

out of this world THIS ISLAND LIFE Opposite: The Galapagos Safari Camp founders, Stephanie BonhamCarter and Michael Mesdag. Stephanie wears shirt by Equipment, £230; sunglasses by RayBan, £120; scarf by Chan Luu, £165; pants, her own. This page: Kaftan by Melissa Odabash, £400; sandals by Ancient Greek Sandals, £115

Surfers gather in the hazy light on the white sands of Tortuga Bay on Santa Cruz, one of only five inhabited islands in the Galapagos. Among them is Stephanie Bonham-Carter, her skin honeyed by the equatorial sun. She paddles out to the break with her husband, Michael Mesdag. Behind the surfers stands the island's distinctive wave-shaped hill, which shadows Bonham-Carter and Mesdag's farm. Like a magic mountain in a Dr. Seuss story, its grassy flank is naked except for a single lollipopshaped tree.

Like a seductive cross between Karen Blixen and a particularly chic Ibiza hippie, Bonham-Carter is equally at ease in the surf, with her hands in the earth, or running the luxury eco-lodge, Galapagos Safari Camp, she and Mesdag have built on their 55-hectare farm. The two met at Mesdag's parents' house near Ronda, Spain, and now live simply with their two children shuttling between Ecuador's capital, Quito, and a volcanic dot in the Pacific Ocean, nearly 600 miles from its coast.

"When I met Michael, he took me camping with just a hammock and a tin of condensed milk. That's when I fell in love with him," she says. "It's not that we intended to end up in the Galapagos. We were biking through the Santa Cruz highlands when we just happened to come across this farm that was for sale.

"I've always had a fatal attraction for far-flung, simple and natural environments," she continues. "The Galapagos was our lucky surprise. I suppose we were taking a gamble, but I never questioned it, not once. I still don't, and it has been nearly 10 years."

It is certainly a contrast to both of their previous lives. In her twenties and early thirties, Bonham-Carter played with the smart set in Europe, while Mesdag was raised in Spain, where his family is known for breeding the country's finest Andalusian horses. "But I always felt free when I was traveling," she says. "Living out of a bag for months at a time." It was only when she returned to England that she felt lost - suffocated at English

Stephanie and

wears sweater

by Gucci, £410:

her daughter, Jasmine.

