

With Best Explorer - 2015 From Mexico to Galapagos

Logbook 2015 - From Mexico to Galapagos

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From Tuesday 13 January 2015 (first part) -
Guaymas, Sea of Cortez



Figure 1: The track from Guaymas to Galapagos

I'm leaving for Mexico.

On 14 July 2014 I left Best Explorer in Guaymas, in Sonora (Mexico) in the hands of a gentleman who had to take care of moving the boat to the shipyard to lift her with a more powerful travel lift for wintering 2014-2015. I wonder how I will find her?

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I am carrying flexible solar panels as a special luggage to mount on the canvas canopy. Going through New York is a nightmare: in addition to showing immigration the visa while being only in transit (today it's much worse) I have to collect my luggage and check-in again, with the solar panels that must follow a different path.

I will never travel via the United States again, if I can avoid it!

In Mexico City the panels do not arrive, and I spend a night in the airport waiting room postponing the flight (goodness of AéroMexico) hoping that they will arrive in time for the next flight, in fact I have to clear them through customs as check-in baggage.

No way. I am leaving without them to Hermosillo hoping to solve the problem later.

After a difficult journey, I go to the appropriate office to explain the problem and receive assurances, although in principle it would not be possible to import goods in transit unless they are together with the passenger.

I rent a car and after driving over 200 kilometers, the hotel finally welcomes me

The useless waiting in the cold hall of the airport in Mexico City left me with the beginning of flu and related annoying intestinal disorders.

Despite being feverish, I am still able to go see Best Explorer, which is situated in the yard near the shore. It's good...

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To resolve customs issues, I must return to Hermosillo airport. The staff at Aéromexico proved to be courteous and efficient beyond all expectations, and managed to get the solar panels to me fairly soon without any further worries. I had with me a bottle of excellent red wine to repay them at least a little, but the officer who did all the work is not there, so my thanks can't reach her.

Putting a boat back into operation after six months in a distant country, where there are not many support points, means facing continuous technical and logistical challenges, from the purchase of telephone cards to the finding of material, which here in Guaymas is not around the corner, to rely on craftsmen whose good will is far superior to their professional capacity.



Figure 2: Fantastic colors of a sunset from the construction site

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From Tuesday 13 January (second part) 2015 - Guaymas, Sea of Cortez

Best Explorer is on dry land in the shipyard site, or rather, in storage, right next to the travel lift that was in danger of collapsing while trying to raise her to no avail.

The yard is in a completely isolated position on the western bank of the furthest bay of the gulf on whose eastern shore lies Guaymas.

The position of the boat is perfect: just under her stern there is the guard house that does the night shift and avoids any trouble on land.

Guaymas is known to be the safest city in Mexico and in fact I went around day and night without having the slightest sense of danger. Nevertheless...

My second outboard was stolen while it was being serviced by the mechanic. It has been replaced it with an equivalent one, no problem for me, but the theft happened.

A boat, moored in front waiting to be lifted, last night was robbed of the dinghy with its engine by people coming by boat, despite being inhabited and the guard of the shipyard turning on the lighthouse, the searchlight and sounding the alarm. The police arrived immediately, but the thieves were more quick and got lost.

There are still small problems: I had ordered a wooden box identical to the old one posted in front of the mast (it holds ropes and the inflatables gear). In its place they made me two half as large! But they are beautiful!

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If you remember the story of the port pilots who wanted to empty the sea with my motor pump, without preventing new water from entering their half-sunken boat, you will understand how I accepted this delivery without protesting...

Francisco, the gentleman who took care of lifting my boat last year, helps me to find the necessary paints to prepare the hull and get the other small repairs done, including fixing the solar panels on the roof of the canvas canopy. He is of great help, but not a great technician...

I solved a mystery: last year leaving in the evening from Puerto Vallarta we saw a fisherman outside the port that was writhing towards us and we wondered why. Here is the reason: stuck between the mobile keel and its housing there is a fishing float with a piece of rope attached, difficult to remove: obviously it was his. Sorry, I won't be able to give it back...

I work all day and my only distractions are few trips to the city to find material and do some shopping, I can not wait for the expected companions: despite the beauty of the landscape I feel a bit depressed. Fortunately the weather is good

I take advantage of the position and with the help of a tree trunk of appropriate length, a hydraulic jack just bought for the occasion and a gas torch I straighten the aft platform, twisted since the purchase and that upset my sense of balance. Behind the boat, in the shallow water, a heron, indifferent to my work, catches a flat fish much bigger than his neck.

The night prevents me from seeing the end of his countless and fruitless attempts to swallow it.

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Figure 3: Heron trying to swallow a big fish

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From Saturday 24 January to Sunday 1 February 2015 - Guaymas, Sea of Cortez

I go by car to Hermosillo to pick up Paolo and Bernard at airport. The near- highway runs for more than one hundred and fifty kilometers through a desert landscape where the vegetation is limited to some cacti and stunted bushes between undulations of dry land that soon replace the colorful rocks of the coastal mountains.

In this season the heat is still quite bearable and when I pick up my friends we enjoy the warmth eating tasty local food outdoors in a restaurant (it's January!) with a view of the surrounding desolate plain.

Launched the boat, on Thursday 29 Gianni arrives as well and we proceed to load a mountain of supplies that the supermarket kindly delivers to the pier on the marina, where we are moored once more.

The journey that awaits us is very long: we have to travel about 2,400 miles to the Galapagos Islands and more than 5,000 more to reach Tahiti, our final destination. It is about the same length as the Northwest Passage.

I planned it carefully, as always. Preparation of the boat, analysis of marine weather conditions, bureaucratic considerations (especially important for the Galapagos), supplies, etc. But the difference of spirit compared to the Passage is abysmal. That test was so demanding and stressful that this could be compared to a field trip. It will not turn out to be like it, but it will still be nothing in comparison.

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In fact we can not expect great possibilities of food supply before reaching Tahiti, so, now with Gianni as well, we ship "dry" supplies and canned goods for six months, the length of our planned stay at sea.

The volume is impressive!

Let's pack it all, and it's a good thing that there are only four of us.

A brief review and it seems that we have thought of everything, we start tomorrow.

