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.
From Charles Darwin

To Robert Waring Darwin
February 1832

Bahia or St. Salvador, Brazil

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 & weak that a little exertion makes a great difference... the ship became a very comfortable house, with everything you want & if it was not for sea-sickness I should have enjoyed the voyage been extremely pleasant... 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 & what does he describe his ship as?

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 & what does he not enjoy?
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 in a perfect hurricane of delight & astonishment…

My collections go on admirably in almost every branch. — For insects I have described species of 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 withtry brilliance of the ocean together make a picture —

Geology carries the day; it is like the pleasure of gambling, speculating on first arriving what the rocks may be.

...think when you are picking insects of 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 try brilliance of the ocean together make a picture —

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?
Maer. May 12th. 1832.

My dear Charles,

On the 3d. 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 they will arrive in time, as you will need the account of the sea sickness very much for your future letters to Caroline and Monte Video. Where I left Mr Owen how happy you were there come into my eye with your very neat letter which has given him a great deal of pleasure. — Your very neat letter which has given him a great deal of pleasure for many thanks for Papa desires I will give you his most affectionate love & many thanks for whatever this ever reaches you.—…

Whether this ever reaches you.—…

gives us some more directions for our future letters as I think it is doubtful that Papa desires I will give you his most affectionate love & many thanks for whatever this ever reaches you.—…

When I left Mr Owen how happy you were there come into my eye with your very neat letter which has given him a great deal of pleasure. — Your very neat letter which has given him a great deal of pleasure for many thanks for Papa desires I will give you his most affectionate love & many thanks for whatever this ever reaches you.—…

3. Susan and Catherine, Charles' 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?

Susan suggests her father should do about the seasickness and what food helps Darwin to get over his seasickness and where we most hoped for you.—…

2. What food helps Darwin to get over his seasickness and what does Susan suggest her father should do about the seasickness and what kind of discovery such a discovery for the benefit of all such sufferers.—…

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