

Immersion

By Hamish Roberts

One July afternoon, I am led by Mollie, my partner, along a cliffside path. The landscape is new and peculiar to me. It *all* demands my attention: the black, volcanic rocks that cover the ground; the clusters of Palo Santo trees, bare at this time of year, their bone-white bark bright and vivid beneath the midday sun. Lanky frigate birds swoop overhead. The chirps and clicks of innumerable insects pulse in some mysterious union.

The path leaves the trees, and takes us down steps cut into the cliffside, and into a rocky bay known locally as Tijeretas. Mollie fastens snorkelling masks around our heads and carefully lowers herself off a half-submerged rock into the water. I follow and, together, we dive down as deep as we can go, into a world I never could have imagined. I stay there for as long as my breath allows, which is not very long at all. Still, by the time I return to the surface, I am not the same person anymore.

Mollie and I are at the edge of San Cristobal, the most easterly island of the Galapagos, a volcanic archipelago in the middle of the Pacific, a thousand kilometres west of mainland Ecuador. Further out, several large rocks rise sheerly out of water, by tens, sometimes hundreds of metres. They are, like all of the Galapagos, the remnants of volcanoes. These frozen eruptions had violent, super-hot beginnings- but, like the black volcanic boulders that litter the edges of the larger islands, the forms into which they cooled over a matter of days have since kept their shape for millions of years.

Zoom out a little wider and everything becomes as impermanent and fragile as you and me. Over *tens* of millions of years, these islands, from the very biggest to the hundreds of smaller rocky protrusions, erupt upwards, and then descend back into the

water, as the earth's crust moves like a conveyor belt over a huge underground reservoir of molten magma. Zoom right back in, into now, into the turquoise ocean, and you find an effervescent waterscape. Seaweed sways from turrets and towers of submerged rock. Silver tunas race in twos and threes through schools of blue-and-yellow surgeon fish, who move forward in tentative expansions, like plumes of smoke. Frigate birds and blue footed-boobies dive bomb into twisting columns of sardines. These species, and many of the others found on the islands and their surrounding waters, are protected by one of the strongest conservation programs in the world. They have lived and evolved here, separately to their continental cousins, for millions of years. They arrived before many of these islands were spewed up into being. Between its volcanic foundations and its uniquely conserved ecosystem, the Galapagos is a microcosm of deep time, and deep change.

Here I am, drifting, transfixed, through this waterscape. Of course, the facts I've learnt about island formation and species evolution are not running through my mind. But the richness of the world they've created is all around me—a kaleidoscopic, teeming myriad of shimmering movement. I am calm — calmer than I expected to be. The human heart slows instinctively once fully submerged— something called the ancient mammalian diving response, it lays dormant in all of us, and is taken full advantage of by properly trained free divers. I am no such thing— I have less than a minute gliding along the ocean floor before the need for air will overwhelm me. But I don't mind. In a way, I don't even notice. For once, I am not watching my time as it runs out. I am genuinely immersed in a moment.

Then, my lungs ache, and I kick furiously upwards, and, suddenly, the breeze is grazing my face, and I am watching the silhouettes of frigate birds, hundreds of metres above me, as they intersect the sun in graceful loops.

I was never supposed to be here.

The Galapagos is Mollie's adventure. She is halfway through a year of teaching English at The University of Quito's San Cristobal campus. An Evolutionary Biology graduate, the chance to spend twelve months in this pristine, unique ecosystem, and see some of the amazing science carried out in the university- it is an immeasurably fascinating experience for her. I met Mollie back in Bristol, England, just nine months beforehand. She was the brightest, cleverest, most outrageous person I had ever come into contact with. From the start, we thought we already knew exactly when our relationship would end—eight weeks later, when she was due to fly to the Galapagos. This time limit was actually a freedom- there was no time to get bogged down in figuring out what we were doing, or how to pace ourselves. We spent eight weeks in each other's pockets, as if we'd known each other for years. Then, Mollie asked me to come visit her out there, on the other side of the world. The wise response, perhaps, would have been a "no, thank you". As a tourist, I could only visit for a maximum of eight weeks, and what then? Wouldn't I just have a bigger band-aid to rip off? Surely, the best thing for both of us would be to forget about each other for a year.