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Figure 4: A small part of the provisions ready to be loaded

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From Monday 2 to Wednesday 4 February 2015 towards Agua Verde, Mar de Cortez

Bernard and Paolo have already sailed with me before and they did this last year coming from Canada, while for Gianni it's the first time, both with me and in these waters.

A rather long route awaits us and we have planned to arrive in about a month.

Planning a long sailing like this when the guests, as almost always happens, have limited time is a puzzle that puts together the assessment of weather conditions, the performance of the boat, the time set aside for sightseeing at the rest places and any unforeseen, but always present, and related delays for repairs and supplies. This time we planned of staying in the Galapagos for a month before departing to the Marquesas Islands, which should not take place before April because of the risk of tropical cyclones in the Pacific.

To get there I decided that, after a first stop in San Carlos just north of here, the only valid point to get water and diesel fuel, we will stop again in La Paz on the Baja peninsula and then in Puerto Vallarta, on the continental coast. After that, depending on weather, I will evaluate the various alternatives for the next route.

So we drop the moorings in the early afternoon of Monday, February 2. The wind is cold and right on the nose and so we start motoring, blessing the canopy even if we are close to the tropics.

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The next morning we refuel in good time and leave with cool and humid weather, but with a light wind from the east that allows us to sail for a few hours until after lunch. The first night of sailing in calm weather and with the full moon and the sky filled with stars we hope to see some animal but we are disappointed. This is only compensated by a spectacular phosphorescence in the bow wave that, strangely enough, does not show at all in the turbulence of the propeller.

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Figure 5: Colors of the Sierra Giganta at dawn

In the morning, after having seen nearby the blows of two whales and after admiring the colors of the sunrise that paint red the impressive walls of the Sierra Giganta on our right, we anchor at Agua Verde, a beautiful protected bay in which the color of the sea is so bright that it has given it its name.

As we douse the main, our hands pass through the canvas like tissue paper. There is nothing to do but replace it with the new spare I keep. The old one lasted a long time, we thank it and we hope to get rid of it in La Paz before going ashore.

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Figure 6: The Agua Verde bay

We had already come across the impressive Isla Carmen, where we used to spend a few enjoyable days exploring the desert landscape a few years ago. At that time, we were sheltered from a storm in a boat that we rented from a well-known and despicable charter company without nearly any essential equipment. The other islands around here are almost inaccessible and terribly desolate as spectacular in their hardness and rusticity full of ochre hues.

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It would be worth strolling around here calmly exploring every little nook and cranny, as we have been able to do at least in part during last season. But now the time is limited and will allow us only a few more stops. Paolo and Bernard were with me and they have already seen something, while for Gianni it is the first time.

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Thursday 5 February 2015 from Agua Verde in San Evaristo, Mar de Cortez

I had the thought that it might be a good idea to have an intermediate stop before reaching La Paz. The sheltered bay of San Evaristo, where we stopped last year, is at the right distance, even if it is a little small, to accommodate the quite numerous passing boats that sail between La Paz and Loreto.

It's crucial to pay attention to double the height of Punta San Marcial, which closes the bay to the east, starting from Agua Verde. It is faced by numerous rocky shoals, but little or nothing has been reported on the official cartography. A problem that, as you know now, afflicts all the coasts of the Sea of Cortez.

When I came here for the first time more than ten years ago, a little later in the season, there were much fewer boats and the life at sea was much more lively. A blue whale came to play with our boat right around here. On a beach just south, there was a part of a whale that had died some time earlier.

As I remembered that visit and a fisherman who provided us with a fantastic grouper at Timbabichi beach further on, I went to anchor myself at the same point: what a difference!

We find the fisherman's hut in shambles, the nearby magical lagoon with mangroves now stagnant and littered with waste and the shore covered by a layer of silvery dead fish, but the latter probably due to natural causes.

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Figure 7: What remains of the lagoon with the then lush mangroves

Less natural were the remains of the heads of many small hammerhead fish, clearly slaughtered on the spot.

The magic that was experienced then is only a melancholic memory.

To lift our spirits, flying manta rays appeared and dolphins visited us again as we headed towards the entrance of the San José Canal, which leads us to San Evaristo.

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Figure 8: Turkey vultures on the poor remains of the fisherman's hut

The north-west wind becomes significantly stronger when we enter the bay and anchor in a relatively protected area with a lot of chain almost in the dark.

The island of San José has been giving us its warm sunset colors for quite some time, but the air is quite fresh and we don't stay outside much to enjoy them.

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Figure 9: The great number of dead and dying fish stranded on the shoreline

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Figure 10: magical sunset behind the Isla San José

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Friday 6 to Wednesday 11 February 2015 from San Evaristo in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

The wind is light and coming from the north-west, just behind. We hoist the Yankee to enjoy the little help it can provide us and proceed motoring.

We sail without history the route of about fifty miles to La Paz, where it is convenient, during a full day stop, to take care of the normal maintenance of the engine and to perform small repairs before facing the approximately 360 miles of ocean to Puerto Vallarta, from which we will sail to the Galapagos. At the entrance of the canal that leads to the port we see on land several pleasure boats overturned by the recently passed cyclone: we did very well spending the winter in Guaymas, out of their path!

Out of the Bahia de La Paz we managed to hoist the sails. But the following wind and a discordant and unfriendly sea from the side make the navigation uncomfortable and force us to gybe every now and then to keep a correct general direction until the wind slows below a decent minimum and, with a calmer sea, we continue motoring.

At night we see the Southern Cross in the sky for the first time.

We arrive in Puerto Vallarta early in the morning and dock in the marina, well sheltered (it is a "hurricane hole", ie a safe shelter in case of hurricanes) surrounded by a continuous belt of modern condominiums, but distant from the old and lively city.

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Figure 11: Puerto Vallarta from above, our mooring is at the extreme bottom right corner (photo P. Alejandro Díaz)

Here we will stop for a few days to prepare ourselves for the crossing of about 1,700 miles of open ocean.

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From Wednesday 11 to Sunday 15 February 2015 Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

As we always do as soon as we arrive in a place that we don't know we allow ourselves a walk around the docks of the port to get an idea of the place and locate immediately the main shops, which are scarce here, given that the environment is reserved for rich tourists. Even the port office is small and almost devoid of information.

