

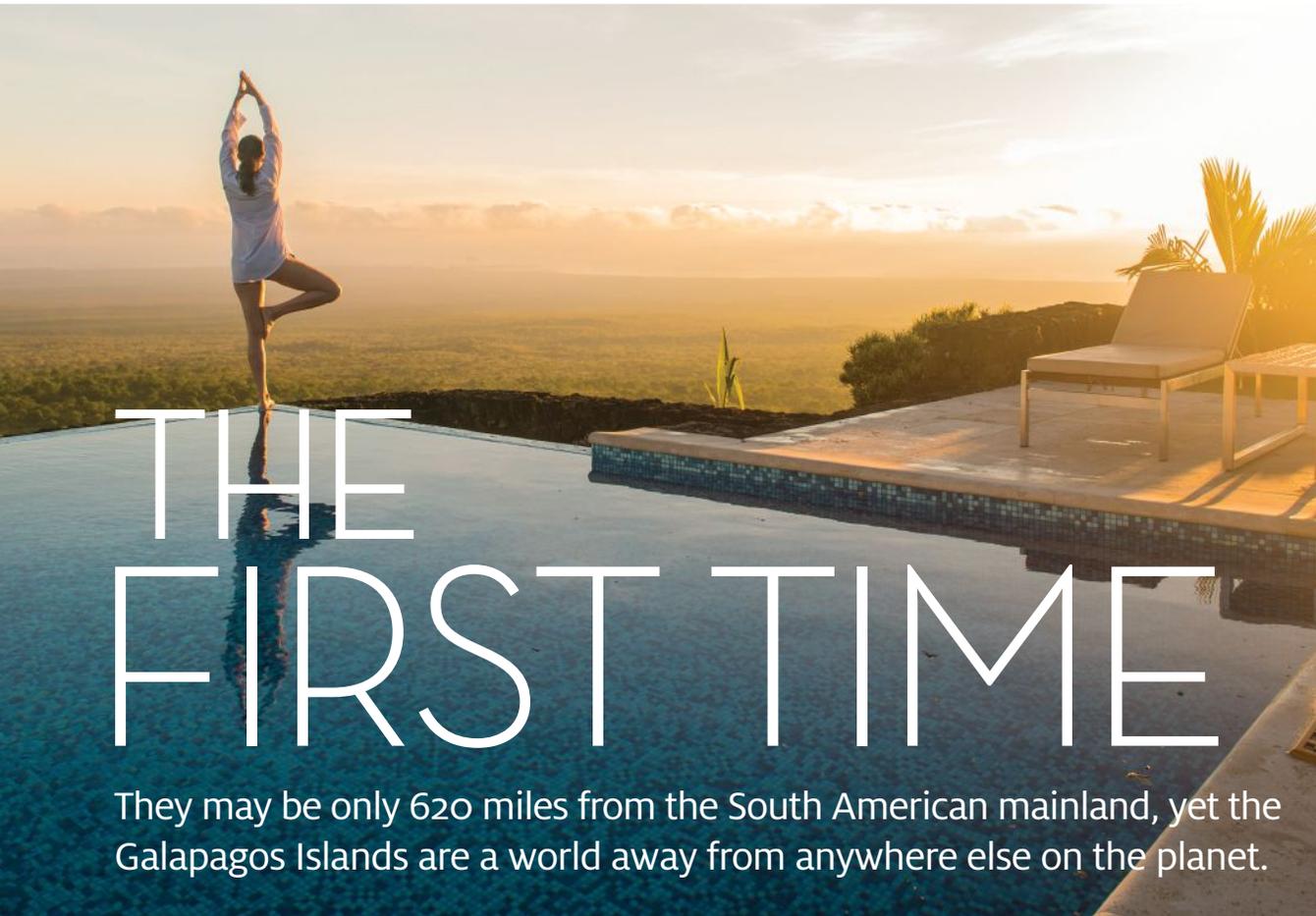
GENTRY

DESTINATIONS

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FEBRUARY/MARCH 2019

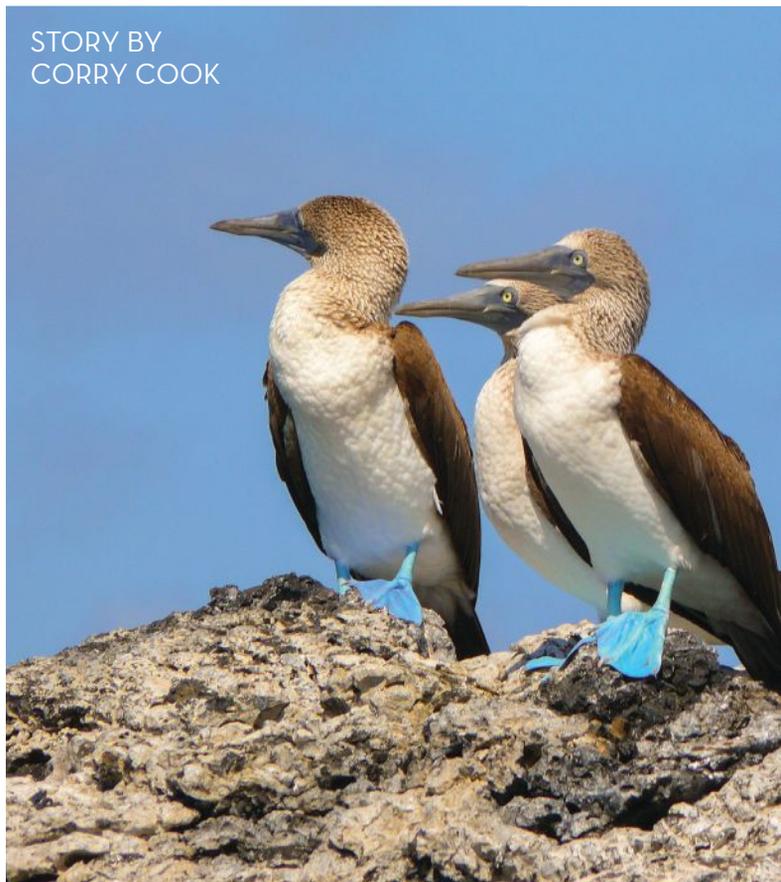


THE FIRST TIME

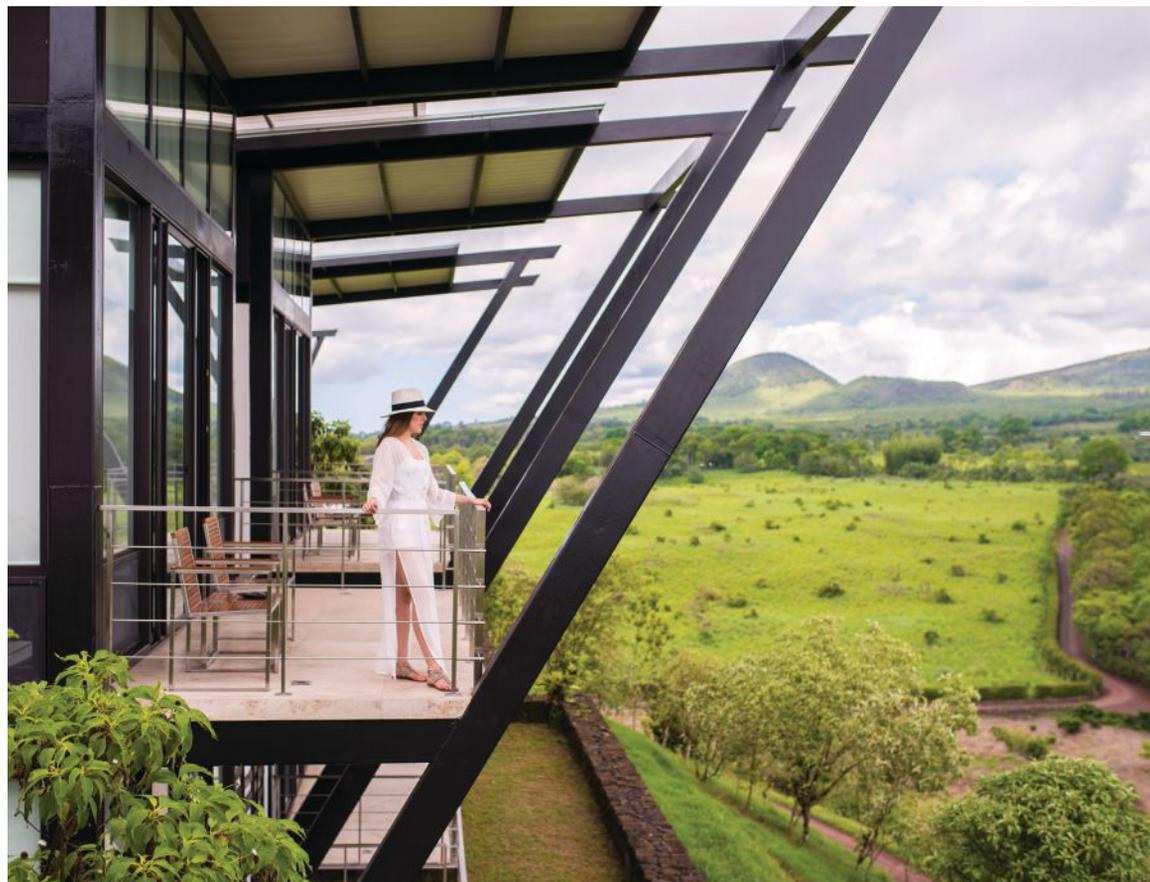
They may be only 620 miles from the South American mainland, yet the Galapagos Islands are a world away from anywhere else on the planet.



PHOTOS: PIKAIA LODGE



STORY BY
CORRY COOK



PHOTOS: PIKAI LODGE



PHOTOS: PIKAI A LODGE

