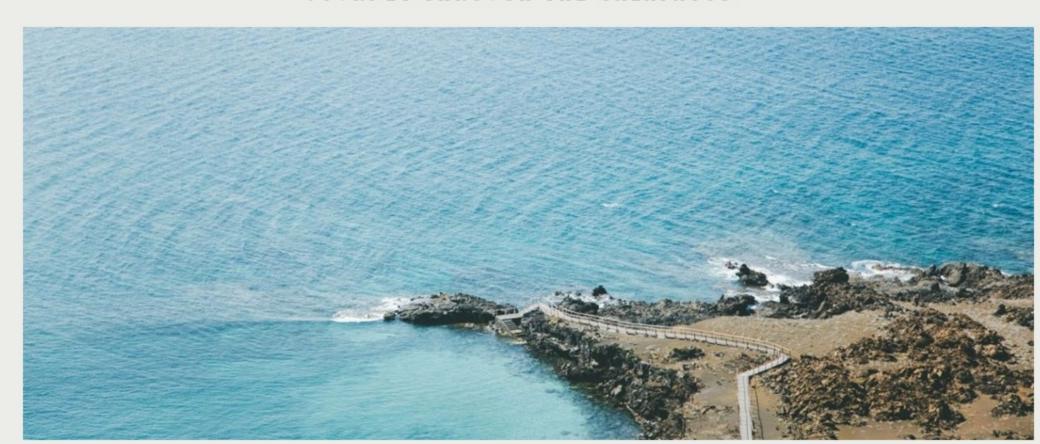


JOURNEY THROUGH THE GALÁPAGOS



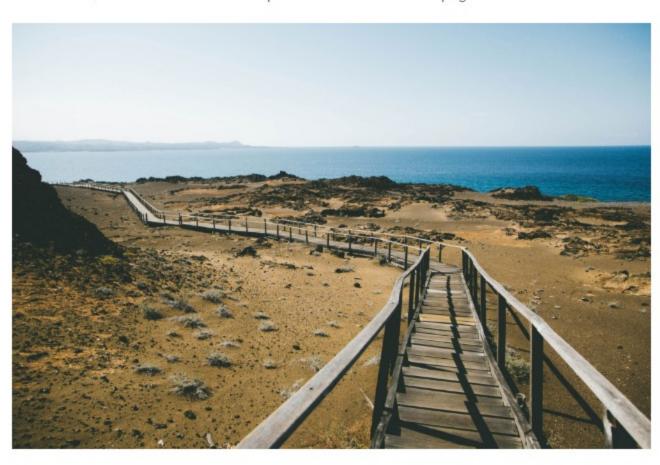
TRIP IDEAS

Journey through the Galápagos

In South America's wild Galápagos archipelago, writer Michaela Trimble embarks on an epic island-hopping expedition (iguanas, penguins and sea lions included).

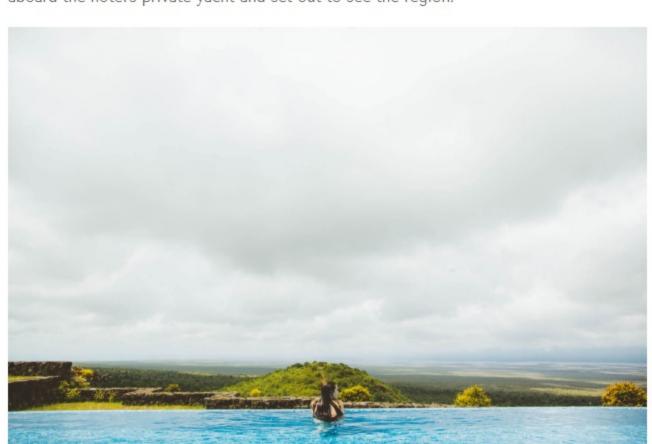
Photos by Marianna Jamadi

Goggles suctioned firmly to my forehead and snorkel intact, I dive into the crystalline waters surrounding North Seymour Island. A school of colorful fish swim by me, their scales glimmering in the sunlight. My travel companion Marianna (who also happens to be a pro photographer and fearless adventurer) is already far ahead of me, kicking furiously toward a group of sharks to capture the creatures as they hover above the seabed. No, we're not in a *Jaws* sequel — we're in the Galápagos.