Paolo grabs only a small guide that seems to hold information and that will be later, without our being able to suspect it, an occasion of a funny episode that I will tell you in due time.

We have high hopes for a few contacts that Paolo has here.

Before going out for dinner, I spend some time checking the connection between the engine and the propeller axis. It was fortunate that I did it.

A homokinetic joint, similar to that present in front-wheel drive cars connecting to the steering wheels, transmits the movement to the shaft. It ensures smooth movement even if the motor and shaft are not perfectly aligned.

There are six high-strength bolts on both sides, towards the engine and towards the propeller shaft. It appears that one is loose. To confirm, I touch it and it's on my hand...

It's clean cut! Strange! I checked the others and found with horror that there are four broken bolts on each side. The corresponding pieces are embedded in the joint.

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Then I remember the log that got stuck in the propeller two years ago and stopped the engine suddenly. The shock must have caused the bolts to crack, which eventually failed completely.

Close to us, there is a large motor yacht. The skipper is a courteous person and has already provided us with information. He directs me to a workshop that can fix the part, even though I have a spare one that I can use.

We went there the next day and found them to be ugly and slightly dirty, but not too bad. They promised to fix it for the next day and they promptly keep their promise. Much more professional and experienced than those of Guaymas! We can reassemble it in no time.



Figure 12: Puerto Vallarta workshop

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There are practices to be carried out when you arrive and leave in a different Country and here, in the far away Port Office, we proceed twice in the long line with the courteous officers of the Mexican Navy who do somersaults to deliver our documents before the weekend. They don't succeed and we'll have to come back on Monday.

There is therefore time to stroll around, complete the fumigation of the boat, requested by the Galapagos against insects and mice, and go visiting the other contact of Paolo, an interesting restaurant owner who also offers us dinner in her restaurant overlooking the shining lights of the bay.

We are well rested and ready to face the long crossing that awaits us.

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Monday 16 to Tuesday 17 February 2015 Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

Viva Mexico! We always found people of the utmost kindness and therefore, when we have to wait five hours to get the documents to leave the country do not get back: we know that they do everything they can to deliver them and if they do not succeed in a hurry it is not for lack of good will. On the other hand, forget Italy as long as bureaucracy is concerned...

We discussed a bit on which route to follow: initially along the coast until after Acapulco or directly to the islands? I prefer the latter. Central America has three necking: one to the west of the Yucatan, one to the east, corresponding to Belize and finally another further east in the middle of which passes the Panama Canal. All of them allow a smoother passage to the north-east trade winds, which strengthen considerably downwind of the continent and abate within more than a few hundred miles only. If we passed by Acapulco and wanted to avoid the sea raised by winds that often exceed forty knots we should continue along the coast for a longer stretch much lengthening the route.

The direct option will expose us to the side waves, but with lighter winds.

We leave then in the afternoon after completing the last supplies and a welcome toast, including good Mediterranean gods like Neptune/ Poseidon, you never know...

Two humpbacks greet us at the exit of the bay.

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Figure 13: Toasting before leaving and crossing!

Paolo has prepared an alternate pattern for the watches, it's a bit' complex, but having it hanging next to the dining table it will not be difficult to follow and will allow us all to meet each other sooner or later, two and a half hours watch each during the day and two at night. Short watches, but sometimes it's good to experiment.

Entering into the ocean, the one we did after la Paz practically is not relevant, brings always with it a certain amount of emotion, however experienced you may be. But here, still close to land, the mighty breath of the great waves of the high seas is missing, although the small ones are aggressive.

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At night small squids instead of flying fish end up dying on



Figure 14: The ocean shows aggressive waves deck.

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Figure 15: A small squid came tonight to die on the deck

In the morning of Tuesday you can still see the far away mountains and suddenly behind the first blue row on the horizon there a big column of black smoke rises fast. It can only be an erupting volcano. We are anticipating a follow-up, but it all comes to a close soon after.

In the evening we greet dolphins of a type not yet met and that we can not identify.

The afternoon stiff wind from NW, drops subsides in the evening.

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Everything is in order on board and we start to get into the stride.

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From Wednesday 18 to Friday 20 February 2015 Pacific Ocean towards the Galapagos

Telling the unexperienced about ocean sailing is a daunting challenge. The main character is in fact Father Ocean, but to an inexperienced eye it could always feel the same: waves, more or less, wind, sun... what a boredom after a while!

But it is not so, if you have an active role on the boat.

Of course the Skipper does not get bored at all! He/she is always alert: the responsibility, especially for the safety and lives of everyone, is only his/hers. Even when he/she sleeps, with only one eye closed, I guarantee.

I made the decision to accept single watches after taking into account my comrades' suggestion and their positive experience. This is the first time I have applied this solution with four people on board. The ocean routes prior to this time were sailed through much more challenging waters. It's evident that we do it with the understanding that I receive immediate notification of any changes in conditions without regard to rest, and everyone can be called upon to maneuver as needed.

This subdivision, like any other one chosen when we are four, theoretically engages each one for only six hours out of twenty-four. In practice, this applies only to the time spent steering. Many other activities are carried out in the rest of the time, from baking fresh bread, which is highly appreciated, to checking equipment, especially engine and sail wear and other maneuvers, cleaning, and so on.

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There is still a lot of free time, if it's nice, to enjoy the trip chatting among ourselves and observing the sea, which, contrary to what the inexperienced might believe, is always different in color and appearance. Not to forget about the occasional sighting of animals showing every now and then.

Like the false killer whale seen on Friday, the many turtles that seem to travel on our same route, the two boobies that have settled on the radar antenna staying there for a whole night (and properly soiling the deck below) or the swallow that has landed on the guardrail to rest.



Figure 16: wo boobies, one old and one younger, resting on the radar antenna

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The wind has dropped towards the evening of Wednesday and for the whole of the following day we traveled by motor on a sea as smooth as oil, while on Friday that little cross wind that has risen allows us to sail quite well with all sails hoisted.



Figure 17: On a flat ocean

We continue to find in the morning only small squids and no flying fish on deck, and even if the water is very warm: over 27°C!

We keep trolling, but we don't catch any fish! Are they missing or are we really bad fishermen, as I suspect?

