

An Alternative Way to Experience the Galapagos Islands

Anyone who has been to Ecuador's Galapagos Islands or ever dreamed of going there has a pretty clear understanding that the experience is stacked heavily in favor of the rare and endangered wildlife as well as toward the protection of one of the most fragile environments on earth. Human access is carefully controlled, with the vast majority of visitors spending all but a tiny part of their visit there on a small-ship educational cruise with guided Zodiac excursions to specifically designated landings and trails along the shores of islands they are licensed to visit.



Enter innovative ROW Adventures (rowadventures.com), creator of the most sustainable eco-tour in the Galapagos Islands, the first of its kind offered on this tropical archipelago. The company's co-founder, Peter Grubb recalls his thoughts upon first visiting the islands, "I went in 1994 aboard a 12-passenger boat. As we cruised I saw the beaches and thought this would be an ideal kayaking and camping destination. That was when the seed was planted. I knew there are lots of people who do not enjoy boat travel and the restrictions in terms of space that entails. In addition, there are many people who want to be active while on holiday, and the boat-based tours offered limited options for this."

"Around 1996 we visited some of the beaches we thought would work and took photos of trash that had washed up from the sea. We submitted an application to the Galapagos Park Service with the case that we would clean up the beaches and keep them clean; use 'Leave No Trace' camping techniques including carrying out all human waste; monitor the beaches for illegal activity, etc. The Park Service turned us down but we persisted with several more applications over the years."

“Eventually, we discovered there were a few beaches already in the Park regulations that allowed camping for locals, so we asked if we could use them too. Finally we were told yes, and in the fall of 2005 we ran an exploratory tour and launched in early 2006. Since then we have kept our word, always cleaning up beaches and leaving them in better shape than we find them.”



Thus was born ROW's **Galapagos Unbound** tour (rowadventures.com/Galapagos-Islands-Adventure-Vacation-Tour), a multisport vacation with a couple of nights of camping and plenty of snorkeling, hiking and kayaking that allows a most intimate perspective on the wildlife and scenery when you get behind a paddle. Grubb is particularly proud of the tour's sustainable ingredients.

“Compared to any cruise, no matter how small the ship,” he declares proudly, “this trip uses a fraction of the fuel (based on per person consumption) and thus has a smaller carbon footprint. Secondly, a much larger percentage of your trip fee actually stays in the islands, with economic benefit to local communities. And thirdly, this is the only trip that includes minimum-impact camping on an island beach, approved and regulated by the Galapagos National Park Service.”

Since 2006 there have been unexpected realities that required modification, including a tsunami that changed one of the beaches sufficiently that it was no longer suitable for camping. The Park Service allowed the company to move to a different beach a few miles away. Trust is now well established and in 2013, ROW Adventures has launched a new itinerary (seakayakadventures.com) with more camping and kayaking than its classic Galapagos Unbound itinerary. Now clients have two choices for a land-based Galapagos exploration.



Recommended minimum age is 12 for full participation. On family-designated trips, younger children have been allowed as long as a parent or adult traveling with them is willing to share a double kayak. The nature of the trip is such that most activities are optional. During kayaking, a motorized skiff is on hand for safety and support, so if someone tires, they can transfer to the skiff. On the Unbound itinerary there is a fairly strenuous 15 to 16-mile hike on Isabela island including scaling a volcano. Some people elect to just stay at the beachfront hotel that day and relax or walk around the town.

The majority of guests are 32 to 60 years, but there are family departures where the parents are in their 40's and kids in their teens; or parents are in 50's with young adult kids. Family-theme trips are scheduled around Spring, Summer and Christmas Breaks.

"Originally when our Galapagos Unbound trip began," says Grubb, "the age demographic was 35 to 70 - we rarely had 20-somethings. But in the last couple of years, we have definitely seen an increase in this age group taking our tours as it has gained momentum on TripAdvisor with reports on how active and unique the trip is. Now our open departures (not those strictly designated for families) are regularly made up of groups ranging from mid-20's to mid-70's. However, we've taken people as old as 80 and as young as seven."

Feedback from clients has been consistently enthusiastic around this unique way to discover the diversity of the Galapagos Islands. And clearly the "incredible" guide, Marco Castro, plays a big part in making the experience what is repeatedly described by guests as the trip of a lifetime. One client summed up their Galapagos encounter without qualification, "This was undoubtedly our first vacation in which virtually ALL our expectations were exceeded!"



ROW Adventures has indeed met extraordinary expectations worldwide with its creative itineraries, including senior adventure trips, women-only adventures and multi-generational family adventures with something for every age. The company has been recognized as the "World's #1 Tour Operator" by Travel + Leisure Magazine, one of the "Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth" by National Geographic Adventure, and is a five-time winner of National Geographic Traveler's "Tours of a Lifetime" award.

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