

Discover

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Cannes Château, The Arts Club

Influence

Roberta Naas, Laurie Brookins,
Frank Marrenbach, Essi Avellan

Inspire

Top outdoor adventures, African
archeology, Galápagos in style

Explore

Rio de Janeiro, Thailand,
Sydney, Marrakech

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elite traveler

THE PRIVATE JET
LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE



Desert flower

BANISH THE BLUES WITH THE
BEST BRIGHT COLORS FROM
THE SPRING COLLECTIONS



INSPIRE
GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS

INTO THE WILD

THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS HAVE LURED EXPLORERS AND SCIENTISTS FOR CENTURIES. YET NEW LUXURY LODGES MEAN TRAVELERS DON'T HAVE TO ROUGH IT. LAUREN HOLMES PAYS A VISIT, A-LISTER STYLE

Before we begin, I have a confession: while the Galápagos may be on the bucket list for most, it was never on mine. As a traveler who thrives on high-intensity adventure, culture woven into human chaos and being pushed out of my comfort zone, I had held a secret apprehension that I would get bored. Instead, I found something I needed more than excitement – peace. Sheer, utter, blissful peace.

The pristine wonders and abundant wildlife of the Galápagos need little introduction. One of the world's most biodiverse natural habitats, the unique conditions scattered across the 16 volcanic islands enabled Darwin to develop his theory on evolution by natural selection and remains a living laboratory for the world's leading scientists.

During my visit, *National Geographic's* Pristine Seas project is conducting an exploration of unprecedented depth and leading philanthropists, such as financier Ray Dalio, have donated research time aboard their superyachts and helicopters to enable scientists to access the archipelago's most remote regions. The current hot spot is Wolf Volcano on Isabela Island, which erupted for the first time in 33 years in May 2015, and is home to the Galápagos pink land iguana, which was identified as a unique subspecies as recently as 2009. There's still much to discover.

I had journeyed 621 miles off the coast of Ecuador to experience the evolution of the Galápagos experience, proposed by the island's first truly luxury lodge, Pikaia. Even breaking the trip with an overnight stay at Quito's elegant Casa Gangotena, it feels like

Right: Pinnacle Rock, by Sullivan Bay, Santiago and Bartholomew Islands





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traveling to the end of the earth. After a two-and-a-half hour flight from the capital to the tiny airport of Baltra, it's a short boat trip across the channel to the island of Santa Cruz, home to two thirds of the Galápagos' 20,000-strong population.

Leaving pelicans and sea lions catching fish in cohorts around the docks, we drive past acres of silvery palo santo trees and up into the highlands, microclimates shifting at a rapid rate. Farming villages of blue and white churches and low bungalows fly past, flat roofs designed to collect every last drop of fresh rainwater. It's only when we turn down a single dirt lane that we hit our first traffic jam – a giant tortoise pausing for lunch in the middle of the road. As the drivers debate on how to nudge him along, he strides off into the undergrowth at a surprisingly quick rate. Often referred to as the guardians of the Galápagos, these guys know how to get around.

Skimming the ridge of a long-dormant volcanic crater, Pikaia's ecolodge is enveloped by breathtaking views, the magnitude of which hits me as I step into the lobby. Floor to ceiling glass doors open onto a terrace and infinity pool that lords over 76 acres of golden savanna stretching on to the glittering Pacific, while behind me, 14 glass treehouse-style buildings arc onto uninterrupted cloud forest. It's masculine in its minimalism, while the eight-million-year-old fossils on display were imported from Africa to put the archipelago's relatively recent four-million-year life span into perspective.

Before Pikaia launched in October 2014, with its charming staff, gourmet restaurant and spa, exploring the Galápagos required roughing it, or submitting to the mercy of the high seas through stay-onboard expeditions. No longer. Visitors can now spend days in the plush ecolodge or aboard M/Y Pikaia I, a 105ft yacht with eight private cabins and a spacious sun deck, by far the most sophisticated boat authorized for day trips. Aboard you can explore the pristine coves and verdant highlands of Santa Cruz, where giant tortoises roam as plentiful as cattle. It's on these days sailing out at sea, a dozen frigate birds cruising overhead, that I feel most inspired.

