



Selected articles from  
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## A Skeptical Journey to the Galapagos

By [Terry A. Smiljanich](#)

Imagine traveling to the Galapagos Islands to witness firsthand the unique diversity of species that helped inspire Darwin's theory of evolution. Then imagine taking such a trip with a group of fellow skeptics, including the incomparable Richard Dawkins, and you have the pleasurable experience I enjoyed this past May. The Center for Inquiry's "Explorer's Club" sponsored a seven-day cruise through the Galapagos archipelago, with Richard Dawkins as guest speaker. With his book *The God Delusion* on all the best-seller lists, and with frequent appearances on talk shows and the news, Professor Dawkins was much in demand, but found the time to spend ten relaxed days (three days in Ecuador) with fellow skeptics. There were so many atheists on board that my wife Dorothy quipped, "If this boat isn't sunk by lightning, it's further proof there is no God!"

The trip was one in a series of cruise explorations that CFI organizes for fellow skeptics and free-thinkers, with past trips to Alaska and the Caribbean, and a planned trip next year to the Amazon. Invited speakers such as Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Susan Blackmore, and Paul Kurtz enliven the cruises with suitable lectures and graceful company. Surrounded by fellow travelers with a shared appreciation for the natural world and abhorrence of superstition, the trips manage to combine both a true exploration of exotic scenes with consistently lively and fascinating conversations. Where else can you dine one night with a philosophy professor, then with a noted defender of free speech, and finally with the most renowned evolutionary theorist in the world?

The trip departed from Miami and began with a short stay in the Ecuadorean capital city of Quito, a surprisingly large and cosmopolitan metropolis perched 9,200 feet high in the foothills of the Andes and practically astride the equator. A flight across the Pacific then took us to the tiny airport on Baltra, one of the smaller islands in the volcanic Galapagos archipelago.

The napping sea lion at the entrance to the terminal served as a hint to the most striking aspect of a

trip to the Galapagos -- the complete tameness and nonchalance of the many animals that inhabit the islands. Blue-footed boobies perform their mating dance just feet away, marine iguanas strew the path oblivious to your passing, small penguins swim past you in the lagoon, and Darwin's finches almost land on your head as they curiously gather about.

The cruise ship, M/V Santa Cruz, fits 90 passengers with private cabins, a large dining room, a library, a sundeck bar, and a lounge that also serves as the lecture room for the many daily talks on the physical and biological splendors of the archipelago. Nightly the ship travels quietly between the islands, and daily the passengers are transported by large inflatable boats to each new landing spot for short hikes guided by well-informed resident naturalists. When his ship HMS Beagle stopped in the Galapagos in 1835, Darwin was struck by the manner in which various species, although somewhat similar to related species on the South American coast 600 miles away, had diverged in multiple ways, even from island to island. Years later, in writing *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin noted this fact as partial proof of his theory of natural selection.

In two of his three lectures on board, Richard Dawkins talked about evolutionary biology and made the subject come alive, especially with his descriptions of Galapagos tortoises and their place in evolution's story. In his third lecture, he talked about his recent best seller, *The God Delusion*, and the both positive and negative critical reception it had received. Dawkins minces no words when it comes to his distaste for religion and its more rabid adherents. And as for "intelligent design" and creationism, he has no patience with their complete inanity and lack of any scientific understanding.

I was fortunate to have dinner with Professor Dawkins on two separate occasions during the trip. He is, of course, an urbane Oxford professor, but in shorts and flip-flops he is a companionable conversationalist. He was fascinated with TBS's "[\\$1,000 Challenge](#)" and wanted to hear about some of the unsuccessful attempts to win the prize. After some thought, however, he became concerned that, since there surely exist some as-yet-undiscovered physical phenomena, weren't we concerned that some day someone would demonstrate something for which we would have to pay? When I told him that \$1,000 was a very small price to pay for such a monumental discovery, his face lit up and he said, "Of course! Splendid!"

The idea of such CFI "Explorer's Club" adventures is a wonderful concept. If you want to visit a fabulous natural site, and not find yourself listening at dinner to someone's breathless account of how the good Lord saved his life through prayer, you should sign up. See you on the Amazon.

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## **CFI–Florida is now CFI Tampa Bay**

Center For Inquiry–Florida is now known as [Center For Inquiry Tampa Bay](#). The hope is that someday there will be CFIs throughout the state.

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## Snippets



The following is the entirety of Jim Webster's brief item in the cited source: "Some fortune tellers in Salem, Mass., are upset because they are finding dead raccoons on their doorsteps, reports WCVB-TV in Boston. The fortune tellers have no idea who is doing it, which might seem to call into question their credentials."