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From Saturday 21 to Sunday 22 February 2015 Pacific Ocean towards the Galapagos

We are approaching crossing the fearsome Gulf of Tehuantepec, the first of several major northeast trade flow channels over Central America from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

I'll change a little bit the course to the east to place us in a more favorable position when we will meet, hopefully soon, the south-easterly trade winds.

First we will have to cross the zone of intertropical doldrums. This is known as the ITCZ or intertropical convergence zone (intertropical convergence zone).

In short: in a few days we will experience some stress, first because of wind and waves, then meeting with calm stretches and squalls.

The ITCZ, for those who do not know it, is a band of instability that surrounds the earth at the equator, oscillating with the seasons a little to the north and a little to the south.

There the belt of north-east trade winds, further to the north, meets with that of the south-east trade winds which passes further to the south and the meeting creates a belt of calms and the lifting of the humid air. This condenses in thunderstorm cumulonimbus clouds associated with sudden squalls possibly very violent that quickly change direction.

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Of course they are not pleasant, especially at night, but for now, in addition to the usual squids, with calm weather we still find some visitors, especially in the evening, who take advantage of us to get a rest.



Figure 18: An evening visitor rests at the bow

This is the area that the ancient navigators called "doldrums" or even "horse latitudes" because the calms, which today we cross easily with the help of the engine, led to sailboats laying sometimes for months in the area and the lack of water made the horses die first, whose carcasses they got rid of by throwing them overboard.

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On Saturday night we crossed half the distance that separates us from Baquerizo Moreno, our destination, with a sea that is becoming confused and unpleasant: it is the welcome of the Gulf.

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From Monday 23 to Wednesday 25 February 2015 - Pacific Ocean towards the Galapagos

The Gulf of Tehuantepec has not hit us too much: the sea with waves of only two and a half meters, a nothing in an ocean, and a wind that did not raise over twenty knots gave sign that we were passing it four hundred miles offshore. His fury, if there was any, calmed down as it left the shore: we were right to follow this route.

On the other hand, after calming of wind and sea, now much more regular and low, we are visibly approaching the area of the squalls.

We are not lucky as fishermen: the line that we kept in the water immediately became a target for boobies and so this attempt also aborted.

In the night a violent squall strikes us treacherously. Bernard is alone at the helm, but, awakened by the crash of the mainsail, I have just time to climb on deck and help him to reef sails. The wind has sudden jumps and it is not easy to cope with them.

The squalls can be seen arriving in advance because they are much darker than the sky, but they move with a surprising speed and unpredictability. A sight made more dramatic by the lightning and flashes that give depth to the rounded and twisted accumulations of clouds. It also happens on shore under cumulonimbus clouds, but there it is more difficult to realize their dynamics and then, in our part of the world, they are usually more localized.

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The hull and equipment are so strong that they do not suffer any damage.



Figure 19: Squall approaching

Outside of the squalls the wind is almost absent, so the engine becomes an important resource to get out of the way as soon as possible. But the situation persists for the whole of the following day. On top, we are also forced to quickly avoid a very threatening squall that seems to be heading right for us.

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Finally during the night, the sky gets covered with high clouds and the wind decreases and becomes more regular, like the sea.

The day after gradually the calm settles completely.



Figure 20: Gianni inspects the hull in open ocean

Gianni is an experienced diver and taking the opportunity, offers to dive to inspect the hull conditions, which should be smooth and clean when we will arrive at the Galapagos: so it is.

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We proceed with the engine running, of course, but after the previous turbulence the calm is good for us and it's an opportunity to bake bread and prepare a risotto and a cake without the cook having to try too hard.

At night some seagulls fly around the boat for the first time, white in the dark. We are amazed by the noise they make: a kind of ticking with the beak as if castanets were playing. We see them only in passing and do not realize what species they are.

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From Thursday 26 to Saturday 28 February
2015 - Pacific Ocean towards the Galapagos



Figure 21: The Darwin's Arch as it used to be. Now it's gone: it collapsed on 17 May 2021

Today at 11 we pass near the Isla Darwin, the northernmost of the Galapagos.

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I must admit that I felt a little emotion seeing that small piece of rock: after all there is no need having any particular navigator skills to get there with the help of GPS, but to see land more than two thousand miles from the departure (and let's not belittle on having started the real crossing only from 1500 miles!) it is still a small undertaking.

The island is a kind of small layer cake with many whitish layers all covered by a thick low blanket of trees with glossy leaves. The vertical walls are stained by the excrement of seabirds, the only form of life visible around here. A little distance away and surrounded by rocks, a stack that looks like an triumphal arch attracts us and we dare to approach it at a short distance: the ocean ripples mark well the position of the skerries (The arch seems to have collapsed in May 2021, too bad!)

We leave this island that looks inaccessible and we continue passing next to the Isla Wolf, twenty miles further, larger and more varied. We sail at a short distance taking advantage of the deep sea, but the surf around the vertical walls of the northern coast does not recommend a closer passage. Time, as always, is tyrant and we can not even afford to go around it.

They are ancient volcanoes, but they don't look like them anymore. Every time I approach these pieces of rock lost in the middle of the vast blue I feel an emotion difficult to express: there is certainly first curiosity, then caution, then wonder for the always new and surprising view, Then again a kind of awe in front of the immovable witnesses of the wildest nature, then... I do not know, even more subtle and evanescent. When I walk away from it as now I feel no nostalgia, but a subterranean sense of relief. Mah!

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The next day, Friday, big ceremony in view of Isabela, the biggest of the Galapagos: our first crossing of the Equator (by boat) for all of us. There is no one who has already passed it; We make do with the Skipper (me) taking over.



Figure 22: Line-crossing ceremony in view of Isabela

A crown concocted from the box of a panettone, as well as the trident, I try to impersonate Neptune at the best. Kneeling and trident hit on the shoulders for all, even for the skipper who is self-hitting, laughter and toasts, with the due parchment. Done!

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I am surprised by the appearance of Isabela, which I thought was steeper: the island is flattened and covered in green. Influenced by the images of the movie "Master and Commander" I expected a more "volcanic" shape, a bit "like our Aeolian Island, maybe more wild. Only later I understood that all the islands of this type, with very fluid basaltic lava, show the same shape.