With 97 percent of the Galápagos a protected natural park, each of the 85 boats authorized to operate is set to a strict route. Although the Pikaia concierge can organize surf lessons, mountain biking and catch-and-release fishing, entirely bespoke itineraries are more complicated than in most of the world's wildernesses. On the plus side, carefully controlled timings mean that even among the most popular daytrip destinations, such as North Seymour Island, we barely collide with another group.

One morning we wake before dawn to cruise south for

two-and-a-half hours to the spectacular Bartolomé Island, where much of *Master and Commander*, starring Russell Crowe, was filmed. Here you can hike up some 400 steps behind Pinnacle Rock to one of the highest viewpoints of the Galápagos, and witness the silhouettes of volcanic vertebrae of surrounding islands flash through the distant mist.

As our Zodiac speedboat pulls up to the lava field that envelops Bartolomé, our guide Paulina Aguirre unleashes a seemingly inexhaustible encyclopedia of knowledge. A passionate naturalist, Paulina spent seven years traveling the world cooking aboard superyachts for the likes of Patrizio Bertelli and Miuccia Prada, before returning to the Galápagos to guide the likes of Laurene Powell, and me. It's a complex destination, and watching scientific theory play out in real time is intellectually stimulating, but at times challenging, so the quality of your guide truly holds the key to your experience.

"Just don't fall," Paulina warns, as we step onto black rock glistening diamonds in the baking equatorial sun. "Volcanic rock is as sharp as glass, it will cut clean through your clothes." Below, the ground ebbs and flows in rope-like rivulets, dividing into chasms of burnt umber and yellow ochre that slip into darkness. Balancing like a tentative tightrope walker across the magma bubbles, the heat of the ground pulses through my soles. It would be hell, were it not for the belt of brilliant Pacific blue that skirts the shoreline, tantalizingly close.

Even compared to the clearest corners of the Maldives and the Mediterranean, the pristine purity of the water here feels otherworldly. We pick our way towards an immaculate half moon bay, footprint free save for the swish of turtles' tails as they lay eggs in the dunes. While Paulina signals to the hovering Zodiac to deposit snorkel masks, wet suits and refreshments, I dive into the surf and almost collide with a Galápagos penguin, darting as fast as a hummingbird.

The world's second smallest species of penguin, they are the only ones to venture north of the equator. With as few as 1,000 couples left, most stick to the coldest channels of the Humboldt Current that surge up from Antarctica along the far western islands of Isabela and Fernandina. We are lucky to see them here, and with this year's El Niño weather system wreaking havoc on their food source, it's anyone's guess if they will still be here next year.

While part of my adventurer's soul longs to set out on a 15 day exploration around the wilder, far flung shores of the Galápagos, where armies of black marine iguanas bask in the sun, I also feel a deep-rooted joy at stepping back onto dry land as the sun sets, to be whisked back to the lodge to paddle in the infinity pool under a carpet of stars, or have the day's creases smoothed out at the spa. Most days, it's a struggle to stay up for dinner. Usually I am ready to drift off by 9pm, enveloped by a chorus of cicadas echoing through the cloud forest and crisp white linen. And over the course of my five days in the Galápagos, as the many mysteries of the islands unravel, so do I. Instead of boredom, I find the ultimate mental detox, soothing and intellectually stimulating. It's a total regeneration for burned-out souls.

THE DETAILS



Stay From \$41,750 per night to rent out Pikaia Lodge for exclusive use (14 bedrooms). Alternatively \$167,000 for a four night/five day exploration package.

Additional services available on request including VIP airport welcome, private escort through airport, private butler service and private tours to the Darwin Research Center. Private yacht service can also be arranged.

To book contact the reservations manager, on +593 4371 1670 or email info@pikaialodge.com. For more information visit pikaialodge.com



Top: Savor the breathtaking views from Pikaia Lodge

Below: Marine iguana (*Amblyrhynchus cristatus*)