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Natural SELECTION

Explore the Galápagos Islands—the ancient archipelago where flora and fauna reign.

by CORINNE WHITING

REGARDLESS OF ALL WE'VE ALREADY SEEN, DAZZLING DESTINATIONS DO REMAIN—PLACES WHERE THE TERRAIN IS SO FOREIGN AND THE BEAUTY SO EXTREME THAT, AT FIRST, WE SIMPLY GAWK, GAPE, ABSORB.

One such spot, the Galápagos Islands, have been coined by many “the last paradise on Earth.” Here, under an intense sun and amidst turquoise waters, we remember, “So this is why we travel.” By day, the land becomes a vibrant panorama of wings, scales, feathers and shells—slithering, waddling, thriving life. By night, the sky explodes into a kaleidoscope of spinning equatorial stars, and we know that we’ve landed ourselves somewhere unspeakably special.







THIS PAGE: The Galápagos Islands are home to at least 26 endemic species (photos courtesy Pikaia Lodge). **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Sea lions enjoy a bit of downtime (photo courtesy Ecuador Ministry of Tourism); rustic luxury at Galapagos Safari Camp (photo courtesy of Galapagos Safari Camp).

The Galápagos Islands, an archipelago of active volcanoes in the Pacific Ocean, serve as a living laboratory for science and evolution about 600 miles off the Ecuadorian coast. Thanks to the region's rich geological history, the 14 islands and numerous islets are home to at least 26 endemic species including such exquisite creatures as marine iguanas, giant tortoises and the finches that inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection.

Like few places on Earth, the Galápagos ecosystem remains largely intact. Today visitors enjoy up-close visits with playful sea lions, whimsical blue-footed boobies and sneaky crabs. When not consumed by the surreal scenes that parade across their viewfinders, visitors enjoy kayaking,

snorkeling, diving, hiking, biking and exploring archaic volcanic tunnels. UNESCO declared the Galápagos a World Natural Heritage Site in 1979, and great measures have been taken to protect and preserve this treasure. However, the future hangs in flux; an increasing number of tourists and new arrivals of invasive species pose undeniable threats to the archipelago's rich biodiversity. When it comes to this bucket-list destination, believe us when we say—there's no time like the present.

READY, SET, JET

Several factors make this otherworldly paradise an ideal destination; year-round, the climate is pleasant and the wildlife active. Ecuador adopted the U.S. dollar as its official currency in 2000, and



countless luxury options exist for those wanting to travel in style. Flights to the islands leave from mainland cities Quito and Guayaquil. Among the principal islands, Santa Cruz and San Cristóbal are the most developed. On Santa Cruz, guests find the Charles Darwin Research Station, a breeding hub for land iguanas and giant tortoises. The archipelago's easternmost island San Cristóbal features white beaches dotted with sea lions and inlets where sea turtles, manta rays and sharks enliven the azure waters.

Visitors can enjoy the archipelago's four populated islands on a limited basis without guides, but the uninhabited islands require a licensed guide, to be arranged through the Galápagos National Park Service (www.galapagospark.org). Before arriving, however, most guests prearrange a one- to two-week package that includes guided island visits. (Hint: To explore the more remote islands or Isabela's two volcanic craters, book a cruise that lasts 10 days or longer.)

GET CRUISIN'

Thankfully, numerous travel companies—like Black Tomato (www.blacktomato.com) and Orvis (www.orvis.com)—offer

package tours that attend to all the details and guarantee top-notch service. Since 1966, Butterfield & Robinson (www.butterfield.com) has offered luxury travel to active folks. Today one of their most popular private tours is an 11-day, family-ready agenda. The itinerary begins and ends in Quito, where visitors lodge like royalty inside a regally restored mansion. Days five through nine feature “Galápagos magic,” during which guests explore the islands by day and then sleep at the Galápagos Safari Camp (www.galapagossafaricamp.com), an “eco-luxury tented



THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS, AN ARCHIPELAGO OF ACTIVE VOLCANOES IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN, SERVE AS A LIVING LABORATORY FOR SCIENCE AND EVOLUTION ABOUT 600 MILES OFF THE ECUADORIAN COAST.