We try to fish again, without knowing that it was forbidden, and immediately the reel goes crazy unrolling all the line. Far to the stern a powerful spray indicates that we actually caught a big marlin jumping out of the water (I have an indistinct photo that testifies it). Three seconds gone and the line breaks. It confirms that we are not fishermen.

The wind seemed to favor us, but then it drops and the sea flattens: motor again.

We are preparing for the inspections by restoring the functioning of the black water circuit and its special tank: tomorrow they will come to check us.

The night is very wet. The next morning we arrive early at Baquerizo Moreno, an open bay just north of the southwestern tip of Isla San Cristobal. It is a town of low houses with a promenade and several large yellow buoys almost all taken, we anchor.

Next to the western tip of the bay, an ill-fated ship lies recently wrecked.

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Saturday 28 February 2015 - Pacific Ocean,
Galapagos Islands - Baquerizo Moreno



Figure 23: Some inspectors fill out their forms, which I will sign...

The entry inspection does not wait: but we are ready. The Agent we had to select in advance, Carmela, lavishly compensated, comes on board with a boat to collect our documents and present them to the officers, nine! Which come shortly after.

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The boat, now with fourteen people on board, is really crowded. There is the Immigration, the Customs, the Parks, the Health control, the divers for controlling if the hull is clean and the Port Control.

While they check the underwater hull and Carmela takes care of the rest of the paperwork I am required below deck for health control. It's all right. I sit at the octagonal table with the officer who fills the necessary papers. I see that he looks up to look around, stiffens, picks up the papers in fury and rushes out into the cockpit.

Soon after they all leave, having collected documents and generous taxes from each of us and the boat. While we also prepare I tell my comrades of the strange behavior of the officer. What did he see to get so scared? Paolo, sitting at the same pace as the officer, looks around and pulls out the tourist book he collected in Puerto Vallarta: it was written in beautiful evidence, but we did not notice, that it is a guide for gays!

How funny! He could not have been more wrong...

We cast off again and moor at one of the big buoys with two lines with a chain link each around the T-shaped top of the buoy. Safer than that I think it's impossible...

We then experience for the first time the transport system by taxi-boat to be called via radio. We land on the staircase of the tourist pier opening our way among the stinking sea lions swarming on the steps and rather unwilling to let us pass.

We sit outside a restaurant where the famous Galapagos finches pick up their crumbs like sparrows do and we relax ready to enjoy the exotic atmosphere of the place.

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It's time for the food to arrive and Carmela also arrives breathless: "The boat has gone on to the rocks!"



Figure 24: Best Explorer moored again correctly

But how? How is that possible? She was secured! I jump on like a grasshopper and rush to the jetty where a boat takes me from Best Explorer, which I find quietly anchored a little further: I am disconcerted.

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To make it short, as we will witness again later, those buoys even with very little waves, swing easily both ways and the arms of the T, by the rotary movement, pass under the chain link first one side and then the other releasing in a short time both moorings and leaving the boat adrift (after we will knot it carefully and tightly). Today is the only day in our whole month of stay with the ocean almost perfectly calm and the boat had just leaned on the rocks of the beach: an incredible luck. A passing fisherman had seen it and had taken care to anchor it properly.

Minimal damage has been done to a lamp of a nearby boat and nothing to us. The fisherman, after some initial misunderstanding, paid and happy with the modest sum of a hundred dollars (and I with a missed lunch and a wolf's hunger).

I will moor again but next time knotting tightly both mooring lines without a chain link.

Once again Best Explorer turns out to be a lucky and solid boat! But what a fright!

Gianni leaves and in his place comes Monica, returning to Best Explorer after a few years, just in time for dinner in the company of the crews of the group regatta "Pacific Odyssey" just arrived.

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From Sunday 1 to Tuesday 3 March 2015 - Pacific Ocean - Galapagos Islands - Baquerizo Moreno

For now, we will take a break from crossings and dedicate ourselves to sightseeing around the islands. Our predictions are immediately met with disappointment: it will not be possible to circle the archipelago as we had planned, even with the aid of a Ranger. A boat belonging to friends received permission in exchange for a very generous sum one or two years ago, but it is no longer feasible.

Our only option is to visit Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz, which is the main settlement of the Galapagos Islands, and Puerto Villamil on Isabela, the main island. These, like Baquerizo Moreno, are not real harbours, but just bays. In fact, Puerto Villamil is even open to the south, marginally protected by an extensive reef that leaves ample space for waves.

We are very disappointed, but we must make the best of what is bad. The program is now set and we will stay here until early April.

The bureaucracy is both tedious and complex. You have to obtain the 'zarpe' from the captain each time, which is the permits to sail for the desired destination, which will then be countersigned by the captain of the port of arrival. Every single time! It's not expensive, but it can be bothersome.

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San Cristobal, this island, from what you can see from our position, is rocky and covered with bushes or low trees. It is a roost for frigates. The park is a natural park where you can't leave certain marked and paved paths. The rocks near the sea are made of black lava. Far away, to the north-east, there is a large rock with vertical sides standing out on the sea. This is called Roca León Dormido, an unmistakable reference point that recalls, with some goodwill, a reclining sea lion.



Figure 25: The deadly manzanillo tree

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We'll go to the beach just east to meet the equatorial ocean for the first time as tourists! The Humboldt cold current, which originates from South America, has not yet reached this location as it does every summer. And the calm sea still has a very pleasant temperature.

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Figure 26: A marine iguana

The vegetation consists of bushes slightly taller than us, except for a manzanillo tree which adorns the entrance to the beach with its shiny and attractive leaves. The fruit produced by the tree is similar to small green apples (which is why the name is given). The apples have a poisonous juice that is dangerous even when touched.

The sand is coarse and pleasing to black marine iguanas, who sunbathe here and there without showing any fear to humans. They have a decidedly prehistoric appearance!

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We make an effort to find a small corner that is shaded by bushes because the sun is fierce and it can be hard to be successful because the best areas have already been occupied by sea lions.



Figure 27: A sea lion has found the most suitable shade

Madrepores are not present in the sea. I imagine that the cold summer water prevents them from taking root. On the rocks at the sides of the beach, there are large red crabs and some herons are skulking fish.

