



CAPTURING THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

by Eric Hoffman



Sweat stung his eyes and every few steps photographer Frans Lanting felt dizzy. His lungs ached for more oxygen. But he was determined to keep pace with native-born guides who led the steep 4,000-foot climb under the equatorial sun to the summit of Alcedo Crater. Ahead, on the faint trail over the twisted volcanic moonscape, Lanting's guide, Pepe, chattered in Spanish about the geologic forces that only that morning had unleashed a 15,000-foot steam geyser into the sky from a volcano on a distant island.

During his visit to the Galapagos Islands, the archipelago which lies 600 miles off South America, Lanting's aim was to avoid the beaten path and explore less well-charted territory. But though Lanting is an internationally known wildlife photographer and clearly on the side of wildlife conservation, the Ecuadorian-run park service rarely makes exceptions to the rules. Around 80 percent of the Galapagos are off limits to tourists of any kind — a policy designed to ensure the

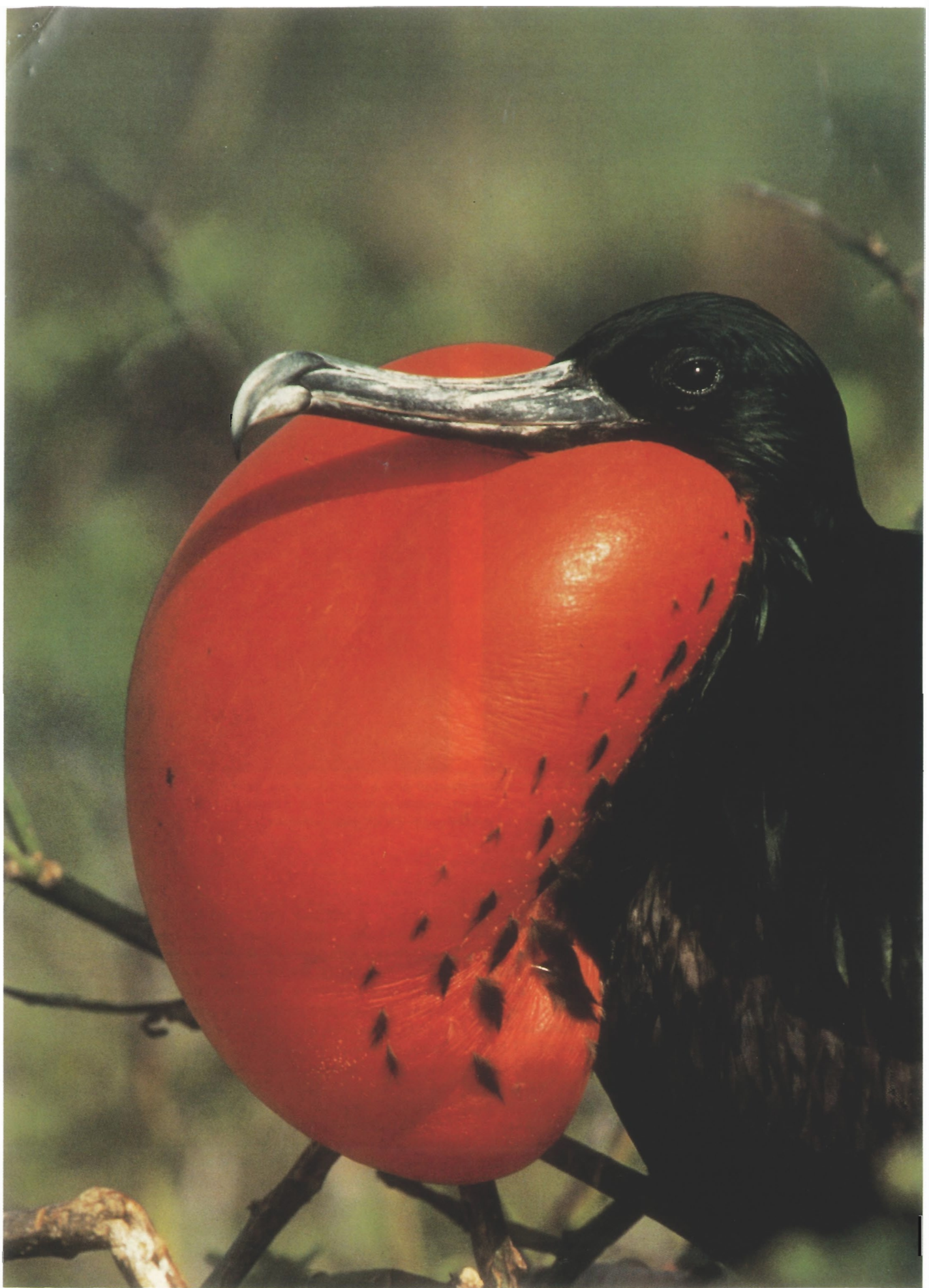
protection of the islands' unique creatures. Lanting was thus overjoyed when he was finally allowed to accompany guides leading a scientific study to one of the seldom-visited craters, located on Isabella island, the largest of the 13 major islands that form the archipelago.

