

I love boobies

I love boobies, I really do. As I am writing this I have recently returned from the *BCMJ*'s Galapagos CME cruise and I have to say that the blue-footed boobie is one of my favorite birds. During mating season the male even lifts one foot after the other as if to say, "See, they really are blue."

Following a number of long flights we eventually arrived in Quito, Ecuador, to start our journey. One of our stops along the way was in Bogota, Columbia, and I have never before been forced to go through so many security checkpoints. They even sniffed the novels I brought along. I assume they were looking for drugs and that they don't have a penchant for scratch-and-sniff books. Quito is located at over 9000 feet, so altitude sickness is a possibility. This is supposedly worsened by alcohol consumption so I sacrificed myself to science and drank heavily. Other than a headache and some breathlessness with activity, I fared much better than some of the group who had significant respiratory symptoms. One of the many benefits of a *BCMJ* cruise is that there are usually a few physicians around. I realize it was probably cruel to hand out Diamox telling sufferers that it works best as a suppository, but

vacations are all about fun. Quito has some interesting sites, but it isn't very safe. Even fast-food restaurant chains have security guards with bully clubs, as apparently french-fry theft is ram-

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pant. I even spotted guards in the supermarket with machine guns, which I don't believe were from the toy aisle. Recently, the incumbent president passed a law that it isn't a crime to steal less than \$600 cash or property unless the theft involves some sort of violent assault. Apparently, he now stands a better chance of being re-elected. I asked how this law affects tourists and was told that "theft from tourists is encouraged as it helps the economy." Therefore, taking a cue from the adage "when in Rome," I almost managed to cover the cost of my hotel room.

Following Quito, we flew to the Galapagos Islands and began our 7-

day cruise of the islands aboard the 100-passenger Celebrity Cruise Ship *Xpedition*. The ship was comfortable, with good food and a friendly crew (at least until I got hold of the PA system). Our days were filled with morning and afternoon excursions to the islands, interspersed by CME provided by some of the *BCMJ* Editorial Board members and other notable invitees. The excursions are strictly controlled and tourists must be accompanied by a naturalist from an accepted tour at all times. The naturalists on our cruise were all very knowledgeable and passionate about the islands. Apart from boobies, we saw sea lions, frigate birds, lava herons, hawks, albatross, iguanas, land tortoises, and more. These species have little fear of humans and therefore can be viewed in close proximity (too close for some of our tour) under controlled circumstances. Human activity is limited to specific trails designed for minimal environmental impact. So imagine our horror when Dr Tim Rowe was spotted riding one of the giant land tortoises.

Our evenings were spent dining, drinking, pooping (those of us that contracted the Galapagos gallop), and partying. Fortunately, our tour group was blessed with talented singers and musicians, and a special thank you is due to Shannon Dutchyn, Clare O'Callaghan, Colin Rankin, and Heidi Oetter on backup vocals. Remember, what happens on deck 5 stays on deck 5 unless you have photos, like I do.

Being among the Galapagos Islands gave me a chance to reflect on the wonders of our natural world and how blessed some of us are to be able to travel and view this splendor. And the trip confirmed for me that there is nothing as beautiful as a well-put-together boobie.

—DRR

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Two health care systems

I enjoy traveling, but there is always part of me that looks forward to returning home. Often the attraction is not much more than sleeping in my own bed and using my own shower! However, sometimes there are extra things to be grateful for: drinking water out of the tap, a sense of security walking along the street, and breathing cleaner air.

Recently I was part of a group who traveled on to Peru after the *BCMJ* CME cruise to the Galapagos Islands. The tour organizer arranged for us to spend some time talking to a local doctor in Cusco (altitude 3300 metres, or 10 800 feet). This conversation gave us a brief glimpse into medicine in Peru.

Approximately 5% to 7% of the population is cared for under a private, and expensive, health care system; another 30% or so have access to a public system with the premiums being paid by their employer. The remaining two-thirds of the people have theoretical access to the public system, but care appears to be rudimentary at best.

The physician who spoke to us worked in both systems (the private

part of his practice centred on tourists with altitude sickness and other ailments). The major diseases dealt with in the public system are tuberculosis and AIDS, the former being driven by the latter. HIV disease has tripled in incidence in the last several years and little care is available. Antiviral therapy costs about US\$700 per month and the average income is US\$1000. Condoms are not talked about, let alone used, in this predominantly Catholic country. Many rural people do not trust modern medicine and use the local healer instead. Maternal mortality is about 180/1000 births, with many women delivering in remote farms with little help. Medical school is available only to those with the ability to pay, and practice in the private system requires some training overseas, again available only to the well off.

It was sobering conversation that left me appreciating, once again, our health care system and our ability to give care to all regardless of income. It reminded me what a privilege it is to work in such a system and how blessed we all are to live in Canada.

—LML



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