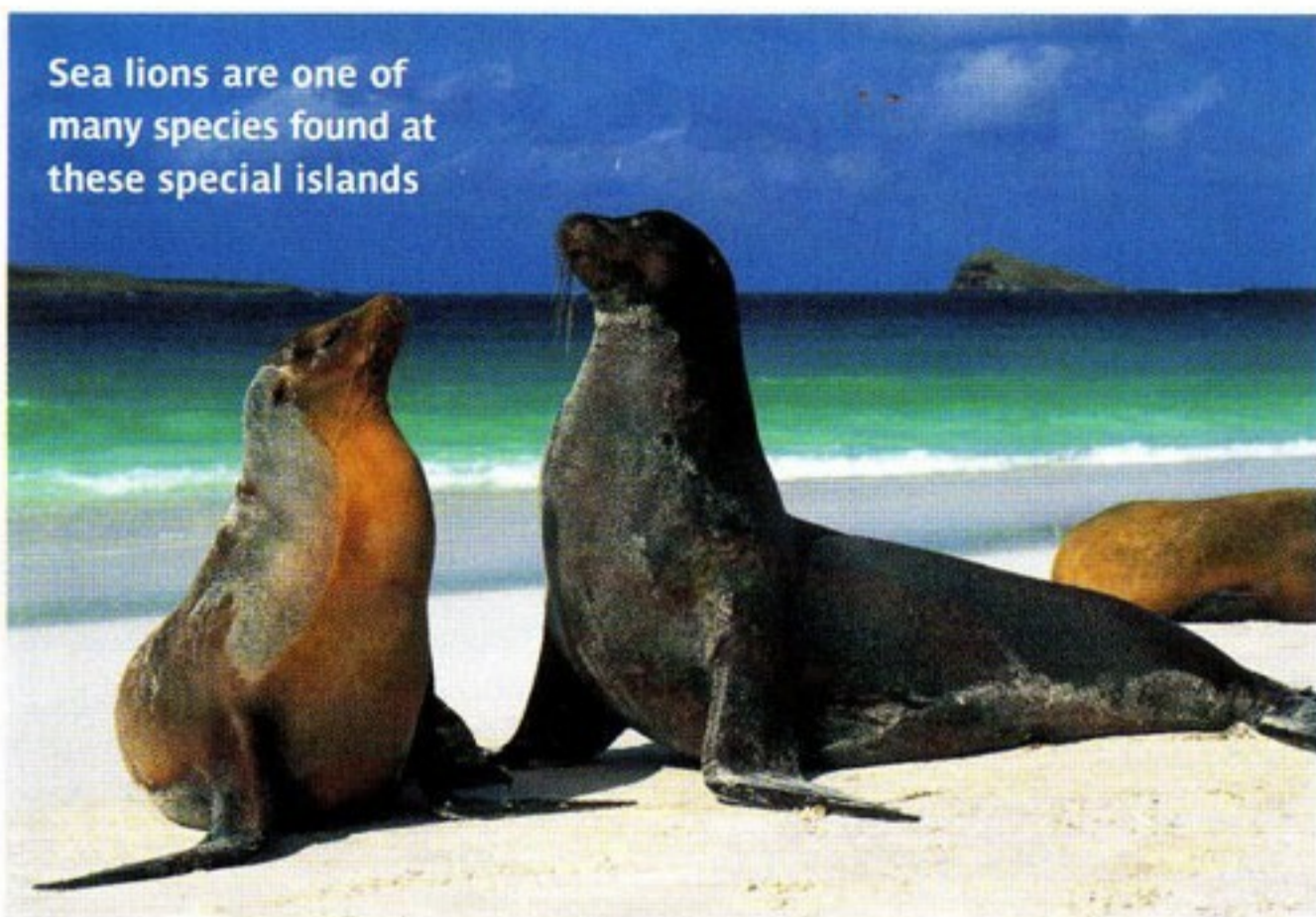


## RUNNER-UP

## Lost and found in... The Galapagos Islands

by Neil Bennion, 31, library assistant

Sea lions are one of many species found at these special islands



Eric should have known better than to tangle with the big one. The male sea lion defending its harem was unimpressed by the attention of the snorkeller. Eric got off lightly with a playful warning – a bite on the backside.

The Galapagos Islands are an archipelago formed entirely from volcanic activity above a tectonic hot spot 1,000km off the coast of Ecuador. Popularised by Darwin's expedition, which led to his book *The Origin Of The Species*, the peculiar geology and the complex ocean currents have created a paradise of biodiversity. In the rainforest, armed with a great deal of time and patience, you may just catch a glimpse of a jaguar. Or maybe you won't. But there is nothing hit-and-miss about the Galapagos wildlife. It's there, you will see it, and it will be closer than you might imagine.

