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A luxury hotel on the Galápagos Islands

Richard Whistler

Pikaia Lodge, which is located on the summit of an extinct volcano, offers a new way of seeing the islands' natural wonders



Volcán Chico on Isabela Island

Charles Darwin was a solemn old man with a furrowed brow and a beard big enough for birds to nest in – or so the classic image has it. But set that stereotype to one side.

Instead, picture the 26-year-old Darwin sitting astride a giant tortoise in the Galápagos Islands, slapping it on the shell to make it giddy-up. Or grabbing an iguana by the tail just to see what happens. Or, as Darwin also records in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, poking a hawk off a branch with the barrel of his gun. For all the evolutionary insights he drew from the Galápagos, young Darwin had a playful side.

The Galápagos archipelago, adrift in the Pacific 650 miles off the coast of Ecuador, also defies preconceptions. It's a wildlife paradise and a volcanic wasteland. It sits on the equator, yet its waters are cool. It has both sun-baked atolls and highland forest wreathed in cloud.

This geological afterthought – the islands are only a few million years old – is now one of the most protected natural environments on the planet. It became a national park in 1959, with proper controls taking effect in 1968, and in 1978 was the first place to be recognised by Unesco as a World Heritage Site.

Some 97 per cent of the land is designated park, with the 30,000 human inhabitants living on just 3 per cent, most of them on one island. With a limited number of hotels, most visitors stay on “live-aboard” boats that cruise around the islands.

Such restrictions have helped the wildlife remain remarkably insouciant about people. They are not as tame as in Darwin's day but you can still draw close to, say, a male frigate bird, and watch as it inflates a large red pouch to attract female attention.

You can marvel at sea lions. One swooped playfully through the water while I snorkelled close by and another, sunbathing on a small jetty, didn't want to budge when my group arrived. Iguanas and giant tortoises, in particular, seem keen to pose for portraits. These days, though, you can look but not touch, let alone grab by the tail.

So the arrival of a new luxury hotel in the land that gave Darwin key evidence for evolution is unusual. Pikaia Lodge, which formally opened on Santa Cruz island on October 1, is a 14-room futuristic haven of modern comforts amid the wildness.

It took Herbert Frei, the creative force behind the project, a year to find the right site and five years to obtain a permit to build a hotel. Frei is of the species *Homo Entrepreneurialis*,

usually found in the business districts of lowland Ecuador but also sighted in the waters of Galápagos.

For years he ran two boats in the Galápagos for divers and tourists, and campaigned to ban the industrial fishing that threatened to destroy the rich marine life. His DNA, though, blends environmental passions with business instincts. When a ban on new hotels expired in 2005, he saw an opportunity for a high-quality hotel built with eco-friendly technology and styled around the theme of evolution. As he told me: “I wanted to create a spaceship in Jurassic Park. I wanted to do something very modern and very green.”



Pikaia Lodge



The result is Pikaia, named after *pikaia gracilens*, an animal that lived 500m years ago and is regarded by some experts as the ancestor of all vertebrates, us included. *Pikaia gracilens* looked like a small flattened worm. Pikaia Lodge looks more like a Bond villain’s lair.

Perched on the lip of an old volcano crater in the middle of nowhere, it has soaring glass walls and roofs that jut out like giant diving boards. Externally it makes few concessions to the verdant hills that surround it; internally, it’s another matter.

Frei says that, on average, Pikaia generates half the energy it needs from solar power, and at times feeds surplus energy into the island’s grid. An integral part of the building’s design is to collect and recycle water, and it injects air into the system to minimise the amount used. Even so, with its luxurious baths and showers, the hotel still needs to bring up the odd tanker of water because resources are limited at the top of old volcanoes.

Why did Frei choose such a difficult spot? “Location, location, location,” he intoned. On a clear day the setting is spectacular. The main area of the hotel, including its infinity pool, has a panoramic view down the steeply falling green slopes to the browns and yellows of the arid coastal plains and beyond to the shifting ocean blues. As I sat in the tropical warmth of the late afternoon admiring the scene, a finch would perch nearby, or an owl would stand sentinel by the pool.

A visit to the Galápagos, though, should be about exploring, not being rooted to the cocktail bar. Pikaia’s other key selling point is that it has its own yacht on which guests can tour the islands. Surely any hotel can have a yacht? Not in the Galápagos.