The Galapagos, a UNESCO Heritage Site described as “a living museum and showcase of evolution,” is an archipelago and melting pot of marine species. Volcanic and seismic activity, together with the extreme isolation of the islands, led to the development of unusual plant and animal life—such as the marine iguana, giant tortoise, and the many types of finch that inspired Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection following his visit in 1835.

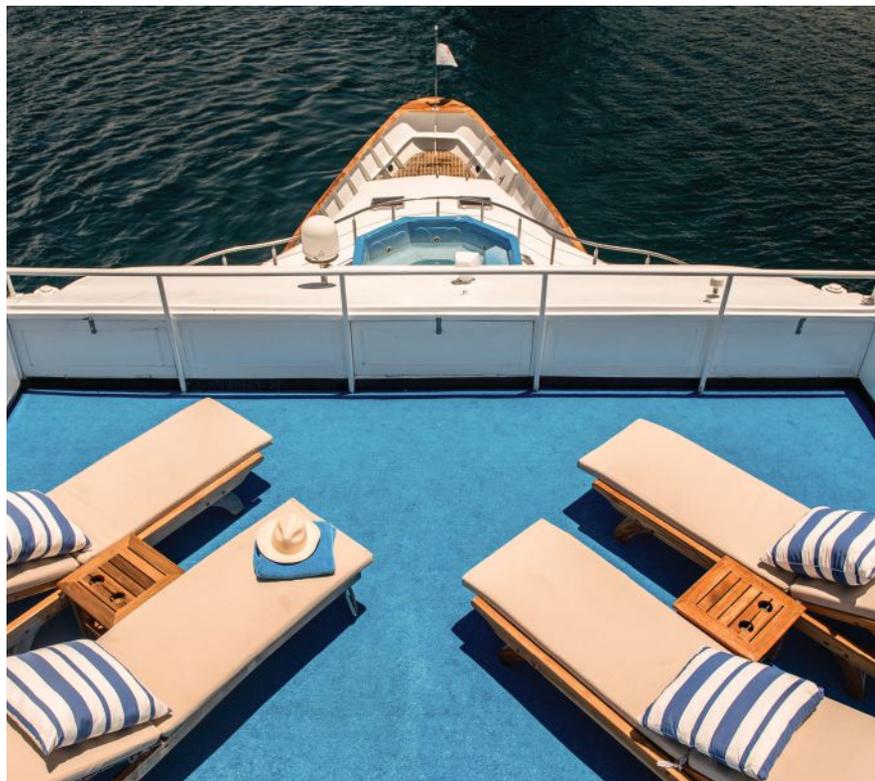
A person’s life is filled with special moments. Some are powerful markers of new beginnings—first day of school, kiss stolen, vote cast, and love solidified. Life is made up of wonderful moments that when shared with someone special, a partner or a child, are seared into memory and become forever part of our identity. I will never forget my first time visiting the Galapagos Islands. Chances are, neither will you.

