



Roni Diving in the Galapagos Islands

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Roni Askey-Doran's Personal Page

Hola! Que tal? (i.e.: What's up?)

Hope all is well in your world, not too wet, not too hot... especially if you are in Australia, which is literally drowning and burning itself up all at the same time! If the north and south could ever meet, maybe the flooding in the north could put the fires out, and the southern fires could dry out the flood damage... Is it a whimsical Mother Nature? The effects of Global Warming? Or just more morons with matches?

So, what happened after Galapagos? Where am I now? Everyone has asked... And no one really knows... Well... The day I left Puerto Ayora was a tough day indeed... Only after a series of flight changes, unavoidable delays and other things (like one last chance to go diving that couldn't be missed) that 'kept' me in paradise for a few weeks longer... On Saturday, 21 January, the bus to Itibaca Channel wound its way over the verdant highlands one last time, past the settlement of Bellavista, past rural Santa Rosa, past Los Gemelos (the twin volcano craters), and my heart shattered into a million tiny pieces. The deep ache in my chest was real, the pain constricting my lungs was unbelievable. Gazing blindly out the window, I didn't try to stop the tears. Reluctantly, and operating on auto-pilot, I allowed airport staff to check my luggage, inspect my tickets, then send me over to Ingala to check me out of Galapagos National Park (no one noticed I was more than three months over my time limit), and someone pointed me in the right direction to get on the plane... When we took off, my heart stopped beating for a moment. I closed my eyes. It was a little death.

On landing in Guayaquil, a taxi took me straight to the enormous four-storey bus station nearby. Trail-blazing through throngs of rowdy passengers waiting in long snaky queues for their tickets, in seconds I'd found the right ticket counter using some kind secret radar system I didn't even know I had. Cool! The next bus to Montañita was leaving in 30 minutes. I made sure I was on it. Pablo Garcia visited Galapagos last year. I met him at the dive center I was managing when he came to go scuba diving with his friend. We were also at the same birthday party later that night... Before he jumped on the dive cruise to Darwin and Wolf, he said he needed someone to help out in his dive shop and said to come to Montañita when I was done with Galapagos. He gave me his phone number, and directions to *Kamala*. When I got to Montañita, we met in town and he took me home, gave me a bamboo hut to clean and clear out so I could live in it and then gave me a series of jobs to do.

Kamala is on its own planet, and operates with its own concept of time and schedules. Located 3km from Montañita (more about Montañita in a minute), a string of bamboo bungalows sit secluded behind a long golden sandy beach which faces due west and stretches for miles and miles along the Pacific Ocean. Around 6.30pm each night glorious orange-crimson sunsets slide into the sea, highlighting the grass-roofed beach bar with a dramatically colorful backdrop. If your volleyball game is over and you're done in the pool and happen to be sitting around the bar with cocktails (particularly a *Kamala*; expertly blended with fresh passionfruit pulp, which grows wild all over the

fences, roofs and walls) at that time of day, the show is not to be missed! We all wait with bated breath to see the green flash at the end of each day! Haven't seen it yet... Not giving up hope!

Montañita is... how do you describe such a place? It's... a booming hippytown, growing ten times faster than the fragile infrastructure can keep up with. Colorful artisans sell their wares on the pavements, muscled and tanned surfers carry bright balsa boards to and from the beach. Everywhere, ropes of twisted dreadlocks, odd body piercings, elaborate tattoos, reggae music blaring from every bar, near-naked tourists (if two buttons and a piece of string can actually be classified as a bikini! Otherwise, they are totally naked!), flocks of wide-eyed backpackers wearing Che Guevara t-shirts... Streets made from sand... buildings made from bamboo and wood... above everything hang the tangles of wire pretending to deliver electricity... phone lines that may or may not work during the day... internet that cuts in and out whenever... got the basic picture? Heaven if you're a party animal, and hell if you are not! Living at Kamala, we have the best of both worlds.

My first job was to clean the bar and prepare the area for the onslaught of a group from Quito. The Argentinians (Caro, Vicki, Janira) worked in the kitchen. When thirty-eight yawning people crawled off the bus from a long over-night journey, we showered them with scrambled eggs, fried bananas, fresh passionfruit juice and strong coffee. Then, we filled them with beer and threw them in the swimming pool and tried to teach them how to scuba dive. Yes, someone hung about to make sure no one drowned! Then, we fed them again until they could eat no more, and sent them into town for more beer, more food and more partying. The next day, we took them on a picnic on the beach at Solongo Island. Some of them went snorkeling for the first time in their lives. Fueled by beery bravado, some got into the water without the life jackets we provided. Fortunately, I had three strapping young Swiss boys (all Rescue Diver students) to help me out if anyone got into trouble in the water. No one did. All heads accounted for, we broke up the Ultimate Frisbee game to head home and get ready for the party.

