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Visiting Galapagos with Kids

A week aboard the National Geographic Endeavor with Lindblad Expeditions

When it comes to making memories, not all trips are created equal. As I think back over a lifetime of travel, there are just three trips that, for different reasons, I still think about all the time: Maui, Utah, and Turkey. But that's a post for another day.

When my family and I went to Galapagos in December, we hadn't been on North Seymour Island for more than five minutes when I knew this was going to be one of those trips.

Why we went with Lindblad Expeditions

Back when I started planning the trip (18 months ago), I considered a handful of tour companies. I knew I wanted a boat-based trip, so that narrowed the field slightly. Besides Lindblad Expeditions, I seriously considered going with Geographic Expeditions or Abercrombie and Kent.

Do you know what these companies have in common? That's right: they're not cheap. My husband and I used to have more time than money, but not anymore. Every vacation day has to count. I can't say for sure if Galapagos is a "you get what you pay for" destination, but we didn't want to take the chance.



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In the end, any Galapagos vacation decision comes down to three factors: size of ship (big ships go faster and feel the waves less, but "big" is a relative term — no ship is allowed to carry more than 100 passengers in Galapagos), itineraries (not all companies have equal access, or good landing times), and quality of guides (hugely important, and sort of hard to evaluate up front).



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How we got there

Most people assume that Galapagos is hard to get to, maybe because it's so remote. Not so. From San Francisco, we flew nonstop to Miami. Because of the time difference, we checked into an airport hotel, ordered room service and relaxed with a pay-per-view movie.

So far, so easy.

The next afternoon, we took a 4-hour flight from Miami to the coastal Ecuadorian city of Guayaquil, arriving late in the evening (though we were still on Pacific Standard Time, so it wasn't at all tough). We were met by a company representative and transferred to our hotel. Again, a cushy overnight.

The following morning, we flew out to the islands (on a nice, sturdy jet, I might add, for the benefit of my soul mates who share my anxiety about small planes), where we were met and transferred to the ship via buses.

The wildlife

But enough with the boring transportation details! As a volcanic archipelago, Galapagos is geologically fascinating. Historians will find a lot to love too with all the Darwin stuff — Galapagos is the *origin* of On the Origin of Species, after all.

We came for the animals, though.



Within moments of stepping out of our first zodiac onto dry land, we were surrounded by hundreds of pelicans, frigate birds, and blue footed boobies — some courting, some nesting, some just sitting there watching us watching them.

The wildlife in Galapagos has evolved for millions of years without land-based predators. Think about that for a second. It means that *the animals aren't afraid of people*. The only animals that didn't trust us were the skittish Sally Lightfoot crabs, who probably thought we were hungry birds. Fair enough.

Park rules forbid getting closer than two meters to any animal, but many animals ignore this rule — especially the *notoriously impish sea lions*. We walked among marine iguanas, giant tortoises, Galapagos land iguanas, lava lizards, and more birds than I could possibly name here.



In the water, we snorkeled with penguins, stingrays, white-tipped reef sharks, green sea turtles, more sea lions, an octopus, and some very funny flightless comorants who were rooting around under rocks for snacks.

Galapagos really is a living museum. Trust me when I tell you I don't think we'll ever be impressed with another wild animal encounter again.

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The staff

The days were busy, but staff were very good at giving us options without overwhelming us. On our sailing, a lovely expedition leader named Paula gently woke us every morning with a public address announcement regarding breakfast and morning outings.

There were constant updates throughout the day, but it was actually kind of strangely soothing — it was like a vacation from *thinking*. Instead of memorizing the itinerary, we just waited for an announcement telling us what we could do. For a more long range view of the day ahead, daily schedules appeared in our room every night, and included island information, available activities, meal times, weather, tides, sunrise, and sunset.



Every time we left our cabin, it was straightened, cleaned, aired out, or turned down. This was wonderful because we were way too busy to do it ourselves. Not only were we constantly hiking, snorkeling, and riding in zodiacs, we were also changing clothes, stuffing kids into wetsuits, and sunscreening little faces all day long. There wasn't a lot of time left for tidying up. Add in laundry service and three delicious meals a day and I was kind of in heaven.

Finally, the naturalists were absolutely amazing. All Ecuadorian, they were additionally knowledgeable, funny, passionate about the environment, and really, really patient. And they spoke better English than most people I know. I was amazed that they could find one person like that, let alone six.

One of the major highlights for the kids were the daily scavenger hunts that were specific to the islands. If they were able to check all the boxes (and the guides made sure they did!), they got small prizes. There were also zodiac driving lessons, which were a huge hit.

On board activities

By far, my favorite daily event was the evening recap and cocktail hour. Not only did they serve cocktails and delicious finger foods, there were also fascinating presentations by the naturalists on topics like Darwin, vulcanism, and microscopic animals of the Galapagos (complete with an amazing video microscop broadcast on the flat screen televisions around the room). If college had been like this, I would probably be a marine biologist today!