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Figure 28: A beautiful red crab (grapsus grapsus)

In the afternoon, we replenish the water supplies that are brought to us by boats in twenty-litre bottles at a cost of \$ 2.50 each. We are far from the comfort of our marinas, but we are in the Galapagos!

Paolo has gone on land and will doing some tourism on his own. The other three of us will leave early in the morning and get to know some of the other islands.

With Best Explorer - 2015 From Mexico to Galapagos

From Wednesday 4 to Friday 6 March 2015 - Galapagos Islands - from Baquerizo Moreno to Puerto Villamil

This morning we sailed very early to go to Puerto Ayora, which is located about fifty miles west, where we should find more assistance. We have several things to set up, and above all, we must revise one of the lifeboats, which was impossible in Mexico. The Pacific is waiting for us, incredibly vast (just look at Google Earth to realize it), and it would be reckless not to take every precaution. Crossing your fingers and adding additional intimate touches is not enough!

A bit of wind comes from the stern sector and we notice a sensitive current heading towards the south-west. This is not surprising as the seabed here between the major islands is only a few hundred meters deep.

Along the route, we pass again next to the small uninhabited island of Santa Fé, one of the oldest in the archipelago, from the southern coastal cliffs beaten by the surf, barren and arid. Even here, we cannot land or anchor in the northern lagoon, which is beautiful in photos. The island was liberated in the second half of the last century from goats, rats, and fire ants, which had practically destroyed the ecosystem. It now appears to be slowly recovering from the reintroduction of endemic species.

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While sailing carefully next to the coast white by the surf, we discovered that the map does not accurately show the position of Puerto Ayora, showing it a hundred meters more north. The surf marks the shoals and helps us avoid dangers. The coasts are low, rocky, and covered by vegetation similar to that of Baquerizo Moreno, but on the mountain, you would imagine that a true lush forest grows. We had some difficulty anchoring in the marina populated by pleasure boats with a grapnel at the stern because there is no space for a drag circle. The seabed appears to be not holding as well as we'd like it to.

After finishing the paperwork, we concentrate on reaching an agreement on the raft's work and some purchases.

We'll take a stroll to enjoy the atmosphere of the place and have dinner outdoors with Gianni, who arrived here yesterday. It is a very touristy place, and the evening lacks local color. The quality of the food does not compensate for the expense.

We disembark the raft the next day and take a walk. I am disappointed to discover that the small diesel generator is not working. It has been causing me a lot of problems since the Northwest Passage.

The next day, we move to Puerto Villamil about forty miles west, with the wind pushing us gently. We enjoy the sailing just before the risky and close passage to the southernmost of the islands, Los Hermanos, Isla Tortuga. This small crescent caldera is completely flooded and open to the south. The volcanic formations are so frequent in the sea, but at the same time so different from each other, that every encounter is a new and exciting experience.

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Figure 29: Breakers against the rocks of Isla Tortuga

Puerto Villamil is a port that is accessible from the south-west and partially safeguarded by a reef that is extensive both in depth and extends towards the south, which we are cautious about. Other boats are anchored where it would be more convenient, but we make the best out of a bad situation and we drop the anchor outside than the best. Tomorrow we will go to complete the boring and expensive entry practices, but tonight we will enjoy the calm and relative solitude of this half-moon shaped anchorage illuminated by the moon that is beginning to fall.

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Figure 30: Open anchorage of Puerto Villamil

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From Saturday 7 to Tuesday 10 March 2015 - Galapagos Islands - From Puerto Villamil to Baquerizo Moreno

We gestured to call the water taxi that takes us to land, so we can learn the path to the jetty, which does not seem easy. In fact, it is a long tour avoiding rocks and shoals and skirting the belt of rocks covered with vegetation on the east that protects us from the sea. Up there, there are penguins! The famous Galapagos penguins are here at the equator! We must leave them alone, they are few and threatened with extinction. Funny, as always.

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Figure 31: Penguins at Puerto Villamil

The dock is frequented by organized cruise groups, but there aren't many people today. The Port Captain's office in the village we reached after a long walk is open, and we hurry to fill out the boring forms that confirm their sole purpose: justifying the existence of the officers. In my opinion, the entire world is a country, except for Scandinavia and the Arctic coasts of America.

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Figure 32: The landing pier

We relax by enjoying a fresh coconut at the bar on the beach with fine and white sand where the marine iguanas don't pay attention.

The next day, the sky is covered. Here, the water taxis are not attentive to calls and make us wait a lot. We kill the time by watching sea lions, penguins and small sharks hunting wahoo.

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The forecasts for tomorrow evening are not favorable because they predict a rotation of winds from the south-east, which means tacking while returning. In the afternoon, when the winds are still very light (a good forecast!) we set sail and return to Baquerizo Moreno in the night.

I have had a positive first contact with maintenance. The mechanic inspecting the generator appears to have a good grasp of his trade. He'll be back.

We are becoming accustomed to taking trips to the beach we have already visited. Along the way, we meet sea lions, iguanas, crabs, various birds, and a reasonable amount of tourists.

The night is very quiet, but the big buoy we are moored to has taken the bad habit of hitting the hull, which resounds like a bell.

Bernard disembarks: every time a good friend goes home, it is a sad separation, more than if it did not happen on shore.

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From Wednesday 11 to Monday 16 March 2015 - Galapagos Islands - Baquerizo Moreno

We will stay at Baquerizo Moreno for this week, waiting for Monica to leave and others to arrive shortly afterwards.

It is an opportunity to take a little vacation and carry out some maintenance. I discovered corrosion making holes in a small area of the bow deck and I arranged for a welder to come and repair it, which was done in a short time. We also load 250 gallons of water (almost one thousand liters) that comes on board in bottles carried on a small boat that every trip seems to be just about to sink.

The days are extremely hot and equatorial. Walking to the beach is an opportunity to look for the most shaded routes, but when the sun is really high, there is only a little shade available at sunrise and sunset. It's amazing how sea lions manage to bask in the sun with dark hair and fat that seem to be made for cold climates.

The drainage channel discharges water (both little and dirty) directly into the bay, despite strict hygiene rules.

