

By lending a hand to one, they forged a bond among all The Boston Globe

By Louisa Kasdon, Globe Correspondent | September 23, 2007



Passengers join to help Michael Hynes, who has multiple sclerosis, disembark on an island. (Joe Hamilton for The Boston Globe)

My husband, Michael, has multiple sclerosis, and needs two canes to walk. Two years ago he decided that he wanted us all to go to the Galapagos Islands - the two of us and my two grown daughters. Everyone we knew who had been there told us we were crazy to attempt the trip. "Out of the question for someone with mobility issues." "How will he get in and out of those rubber dinghies, climb rocks, navigate lava fields?" Whatever were we thinking?

If he really wanted to go, these folks said, maybe we could try one of the mega ships that can at most visit three of the "big islands," but he'd have to stay on the boat, confined to the observation deck. Otherwise, conventional wisdom (i.e., my mom) suggested that we were probably facing a frustrating week on a small boat with strangers, a non-English-speaking crew, and two rubber Zodiacs. "Blah blah blah," was Michael's reaction.

He is a stubborn sort. This was his dream trip, and he was going no matter what. And no, he's not one of those super athletes who has a handicap but can support his entire weight on his index finger. He's a 50-plus, couch-potato nuclear physicist. Physicists don't generally listen to civilians' views on anything. Michael couldn't imagine why not being able to walk without two forearm crutches should keep him from communing with marine iguanas and blue-footed boobies. He was determined to see the view from the top of Tower Island, no matter that it was 636 steps up from sea level.

And so in June we arrived in the Galapagos, and took off for an eight-day tour on the 20-passenger M/Y Letty yacht. The trip was a smashing success, beyond expectations - eerie and magical even for a non-naturalist like myself.

For us, as for most tourists, the rare, intimate contact with raw nature was the reason to visit the islands: sea lions and giant prehistoric-looking tortoises, land and marine iguanas, albatrosses, frigate birds with huge fire-engine red patches of skin that males inflate to signal their sexual availability, and blue- and red-footed boobies. But as surreal as the wildlife experience was for my family, the handicap issue was equally real.

For the first few days, I froze every time we approached an island and Michael had to lower himself into the Zodiac. In my mind's eye, I could see him losing his balance on the deck and slipping into the Pacific with the sharks. Although I hovered at his elbow, I almost couldn't watch, fearing a disaster. My daughters were anxious, too. While they wanted to help, they were, like me, not sure where to stand or how to brace themselves, and they wanted to allow Michael his dignity and give him room to maneuver.

Michael's first few transitions from the boat to the dinghy held a gory fascination for passengers and the crew, an odd kind of spectator sport. But with true grit and meticulous movement planning, he made the transfer and was able to go with the rest of us to Genovese Island. Michael figured out how to hold the stanchion, when to hand me his canes, and how many people needed to be on the dinghy to give it stability before he attempted to get on.

After the first few scary launchings, I stopped worrying. Getting Michael on and off the boat became a group activity, a sort of team-building exercise. His ability to visit and fully experience the islands became a matter of group pride.

One passenger, a powerful retired pipefitter from Chicago named Gary, quickly established himself as Michael's main man, lending his strong arm for almost every launch. It was a moving show of tenderness and humility on the part of two proud men. In the rare instances that Gary wasn't on hand, several young males were eager to fill in.

One passenger would go for Michael's canes and hold them on the dinghy ride. Another would get him a life jacket. People were tripping over themselves to be helpful, and I almost felt I was horning in when I hovered too close.

By the end of our cruise, all aboard came to refer to ourselves as Team Letty. The others seemed to feel that giving a helping hand to a fellow passenger added a meaningful dimension to the trip. In a way, Michael became our own blue-footed booby: rare and in need of protection.

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