Halfway through the climb, weighted down with equipment and enough water to last three days, Lanting remembers hoping that he would reach the crater's rim with enough energy left to photograph what he saw. He made it. And while relating the experience in the comparative comfort of his Santa Cruz, California home, he re-lived the moment when he set eyes on his goal. "At the crater's rim we plunged through Devil's Gap where the world changed. Suddenly there were clouds, moisture, tropical plants, lichen and trees. Life in the crater is as primeval as when reptiles ruled the earth.

"Giant tortoises, some weighing nearly 700 pounds, roam all over the place. They have a pace, an ageless pulse, and an intelligence that are all their own. They

“Great Frigate Birds and Grey-Headed Seagulls continue their nesting undisturbed by tourists who snap their pictures from a few yards away.”







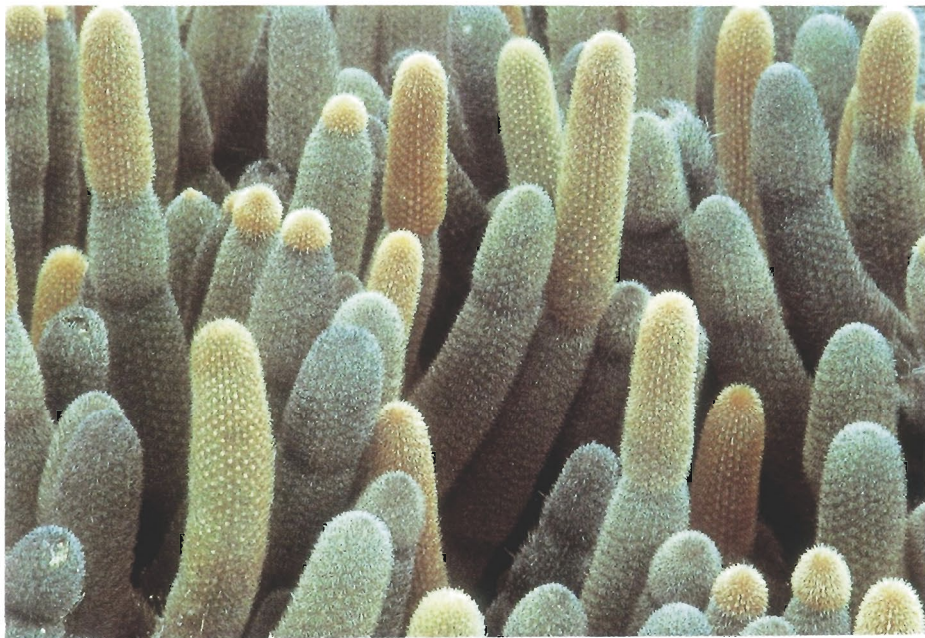
Above: volcanic moonscape where prehistoric creatures such as iguanas can still roam freely. Opposite page: the indigenous flora and fauna are ensured protection by the Ecuadorian-run park service — 80 percent of the Galapagos are off limits to tourists.