FROM TOP: Tucked away in the lush highlands of Santa Cruz Island, the Royal Palm offers luxe lodgings in the heart of the Galápagos (photo courtesy of Royal Palm Hotel); Iguana Crossing boutique hotel features innovative cuisine that ranges from ancestral delicacies to grilled meats (photo courtesy of Iguana Crossing); inside the M/V Pikaia I—Pikaia Lodge's private 100-foot oceangoing cruise yacht (photo courtesy of Pikaia Lodge).



camp" perched in the Santa Cruz highlands. Butterfield highlights include daytime activities like kayaking and coffee plantation tours plus candlelit dinners. A similar 11-day itinerary lodges guests out at sea, aboard the decadent *Isabella II* that comes equipped with a glass-bottom boat.

REI Adventures (www.rei.com) prides itself on being "active caretakers of the environment," and for decades they've matched travel-savvy guides with like-minded adventurers. Their Galápagos

itineraries range from the five-day "lodge-to-lodge" option (think snorkeling among sea lions by day and sleeping comfortably onshore by night) to eight-day island cruises aboard a 20-passenger luxury yacht. Combination packages like the 10-day "Amazon Basin & Galápagos Islands Family Adventure" allow curious travelers to cover an array of coveted territory.

Abercrombie & Kent (www.abercrombiekent.com) boasts intimate group sizes (12 passengers per naturalist guide)



and the use of an eco-friendly vessel that nimbly navigates Galápagos waters. Daily excursions on *pangas* (rafts) mean visitors get up-close encounters with wildlife. The 10-day "Wonders of the Galápagos" tour begins with a multilingual director greeting guests in Guayaquil. The Galápagos portion takes guests to sites like Albemarle Point (which few other companies access) and the pristine western region of the archipelago. On the white sands of Española, explorers find a colony of sea lions and a nesting site for sea turtles. Two million birds call Genovesa home, including red-footed boobies, frigates, swallow-tailed gulls and endemic owls. Solitary adventurers love A&K's solo-traveler rates, and families enjoy perks like kid-friendly menus.