At the same time, they told us that the stranded ship was loaded with food that was rotting on board. In fact, if there is a rare breeze blowing from the wrong direction, you may start to perceive a certain smell that is not really fragrant. It seems to be the second one sunk in a few years out of the three that supplied the islands and they fear that soon food on sale here will begin to run low because the delivery priority will certainly be to restaurants and hotels.

We only buy some fresh food, so we shouldn't be too severely hit.

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Monica leaves as well, maybe a little disappointed by the short visit, but we kept each other good company, and I will be alone for only a couple of days that I occupy in small maintenance works. The humid heat is making me gasp.

Finally Nicoletta with Marco and Andreas arrive and with them we will go back to do the ferry between here and Puerto Ayora and Puerto Villamil. It is a pity not to be able to go around the islands, but the visits are reserved for local transport. In part, the decision is understandable: many visitors, we have seen it everywhere, behave like vandals, consciously or not. It's advisable to prevent their influence.



Figure 33: Sunset at Baquerizo Moreno

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Here in Baquerizo Moreno, there would be nice strolls to take, but I can't walk for more than a few hundred meters without experiencing acute pain in my leg, which severely limits me. On top of that, the heat is unbearable and I am not interested in joining some sightseeing tours. On the other hand, I can enjoy the view of spectacular sunsets.

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From Tuesday 17 to Thursday 19 March 2015 - Galapagos Islands

We have become accustomed to traveling back and forth between the major islands. It will not be particularly fun from a sailing point of view, but we will try to see as much as possible of the places that we will visit and that so far we have not really explored.

Today my last granddaughter was born (out of nine!): Adèle. Another family event that I am missing. I am fortunate to have children and grandchildren who accept willingly a father and grandfather who is absent for so long.

The wind is light, but fair, so benefiting from the calm sea, moved only by the long gentle ocean swell, we can advance slowly with all sails set and the newbies (in fact only one: Marco) can settle their stomach without problems.

It's not a good place to anchor in Puerto Ayora because the sand on the bottom is coarse and not the best it could be. The bay is open to the south-east, but it is very busy with tourist boats and water taxis, which greatly reduces the area where you can rest in relative tranquility. In addition, the lack of space makes it necessary to deploy a stern anchor, and the grapnel that we use, although heavy, does not perform well. In addition, the bow windlass is becoming increasingly asthmatic.

The next day, Nicoletta and Marco, both keen divers, go on a trip to a nearby island where they hope to see hammerhead sharks, while Andreas and I visit the Darwin Centre.

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This is a small park that combines a park, botanical garden, and a small zoo of local animals, with a particular emphasis on giant turtles and land iguanas.

For a few years now, I have been experiencing an irritating walking restriction that requires me to stop for a few minutes every two or three hundred meters. Andreas patiently waits for me each time.

The road to the Center that is a couple of kilometers far from the piers of the port is a pleasant walk, not all in the sun, which passes first between the low, colored houses of the town, open for a little stretch over the bay where in the morning there is the small fish market in front of an ice cream parlor. Then it continues straight through private gardens that shade it on both sides and finally stretches in between the bush up to the half-hidden buildings of the Center.

The last stretch is where marine iguanas are sunbathing and have no intention of moving to the passage of people who are mostly there to swim in the waves. We stopped to observe their behavior, but we only deduced that they are very lazy.

Visiting the center is more worthwhile than simply walking through. Even though there aren't many explanations, the flora is enough to justify visiting. The plants' appearance is completely foreign and has no resemblance to those found in other desert areas.

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I am particularly fond of the ones that I can only refer to as prickly pears. The leaves (pads) have the same appearance as our own. The trunk is thick, straight, of a warm, intense brown color, neither too light nor too dark, and smooth up to a man's height. Perhaps because the visitors have stripped it of its dense covering of thorns.



Figure 34: Opuntia galapageia (Ljuba Brank)

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The giant turtles are very strange. Unfortunately, the oldest and biggest of its subspecies, Lonesome George, has died a few years ago without leaving any descendants. Here they breed many in captivity and then release them into the wild. Even the strange and colorful land iguanas, which are at high risk of extinction, are protected here.

We return satisfied to the boat, collecting in the meantime the inflatable boat that has been overhauled, redoing the anchorage that had not performed well and drenching us with a strong downpour. Nico and Marco return very satisfied.



Figure 35: Lush vegetation of the interior

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Nico and Marco will also go diving in the following days. I took a horseback ride through the highlands of the island to avoid walking and found a landscape filled with moisture and vegetation that I wasn't expecting. Lush trees that give pods filled with sweet and juicy seeds, stretches of tall and dense grass, wild coffee plants make the trip seem like an exploration into a forest, while farms are behind the next ridge.

The climate here is humid and there are also giant turtles encountered along the way. Some cattle provide support for many cattle egrets, and at the end, while storing the saddles, a barn owl stares at us worriedly from its shelter in the stable cupboard.

I also have the opportunity to visit a lava tunnel that is so big that it could easily be used for railway tracks.

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Figure 36: Barn owl hidden in the saddle shed

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From Friday 20 to Monday 23 March 2015 - Galapagos Islands

Andreas took the opportunity to visit Floreana with local transportation, the southernmost small island of the archipelago. He has given me a book that tells the story of the German couple who lived there in the first half of the last century practically without bringing anything with them.

Nicoletta and Marco are going on a trip to the interior while I stay to do the usual paperwork and go hiking with them along the coast in the afternoon.

In front of the fish market, there is an ice-cream parlor that sells DOC Italian ice cream that we do not want to miss!

On Saturday, we will be back in Baquerizo. The weather is beautiful and the sea is smooth with long gentle swells that are only experienced in the ocean, leaving a strong nostalgia for the feeling of calm power that emanates.

The smooth surface shows us for the first time the trace of currents, which show themselves with clear lines of small waves and breaks.

Powerful cumulonimbus clouds have appeared above the islands, but they are not yet pouring rain.

Approaching Baquerizo, we meet several bottlenose dolphins who will swim with us for a short stretch. They are consistently a source of happiness! Here they are:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bVpOWO5jz0>

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Marco, who is naturally milky in color, has become purple due to too much sun. But it does not worry, and in fact the next day will be back, if not white, at least rosy, without absolutely tanning...

On Sunday, Salvatore arrives and we don't waste time leaving for Puerto Villamil, sailing at night.

