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Lindblad's eco-minded exploration

By JoAnna Haugen



Photo by JoAnna Haugen

Eighty-seven passengers ranging from a 12-year-old traveling with his grandfather to retirees ticking off their bucket lists sat in the lounge of the National Geographic Endeavour.

Expedition leader Carlos Romero welcomed the group to the Lindblad Expeditions family and asked how many people had traveled with the company before. Several people, perhaps 10 or 15, raised their hands.

"Where else have you traveled with Lindblad?"

Carlos asked. People responded with a list of destinations: Costa Rica and the Panama Canal, the Arctic, the Columbia River, Antarctica, Baja California.

This was my maiden Lindblad voyage, but it immediately became clear that once someone cruises with the company, he or she will be inclined to return.

Originally founded by Lars-Eric Lindblad in 1958 as Lindblad Travel to fill a more adventurous travel market segment, the company expanded in 1979, when Lars-Eric's son, Sven, added educational offerings in Costa Rica, Mexico's Baja peninsula and Alaska.

In 2004, Lindblad Expeditions partnered with National Geographic to offer exploration opportunities that include photographic instruction and guidance in some of the most remote and unusual places in the world.

"My wife and I always wanted to go to the Galapagos," said Dennis Maika, a passenger from Pleasantville, N.Y. "We read about it for decades. National Geographic made it immediately appealing. We don't do cruises, we've never done a cruise and we weren't interested in a cruise, but National Geographic seemed to suggest that it would be a reputable adventure."

Throughout its history, Lindblad has combined this sense of adventure with a commitment to conservation and sustainability efforts in the geographical destinations in which it cruises.

"Lindblad takes responsibility wherever it goes," said Celso Montalvo, a naturalist who has been working with Lindblad for more than 10 years. "Sven comes in and really listens to us. We can see that he believes in the company's mission. The company is very interested and committed to its work."

Upon boarding the Endeavour, we did not receive keys to our rooms, which was both unnerving and indicative of the family-like, safe environment found on the Endeavour. On the first day at sea, we were saturated with details about our stay onboard, and every detail was considered.

Guests receive reusable water bottles to reduce waste in this sensitive environment. A wellness instructor offers morning stretching exercises for the early risers. Dramamine pills are easily accessible 24/7 for those feeling a bit queasy from the rocking of the boat. A container of hand sanitizer is available outside the dining room. Dining staff on each ship create culinary experiences that guests rave about long after leaving the ship.



Photo by JoAnna Haugen

Naturalist Gilda Gonzalez provides information during a hike on the western coast of Isabela near Urbina Bay.

To close off the first day in the Galapagos Islands, we boarded Zodiacs for a shore excursion, a walk along the beach on Santa Cruz.

We spotted a Sally lightfoot crab skittering across lava rocks and a flamingo wading through a lagoon. Our first wildlife sightings and the first licks of a sunset from the shore were treat enough, but the excursion highlighted some of the features that make Lindblad a particularly appealing company.

Among the 71 crew members onboard, several were professional naturalists, and they each led a small group and provided a personalized experience from a well-trained background.

They were a wealth of facts and natural history information, but many also grew up in Ecuador and/or had been working with Lindblad in the Galapagos for several years, so they also shared colorful anecdotes and stories about the few inhabitants in the islands and the conservation efforts taking place on the islands.

"All the naturalists share everything in a very conversational, nonintimidating way," Maika said. "You feel like you're learning something all the time."

Expedition expertise



Photo by JoAnna Haugen

Guests had the opportunity to interact with, and photograph, sea lions and other wildlife.

Throughout the course of the week, we walked on the volcanic surface of Fernandina, the youngest island in the Galapagos, where black marine iguanas are piled on top of each other after a morning swim to search for food. On San Cristobal, our blue-footed booby sighting was complemented with a red-footed booby sighting.

Naturalists explained the importance of Galapagos tortoises at the Charles Darwin Research Station on Santa Cruz, and then later that same afternoon, we walked through fields on the island and watched tortoises munching on grass and sleeping in the sun.

Throughout the week, we also had opportunities to kayak and snorkel with sea turtles, sea lions, Galapagos sharks and dozens of colorful varieties of fish.

While some Lindblad expeditions are not specifically designated as National Geographic photographic excursions, this one was, so we were given the opportunity to enhance the experience with photographic instruction. And even those that aren't specifically photography expeditions are rich with natural and cultural history education.

This is the Lindblad way, regardless of the cruise destination, and it's one of the reasons guests return cruise after cruise, destination after destination.

"We sell a lot of Lindblad," said Jodi Fox, travel agent with Vision Travel Solutions in Calgary, Alberta, who was cruising with the company for the first time. "I personally didn't know what to expect with the larger boats in the Galapagos, but with the National Geographic partnership and the educational component of this trip, there is nothing else that compares."

When to visit the Galapagos Islands

There is no bad time to visit the equatorial Galapagos Islands, but there are a few things to consider before choosing a cruising date.

From December through May, the water and air are warmer. Snorkeling is much more comfortable, though there aren't as many fish as later in the year, and it's much warmer and sunnier, though it often rains for a while each day. This is breeding season for many animals, and flowers are in bloom February through April.

From June through November, the air temperature is a bit cooler (in the 70s), often making shore excursions more bearable given the lack of shade on most of them. Expect clouds but minimal rain. The water is cooler, too (usually in the high 60s). Animals give birth during this time of the year, so there are more babies on land, and there are more fish in the water. -- J.H.