What Darwin never saw

Her face glued to the submarine's rear porthole, Victoria Turner found herself eye to eye with alien beings, night-time visitors from the abyssal plain thousands of metres below.

An excited babble broke out in the wet lab over what to call this latest addition to science...

abruptly aware of how alien we were in this pelagic netherworld, and I fell silent again.

Time had flown by, and the pilot was soon discussing our ascent co-ordinates with the mother-ship. I heard my name mentioned and I was reminded to collect my polystyrene cup, which had been placed in a net outside the sub and taken down on a previous, much deeper, mission.

In a rather endearing tradition, the crew all drew complicated designs on felt-tip pens on the cups before the dive. These would emerge in miniaturised form after the immense pressure had crushed them to a quarter of their previous size, making a great souvenir.

The mother-ship also informed us that, after surfacing, we should make our way to the wet lab where an aquarium had been prepared by the head cameraman Al Giddings to film the creatures collected.

Back on the ship, I slid out of the hatch after our two-hour trip feeling strangely insignificant and with a very different perspective of the underwater world. I made my rather giddy way to the wet lab where scientists and crew were gathered around the filming tank in awe. A deep-sea bat fish fixed the spectators with an aggressive stare. Oddly human thick, red lips contrasted with its white face and ribbed, white body.

The real star of the tank, however, was a new species of free-swimming sea cucumber. The lines of pulsing cilia on its ridges distracted the lowered camera lights in rainbow colours. Al poked an incongruous finger at it, and it flashed green bioluminescence in response.

An excited babble broke out over what to call this creature, this latest addition to science from the underwater world that Darwin never saw.

Going down, The Johnson Sea Link, which is capable of diving to 1,000m, submerges over the Galapagos Rift. Inset: Bat fish, a regular visitor from the deep.