On the first morning of my week-long boat tour, I opened the curtains and was confused to see nothing but red. We were moored by a sheer lava cliff. It was the kind of visual surprise my fellow travellers and I would get used to over the next few days: barren cactus-punctured landscapes; lush mangroves dipping their toes into the welcoming ocean; vast aprons of lava trapping sandy shores,

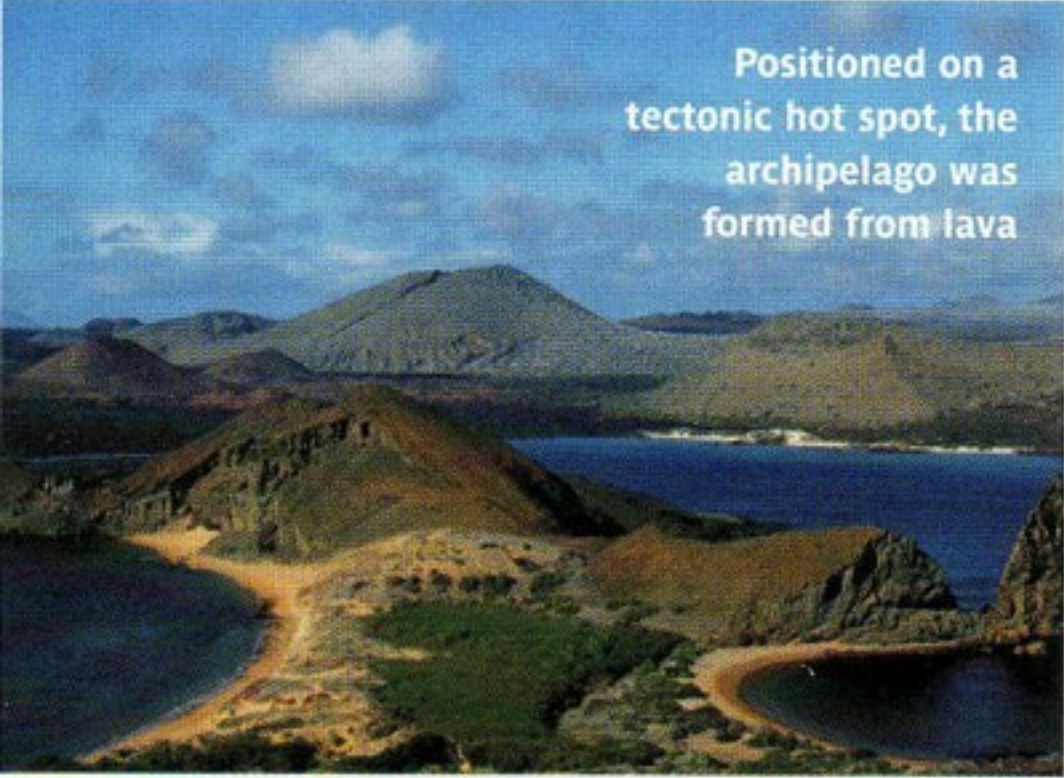
and countless menacing volcano silhouettes.

The Galapagos are famous for finches; examples of their 'adaptive radiation' helped Darwin to draw his groundbreaking conclusions back in 1835. But the real crowd-pleasers are the species



with unique quirkiness – the superstars of the Galapagos.

Red and blue-footed boobies are large diving seabirds, and they perform a hilarious courtship ritual involving strutting and beak-pointing. The world's only marine iguana plays straight-man to the antics of the bright red Sally Lightfoot crab. While the iguanas bask in clusters on the black lava, the crabs comically scamper sideways right over them. I wouldn't have been at all surprised to



Positioned on a  
tectonic hot spot, the  
archipelago was  
formed from lava

hear the crabs start whistling in feigned innocence.

Not to be outdone, however, the magnificent male frigate birds inflate their blood-red chests with air, to the size of Hollywood egos, in order to attract a mate. No doubt desperately hoping that their love-rivals aren't armed with drawing pins.

While these might be the star turns – in fact, it would have been easy to get blasé about it all: 'Oh look, some more flamingos; another sea-lion body-surfing' – it would be only

half a trip to these islands if you didn't take advantage of their underwater world. The most thrilling sight, for me, was when snorkelling through a part-submerged crater called the Devil's Crown. Two hammerhead sharks were serenely patrolling the waters, oblivious to the gasps of delight from the people floating above.

It was going to be hard to leave the Galapagos, and not just because the airport was temporarily closed for

*'Sharks were oblivious to my underwater gasps of delight'*

resurfacing. Eric must have been kicking himself for not taking on that sea lion. Had he won, he'd have taken over the harem. He could still be there now...