Stephanie

sunglasses

by Ray-Ban, £120 LIFE'S JOURNEY

Michael takes the

family for a ride on

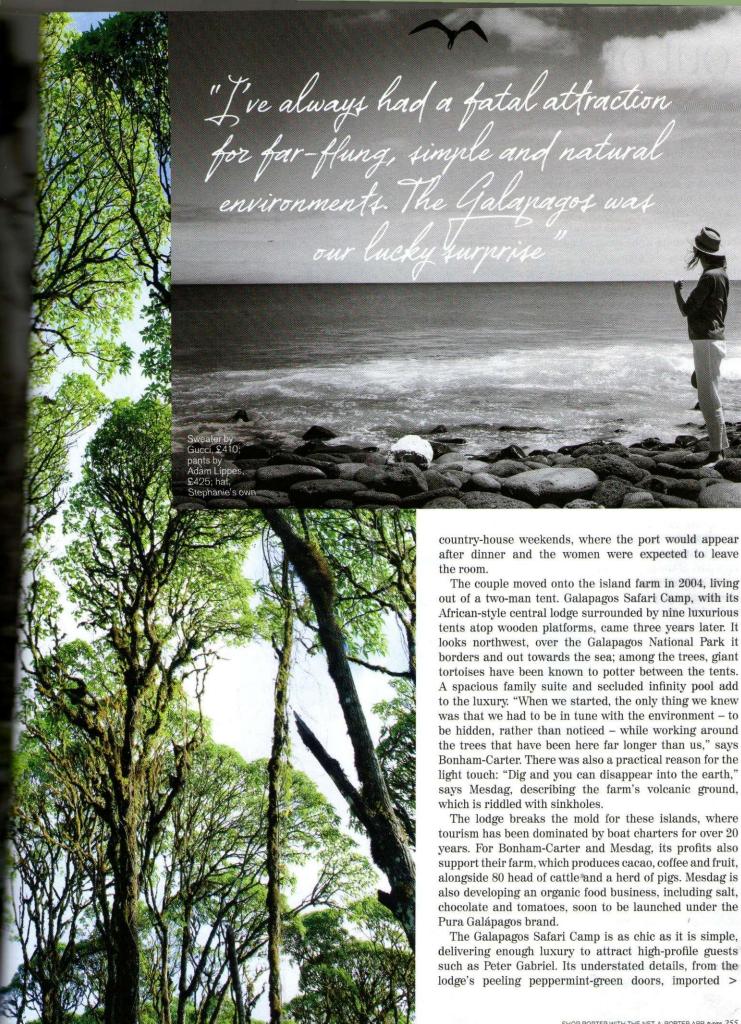
a vintage motorbike

Stephanie wears shirt

by Equipment, £230;

ans, her own





out of this world

from India, to the tents' en-suite wooden bathrooms with rose-head showers, could have come from Blixen's sumptuous plantation in Out of Africa. The food is lovingly sourced and hyper-local - beef raised by Mesdag; ducks, eggs, cheese and milk from the farm; coffee, avocados, oranges and lemons harvested from their own modest plantations and fresh fish caught by guests on day expeditions.

This is how one spends one's time on the islands: hiring boats for visits to beaches unmarked by the footsteps of others; going on hikes with a naturalist to see the lava tunnels, mangroves and sunken craters; mountain-biking along local trails to the swamps favored by giant tortoises. But Bonham-Carter and Mesdag are also part of the community. Stay with them and one becomes immersed in the human history - and present - of the islands. We enjoy a Sunday lunch of grilled chicken, fried pork and Andean corn with local families while watching a volleyball game in the village of Bellavista. We sip coffee on the pier in the main town of Puerto Ayora and eat ice cream in the company of artists, fishermen and missionaries who, over the years, have come to live on the islands.

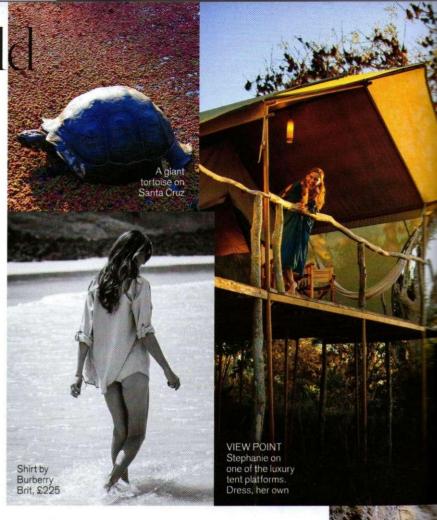
For me, it is a revelation. I have done a cruise here before, and found it claustrophobic: traveling in close quarters with complete strangers, following a rigorous itinerary in order to tick off the animals that inspired Darwin's On the Origin of Species, with one's movements heavily controlled by National Park strictures. But with Bonham-

Carter and her family, the experience is different. The creatures on the farm, whether domestic or exotic, are also part of the family's lives.

Their children, both born on the farm, are experts on the giant tortoises, which can measure nearly 6ft in length. Lawrence, six, tells me that they can live for well over 100 vears, meaning that the specimen that brushes against the walls of his tent at night could have hatched in the 19th century. The frigates, as common as city pigeons, have throats that puff up into crimson balloons, and when the kids throw sticks, it is not for dogs to chase, but sea lions. The children swim with manta rays and seals, and when they make sandcastles, they are surrounded by salt-spitting iguanas that are as long as Jasmine, four, is tall.

When I ask Jasmine what her favorite animal is, she has to think for a minute. Hammerhead sharks? Darwin's finches? Galapagos penguins? Eventually she answers. "Fairies," she says, looking me straight in the eye. She describes them carefully, how they come out at night, and how they are the color of light.