(*St. Pete. Times*, June 16)

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Magician [James "The Amazing" Randi](#), who has spent countless hours and dollars exposing the "psychic" feats of [Uri Geller](#) and defending himself against the ensuing lawsuits, has jokingly(?) told a reporter that if he dies before Geller, "My best friend is instructed to throw [my ashes] in Geller's eyes. I'd like him to get an eyeful of my ashes. I think that would be appropriate." And it would also further erode Geller's "psychic cred" if he were to not see it coming.

(Associated Press via the Internet, July 9)

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Biblical scholar Michael S. Heiser, Ph.D., one of the 100 most influential people in ufology according to *FATE Magazine*, hired Dr. Carol Chaski to authenticate (or not) 17 of the so-called "MJ-12" documents. These "Top Secret" UFO-related documents, which were leaked to the public in the early 1980s under suspicious circumstances (and subsequently shown to be a hoax by skeptic [Philip Klass](#) and others), were allegedly written by high-ranking government and military officials, including three U.S. presidents, and are still believed genuine by many in the UFO community. Dr. Chaski, a leading expert in the linguistic science of authorship attribution (which uses computers to define stylistic patterns in an author's writings), was able to validate only one of the 17 documents as having been written by its alleged author. Dr. Heiser's assessment: "Anyone basing any claims of alien existence or an alien crash at Roswell on these documents would be foolish to do so; they just don't stand up to

cutting-edge scientific analysis."

(PRWeb Press Release Newswire, July 24)

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## TBS in the Media

On August 16, Terry Smiljanich made a tour-de-force presentation of skepticism as guest on the hour-long *Atheist Forum* program on Hillsborough County public access TV, co-hosted that night by Rob Curry and Jim Peterson.

Gary Posner was quoted in the July 5 *Tampa Tribune* article about the 60th anniversary of the Roswell UFO case, as well as in the July 29 *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* article about the 18-member "SPIRITeam" of paranormal investigators, which has ghost-busting chapters in Lakeland and Punta Gorda.

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## Letters to the Editor

Hey: How are you? I want you to test me regarding my telepathic ability. I am able to do it quite easily. All I need is for you and/or your associates to send me your picture and I will be able to talk/communicate with you directly telepathically. You will be able to hear me just as if you were sitting right next to me. So hopefully I will hear back from you. Thanks.

--Jude  
frogwithhalo@yahoo.com

*Gary Posner's e-mail reply (to which we received no response, and with apologies to Sir Paul):*

♪ Hey, Jude. Don't let me down.  
Take my photo directly from [my website](#).  
Remember to say your words crystal clear,  
So I will hear, and they'll prove you right. ♪

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Editor: I can demonstrate a paranormal phenomenon. If I am able to win [your prize](#), could you help me get in contact with [James Randi](#), so I may also claim the prize he is offering, as well as all other prizes currently being offered under similar circumstances? My demonstration is repeatable under a multitude of circumstances, however, it is very specific that certain conditions must be met. It requires two individuals, one of whom could, in theory, be myself. However, any two individuals under the correct circumstances can accomplish the same thing.

Many people are aware of this phenomenon. It is a tool that everyone, anywhere, can use. On the surface, it is a simple process that is the key to the entire universe. Deeper, all participants can be shown an array of dimensions and realities that are impossible for one to type or explain in any known language. Generally, as someone who is aware of this phenomenon, it would be in my best interest to keep it a secret and use it to my advantage over those who are unaware. We do all have our price, though. Mine is not \$1,000. I would, though, risk exposing a small portion of people to this phenomenon, since I am highly doubtful that anyone who witnesses it would be eager to share it. Why? It is much more valuable kept a secret. Such high value creates greed. Greed has protected the secret for longer than I can imagine. I am under the assumption that many world leaders, famous individuals, and influential figures throughout history have possessed this gift, and managed to keep silent.

Which brings me to another point. Words are inadequate tools for explaining this phenomenon to anyone. I fear it is not a coincidence that I first witnessed this paranormal phenomenon almost a year ago exactly today, and today is also my birthday (June 1). I was given this gift unexpectedly, although I was unknowingly searching for it for several years. I am entirely confident that I can demonstrate this paranormal phenomenon, on a repeatable basis, with any other individual in the world. I utilize it on a daily basis, and it still remains a mystery to anyone who fails to make the connection between what they are seeing and what is reality. Would you believe your own eyes if you saw it? I certainly hope so. Please contact me if you would like to know more.

--Timothy John Michael  
St. Petersburg  
jinnmustaffa@gmail.com

*Gary Posner's e-mail reply: I would like to know more. [Regrettably, we heard no more.]*

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Editor: How much are the skeptics willing to pay if it can be proven that "God exists"?

--[Name unknown]  
aquarius542@yahoo.com

*Gary Posner's e-mail reply (edited): Anywhere from \$0 to \$6,666.66 depending upon exactly what you mean by "it can be," "proven," "God," and "exists." If you can devise a scientific experiment that can prove God's existence, we will look it over. If we then go on to win the Nobel Prize (or any other cash awards), we would split the proceeds 50/50 with you.*

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