



ISLANDS OF FIRE AND FAITH: The Galápagos

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Church Magazines

Out beyond the broken field of blackened lava rock rises a great pillar of a boulder, a bastion against the ocean's cold saltwater spray. Looking closely, one realizes that the jagged edges are actually the heads of a dozen marine iguanas, huddling together like dragons to await the energy-imbuing heat of the morning sun. Some straggling iguanas await alone here and there near the rock's base, their great talons, sharp as knives and nearly as long as a woman's fingers, holding the rock with vise-grip efficiency.

But most gather in groups for warmth and safety, their leathery bodies instinctively supporting each other against the cold and the dark, helping one another in their common need. Here, on the Galápagos, islands born of fire, life takes on precious meaning. It is a land where science and faith intermingle, where we come to understand that we are all part of a common humanity. And here, members of the Church, like these marine iguanas, understand that strength comes from holding tight to their covenants as they forge a united course toward the Lord through faith, service, and sacrifice.

There is much more to the Galápagos Islands than lava rock, finches, tortoises, and tourism. It is an epicenter of faith, where service and sacrifice have resulted in extraordinary unity and strength of conviction.

How the Gathering Began

Early one morning while visiting Quito, Ecuador, tour guide and naturalist André Degel was taking a Sunday walk by a Latter-day Saint meetinghouse. The year was 1997, and though he was a member of the Church, he had been less active for years after moving to the Galápagos Islands. André remembered the comforting feelings of being in church and would often intentionally walk by a meetinghouse when he was in Ecuador. He didn't usually go inside. He just wanted to be near the building. "It made me feel better," he says, "like I was home."



Left: The islands of Santa Cruz (left) and Baltra (right) in the Galápagos. Above: Marine iguanas hold fast to a rock in Tortuga Bay, Santa Cruz.



Above: The bay and town of Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz. **Below, from left:** Sandra and André Degel with their niece Claudine; Mariana Becerra; the Palacios family; Oswaldo and Rosario Villón.

On this day sacrament meeting was just beginning. After a moment's hesitation, André decided to enter. It was a decision that ultimately would alter the destiny of hundreds of lives.

After the meeting the missionaries and members greeted André. He remembers the conversation fondly, especially about how surprised—and excited—they were to discover he was from the Galápagos.

At the time, there was no formal Church organization on the islands. In fact, priesthood leaders in Ecuador weren't even aware members lived there.

The missionaries didn't waste any time. They introduced André to the Quito Ecuador Mission president and made sure they had

André's contact information.

Shortly thereafter André returned home to Puerto Ayora, the largest town in the Galápagos, on the island of Santa Cruz. Soon the mission sent him two boxes of Church materials, including manuals for study. But perhaps most important, the mission president had acquired a list of members living on the islands, which André could use to help gather the Saints.

A quick review of the list surprised André.

"There were people on the list I knew, but I didn't know they were members of the Church," he explains.

At the same time, other members in Santa Cruz felt pricked in the heart to establish the Church there. All had moved to the Galápagos Islands looking for work. Now they were searching for each other.

The Call to Gather

For Mariana Becerra, life was hard before the Church was established there. She had been a member of the Church for only a couple of years when she came to the islands in 1990.



TOP LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF FLOYD AND SUSAN BAUM



“There was no Church when I came,” Mariana says. “It was just my son and me. We held family home evening and tried to live the gospel. But the few other members I knew didn’t live according to gospel standards.”

David and Jeanneth Palacios had a similar experience. David had joined the Church as a teenager, and Jeanneth was baptized in 1993, just a year before the couple moved to the Galápagos.

“When we moved here, we didn’t know any other members. I thought we were the only ones. It was very difficult to live without the Church,” Jeanneth says.

“Then one day in 1997 André came to where I worked and said, ‘I’m looking for Jeanneth de Palacios. Are you a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon Church?’

“I felt as though the Lord had extended His hand and was gathering His sheep,” Jeanneth remembers. “And I said, ‘Yes, yes!’ I felt such happiness because we are not alone. We are more!”

Mariana adds, “It felt so good when André gathered us. We had something profound—something greater than friendship—as members of the Church.”

The Unity Within

Once André had gathered a core group, they began meeting together regularly. At first, there were only four families and friends.

“We would meet often, sometimes daily, mostly at my house,” André says. “We studied the books the mission had sent us and the Bible and the Book of Mormon.”

“It was a beautiful time,” says Araceli Duran. “We were very united. We would gather each week to study.”

“It is something that I will never forget,” says Jeanneth, “because there was such a sense of unity, such a feeling that our Heavenly Father loved us and knew that it was now that we needed to get together.”

They depended on each other, taught each other, and built their faith together. Soon their efforts were recognized, and an official branch was organized in early 1998.