It's day one of a week-long island-hopping expedition around the volcanic archipelago, a nature lover's paradise where giant tortoises roam free, Jurassic-like birds fly overhead, and sea lions float side-by-side in the cool ocean waters. But for all its wild beauty, the remote inlet just off the coast of Ecuador has remained relatively undiscovered, serving as a quick pit-stop for cruise ships rather than a resort destination. Yet, thanks to the recent opening of the design-forward Pikaia Lodge, more curious travelers are flooding in. The 14-room hilltop palace isn't your typical bare bones eco-resort. Though it has its own solar panels, rainwater supply and 77 acres of private land, this is luxury at its finest.

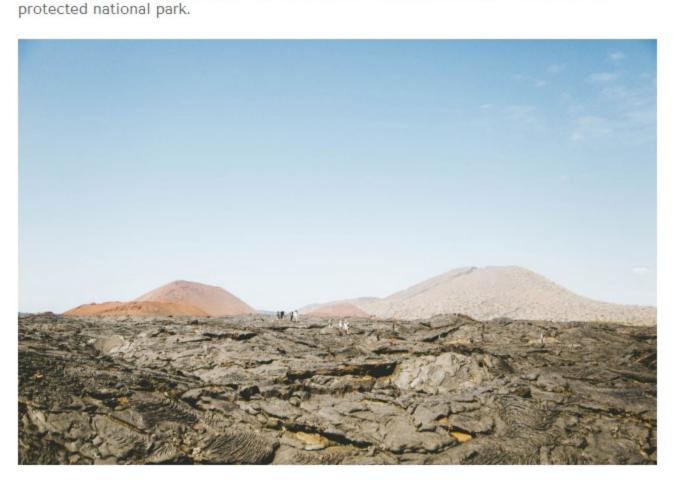
We check into a sprawling villa perched on the lip of a crater. My breezy suite has bamboo wood floors, Peruvian travertine marble bathrooms, and a huge terrace overlooking the lush tropical forest and arid savanna. Dinner is a fusion of South American flavors like sauteed prawn sango (stew), quinoa risotto in refrito, and aji de carne (traditional Ecuadorian soup with yellow plantain, peanuts and crispy beef), paired with Argentinian malbec and Chilean chardonnay at the cheeky restaurant, Evolution. And while it'd be easy to laze the days away on a plush lounge by the infinity pool, you don't come to the Galapagos to veg out, you come to explore. So, we sign up for a tour aboard the hotel's private yacht and set out to see the region.



From a day excursion on the boat, we stop at North Seymour Island, where exotic birds soar above as we trek along the trail. "There's a blue-footed booby and a great frigatebird!" our guide exclaims as he points to a red-chested fowl with the wingspan of a giant. Later, we visit Bachas Beach and come across a flock of flamingos hunting for crustaceans in a shallow pool. The animals are unaccustomed to human interaction, bravely inching toward us to take a closer look (they're just as curious about us as we are of them!).



Other trips are more adrenaline-inducing. On Santiago Island, we walk on coal black lava fields, the molten magma etching a zebra-like pattern on the earth. Scuba diving around Sullivan Bay, we explore the second biggest marine reserve in the world (behind Australia's Great Barrier Reef), and on Bartolomé Island we hike up a jungle mountaintop to see panoramic views of the bay below. There's even Santa Cruz Island, home to one of the largest tortoise populations. It's no wonder Charles Darwin was so taken with this area, and why today it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site as well as a



The most memorable experience is the last day, when two penguins come up to play with us. Ditching our fins and goggles, we float closer to the birds. It's the first time we left our cameras behind, but we didn't miss a thing.

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