

# Birth of a Birder

TRAVEL STORIES: Eva Holland never got too excited about birds. But then she found herself gazing up at the sky in the Galapagos.



Photos by Eva Holland

I'd never thought much about birds. I'd certainly never gotten excited about them. But as the albatross banked hard and circled back toward our small group as we stood frozen on the trail, and as Xavier shouted "Here he comes again!" with his voice pitching higher, I felt my pulse accelerate. I craned my neck back and squinted into the bright equatorial sun while the great bird flew low overhead, its seven-foot wingspan more than filling my field of view.

Another albatross, a female, rested in the tall grass a few feet away. She watched us with one enormous, warm, dark eye, her beak hanging open slightly in what seemed like a smile. The male circled above us. Xavier, a naturalist guide, was ecstatic about their presence. He worked his camera, talking as fast as he shot. The waved albatross builds its nests exclusively in the Galapagos Islands, he explained, and the birds vanish each year from January to March, ranging out to sea. It was now March 31, and ours was the first sighting—from our ship, at least—so far this year.

I was a passenger on the National Geographic Endeavour, a Lindblad Expeditions ship that carries visitors into the Galapagos Islands for week-long cruises that also include nature walks, snorkeling sessions and documentary screenings. I'd flown from Whitehorse to Vancouver to Phoenix to Miami and then on to Guayaquil, a sprawling city I knew only from a dystopian Vonnegut novel, and finally out to San Cristobal Island to board the Endeavour.

The ship had spent its youth in the Arctic and the Antarctic, and had now been retired to the Galapagos year-round to