Over time the branch grew, and the members needed more space. They rented a small house and then moved to a larger building that had been a hotel. In this larger building they grew to nearly



Below: Daniel and Angela Calapucha; Araceli Duran with her children; members of the Galápagos branch who helped build Elena Cedeño's house; the Galápagos Islands Branch meetinghouse.

100 members attending. Although the branch grew through activation efforts and people moving in, much of its strength came through converts.

Oswaldo Villón and his wife, Rosario, are such an example. Rosario was baptized in 2000 and has served as Relief Society president, Primary president, and Young Women president. Oswaldo, baptized just a year later, serves as elders quorum president. For both of them, the Church

brought a complete change of life.

"The Church saved me," explains Oswaldo. "Before, I lived in the world. I wasn't an alcoholic, but I drank like I was. When I joined the Church, these 25 people were my family. We were as united as could be. And we worked hard to help the branch grow."

Through the tireless efforts of Galápagos members, sacrament attendance often hovers between 100 and 120 members. In September 2009 they were rewarded with the dedication of a chapel.

The Power of Service

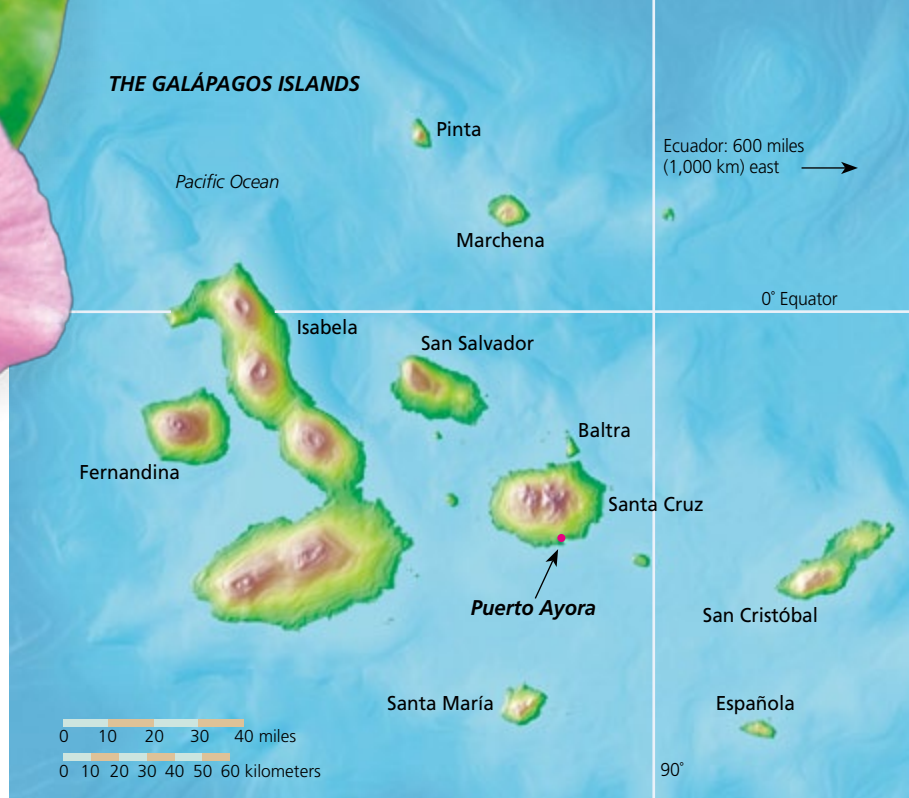
Some branch members and their families live in the lush highlands of Santa Cruz. It is here that the branch leaders decided to host a service project on September 4, 2010.

"As an elders quorum, each month we try to host one or two *mingas*," or service projects, says Oswaldo. "We hold them for the person who most needs the service. This time we are going to build a house for a sister."

Half of a house, actually. A week or so before, members had built the first half. This day over 20 of them spent six hours or more building the other half, including a kitchen, a water-collection system, and a walkway around the house. The modest home provides a place to live for Elena Cedeño and her children, who were not members of the Church at the time. All were extremely gratified by the time and effort the members gave. (Sister Cedeño and her son Sebastián were baptized in January 2011.)

"There is nothing better than serving the people who need it," Oswaldo says. And the look in his eyes, as well as that of the other branch members and the sister they served, testify of the unity such service yields.





What Really Matters

The service and interdependence among members in the Galápagos Islands that have created such unity led to rich blessings in 2007. That year David and Jeanneth Palacios escorted five branch families, nearly 25 people in all, to the Guayaquil Ecuador Temple.

“To see those families sealed, I felt as though we had been transported to the heavens,” says Jeanneth. “We felt the presence of the Lord so profoundly. All five of those families are very active today.”

