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PHOTO BY JAMES MORGAN



It's impossible not to be blown away by the extraordinary wildlife in the Galapagos Islands – and the Lindblad Expeditions experts who take you there.

# NATURE'S PLAYGROUND

WORDS: FIONA HARPER

Straddling latitudes 30 degrees north and south, I'm in what's called the doldrums or horse latitudes. Stories abound about how these parts, known for their sultry tropical climate and little or no wind, were so named. One theory originates from Spanish sailors transporting horses to the West Indies tossing dead or dying animals overboard during prolonged periods of calm in order to preserve limited water supplies.

So it's ironic that, as *National Geographic Endeavour* steams towards the Equator along the coast of Isabella Island for a

ceremonial sunset crossing of this unseen line, it's blowing dogs off chains. Expedition leader Carlos Romero, who has worked with Lindblad Expeditions for the past 16 years, pre-emptively most shore excursion announcements in his deliciously rich Latin accent with the observation that "it is a little bit windy, so wear your windbreaker". He's a master of understatement.

Blustery winds make excursions from the ship challenging (read cold and wet) but mostly add an element of adventure to our explorations of Archipiélago de Colón.

One thousand kilometres west of South America, and more commonly known as the Galapagos Islands, they had a dramatic impact

on 23-year-old naturalist Charles Darwin in 1835. Visiting as a self-funded supernumerary on board the *Beagle*, Darwin was initially underwhelmed, noting that "the black rocks heated by rays of vertical sun give to the air a close and sultry feeling. The plants also smell unpleasantly".

Twenty-four years later, he went on to change forever our view of the world when he published his theory of evolution in *The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection*.

I confess that I too was a little underwhelmed upon arrival at Seymour Airport on Baltra Island. But it didn't take long for me to succumb to the islands' unique charms – about three minutes, actually.

## FACT FILE

**CRUISE LINE:** Lindblad Expeditions

**VESSEL:** *National Geographic Endeavour*

**STAR RATING:** N/A

**MAX PASSENGER CAPACITY:** 96

**TOTAL CREW:** 70

**PASSENGER DECKS:** 5

**ENTERED SERVICE:** 1966

**FACILITIES:** Gym, spa, sauna, daily stretch classes, library, wi-fi (additional cost), swimming pool, restaurant, lounge bar, doctor, gallery/gift shop, all outside cabins, glass-bottom boat, kayaks.

**BOOKINGS:** 10-day cruise package (including pre- and post-cruise hotel accommodation plus return flight from Guayaquil) starts from \$5,490 per person, twin-share. For more details phone 1300 361 012 or see [orionexpeditions.com](http://orionexpeditions.com).

I don a mask, snorkel and wetsuit and, within minutes of sliding off the Zodiac into the Pacific Ocean, a pair of curious sea lions are performing an elegant mercurial marine ballet, swooshing and twisting their honey-hued bodies around me.

I resist the urge to stroke the pelt as one glides past, enormous brown eyes melting my heart. Slivers of sunlight piercing the surface strike the carapace of a green turtle foraging below and cheeky penguins buzz my mask, flitting past swiftly in a blur of ascending bubbles left in their wake. They return relentlessly to offer me a lingering look at their tiny, pert bodies as they dart hither and thither.

Further afield, blue-footed boobies are dive-bombing the sea for fish, their bodies streamlined into piercing arrows, vibrant blue



Blue-footed boobie



An encounter with a giant tortoise

feet tucked into their underbellies. There is a lot going on. Despite the chill in the water, it is quite possibly the most extraordinary 30 minutes of snorkelling I've ever experienced.

Deep-water snorkelling turns out to be a highlight of our voyage, even for those who have never tried it before. But it's actually rather difficult to decide which activities to participate in, with kayaking, hiking, sitting on the beach watching the wildlife or onboard lectures occupying most days.

It's also tempting to hang out on the ship and indulge in a little quiet reflection while everyone else goes ashore. Though the temperature remains mostly too cool to take advantage of the swimming pool, there are sun lounges and deckchairs scattered around the decks, providing the perfect opportunity to devour reading material from the ship's extensive library.

There's also a well-equipped gym that I make full use of, as well as a sauna, which proves popular after snorkelling expeditions. In typical expedition style, *National Geographic Endeavour* is not luxurious but she is a sturdy, comfortable vessel with a splendid Ecuadorian crew who enthusiastically share their passion for their homeland.

Hiking expeditions offer astonishing encounters with so many species of wildlife it's hard to keep up. We walk with ancient giant tortoises the size of washing machines. Then we witness newly hatched tortoises little bigger than an iPod taking their first steps.

The incredibly delicate ecosystem of the Galapagos is its main attraction, but also its Achilles heel. Declared a national park 54 years ago, the entire archipelago is tightly controlled to preserve and protect the natural environment while encouraging a sustainable tourism industry.

Recognised by UNESCO in 1979 as a Natural Heritage for Humanity, 97 per cent of the Galapagos is national park with 90

official "visitor sites". The other 3 per cent is reserved for essential infrastructure and for resident Galapaguenos. It's fitting that as we circumnavigate the dramatic tors of Kicker Rock on our final sunset at sea, the wind blows the bubbles from our Champagne glasses. The doldrums haven't lived up to their windless name. But the Archipiélago de Colón that compelled Darwin's extraordinary observations remains little changed.



## The verdict

### HIGHS

Wildlife seems to have no fear of humans, allowing extraordinarily close encounters.

### LOWS

Free spirits may struggle with the concept of being herded from one visitor site to the next with no ability to explore independently (national park-qualified naturalists accompany every group, who must stay on marked trails).

### BEST SUITED TO

Expedition-style cruising is not luxurious, rather it is indulgently comfortable. Suitable for all ages, particularly families with young children and couples looking for a mini break. Passengers should be mobile enough to board inflatable Zodiacs and negotiate stairs.