky darkness on the upper deck—I thought about how we were seeing the Milky Way just as Darwin had. Danny was riveted by the last lecture, which told us the famed naturalist developed his theories observing the same kinds of creatures we'd seen. For Danny, this was the best classroom on earth.

By the end of the trip, I had a deep sense of what "survival of the fittest" really

means. It's easy to believe we humans are supreme beings (especially when you're sipping guava nectar on the sun deck). But after swimming with sharks and visiting an island so barren that only lizards and snakes survive there, I had to acknowledge that we might have some competition in the adaptation department.

Of the many experiences we had, a couple will stay with me forever. One was when we were swimming among sea lions, rays, and penguins on our first snorkeling trip and Danny smiled and reached for my hand; he was as grateful to see this world as I was. The other was the moment a sea lion swam up and looked directly into my eyes—and I finally had that communion I had craved as a boy with my handful of birdseed. 🌍

1 Rivadeneira with the boys at Punta Suarez. 2 Our cabin inside the *Eclipse*. 3 A fish market on Santa Cruz Island. 4 Danny searching for animals. 5 Danny and the author at the equator.

FACT SHEET What to know when planning this once-in-a-lifetime trip.



TO GET THERE Most major airlines fly to Quito. From there, it's a two-hour flight (with a stop in Guayaquil to pick up more passengers) on TAME or Aerogal to Baltra Island.



HOW TO TOUR Packages include lodging, most meals, and activities. (From \$6,425 per adult and \$5,125* per child ages 5 to 12 for 11 days, abercrombiekent.com)



WHEN TO GO Because the islands straddle the equator, temperatures average 80° F year-round. However, it's always most crowded from June through August.