More than a place that warms the skin and recharges the batteries, the islands bring people together through discussion, learning, and thought. This exceptional destination fuels curiosity and wonder and delivers newfound appreciation and perspective. As an eco-travel academic and wildlife fanatic, I was particularly ecstatic to see this utterly unique place for the first time, but truth be told, it might actually be impossible for anyone not to be amazed. All that said, the joy in sharing the first visit with a person, or people, you love cannot be understated. So, it’s important to go about the whole thing properly.

ECO-LUXE ECSTASY

Let’s cut to the chase—Pikaia Lodge Galapagos is a modern eco-tourism marvel. The Lodge rests on a former cattle ranch, which is now revitalized with restored grazing areas and more than 12,000 newly-planted endemic trees that have fostered the return of giant tortoises and endemic birds to their ancestral habitat. The Lodge offers an itinerary that accommodates all travelers—whether looking to explore nature’s laboratories and discovering undisturbed wildlife, scuba diving in some of the most sought-after waters, or spending the day on the property indulging in the flavors of freshly fused Ecuadorian/Peruvian cuisine.

Pikaia’s structures are truly striking. Fabricated from recyclable steel, glass, and natural stone, they are decorated with sustainably cultivated Ecuadorian teak wood furniture and bamboo wood floors. And the carbon-neutral operation is upheld utilizing solar and wind energy, while rainwater is collected and stored with wastewater repurposed for irrigation. Since its debut in October 2014, the Lodge has maintained its commitment to the long-term preservation of the unique landscapes and wildlife of the Galapagos Islands.



PHOTOS: PIKAIA LODGE

General Manager Andrew Balfour is the son of a British father and an Ecuadorian mother and was brought up in the Galapagos Islands. He, like everyone employed on the property, has a personal stake in Pikaia's success. In addition to social responsibility programs for the nearby community of "El Cascajo," the Lodge prioritizes community members first when hiring and sourcing ingredients.

A YACHT TO REMEMBER

A stay at the Lodge includes day tours on the *Pikaia I*, a 100-foot long motor yacht and luxury vessel that takes guests to neighboring islands to discover the encompassing mystique of the Galapagos. The yacht recently underwent a series of upgrades, including a renovation of the dining area, a stunning new sun deck, and a soft-goods refresh of all staterooms and common spaces. With no more than 16 guests on board, the Pikaia team makes every adventure possible with perfect comforts at hand and an operation that would pass any green-glove inspection.

Each morning, your experienced guides plan exploration options based on satellite weather imagery and tide charts; no matter what the conditions, the Galapagos delivers. On-board guests can snack on authentic Ecuadorian cuisine, rest, shower, and freshen up in their air-conditioned private cabins, soak in the jacuzzi on deck, watch a Galapagos documentary, join a discussion with guides, sunbathe, or watch for seabirds or dolphins. And at the end of each adventure at sea, guests are whisked back to the Pikaia Lodge and its many comforts. Known for its particularly romantic vibe, the Pool Suite is nestled on top of the

small plateau on the Lodge's main crater with its panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows, private plunge pool, and a shaded terrace with breathtaking unobstructed views.

