

Galapagos

Alanna Bove and Jim Finn, clients

We traveled with Lindblad Expeditions on the *Polaris* around the Galapagos Islands in February 2005. It was a once-in-a-lifetime trip, because of the unique destination, enhanced by a tour company that deserves its excellent reputation. The Galapagos are amazing because of the wildlife, which are not only omnipresent and unusual, but have no fear of humans, owing to the almost complete absence of predators. One has to literally step over the sea lions on the docks of the islands we visited, so nonchalant are the beasts about our presence. You rarely use your binoculars, because the birds are right in front of you, feeding the chicks, doing their mating rituals and even mating mere feet away. The snorkeling is amazing, not only because the water is beautiful and at a comfortable temperature (with light wetsuits) but because the creatures, especially the sea lion pups, swim right up to you. Being nose to nose with a sea lion underwater is unforgettable.

Lindblad did a great job, for many reasons. First and foremost, they employ the best guides, who are not only very knowledgeable, well educated and experienced, but also very enthusiastic, infectiously so. They added immeasurably to our experience. The best example was our last day, when we were getting ready for our last snorkeling along the shore. They spotted a school of dolphins at the mouth of our small bay and urged us to hop in the zodiacs so we could zoom out there, jump in the water and swim with the dolphins. When we got out there, the dolphins had disappeared, but were replaced by a huge school of melon-headed whales. The guides were beside themselves at our luck -- several of them, natives of the Galapagos, had never seen these whales, which usually are found only far out to sea. They placed us out in front of the school, we jumped in and found ourselves in the water with a huge school of whales (these were about the size of large dolphins) swimming straight at us. And we heard them whistling and squeaking to each other as they swam by. At the end of the trip, Lindblad supplied us with a video of the whole week, including awesome underwater footage of these whales, which they took with the underwater camera they had grabbed to take with us on the whale chase.

The food on the ship was excellent, with much local produce and seafood. The ship was very well organized, moving people on and off the boat all day for our activities (snorkeling, hikes, beach time, a little shopping), which were well planned and varied. We felt the itinerary Lindblad followed allowed us to see all the wildlife and varied landscapes (volcanic expanses, great beaches, green uplands, etc.) the islands have to offer. Our accommodations were very comfortable. There was debriefing in the evening and a couple of great guest speakers. The guides and speakers did a great job explaining Darwin, evolution and the key role the Galapagos played in Darwin's discoveries and the work of today's scientists who have shown that evolution is occurring virtually right in front of you there. We would unhesitatingly recommend Lindblad and the Galapagos to anyone.