The infinity pool at Pikaia with views across the coastal plains

All boats carrying tourists must have a permit – the number is limited and hasn’t changed for years, says Frei. His solution was to repurpose an existing live-aboard boat, which is now dedicated to taking Pikaia guests on day trips. The Pikaia 1 is 100ft long with four decks and eight twin or double cabins, each with an en suite shower and proper loo. For a live-aboard cruise, it would be comfortable; for day trips, it’s luxurious.



A blue-footed booby on Seymour Island

In the mornings we drove 50 minutes by minibus down from the hotel to the landing stage on the north of Santa Cruz. A rigid inflatable then whisked us out to Pikaia 1, waiting just offshore. Within an hour one day, we reached Seymour Island where we found blue-footed boobies, frigate birds, iguanas and a rocky landscape studded with desiccated bushes and cactus.

On another day, a couple of hours’ sail took us to Santiago and Bartolomé islands, where we explored a jumbled plain of black basalt rock – the remains of lava from an eruption 200 years ago – and climbed an ash mountain for a glorious view of the bays and craters. This was lunar landscape, where few plants grew. What made it fascinating was our guide, Paulina, whose knowledge turned barren basalt into fertile ground.

In the islands’ protected areas, visitors must be accompanied by a naturalist guide. There are some places, such as the beautiful Tortuga Bay on Santa Cruz, where you can wander at will but at most sites you must go with a guide and only for a set time.

If that sounds a little regimented, it is. The benefit is that both wildlife and tourists are spared overcrowding: the permit system stipulates itineraries for boats to ensure overload is avoided.

In a decade, the annual number of visitors to the Galápagos has nearly doubled: from 109,000 in 2004 to 204,000 last year. Yet during my brief visit, other tourists were less evident than blue-footed boobies, though that might feel different at high season.

For many, the greatest attractions of the Galápagos are found in the ocean waters. Three large currents meet at the archipelago,

Delivering rich nutrients and unexpected animals. In shallow waters close to the islands you can see angel fish, sharks, surgeonfish, bumphead parrotfish, sea lions and much more, even penguins.

The Galápagos has the only wild penguins north of the equator. It is faintly surreal to find a penguin standing to attention on a rock bathed in tropical sun. But, at some point, penguins found their way to the islands and survived thanks to the cool waters brought by the Humboldt and Cromwell currents.

Returning to base each day limits your range but has advantages. After a day exploring, we would sail back and drive up to Pikaia, arriving in time for a shower and drink before dinner. The food on Pikaia 1 was good; the lodge was a different experience altogether.

Delivering fine dining on a remote archipelago where the import of organic produce is strictly controlled is no mean feat. In the 1930s, a German doctor called Friedrich Ritter decamped to the Galápagos seeking new horizons and, having taken the precaution of removing all his teeth, lived a life of mostly vegetarianism and nudity. He died from eating a piece of contaminated chicken. Since then, Galápagos cuisine has improved a lot.

“ As I sat in the tropical warmth admiring the scene, an owl would stand sentinel by the pool ”

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At Pikaia, most of the dishes are prepared from local ingredients, including deliciously fresh fish. The menu is limited but the quality and presentation are straight out of *MasterChef*. Around \$60 a bottle for the hotel's mid-range Sauvignon Blanc partly reflects the cost of such goods having to be shipped in.

The staff are endlessly attentive, and the setting blends style with thoughtfulness. In the centre of the dining room is a large modern sculpture of the DNA helix; on one wall is a depiction of an ape evolving into a human; around the hotel are numerous fossils, some dating back 500m years. And in the “Explorer's Lounge” there is that picture of an elderly Darwin, with furrowed brow and bird-nest beard.

“Luxury is not opulence,” Frei told me. There are no gold taps at Pikaia; what Frei hopes will enrich people is experience. “My idea is that when people come out of Pikaia, they have a philosophical turnround, a mystical experience, a deeper understanding about life and themselves.”

Or you could just remember what fun the sea lions were.

Details

Richard Whistler travelled as a guest of Steppes Travel (steppestravel.com). A five-day/ four-night package at Pikaia Lodge on a full-board basis, including domestic flights (Quito-Baltra-Guayaquil), costs from £2,995 per person based on two sharing

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