We arrived there on Monday morning late, and were forced to anchor even more outside of the previous place. There is a current and we have to redo the anchorage in an unsuitable area with lower depth. The sea is getting higher. Later, we recovered with some difficulty Marco and Andreas who had gone ashore.

While we are eating, we hear strong impacts, as if we had run into a pier. We jump out immediately, but we are still at the same place as before. We immediately discover that the anchor chain is now stretched like a steel bar, and each wave violently holds back the bow with terrifying blows. While we are still trying to assess the situation, it is tearing off the large, strong retaining rope.

The situation is critical and we do not understand the reason why it is happening.

We can't stay like this any longer: a few more blows could risk tearing the lines and the winch. We jump away from the bow immediately to avoid getting hit by fragments if it breaks. I turn on the engine quickly and with difficulty, while the pitch increases. We weigh the anchor, which shows the large shackle connecting the chain is thoroughly twisted. We drop the anchor further offshore and the boat pitches a lot, but gently.

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After that, we will discover that the hydraulic cylinder that raises the keel loses a small amount of oil, which allows it to slowly lower itself. As I said, we were in shallow water and the keel completely released during low tide and got planted on the bottom, blocking the boat. Waves pushed back the boat, stretching the chain, and prevented the weight of the chain from acting as a shock absorber.

We will be informed that that same night in Baquerizo, the same exceptional storm destroyed part of the promenade! We were lucky, but on the other hand, we verified that our anchor holds wonderfully!

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From Tuesday 24 to Sunday 29 March 2015 - Galapagos Islands

Today's weather is overcast and the sea continues to make its presence felt so much that it suggests that the mooring lines on the anchor chain should be reinforced. Along the reef that protects the landing at the bottom of the bay at the mouth of which we are anchored, there is a small colony of Galapagos penguins. They are at risk of extinction, and the guardians of the dock watch that the boats in transit do not pass too close to them.

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Figure 37: Isabela's volcanic interior panorama

The next day, my friends are all going on a trip inside. Unfortunately, my leg does not allow me to go with them, which is a shame. I participate by watching upon their return the harvest of photographs they have taken, which makes me feel even more disabled.

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*Figure 38:
Broken low shroud
coupling on the mast*

We sail back to Baquerizo the next evening, with the sea still rough. We will anchor ourselves the next morning in good weather with a light northern breeze.

In Puerto Villamil I had the feeling that there was a problem at a lower shroud. Here we verify that the attachment fork on the shroud is partially broken. It must have happened because of metal fatigue, as we did not suffer any particular accident or stress. It is impossible to find a replacement, neither here, of course, nor in Italy, after so long a time since its construction. We are looking for a mechanic and find one who will prepare a replacement that will be ready in a week.

Here they are making do by themselves, as it happens in many isolated places. The craftsmen know how to manage, a situation that has by now disappeared almost everywhere, resulting in a decrease in the quality of life for everyone.

Saturday, February 28th, Nicoletta, Marco, and Andreas will land to return home. Separations are always sad: we spent a joyful period together and then the end was a moment of sadness.

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In about a week, our new companions, who we do not know yet, will arrive and accompany us on the long crossing towards the Marquesas Islands. The departure time is determined by the end of the tropical cyclone season. Leaving before April would be risky to venture into Polynesia.

We have a lot of preparation to do and we shouldn't waste any time. Meanwhile it is becoming difficult to get fresh food. The ship, which continues to remain half-sunk nearby and to pollute the air with the smell of rot and attracting insects, has not been replaced yet.

Now I have been away from home for two and a half months, and in the meantime, my last granddaughter was born. Regrettably, I also receive less pleasant news from my children, but it's not something my presence can alleviate or easily remedy. For a long time, they have been adults and I hope they can resolve their problems on their own. My dear cousin also passed away.

I am confined to bed with a sudden fever, cough, and sinusitis that I treat with antibiotics and paracetamol. This is an opportunity to update the inventory of the pharmacy on board. I reflect sadly on how hard it must have been, even in that aspect, for the lives of sailors in the age of square sails. For many years, they were absent from home without any news, leaving the family to fend for themselves. And so many of us today complain about minor things!

But no more dark moods: Salvatore and I, once back in the healthy state, we take some time every day to go for a walk and observe with admiration the incomparable nature of these islands.

With Best Explorer - 2015 From Mexico to Galapagos

From Monday 30 March to Monday 6 April 2015 - Galapagos Islands

We put in a lot of effort to fix all the little things that have broken down or are not perfectly tuned. Starting with the water heater thermostat, moving on to grease the propeller bearings, and finally mounting the new connection of the low shroud to the mast.

We stop working when we are exhausted by the humid heat and refresh ourselves by walking along the seafront. We are taking photos of the fauna and listening to the cacophony of small sea lions returning from the sea in search of their mothers, apparently indifferent to their fate. But here in the harbor, there seems to be no danger.

We noticed that many seaweeds have grown along the boattop, which is an unusual and unexpected event. Who knows, since this has never happened again even in equatorial waters, has it anything to do with the rotting debris that the half-sunken ship throws into the sea?

Together with Salvatore, we work hard to clean the hull with scrapers and brushes, a laborious operation that is slow and difficult.

It's a good thing that the water is warm so you can stay in it for a long time.

We have to operate in shifts for several days.

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The seaweed, which covers the hull for a height of over twenty centimeters and is several fingers thick, is home to a variety of crabs. At the beginning, they are smaller than a small fingernail, but they grow visibly. They have to feel comfortable inside the weed!

When we come to disturb them, they swim away and often come to rest on our naked skin, hard tickling us! We use brush strokes on the hull and slaps on our backs to drive them away.

We still enjoy visiting the Darwin Center, it's too interesting not to enjoy it more.

Saturday 4 April we move again to Puerto Ayora where we continue the cleaning of the hull, suffering the contempt manifested aloud on the water taxi by the rich Anglo-Saxons owners provided with slaves who keep their boat shiny and in order.

On Sunday (Easter), we give ourselves a dinner ashore as a prize. Tomorrow and the day after, the new friends will arrive, and then we'll leave immediately for the Marquesas Islands.

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Figure 39: Catwalks in the Darwin centre