NAVC Expeditions (navc.com/expeditions) offers veterinary professionals the opportunity to travel deep into some of the most intriguing destinations—from the jungles of Brazil to the ice caps of Antarctica—to study exotic native species and learn cutting-edge veterinary techniques from around the world. Leading veterinary experts guide the excursions, which are each limited to a small number of participants.

Debby Butler, DVM, shares her experiences participating in 2 expeditions and explains how the trips gave her a new perspective on her profession.

You participated in NAVC Expeditions to the Galapagos Islands and Rwanda/Tanzania (gorilla trekking and safari). What attracted you to these specific expeditions?

I have always wanted to go to both the African continent and the Galapagos Islands. I heard about the NAVC Expeditions at the annual NAVC Conference and thought it would be fun and educational. However, I never expected such awesome experiences. I have only one regret—I wish the trips had been even longer. I didn’t want to come home!

Can you describe your Galapagos Islands expedition experience?

In the Galapagos Islands, I learned that native species were on the brink of extinction and tremendous efforts were undertaken to remove the introduced species that were causing habitat destruction. In addition, I learned about the efforts taken to reintroduce some species, such as the giant Galapagos tortoise, and steps taken to protect others, such as the albatross.

My group was taken to the islands aboard a yacht, and the beach landings provided us the opportunity to photograph and enjoy sea lions and shore birds. We also hiked the island and enjoyed the beautiful volcanic landscape, and we walked right next to Darwin’s finches, hawks, and other wildlife, which had no fear of us.

Can you describe your experiences from the Rwanda gorilla trekking and Tanzania safari expedition?

In Rwanda, the gorilla doctors spoke to us about the Mountain Gorilla Project, an effort to help the gorillas through conservation of the species as well as habitat protection. Then we had the wonderful opportunity to climb the mountains and visit a gorilla group in their home…the jungle. The whole experience was simply magnificent. Huge silverback gorillas and their families were very close to us and unafraid. I saw a large silverback gorilla playing with his infant, tickling him and rolling him around so gently. It is amazing that something with such power can be so gentle.

On the Tanzania safari, we witnessed the great migration, including wildebeest, zebra, and antelope as far as the eye could see, as well as a lioness with her cubs and their kill, and baboons playing in the trees and on the ground. Giraffes and their young ate leaves from tall, flat-top trees, and herds of elephant could be observed eating small plants and trees. Watching these animals living on this beautiful continent was breathtaking.
How did the trips change the way you view or practice veterinary medicine?
I have found that continuing education conferences, either in exotic ports of call or on the NAVC Expeditions, have proven double their weight in educational value. These 2 trips, in particular, gave me a new perspective on animal conservation and preservation of life. I provide veterinary services to many exotic species. Seeing these animals in the wild, I can now share my knowledge of their lifestyles. I also recommend that owners research the needs of the creatures they are planning to own, as some exotic animals are not suited for captivity.

What words of advice do you have for other veterinarians considering participation in an NAVC Expedition?
These trips were a fantastic and unequivocal life experience. A person may be able to go on a safari or trek gorillas, or even visit the Galapagos Islands. But I don’t think you could have a richer experience than on one of the NAVC Educational Expeditions. Thank you, Dr. Carol Walton and Dr. Richard LeCouteur, for making this possible! To anyone who is lucky enough to go, you will thoroughly enjoy an NAVC Expedition.

For more information about participating in a future NAVC Expedition event, as well as recaps of past expeditions, visit navc.com/expeditions. Dr. Debby Butler practices veterinary medicine specializing in exotic animals at Ark and Bark Animal Hospital in Palm Bay, Florida.