

Darwin's Fantastical Voyage

Activity 1: Darwin's letters home

www.darwinproject.ac.uk/learning/7-11/darwins-fantastical-voyage

Suggested preparation

Presentation: Darwin's Fantastical Voyage

Ask the expert film: Darwin and the Beagle Voyage

Alison Pearn, Associate Director of the Darwin Correspondence Project, describes Darwin's amazing voyage

How long will activity take?

- 30 minutes

What do I need?

- Each pair will need one of the included letters and the corresponding questions

Darwin set off on the HMS Beagle when he was 22 years old and was away from home for nearly 5 years.

How was Darwin feeling on his epic voyage?

Find out by reading the letters that he sent home and answer the questions.

What do I do?

1. In pairs, read through a letter that Darwin exchanged with his family or friends, then answer the questions underneath.
2. Tell the class what your letter was about and describe what you found interesting and what you found challenging.



LETTER 158

From Charles Darwin

To Robert Waring Darwin

Feb 1832

Transcribed extracts

www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-158



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Bahia or St Salvador, Brazil

Feb 1832

My dear Father

We sailed as you know on the 27th. of December & have been fortunate enough to have had from that time to the present a fair & moderate breeze: In the Bay of Biscay there was a long & continued swell & the misery I endured from sea-sickness is far far beyond what I ever guessed at...

Nobody who has only been to sea for 24 hours has a right to say, that sea-sickness is even uncomfortable.—The real misery only begins when you are so exhausted—that a little exertion makes a feeling of faintness come on.—I found nothing but lying in my hammock did me any good.—I must especially except your receipt of raisins, which is the only food that the stomach will bear:

From Tenerife to St. Jago, the voyage was extremely pleasant.—I had a net astern the vessel, which caught great numbers of curious animals, & fully occupied my time in my cabin, & on deck the weather was so delightful, & clear, that the sky & water together made a picture.

I already have got to look at going to sea as a regular quiet place, like going back to home after staying away from it.—In short I find a ship a very comfortable house, with everything you want, & if it was not for sea-sickness the whole world would be sailors...

Believe me, my dear Father
Your most affectionate son
Charles Darwin

Questions

1. What is wrong with Darwin at the beginning of the letter and what two things help to make him feel better?

2. What did Darwin attach to the back of the ship or vessel? Why?

3. In the fourth paragraph, what does he describe his ship as?

4. What do you think Darwin is enjoying and what does he not enjoy?

LETTER 168

From Charles Darwin

To William Darwin Fox

May 1832

Transcribed extracts

www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-168



May 1832
Botofogo Bay, near Rio de Janeiro

My dear Fox

I have delayed writing to you & all my other friends till I arrived here & had some little spare time.— My mind has been since leaving England in a perfect hurricane of delight & astonishment...

...My collections go on admirably in almost every branch. As for insects I trust I shall send a host of undescribed species to England...— But Geology carries the day; it is like the pleasure of gambling; speculating on first arriving what the rocks may be.

So much for the grand end of my voyage; in other respects things are equally flourishing, my life when at sea, is so quiet, that to a person who can employ himself, nothing can be pleasanter.—the beauty of the sky & brilliancy of the ocean together make a picture.—

...think when you are picking insects off a hawthorn hedge on a fine May day (wretchedly cold I have no doubt) think of me collecting amongst pineapples & orange trees; whilst staining your fingers with dirty blackberries, think & be envious of ripe oranges.— This is a proper piece of Bravado, for I would walk through many a mile of sleet, snow or rain to shake you by the hand, My dear old Fox. God Bless you.

Believe me

Yours very affectionately

Chas Darwin

Questions

1. In the second paragraph, what has Darwin been collecting and what gives him most pleasure?

2. In the third paragraph what does Darwin say makes a picture?

3. Why does Darwin think that Fox would be envious of him for collecting ripe oranges?

4. Towards the end of the letter how does Darwin show that he misses his friend very much?

LETTER 170

From Susan Darwin

To Charles Darwin

12 May 1832

Transcribed extracts

www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-170



Maer.
May 12th. 1832.

My dear Charles,

On the 3^d. of May we received your *last* written letter from St Salvador, which all the house rejoiced over most heartily: the happy account you give of yourself and all your enjoyments in the tropical world far exceeded what we most hoped for you.—...

Papa was much interested by your miserable account of the sea sickness you had endured, & not a little proud of his prescription of the Raisins answering so well. I think he should publish such a discovery for the benefit of all such sufferers.—

Catherine wrote last month to Monte Video, where Caroline sent her March letter also.— I am in hopes we shall before very long hear from you again in answer to the letters you will find at Rio, & I hope then you will give us some more directions for our future letters as I think it is doubtful whether this ever reaches you.—...

... Papa desires I will give you his most affectionate love & many thanks for your very nice letter which has given him a great deal of pleasure.—

When I told Mr Owen how happy you were tears came into his eyes with pleasure I am sure he considers you one of his own children.— Fanny was married on the 31st. of May to Mr. Biddulph. I have not room here for any particulars, but Caroline will fill her next letter with them.

God bless you my very dear Charley. All our Loves & I am

Ever yr affecti

Susan E Darwin

Questions

1. How does Darwin's family feel about receiving Darwin's letter from St Salvador?

2. What food helps Darwin to get over his seasickness and what does Susan suggest her father should do about the discovery?

3. Susan and Catherine, Charles's sisters, are sending letters to different places (Rio and Monte Video). Why might this be and why might they not receive letters from Darwin very often?

4. In the last paragraph Susan describes family and friends from home. How might this make Darwin feel? Why?