THE RIGHT GUIDE

If you get the right guide, he or she will become your hero (no exaggeration). Because the flora and fauna of the Galapagos Islands are so unique, specialist knowledge is required when exploring the region. This is why Galapagos naturalist guides are so important. Strict regulations by the Galapagos National Park authorities prevent anyone from visiting the islands without a formal guide. You don't need to go to the Galapagos to sit and listen to a lecture; Pikaia's choice of guides will provide you with all kinds of interesting and entertaining information in the real-life classroom of the archipelago.

I imagine Darwin would have enjoyed meeting individuals such as Andres Vergara, the naturalist guide who shepherded me through the landscape. I picture the two of them waxing poetic until dawn over Michelleadas—a beer with hot sauce that is surprisingly great. Rigorously educated and trained, Vergara and other Galapagos naturalist guides are also there to keep visitors safe both on land and at sea. Each day from private transport to yacht to skiff to island and back again, Andres' ability to entertain and educate was uncanny.

LOVE THE LIZARDS

Who knew iguanas had a following? No matter which continent I visit, experienced travelers, naturalists, and biologists ask about



PHOTO: CORRY COOK



PHOTO: PRISCILLA GARZA



PHOTO: CORRY COOK



the marine iguana. While giant tortoises, penguins, sea lions, and the like can be discovered in other corners of the world, only Galapagos has a species of aquatic lizard. The marine iguana is the only lizard in the world with the ability to live and forage at sea and is endemic to the Galapagos Archipelago.

However, Darwin himself wasn't impressed. Just 22 years old when he first visited the Galapagos Islands in September 1835, the keen naturalist was utterly amazed and noticed and described every single detail of the rocks, plants, and animals he saw. In his 1839 book, *Voyage of the Beagle*, Darwin's disgust at the marine iguana is palpable; he calls it a "hideous-looking creature, of a dirty black color, stupid and sluggish in its movements." Lucky for us, today the dark colored marine iguana and others in a rainbow of colors can be found on most islands in the archipelago, at the shoreline, all year round.

ENOUGH FILM FOR BLUE-FOOTED BOOBYS

Birdwatchers come from all over the world to visit the Galapagos Islands where there are hundreds of bird species to be seen. Many of them are endemic, and the Galapagos is the only place in the world you can see the infamous blue feet of the Blue-footed Booby. The popular sea birds prefer to nest in any open spot, which often includes the middle of the trail!

Of course, it's all about attraction; the blue hue is very important to the birds' mating ritual, during which the males take great pride in their fabulous feet and show them off by way of a high-stepping strut. Silly at best and hilarious at worst, he keeps showing her his feet, possibly bowing to her with much fanfare and presenting her with gifts of precious twigs and the like. The romantic "atmosphere" is further heightened by the specific hue of blue; the bluer the feet, the sexier the booby. Chicks hatch in or around the month of June and need five to six months of development before they can fly. After all that song and "dance," at least the males stick around to help raise the baby boobies.

Of course, the Galapagos finches are the land bird that will forever be associated with Darwin, who used them to illustrate his Theory of Evolution. As for seeing the 16 different species and hundreds of other birds, timing is everything. From Frigatebirds to Waved Albatross and beyond, all the Galapagos bird species follow very particular life cycles of mating, nesting, and feeding, and it's important to come at the right time to see the birds you are most interested in.