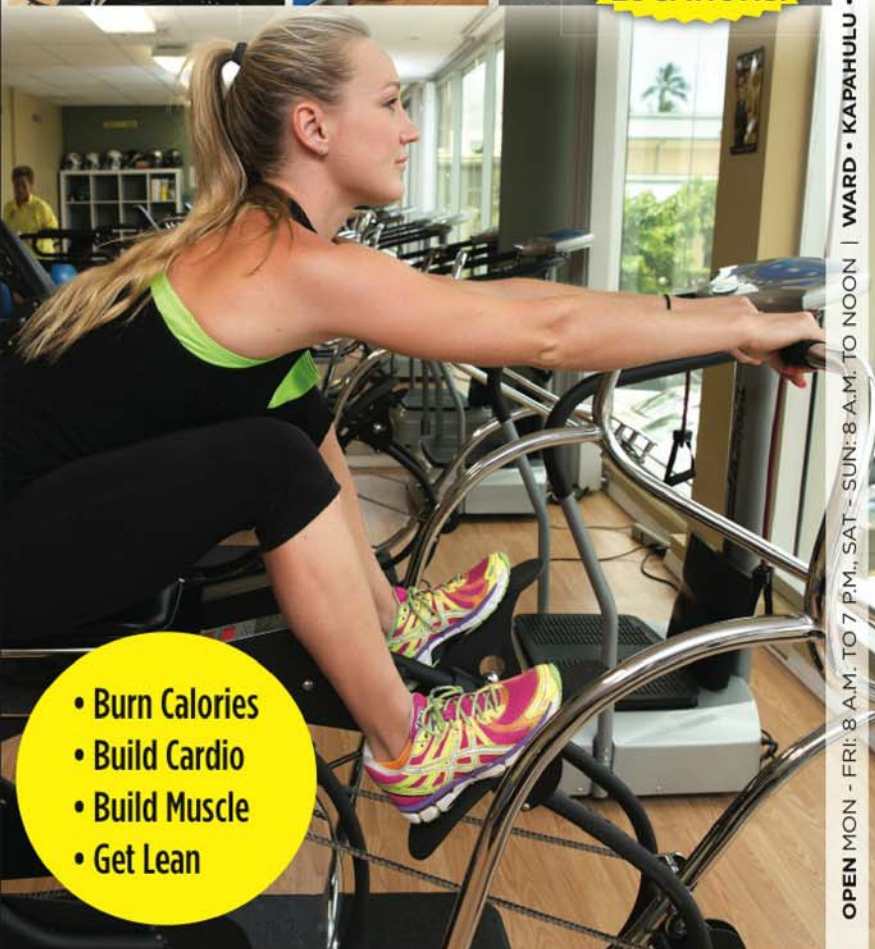
THE INN CROWD

However, if you forego an all-inclusive package that covers lodging and dining, never fear; choices abound. On Santa Cruz, the five-star Royal Palm Hotel (www.royalpalmgalapagos.com) boasts a lush landscape, tennis courts and pool, and an on-site restaurant merges "elegant colonial style and traditional island design" (think warm mahogany and an open fireplace). Chefs source fresh ingredients from the island; diners relish

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When it debuts in May, Pikaia Lodge will be the first carbon neutral accommodation in the Galápagos and one of the most advanced green lodges in the world (photos courtesy of Pikaia Lodge).

dishes like *ceviche* or the citrus-crusted Galápagos cod. On Isabela, the Iguana Crossing (www.iguanacrossing.com.ec) boutique hotel also features innovative cuisine that ranges from ancestral delicacies like *ancocho de pescado* (fish soup with yucca) to meats grilled on a lava-stone barbecue and marinated with the juice of local, organic fruits.

Keen to try the newest Galápagos hot spot? At the end of May, Pikaia Lodge (www.pikaialodgegalapagos.com)—a land-based day tour concept—will draw eco-adventure travelers craving some pampering (on solid ground) each evening. The first carbon neutral

accommodation in the Galápagos and one of the most advanced green lodges in the world, Pikaia entails a stunning location on Santa Cruz Island and its own, private tortoise reserve. Thanks to floor-to-ceiling windows, plush suites offer sensational views. Other perks include a luxurious infinity pool and the Evolution restaurant (on the edge of a volcanic crater). Daytime programs designed for small groups showcase surrounding gems aboard the oceangoing yacht *Pikaia I*. In the end, regardless of how you choose to explore this magnificent pocket of the planet, we promise, you'll be infinitely grateful you came. ■



PHOTO COURTESY TRAVAASA HANA

The road to Travaasa Hana just got a less gnarly. Well not the road exactly—the 68-mile, curve-filled, forest-lined Hana Highway is still the

HIDDEN GEMS

same—but now you can skip the drive and fly straight to the grand getaway in just 20 minutes via Mokulele Airlines (from Kahului Airport).

Check into the “experiential resort” and find out just how accurate that distinction is. Though the sprawling, yet elegantly manicured property is conducive for some serious R&R with its well-appointed bungalow garden suites and ocean-side Sea Ranch Cottages, the resort is also rife with hands-on activities—from throw-net and bamboo fishing to outdoor yoga—to help you recharge, or at the very least, forget about the maddening situation back home.

And like many places that embrace the locavore movement the resort also touts ocean-to-table cuisine and local produce. With executive chef Derek Watanabe (who cut his culinary teeth working with Alan Wong in addition to stints at several Four Seasons’ resorts) and his team in the kitchen, you can bet the freshest ingredients are being used to create a medley of impressive offerings.

Though it’s come a long way from 1946, Old Hawai’i still lives and breathes here at Travaasa Hana.

www.travaasa.com/hana

—by HILuxury Team