

BEYOND RYE

Oh, the Communities We Build

By Laurie Batal and Jamie Jensen

Picture this: Four families brought together for the first time by an extraordinary and unflappable trip leader to venture to the equator with little idea of what to expect.

We arrive in Santa Cruz, Galapagos, April 5, exhausted from our overnight flight, and before we have a chance to wipe the sleep from our eyes, we find ourselves exploring a lava tunnel and snapping photos of an 800-pound land tortoise. We are whisked into the highlands and arrive in front of a thatched hut near an enormous tree resembling something out of “Avatar.”

There, we are served coffee brewed on an open fire and a sampling of exotic fruits by an older woman and her family, a family strikingly poor by American standards, but clearly rich in culture, ambition, and pride. The coffee was grown, picked, pounded, and roasted by them on their farm in the highlands. Before we checked into our hotel, we saw firsthand what makes the Galapagos so extraordinary.

For spring break, three families joined Craig Dreves, Rye Middle Social Studies teacher and founder of VolunTravel, along with his father, Jim Dreves, on a ten-day adventure to the Galapagos Islands. Part service, part adventure, our crew of 12 – six adults and six students – experienced the wonder of evolution in more ways than one. We saw endemic wildlife that only exists on this small cluster of islands in the middle of the Pacific, hundreds of miles off the coast of Ecuador. Surrounded by affable, 500-pound sea lions nursing their pups, lethargic black iguanas piled on top of each other baking in the sun, brilliant orange crabs skittering across lava rocks, and blue-footed birds boobies nesting in the bush, we “ooh-ed” and “ahh-ed” as if at a fireworks show.

During our various island

tours, we spied and swam with sharks, sea turtles, penguins, tropical fish, and rays. Our hikes – which sometimes included a deluge of rain and the occasional muddy fall – illuminated the starkness of the landscape and the humbling power of the Sierra Negra volcano.

While the group’s adventures in nature kept us awestruck, our

experience in transforming a dilapidated, trash-filled playground reminded us of the human side of our trip. Now a giant nature preserve comprised of dozens of islands, the Galapagos are also home to some 25,000 human residents and, as in many communities in South America, an acute shortage of social services. Working with Galapagos ICE,

a local non-profit, we learned how hard life can be in a developing country with little fresh water, a crumbling infrastructure, and a lack of services we take for granted at home. Despite the benefits of tourism, most of the economic spoils do not flow into the islands. The people of the Galapagos need some help, too.

It was “hot as Hades” near the

equator, but the group worked tirelessly for three days. The park was weeded, the curbs white-washed, the garbage and glass removed, and all of the play equipment was painted in bright pastels.

Perhaps our favorite part of the park transformation was what we left behind. On our final day, we transformed a paint-chipped community stage into a giant, painted mural of children playing sports in honor of the kids of the Galapagos whom our kids met and played impromptu soccer games with.

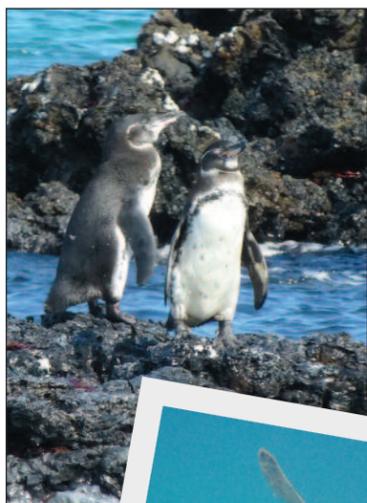
This group unanimously recommends a service trip for families looking for an adventure next spring break. For us, what was initially a question of “Do we really want to spend our vacation with strangers?” became a celebration of newfound friendships and a lesson for our kids in social risk-taking. Perhaps more impor-

◀ Craig Dreves, foreground, with the intrepid group

tant, what was initially “Do we really want to stay in low-budget hotels and ‘work’ on vacation?” turned into a valuable reminder that the most rewarding experiences in life are usually not borne of creature comforts, but a function of the choices we make and the communities we build.

If you are thinking about a VolunTravel experience with your family, we have just one tip: Expect the unexpected and embrace whatever comes with humor. Expect to discover new friends and lifelong memories and to be surprised and awed by the capacity of your children to rise to every occasion, work hard, and meet the challenges of adventure travel with grace.

For more information, visit Voluntravel.com or email Craig Dreves at Craig@Voluntravel.com. ■



Above clockwise: The Galapagos penguin is the only penguin that lives north of the equator.

Sea turtle making waves

One of the most colorful birds in the lava-encrusted islands

Galapagos tortoise

At the end of the adventure

Mission accomplished: a restored playground



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