But of course, I said yes. Wisdom be damned. I got through a miserable English winter by doing an English-teaching course, and made plans to go on my own adventure, to travel on around South America after visiting Mollie. I sold my bike and my bed, I quit my job and moved out my house, and left for San Cristobal, on Valentine's Day, 2020.

Reuniting with Mollie was an indescribable joy. She showed me around the town where she lived and worked, Porto Baquerizo Moreno. The university is at the bottom, where the town meets the ocean, just along from the Malicon and the touristy maze of hotels and restaurants. Human development is allowed on just 3% of the Galapagos' landmass, but of course, the animals make no such distinction. Sealions, most often adolescent males banished from the beaches by their bigger, stronger rivals, are found

dozing outside restaurants and shops. Pelicans, dotted around the harbour, often swoop up the island- sometimes landing with a loud bump on the roof of Mollie's flat at the top of town. Perhaps the most striking feature of the wildlife is that they aren't afraid of you. Humans first made their way onto the islands just five hundred years ago, and, until recently, only lived here in very sparse numbers. Finches, giant tortoises, sealions, marine iguanas— none of them have ever learnt to think of you as a threat, as a predator, or an aggressor. In fact, they don't show you much interest at all- no more than they show each other. You are just another animal.

One evening soon after I arrived, Mollie told me she had been walking a different route through the town to the university every day. She'd been reading a book about neuroscience, about how more of our brainpower is devoted to modelling what is about to happen next than in processing new sensory information. Consciousness, the book said, only comes into play when our expectations are, in some way, violated. Mollie was taking active steps to displace her expectations, staying maximally alive to her experience by, for instance, finding a different route to work every day. I was so impressed by this approach to being here that I felt disappointed in myself. When Mollie was away teaching, I wandered around the island in a kind of daze. This strange, beautiful assault on my senses, the equatorial sun, the onslaughts of rain from nowhere, the spellbinding ecosystem, the Spanish language, the interesting, Galapaganean variant of Ecuadorian culture... I couldn't give it the attention it deserved. I was too wrapped up in the story of me and Mollie, of how to make the best of the eight weeks I had with her, of what I would do after my time here ran out. There were some possible routes to prolonging my stay— securing a job or a volunteering position- but they were all as unlikely as each other.

Then, like so many others, this story was blown apart. The pandemic swept around the world. Almost all the foreign students and tourists got on emergency flights out of

the Galapagos, afraid of getting stuck here. Most of them managed to do so, a handful didn't- including myself. My flights were cancelled, and I found myself stuck, stranded, on an archipelago in the middle of the Pacific Ocean- exactly where I wanted to be.

Suddenly, separation was not a problem that Mollie and I had to deal with. In fact, the island was put into full lockdown, and we had to spend almost every hour together. A poor internet connection made us dimly aware of the world we'd left our friends and family in changing forever, but, really, her two-room flat became our entire world. We kept sane by making a to-do list every morning— and there was no lack of stuff needed doing. Every human-made object in the Galapagos either has to be made there by hand or shipped a thousand kilometres from mainland Ecuador. Things like furniture, cooking utensils or any kind of pre-made food were prohibitively expensive, and so, the day was given over to things which I was used to being handed to me, premade and prepackaged, to consuming without thinking about it. We made our own bread, our own granola. We gutted fish that were caught that morning. We shared a single pillow, two knives, two forks and a spoon. We read and wrote and created ridiculous games. We did yoga and meditation. We had no television or workable internet to kill time with- and so time came alive. My days were big, my present experience was big- too big to look outside of or beyond. Every night, we would take our sofa (more like a hard, wide chair, to be honest) through to the open-air hallway outside our flat and look at the stars. Every night, the same constellation, the plough— or the frying pan, as we preferred to call it—would swing slowly across the same rectangle of sky that our hallway opened out onto. Every night, we would go back inside, open Mollie's diary, and tick off our to-do list, and then each write an entry on the same page, recounting our days or just whatever thoughts were in our head. I had never, as an adult, felt so firmly planted right in the middle of daily life, as I did in that flat. Out on the equator,

days are always the same length, 12 hours of day and night a piece. Without that marker of the passage of time, the past and the future stepped out of sight.

