



Artwork © by Magno Bennett

CNH TOURS - Helpful Guides

Ship Classes Defined Once and for All!

Any search on the internet will show you that Galapagos expedition cruise ships are classed using what appears to be a variety of classifications systems often leaving you a bit puzzled as to what they actually mean. We've done a good amount of research, contacting the Galapagos National Park Service's (GNPS) department of tourism, the Galapagos Chamber of Tourism (CAPTURGAL), and the International Galapagos Tour Operators' Association (IGTOA), and have compared the results to our own personal knowledge of several ships to come up with the following answers we hope will help clarify any confusion.

There is only one official classification system - the one set up by the Galapagos National Park Service (GNPS) in 1995. It classes ships according to 4 basic criteria:

1. Whether or not cabins are private;
2. Whether or not cabins have private bathrooms, and
3. Whether or not there is air conditioning.
4. In addition to these, there are a limited number of ships which are permitted by the Park Service to offer day tours.

This system was developed in the relatively early days of Galapagos tourism and no longer provides great guidance given that today, all ships (save 1 – the 8 passenger Merak) provide for private cabins, private bathrooms and air conditioning. Visitors must rely on other variables when considering one ship over another. These could include:

- **General spaciousness:** Room size, amount of covered and uncovered deck space available, existence and sizes of salons on board, etc.
- **General maintenance standards:** How rapidly does a ship fix broken or run-down items? Will the air-condition work, or is it chronically broken? Does it need a paint job?

cnh tours

Cultural and Natural Heritage Tours
www.cnhtours.com

"Proud of our unmatched personalized service"

- **Professionalism of the crew:** Are they always very attentive? Do they go the extra mile?
- **Guide Quality:** Does he/she really know what he/she is talking about? Is he/she easily understood? Does he/she have lots of enthusiasm?
- **Cuisine:** Simple meals versus multiple course meals with fine china settings, attentive dining room service, freshly brewed coffee versus instant, etc.
- **Quality furnishings:** Presence of polished brass fixings and high-end marine décor, use of professionally crafted materials, versus basic fixtures.
- **Extras:** On board pool / sauna, email access, comprehensive reading room, medically trained staff person etc.

In an attempt to convey these differences, an alternative, informal Galapagos ship classification system has evolved, led primarily by the tour industry. Our experience and first-hand knowledge of the ships lead us to believe that the tour industry classification system is *generally* accurate and reliable.

Tour Industry led Galapagos Expedition Cruise Ship Classification System

No formal definitions exist. Most commonly seen classes are: **Luxury - First Class - Tourist Superior - Tourist**

Generally, this rating system is fairly accurate, but one can find a ship classed as "First Class" on one web site, and "Tourist Superior" on another.

- **Luxury** ships go all the way in attention to detail, spaciousness and service. While almost all larger (32 – 100 passengers) vessels are luxury class, about 25% of smaller vessels fall in this category.
- **First Class** ships may have similar service levels as Luxury ships, but are usually smaller, with less deck space. One or two larger vessels are First Class. Another 40% of smaller ships are first class.
- **Tourist Superior** ships are usually quite reliable and offer the basics in service and attention. Approximately 25% of ships are in this class – though the number is going down as ship owners swap them out for higher class ships.
- **Tourist** class ships can be considered backpacker specials. There are very few such ships remaining in Galapagos and none would carry more than 16 passengers.

Each ship will be more or less professionally managed, depending on the people in charge – you may find a tourist superior ship with better guides, or more attentive crew than on a first-class ship, for example. Luxury ships will typically have mastered the “hotel management” aspect of the on-board experience.

Tourist class ships should be considered by those for whom the lowest possible cruise price is the main deciding factor. Having said this, we strongly recommend finding sufficient funds for at least a Tourist Superior class ship – remember, Galapagos is a once in a lifetime experience and it’s worth going the extra mile to make sure it’s a good one!

OUR FINAL WORD ON SHIP CLASSIFICATION: In the end, we suggest that the price of a cruise generally reflects the relative level of luxury you can expect on board, with the risk of unexpected problems occurring rising rapidly at the very lowest end of the price scale. If money is no object, a luxury ship will give you a wonderful experience. But if you’re happy with less attention to fine detail, you can also have a top-notch trip in Galapagos on a good ship in any class.

cnh tours

Cultural and Natural Heritage Tours
www.cnhtours.com

“Proud of our unmatched personalized service”