The Galapagos Islands

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The islands were first discovered by Spanish Bishop Tomás de Berlanga in 1535, who named them "Insulae de los Galopegos," which translates to "Islands of the Tortoises" due to the high num-ber of Galapagos tortoises found inhabiting the islands. In the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries the islands became a popular hideout for pirates and a base for British and American whalers and fur sealers. This marks a dark time for the Galapagos, when significant ecological damage oc curred, and invasive species were first introduced to the archipelago. Between 100,000 and 200,000 Galapagos tortoises are estimated to have been killed during this time. These animals were prized for their ability to survive for months on ships without food or water, providing a reliable source of fresh meat for travelers. In 1832, Ecuador officially took possession of the archipelago. In 1835, Charles Darwin arrived on the HMS Beagle to observe species variations in the Galapagos, particularly in finches and tortoises. He later would use his findings on the islands to develop his theory of evolution. In the 1930s, the first airport on the islands was built and served as a crucial U.S. military base during World War II. In 1959, Ecuador declared the archipelago its first national park, and the Charles Darwin Research Station was built. UNESCO designated the Galápagos as the first World Heritage Site in 1978 and as a biosphere reserve in 1984. To-day, the Galápagos Islands are a popular tourist destination and the center of crucial ecolog-ical conservation research focused on protecting endemic species from introduced threats.

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The Galápagos Islands are among the world's most biodiverse hotspots. This archipelago is situated in the eastern Pacific Ocean and was formed by a hotspot on the Nazca tectonic plate, located 100km west of Ecuador. The Galapagos consist of 120 islands and seamounts, ranging from barren volcanic fields in the west to old-er, eroded, vegetated islands in the east. The high levels of biodiversity are attributed to the intersection of three major ocean currents, the Humboldt, Panama, and Cromwell, which mix cold, nutrient-rich water with warm, tropical water, allowing various marine species to co-exist in the same habitat. The islands are highly isolated from the mainland, and because of this, any species living there arrived by chance, via currents or strong winds, and developed in total isolation, leading to high levels of endemism in the islands. 80% of birds, 97% of reptiles and land mammals, 30% of plants, and 20% of marine species are endemic, meaning they are found nowhere else on Earth and only inhabit the Galápagos Islands. Examples of these species include the marine iguana, flightless cormorant, Galapagos penguin, and, of course, the iconic Galapagos tortoise. The Galápagos Islands host roughly 560 native plant species, 175-180 bird species, 2,900 marine species, 2,000 inverte-brates, 25 reptile species, 14 mammal species, and, unfortunately, 1,500 invasive spe-cies due to influxes of trade and tourism.