But, of course, the future has arrived. It is now July, and the lockdown has finally lifted—but no tourists have been let back onto the island. San Cristobal has maybe a fifth of its normal populace- a handful of stranded foreigners, and the locals who have lived here all their lives and tend not to venture every day into its depths, as Mollie and I do. Here we are, gasping for breath in Tijarettas bay. Charles Darwin first landed here when he arrived on these islands one hundred and fifty years ago, and it is, now, as devoid of human noise as he found it- as devoid of human noise as the water I was just immersed in. When Mollie first came down here, before the pandemic, it was full of people, hundreds of them, as curious and amazed as us, clambering across the rocks, swimming through schools of fish. Now, it is just the two of us. It's like the walls of her flat have widened out beyond the horizon.

This is what changes me forever: this moment, that I never could have dreamed of, let alone brought about, this absurd convergence of good fortune, to place me on these unique islands, with their unique history, at this unique point in time...it will never be repeated. The tourists will come back- they have to. They fund the whole conservation effort. If I come back here, which I hope to one day, it will be wonderful- but it won't be like this. It will never be this empty of human noise ever again—at least not whilst us human beings are around to visit it. There is no bookmarking this moment for later, no negotiating with the future; I am exactly where I want to be, exactly where I will never be again. This is it.

I want, somehow, to help my future self, who won't have this, who won't be here. I think, how can I approach this experience, how can I absorb this moment, so that it still means something, after its gone? But as I ask this question, I feel the bay, I feel

the water immersing my body, reducing to a memory, an anecdote, to the anticipation of a future moment, when I look back on what is happening right now. And I am doing this whilst I am still here, in the bay, whilst the experience is still real and vivid and all round me. So, I stop. I relinquish my attempt to control the future from a distance. It will mean whatever it ends up meaning. For now, I need to be exactly where I am. This is hard because we are planning animals. We project and strategise; that is how we survive. But, it is sometimes relieving to appreciate the limits of your control. That is why I enjoy thinking about deep time—because it takes my understanding where my influence cannot possibly follow. And I can't control the future meaning of a moment as it is happening, any more than I can stop this island falling into the sea. And this is not a trick. That moment is now almost two years old. And I am not sure what it means to me now, just because I fully embraced it then. All I know is that I enjoyed it more at the time. What I in fact realise now is that, in a way, there was nothing special about that moment. No part of our lives is repeatable. Whatever is here now will be gone, as surely as that moment is now.

Luckily, I had far more than a moment to enjoy. I spent nine months in the Galapagos. I was incredibly privileged to swim with sealions, turtles and rays, to cycle to the tops of volcanos. I watched an albatross dive and dip in the slipstream of the boat we were sailing around the island. But what has stuck with me, more than any individual experience, was how this peculiar landscape somehow became my normal, my every day. You don't need to recall specific memories to reenter somewhere you have called home. You can close your eyes, walk up to that door, enter the hall, find your way to the kitchen, to the garden, up to your old bedroom. That is what San Cristobal became to me. I can close my eyes and walk from our flat, down the brick roads, past the banco and onto the Malicon, the air full of sea salt, fried fish, and plantain. I can find my way onto Carola beach, feel the sand between my toes, I can

walk into the ocean, feel the cold as it laps around my waist. I can pull on my mask and plunge downward and spread my gaze all over the endless wonders of the ocean floor. I can turn onto my back to meet the eyes of an adolescent sealion as she stops for a second to gaze at the curious creature that I am.

After we left in November, Mollie and I completed our isolation period at my parent's house in Devon. It felt strange- the partitioned hills, the skittish animals. When the moon appeared, it was hard to believe it was the same moon as the one we left behind in the Galapagos. It is hard, having what had become normal and everyday, crushed back down to something distant, alien, impossible. Our lives naturally become so everyday, so normal that, somewhere in the back of our minds, we equate them with eternity. But, like the islands of the Galapagos, like the continents themselves, you only have to zoom out a little, and their solidity disappears.