

Galapagos Islands: These days tortoise is off the menu



There's a process of systematic desensitization that foreigners go through when they move abroad. Foods that once have seemed eccentric at best and insane at worst become natural as, say, putting mint jelly on roast lamb.

This was sharply brought home to me yesterday when I was having lunch in La Puerta Madera, a favourite restaurant catering to local office workers. It has an open kitchen, good food and, most importantly, it's very close to my house. The waitress plonked down the pudding next to my glass of lulo (a gooseberry-type fruit) juice, and it jolted me out of my meanderings. I surveyed my lunch: a starter of banana soup with a dollop of aji (chilli sauce); a main course of steak with rice, cold tuna pasta and fried banana stuffed with cheese and guava jam; all finished off with a block of lime jelly.

“What are you doing?” I thought looking, suddenly incredulous, at the array of incompatible foods. Not only was I eating such a bizarre assortment of flavours, but I had actually ordered this culinary potpourri. This was my choice and I was enjoying it.

Still, “going native” like this takes time—I've become accustomed to the combination of unlikely flavours. (I do draw a line, however: Colombia leads the world in the

inappropriate use of cheese—it's eaten grated or dunked it into anything unlikely, such as hot chocolate, fruit salad or ice cream.)

Holidaymakers, fresh off the plane and keen to remove the memory of the plastic-clad abomination on the flight, do not want to be confronted with the challenging extremes of the indigenous cuisine. New arrivals' untutored palettes cannot be expected to tuck into the local equivalent of a steak and kidney pudding with relish.

This raises a difficult challenge for local chefs offering a set menu to their foreign guests. They don't want to offer something totally alien or cater to the sort of people who consider mini chicken tikka kiev to be the exhilarating edge of foreign sophistication. Do they serve local food aimed at international tastes or provide international crowd-pleasers with an inevitably local slant?

Both have their dangers, a Colombia attempting to impress an Italian with his lasagna is as likely to curry favour as the same chef attempting to delight

breakfasters with coarse tripe bangers (a Colombian speciality).

I was recently on a trip where I was exposed to both approaches. Your dining options are limited if you're in a luxury campsite in the highlands of the Galapagos Islands on a cruise around the archipelago. Don't get me wrong, I'm not really complaining. While guests at the Galapagos Safari Camp do stay in tents, they have en-suite bathrooms and more like luxury canvas cabañas than anything a cub scout might recognize. Undo the tent zips, walk back to bed on the wooden floor (they're raised so the giant tortoises can walk beneath), lie back and admire that there beyond the mangrove is the Pacific Ocean. Glorious.

While I was staying with there, the Ecuadorian chef was developing a new menu. An open-minded soul, I am always happy to be a guinea pig (although an Andean speciality, guinea pig was not on the menu here). Eating lunch on the terrace with the owners, Michael and Stephanie, we started with ceviche—Peru's gift to the gastronomic world—before pollo de seco. Literally “dry chicken”, this is one of the world's more ironically named dishes, as the tender meat comes in a sauce of tomato, coriander, celery, chilli and

naranjillo citrus fruit (the Ecuadorian name for lulo).

Santa Cruz Island is 700 miles off the Ecuadorian mainland, so GSCwisely source as much as possible from the island. They're self-sufficient in water, grow much of their food, even rearing their own cattle, and what they can't provide themselves is bought from neighbouring farms or local fishermen.

It's surprising the appetite that can be built up after a hard day of walking through lava tunnels, surfing or admiring the tortoises—they have a pleasingly prehistoric look and a gait that suggests that millennia have taught them there's really no point hurrying. If you get too close, they make a sort of disappointed sigh, releasing air to allow them to retreat within their shells. In the days of Charles Darwin, tortoises were a favourite of protein-hungry sailors and used to potter about on deck awaiting the chop.

These days, tortoise is off the menu. After a sharpener by the fire, dinner is served at the long dining table, where the chef would introduce the forthcoming treats.

Stephanie and Michael are ideal hosts with a seemingly endless succession of interesting and endearingly eccentric friends. Beyond Argentina and Chile, imbibing wine is not really in the culture, at least not with the appropriate enthusiasm. After dinner, as I swayed happily back to my tent past a curious barn owl, I was grateful for Michael and Stephanie's dauntingly international backgrounds.

After a revitalizing swim in the pool, I discovered an epic hunger for breakfast. I gorged on eggs, bacon, toast, sausage, fruit, patisserie, pancakes, juice, coffee.

The danger of staying in a place like this is that wherever you stay next can only be a disappointment. And so it was.

Rather than depress you with the details of my night in Puerto

Baquerizo Moreno (the town on San Cristobal), I'll head straight for the highlight: dinner on the pavement outside a restaurant by the bay. I chose shrimp cocoda—not the light option—fat shrimps with onion and cream covered in shavings of coconut with rice and patacones (fried plantain cake).

The beach is separated from the road by a plastic wall; this is notto dissuade

inquisitive tourists from bothering the sea lions. Instead, the wall is to stop the sea lions from getting out and making a nuisance of themselves around town like boys on a school trip to Calais.

The next day, I set sail aboard the Flamingo, on one of Ecoventura's cruises around the Galapagos. The animals are spectacular: snorkelling with sea lions and penguins; watching courting blue-footed boobies, albatrosses taking off, migrating whales... It is amazing.

And the food: the Galapagos Islands are not an obvious gastronomic destination. A few short generations represents a lengthy dynasty on the islands. As a result, despite their endemic flora and fauna, no indigenous cuisine has developed. Instead, local Ecuadorian food, truth be told, is never going to challenge for a position as one of the world's great cuisines. We did have some rather peculiar dishes; calamari with a gammon chop stands out as particularly idiosyncratic.

While cooking in a kitchen in the highlands of Santa Cruz had its challenges,

catering for 20 in a galley bobbing about the Pacific places somewhat greater demands. Feeding a disparate group of punters, it is understandable to take an internationalist approach.

Dishes such as steak in mushroom sauce and pork in cheese sauce were all perfectly acceptable. It was the evening when Chef Tausto

Holguin Peñafiel could make his own Ecuadorian food that it really got interesting.

Given that it was only him and his sous chef catering for 20 guests in a tiny galley it was a spectacular achievement: happily, the seco de pollo was no drier than last time; frittola—tender seasoned pork with white onion, beer and garlic; yopinojocko—a potato cake stuffed with cheese and white

onion, with peanut sauce; corbina (sea bass) grilled in flour; ensalada

creolla—a seasoned salad of tomatoes, onions, and peppers; mote pío—sweet corn with scrambled eggs, white onion and coriander, and arroz con achiote—rice coloured and flavoured with a fragrant red seed. All in all, it was a prodigious achievement.

Perhaps it was not as memorable as swimming with sea lions but it was certainly better than La Puerta Madera's block of lime jelly.

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