

Hello, Strangers

They went from living in a city to sleeping in a tent — and that was the easy part

BY COLIN BARRACLOUGH

> STEPHANIE MESDAG IS HUSTLING TO GET HER KIDS TO SCHOOL WHEN SHE RUNS INTO A traffic backup. Five cars ahead in the middle of the road is a half-ton object: a gigantic tortoise. It's a typical tardy excuse in the Galapagos. After a bicycling trip here, Stephanie and her would-be husband, Michael, bought a 100-acre farm on Isla Santa Cruz. They swapped the daily grind of Barcelona and Seville for a year in a tent, surrounded by giant iguanas. Seven years later, they harvest their own coffee, gather bananas out back and host tourists at the only tented camp in the islands.

Q: Galapagos? Tents? Are you nuts?

A: Michael and I were riding on this lonely path through the countryside. It ended here at this farm. We looked down through the forest canopy and saw islands scattered around the ocean. We fell in love: with the view, the property, with each other. It sounds corny and stupidly romantic, and it was.

Q: How do you go from office jobs in Spain to a Galapagos safari camp?

A: We toyed with ideas for a year. Then we got into the details: buy the farm with the chickens and the cows, or without? There was nothing here. We lived in the tent, showered outside. It took two years to get the road done.

Q: You built your own road?

A: Yeah. A water tank too. And we put in electricity. We dug a mile by hand to get the cables underground. It was only when I got pregnant that we built a room.

Q: I didn't know you could even buy property in the Galapagos.

A: Three percent of the Galapagos is outside the national park. And it's more accessible now for people. But we're up in the highlands, where the tropical storms dump a lot of water. There are scalesias all around — they're basically daisies,



Michael and Stephanie Mesdag left the rat race in Spain for a tortoise-friendly pace in the Galapagos. Their labor has produced a safari camp, where tent lodging is more luxurious than you'd expect.

but they grow into 30-foot trees. We get lots of carpenter finches here, the ones that have learned how to imitate a woodpecker. And the Galapagos dove, the beautiful one with the blue eyes.

Q: Got any human neighbors?

A: We have a former Haight-Ashbury hippie not far away, and a few farmers. But we're right on the park boundary, so there aren't many people here. Santa Rosa, the nearest village, is four miles away.

Q: You are 650 miles from the mainland, surrounded by weird creatures. Isn't it ... weird?

A: Yeah, I guess it can be. Like the male sea lions can get territorial — they tend to chase us away. But the pups are pretty playful when we go swimming. Tortoises come through the farm when they migrate up from the lowlands. The old guys are pretty big — 4 or 5 feet long. They rub their shells against the tents sometimes, and make this deep sighing sound. It's just air coming out, but our

kids (Lawrence, 4, and Jasmine, 2) love it.

Q: Were your kids born here?

A: Yep, right here in the camp.

Q: In a tortoise enclave. How'd that work?

A: Lawrence's was a water birth, the first in the Galapagos. Michael built a bathtub in the middle of nowhere, but

there was no clean water to pump out there. So we ended up buying a kids swimming pool and filling it with the rainwater we collected from the roof.

Q: And Jasmine?

A: She came two years later. Prince Charles and Camilla were visiting, and we threw them a cocktail reception. I got the royal doctor to be on duty in case anything happened.

Q: Sounds like you're ready for any type of guest — human or otherwise.

A: It wasn't easy. We had to rethink everything three times. We brought out an architect from Kenya, but found out it's too damp for an African-style tented camp. So we shipped in heavy-duty tents from Australia and kitted them out with cedar floors and stone basins. We had to teach the personnel how to set a table, what's a fish knife. I cried so much the first year. But now we have a manager and good balance.

Q: So life hasn't been one long vacation?

A: Doesn't quite work that way. The camp's hard work, and we raise cattle on the farm too. Still, nothing blocks the view of the horizon from our bedroom window. We woke up at 2 a.m. the other night and saw the entire sky burning pink. It was a volcano erupting, miles away on Isla Fernandino. We couldn't see the crater, but the fires filled the sky. Amazing. ■ ISLANDS.COM/galapagos

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