Her comment sticks like a burr. It is as if I have gone through the wardrobe door and entered Narnia: where the existence of fairies is not just plausible, but verifiable;



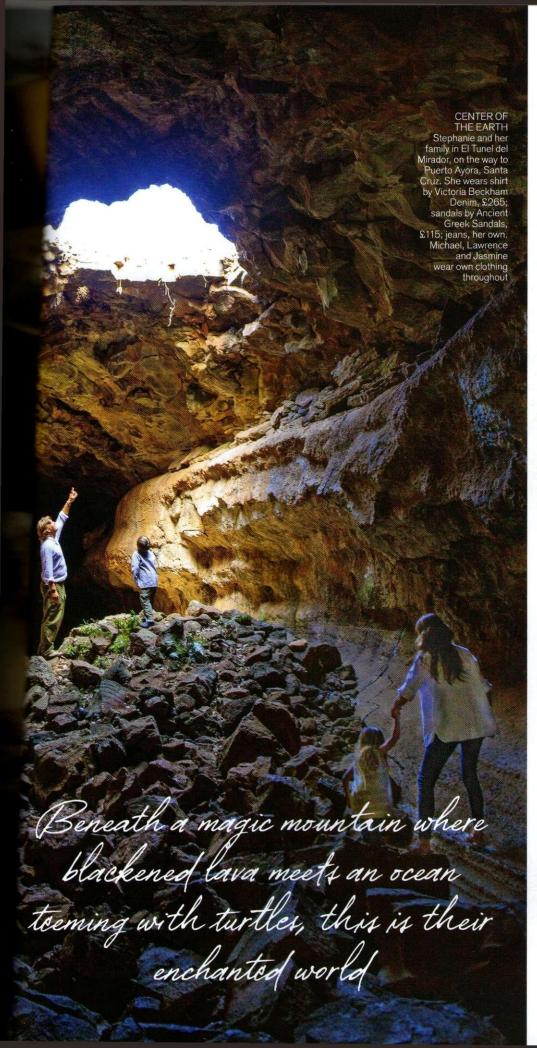
need to know

Half-board at Galapagos Safari Camp is from £328 per night, based on two sharing (galapagossafaricamp.com). Fly to Quito, Ecuador, from Europe with Iberia (iberia.com) or KLM (klm.com), or from North America with American Airlines (aa.com). TAME (tame.com). among other local airlines, flies from Quito to Baltra, Galapagos, at least once a day. The writer stayed at Galapagos Safari Camp, with the trip organized by global tour operator Butterfield+Robinson (butterfield.com).

where I'm living among animals that have no fear of humans; where the peculiar aberrations in species that led Darwin to call the islands "a little world within itself" make the unfamiliar seem everyday. I'm reminded of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, in which Samuel Taylor Coleridge described the strange dream-state zone of the doldrums, so apposite for these waters, where the wind can disappear altogether and trap a sailboat for days:

All in a hot and copper sky, The bloody Sun, at noon, Right up above the mast did stand, No bigger than the Moon. Day after day, day after day, We stuck, nor breath nor motion; As idle as a painted ship Upon a painted ocean.

Straddling the equator, the Galapagos possess a peculiar magnetism, even if once these islands were where pirates dropped captives off to die. To Bonham-Carter and Mesdag, they represent a positive force - a place to put down roots, where their family can thrive. Among bald rocks recalling an Andy Goldsworthy sculpture, beneath a magic mountain where blackened lava meets an ocean teeming with turtles, their backs like giant stepping stones leading into the sea, this is their



PORTER RECOMMENDS

Eco lodges



1. AWASI PATAGONIA, CHILE

Wraparound windows frame views of Torres del Paine mountain range. Explore the region with a dedicated guide and 4x4. *awasi.cl*



2. NAYARA SPRINGS, COSTA RICA

These private villas offer around-the-clock butler service, hot tubs and spectacular views over dramatic landscape. *nayarasprings.com*



3. MASHPI LODGE, ECUADOR

This rainforest biodiversity reserve is a cocoon in the clouds, featuring a butterfly garden and aerial tram. *mashpilodge.com*



4. REFUGIA, CHILOÉ ISLAND, CHILE

This luxury lodge offers epic views of the Andes; nearby islands boast 14 stunning UNESCO World Heritage Sites. *refugia.cl*