At last! All those Salsa classes finally paid off! Despite working like a maniac behind the bar – until about 5.30am – mixing weird cocktails and serving icy beer to people who looked barely old enough to be in high school, I kept my hips swinging and my toes tapping all night either solo or with Cristian who frequently leapt over the bar to spin me around. Whirling around in a fast salsa, I still managed to put together orders of drinks (all taken in Spanish!) and organize crushed ice (made with a rolling pin and a lot of pounding!) without missing too many steps... The Argentinians escaped the arms of several wannabe paramours to be up early for the breakfast shift the next day, but the Swiss boys were raffled off and won by three lucky (or not) girls from Quito... Pablo danced until the sun came up and he finally fell down and slept somewhere – to this day no one is sure where, including Pablo!

After begging someone to actually give me some practical Spanish lessons, my Spanish is improving in leaps and bounds... Truthfully, it's only because Cristian calls me two or three times every day, and I have to work really hard to understand him on the phone! Face to face conversations are a million times easier! And I think I'm falling in love with the Spanish predictive text on my cellphone – SO useful! Finally motivated to learn, I'm doing well; learning around a dozen new words a day and figuring out how all this complicated grammar goes together... One day, I will speak amazing Spanish (if only because I just wanted to talk to a boy!)

Life continues as usual... I'm helping Pablo run the Otro Mundo Dive Center in town; which also incorporates paragliding tours (remember when I used to do that in Ölüdeniz, Turkey more than a decade ago?), snorkeling tours and tours to Galapagos (what a surprise!) including diving, cruises and various other land-based and island-hopping tours (don't forget to add mountain-biking and sea kayaking to your itinerary!). Good thing I'm up on the happening things in Galapagos... I'm also working behind the beach bar at Kamala on weekends and whenever we have large groups (which we do, for four weeks in a row! Three down, one to go!), and helping out in the kitchen each morning to make breakfast for the hordes (No, I didn't tell anyone I used to be a chef. That just means more work for me...) Although I am making the mayonnaise for the sandwiches each day (that used to be my first daily task decades ago too!). And if you've ever had to make fresh passionfruit juice for 40 people, you really don't want any more work!

My bamboo bungalow is right next to the Kamala Dive Center; a different place to the office in town, which houses all the scuba equipment and teaching materials we use to organize dive trips and instruct diving courses. The other day, woken up by the sound of a million horses stampeding

through my cabin when someone started the compressor to fill tanks at 5.30am, I was not a happy camper... bolted outside to ask WTF...?! Some French guy tried to introduce himself! Sorry, but it's difficult to be friendly at that hour! Not a big deal... I made up with him later... Tasmania is no longer at war with France! Enslaving two idle men one afternoon, I got them to carry a wooden pallet that had washed up on the beach to my hut so I could build a "shower room" out the back. Add a wooden fruit crate and two buckets; one for hot, one for cold! Candles provide light at night, incense keeps the mosquitoes at bay... There is no roof, a daytime shower is a sunny experience, a nighttime shower under the full moon is nice too... A length of pretty blue fabric hangs down one side to block the view from outside. A red cloth hammock hangs from the opposite corner of the garden and there is, of course, a small table nearby to put my book, a glass of freshly made passionfruit juice and a plate of sliced mango and bananas! Inside, the whole A-frame room is taken up by the bed and mosquito net. I built shelves to get things off the floor where most of the prolific insect life that inhabits my hut likes to spend its time when I'm not around (do not ask how I know this!). Rather than spend time wondering what creatures are crawling around underneath me, I lay in my bed each night and listen to the waves crashing on the beach. What more can you ask for?

Foodwise, I'm going bananas on bananas... mostly plantains; green and yellow... with green, we make *bolon con queso* and *patacones*, with yellow we make *maduras con queso*, which are slightly sweeter. It's all about fried bananas... The name of the dish largely depends on the way the banana is sliced... or shaped... and how many times you fry it... and what you squish it together with... cheese in the *bolon*... cheese and *maduras*... cheese and *patacones*... hehe... Strangely enough, they all taste different... go figure! I could almost write a book about what cooks do with bananas in Ecuador! I'm also living on avocados, "normal" bananas, apples, pineapples, passionfruit, grapes, natural yogurt, and organic granola... as well as the wicked roast chicken with salad from the place down the street, and the local *ceviche* is pretty good too; fresh rock oysters, juicy prawns, slices of fish in lemon, tomato, onion and spices... Delish! I have a date with Caro to make caramelized bananas on Thursday... I bring the skills, she brings the food and together we will feed the starving masses!

Until next time, *buen provecho!*

Big love, big hugs, big bubbles...

Roni

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MONTANITA



KAMALA

SEE RONI'S 5 STAR ACCOMMODATION IN KAMALA BELOW







Alojamiento / Accomodation

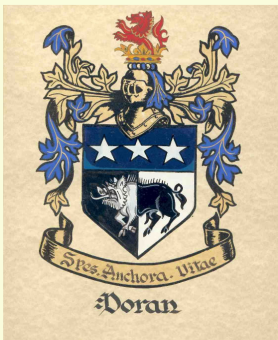
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