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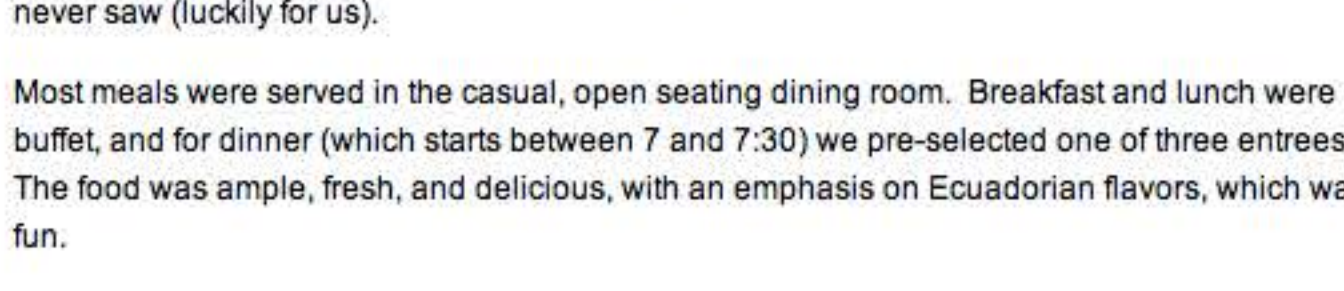


Other activities included a hands-on photography seminar, a barbecue dinner, an equator-crossing party, a pizza and movie night for kids, and a demonstration of traditional Ecuadorian music and dancing — most of which I slept through because I was so exhausted from all the fun we had had that day.

The ship

The fully air-conditioned National Geographic Endeavor can accommodate 96 guests. Our favorite areas of the ship were the lounge (cocktail hour and all other group briefings), the library (tea, coffee, and cookies 24/7, plus mountains of books), and the very small saltwater swimming pool. There was also a gym and spa we didn't use, and a doctor on board who we never saw (luckily for us).

Most meals were served in the casual, open seating dining room. Breakfast and lunch were buffet, and for dinner (which starts between 7 and 7:30) we pre-selected one of three entrees. The food was ample, fresh, and delicious, with an emphasis on Ecuadorian flavors, which was fun.

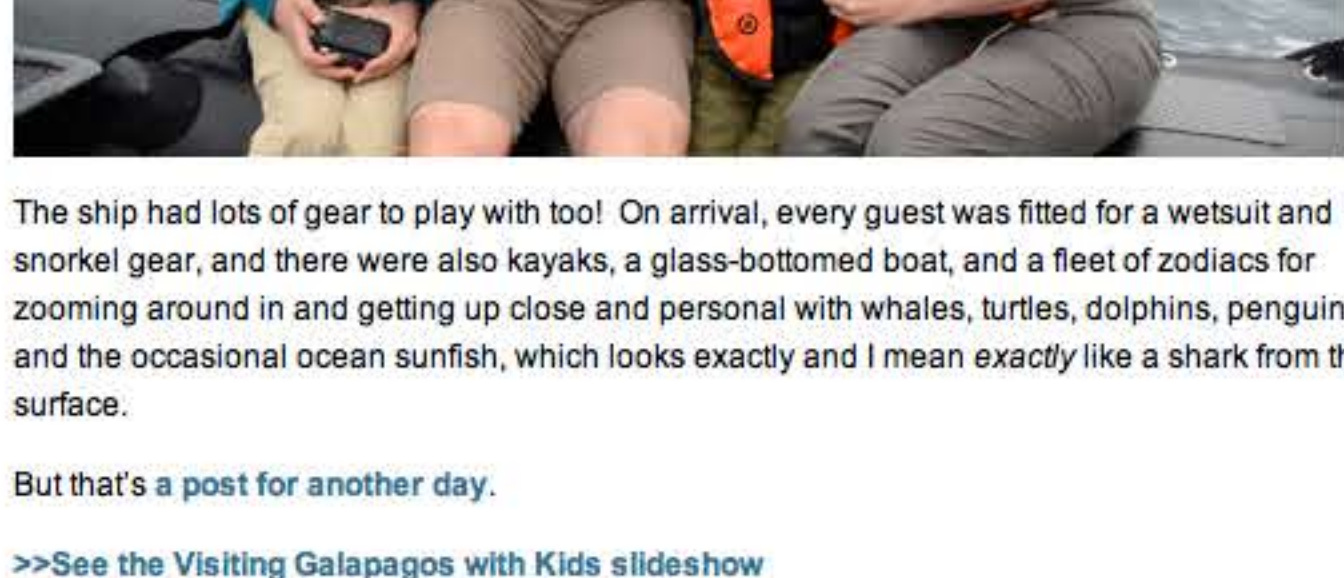


The ship had lots of gear to play with too! On arrival, every guest was fitted for a wetsuit and snorkel gear, and there were also kayaks, a glass-bottomed boat, and a fleet of zodiacs for zooming around in and getting up close and personal with whales, turtles, dolphins, penguins, and the occasional ocean gunfish, which looks exactly and I mean exactly like a shark from the surface.

But that's a post for another day.

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Despite this glowing review, I paid my own way on this trip and all views are my own. For more information about this and other Lindblad Expeditions + National Geographic trips, go to [www.expeditions.com](#).



March 24th, 2012 | by [Jamie Pearson](#)

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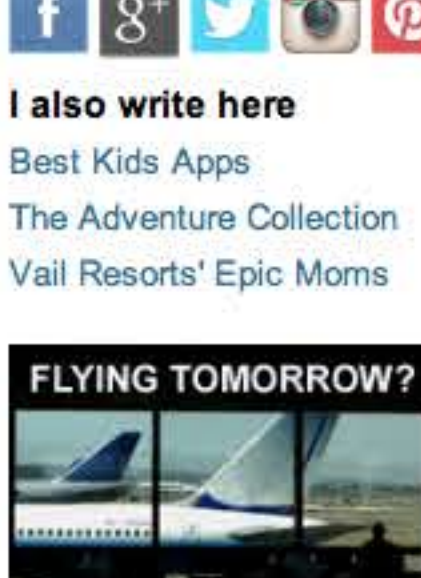


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