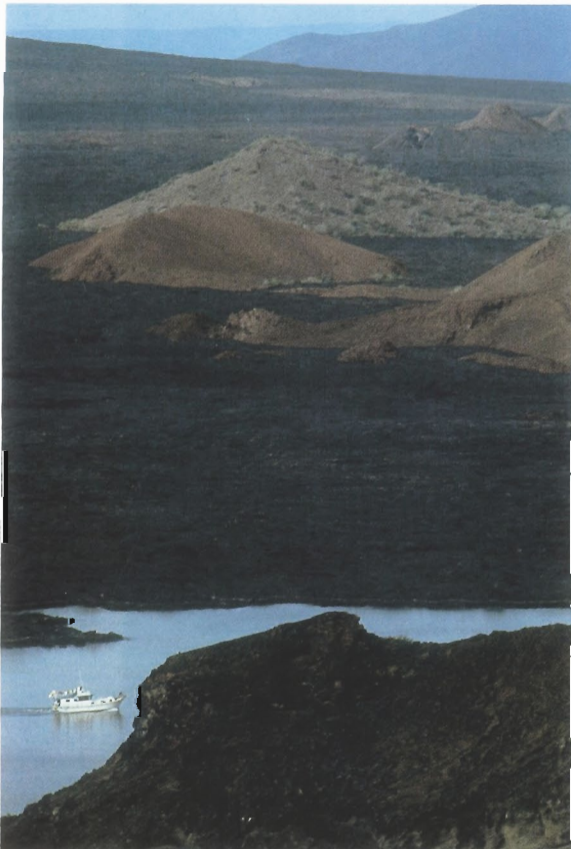
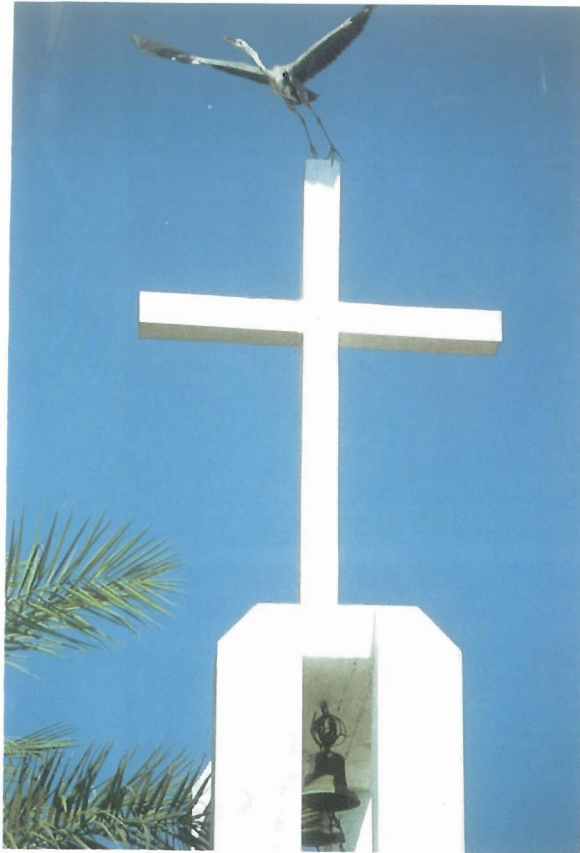
are wise, suspicious, weary and old — typically they live 100 years or longer.” Smiling, Lanting described the courtship behaviour of the males, who alternately ram fellow suitors, like automobiles in a demolition derby, while pursuing a young female which usually finds refuge in a thicket.

Lanting also encountered a territorial tortoise who ploughed into his tent repeatedly until he moved. “I had set up my tent in the best campsite I could find. I suspect the old tortoise had been using the spot long before I was even born and wasn’t about to give it up to an uninvited alien. While the old tortoise squashed my tent from one side I pulled up stakes and moved it from the other side. Once I was out of the way the tired tortoise settled down to his afternoon siesta on the spot where my tent had been. It was then that I realised

I was in a reptilian world, and not a human one.”

Dutch-born Lanting travels seven months a year to capture rare glimpses of wildlife and record landscapes which millions of people around the world see in as many as 40 different magazines in a year. With no formal photographic training, but a degree in economics, Lanting is among the premier wildlife photographers at work today. In the past few years he has garnered assignments on tiny islands throughout the Pacific, and in Madagascar, East Africa and North America for top-paying international magazines. It is the freedom to set his own schedules and choose what he wants to photograph that Lanting most enjoys. “It’s a lifelong education,” he says. “I get paid to be curious and investigate, which most people have to abandon when they grow up.”





However, Lanting is quick to point out that his idyllic existence is hard-earned. "Many people think a photographer's job is dawn to dusk with a camera. It's much more than that. I spend 99 percent of my time on research, logistics, talking to editors, and negotiating with the organisations and agencies that grant permission to visit sensitive environments. And," he added with a smile, "wild animals are not always the most cooperative subjects."

To Lanting, who often spends weeks devising strategies to get close enough to photograph reclusive creatures, the Galapagos Islands were a refreshing change. "Within short walking distances on the various islands, there are five endangered species that tourists can visit in the wild. The animals are so tame they don't even walk away. They're as curious about you as you are about them."

On one island bright orange land iguanas, like painted miniature dinosaurs, scurry about begging for hand-outs as people eat their lunches overlooking the ocean. At other sites, usually reached by boat, specially adapted marine iguanas dive into the surf to munch on seaweed below the surface. Darwin's famous finches, which share a common ancestry but are now uniquely adapted for survival on the islands, flutter to within a few feet of a camera lens. On the nearby trails, Blue-footed Boobies and Great Frigate Birds continue their nesting activities undisturbed by the dozens of tourists who snap their pictures from a few yards away. "It's a photographer's paradise," concludes Lanting.

Lanting attributes the trusting nature of the islands' creatures to the policies of the Ecuadorian park service — and to evolution itself. "The strict rules that control the activities of tourists, together with centuries of evolution in an isolated environment, has allowed the animals to remain naturally tame and trusting towards humans.

"For the most part, the uniquely adapted animals that stimulated Charles Darwin to publish *On The Origin Of Species* are every bit as accessible and cooperative to humans today as they were when Darwin visited the islands in 1825. Each kind of animal is a study in evolution and natural history. Let's hope," he added, "that it stays that way."

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Right: the oldest inhabitants of the Galapagos — the giant tortoises that gave the archipelago its name.

