

## A Rare Encounter with Two Giants



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

**IT** was the middle of October when my wife and I arrived at Puerto Lopez. This is a pleasant little fishing town set in a beautiful horseshoe bay on the Pacific coast of Ecuador. From the bus terminal, a "taximoto" took us up a small hill to Hosteria La Terraza, a guest house run by a German couple. We chose this guest house for its exquisite location overlooking Puerto Lopez and the Pacific Ocean. A chalet with two beds, en-suite facilities and a balcony to take in the views only cost us US\$24 a night.

Many foreign tourists come to Puerto Lopez between June and September for a spot of whale-watching. The town is also a gateway to Parque Nacional Machalilla which includes, among other attractions, Isla de la Plata, popularly known as the poor man's alternative to the Galapagos.

In the morning after our second night in Puerto Lopez, we boarded a boat for Isla de la Plata. There were three other couples in the group, each of a different nationality.

On the way to the island, we had a close encounter with what most tourists came to see – a humpback whale! We had thought that since we came here after the whale-watching season, our likelihood of seeing any whale would be very slim indeed. So it was a really pleasant surprise for all of us to see a humpback whale up close, and not just one, but a pair of them!

They were swimming, blowing, slapping and diving together. I thought it was a mother-and-cub pair, but our guide said both were adults. As humpback whales are normally solitary creatures in nature, this pair must be in courtship. What a rare treat! I managed to capture a pretty clear shot of the pair's tail flukes together as they dived. Tail flukes are the fingerprints of whales. Scientists identify individual whales by the shape, colour, marking and scars of their tail flukes.



We spent a good 40 minutes with the humpback whales. It was a most exhilarating and memorable experience!

Back to Isla de la Plata, it is about 24km offshore. There were nesting colonies of waved albatross, frigate birds and three species of boobies on the island. During our walk, we came across a large number of frigate birds, blue-footed boobies, Nasca boobies, red-footed boobies, waved albatross, red-billed tropic birds, black vultures and turkey vultures. Many blue-footed boobies were hatching eggs in the middle of the trail. A few pairs were doing their mating dance.

If the Galapagos is not in your itinerary because of time or financial constraints, Isla de la Plata is certainly a good alternative. ■

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