TAKEN ABACK BY A GIANT

Of all the native creatures in the Galapagos, the giant tortoise



PHOTO: PIKAI A LODGE

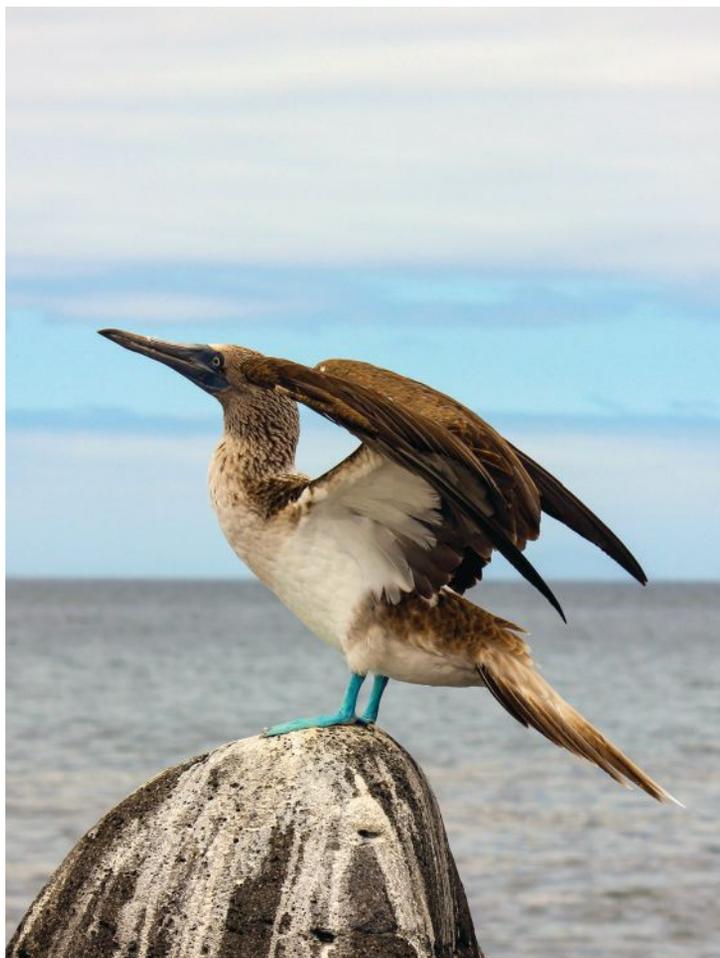


PHOTO: CORRY COOK

is perhaps the most famous of all. The first time you encounter one of these lumbering beasts in the forest, it can be spellbinding. Their unexpected hissing and mooing sounds might surprise you. These gentle giants were once abundant on several islands, but early whaling ships and pirates often carried them off because they can survive for a long time at sea without food or water, providing fresh meat for sailors who spend long stretches away from land.

Fortunately, recent conservation efforts for the remaining Galapagos Giant Tortoise subspecies have been very successful. There are now more of them living in the wild since before passing ships started capturing them hundreds of years ago. The best time to see them is from June to December, when most of them have come up from the lowlands.

DANCING WITH SEA LIONS

Nothing beats the thrill of swimming with Galapagos Sea Lions. Unlike birds, most mammals cannot fly to Galapagos, so all of them had to get there by accident. The famous Galapagos sea lions are descended from ancestors who lived off the South American coast. (One legend tells of a fierce storm that occurred centuries ago that brought them to Galapagos, where they thrived.) Highly prevalent around the islands, we enjoyed ob-

serving sea lions sleeping under the prickly pear cactus and on the sandy shores or swimming near our skiff, occasionally showing off their shiny coats and cute little pointed snouts out from under the water.

True to nature, there are no guarantees when attempting to snorkel or dive alongside sea lions in the archipelago. Should you ever be so fortunate, they certainly know how to make an entrance. In a split second, they magically appeared, twirling all around us and torpedoing through the water. Inquisitive by nature, the sea lions seemed equally fascinated by our encounter, encircling our group and swirling in between us with impressive beauty and grace.

The excitement in the air was palpable, as whiskers and fins torpedoed by with expert navigation and lack of collision, and audible squeals of delight could be heard under water from visitors of all ages. Making our way back to the yacht, silence reigned on our skiff as I attempted to process how special that first was for me. I wondered if everyone felt as exhilarated as I did. Unable to control himself, a young boy on our excursion suddenly broke the silence by blurting out at the top of his lungs, "That was REALLY, REALLY FUN!" His father's eyes sparkled, and his mother's laugh resounded—another in a series of unforgettable Galapagos moments. ♦