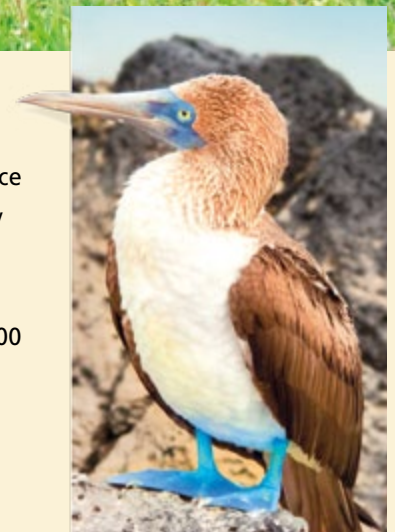
On this visit to the temple, branch president Daniel Calapucha and his wife, Angela, were sealed, and their three children were sealed to them as well. “The temple totally transforms you,” President Calapucha says. “Truly, it is the house of the Lord. To be together as a family in the gospel of the Lord changes lives. That’s why I stay in this church. Having been sealed as a family, I no longer fear death. I no longer fear that I’m going to lose my family when I die.

“The temple has become the foundation for feeling and knowing that our Heavenly Father exists—and His Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. It is a testimony that no one can take from me.”



THE PROVINCE OF THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS

The islands constitute a province of Ecuador. Although roughly 97 percent of the land has been claimed as a national park, that leaves plenty of land for the 25,000 or so inhabitants to work in business, tourism, and agriculture.





Below: The Fueres family joined the Church in Otavalo, Ecuador, and later moved to the Galápagos Islands in search of work. Below right: Elena Cedeño (left) with her sister, Maria; with Maria's help, Elena joined the Church earlier this year.

What the Galápagos Teach Us

Every member of the Church in the Galápagos Islands is a modern pioneer. Almost all of the adult members are converts, many having joined within the past few years. And each is helping build the kingdom of God in a remote island where resources are scarce. Much of the food and all of the gasoline and industrial and technological products have to be imported. The local economy, though relatively productive, depends on that fickle merchant of fortune known as tourism.

Perhaps the most stable thing on the islands is the members' dedication to each other and to building the kingdom. That dedication is as remarkable as the ecological interdependence of the islands on which they live. The ecosystem in the Galápagos Islands depends on the health of living creatures—both as individuals and as a

species—interacting successfully with their natural environment.

As a tour guide and naturalist, André explains, “The Galápagos teach us that an ecosystem is like a living being. It’s like a body. It has pressure, fluids, and organs. If one of those things goes wrong, then everything suffers.”

The Galápagos Islands also teach us about the vast grandeur of God’s creations. Nothing is indigenous to the Galápagos. All life, plants, animals, and people are imports.

“If you think about it,” André explains, “the chances of life beginning here on the Galápagos are incredible. First, the lava rock had to decompose to the point where it would support life. Then freshwater sources had to develop. Then seeds had to arrive in a condition that would allow them to germinate. And they had to be able to pollinate each other.

“Then creatures had to arrive, whether floating on the water or flying or whatever. And members of each sex had to arrive at the same time and place and condition so that they could reproduce and find food and water. There are thousands of



species of animals in the Galápagos.

“Remember, the nearest land mass is 600 miles [1,000 km] away. For all of these conditions to be met is something of a miracle.”

And yet that is exactly what the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, caused to happen.

Just as an ecosystem thrives when all its members work in harmony, members of the Church form a kind of social and spiritual ecosystem. The members are individuals who are also part of ecosystems called families and wards and branches of the Church. Each member plays an integral role,

contributing to the salvation and exaltation of themselves, their families, and other members of the branch.

Individual decisions, like the one André made to attend church that day in 1997, can have a lasting impact. The combined decisions of the members to build the kingdom through selfless service may seem like nothing more than an old adage to some. But for the members in the Galápagos Islands, such decisions make all the difference in the strength of their convictions, the power of their unity, and their faith in their covenants. ■



THE RICHNESS OF THE LAND

Much of the land in the Galápagos Islands consists of hard, broken cobblestone of rough-hewn lava rock, split and made uneven by the passage of wind and water. Other areas are covered with pear cactus, palo santo trees, and brown and gray vegetation. On the younger islands, such as the mammoth Isabela, there is a feeling that you’ve walked back to the dawn of time.

But there is much vibrant life too, especially on the island of Santa Cruz. There, vast areas of mangrove trees grow along the shoreline. As the elevation rises inland to the north, the climate zone changes to a lush, verdant temperate zone, where abundant farming takes place, including the cultivation of tropical fruits and other crops.

“People think the Galápagos are just a land of rock, lava, and birds,” says branch president Daniel Calapucha. But, as he explains, they are blessed with ranches, cattle, and fruit trees.

