

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT

The Galapagos Islands

THE ECUADORIAN ARCHIPELAGO WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR CHARLES DARWIN'S THEORY OF EVOLUTION. TODAY'S VISITORS WILL BE AS MESMERISED, SAYS MAYA BOYD

FAMILY FUN

For families with adventurous children, the Galapagos Islands, with their white powdery beaches, steaming volcanoes, lava tunnels and bizarrely tame, oversized wildlife, are an ideal option. Untouched by humans until 1535, the island's native creatures have evolved to be uniquely unafraid of human contact, meaning children can swim with sea lions, stroke giant turtles or sit quietly as blue-footed boobies flip-flop aimlessly past.

Veloso Tours (www.veloso.com), half-term from £3,117 including daytime flights, transfers, meals and excursions) has a yacht-based Galapagos Family Tour that includes children's activities such as stargazing, navigation and knot tying with the boat's captain, plus children's naturalists and onboard kids' menus.

If your children (or you) get seasick, Andean Trails (www.andeantrails.co.uk), from £1,323 per person for a family of four, excluding flights) has a land-based tour that promises excellent local guides tailored for kids, leaving parents to relax on the beach knowing their little explorers are in safe hands.

ON THE HIGH SEAS

The classic way to tour the islands is by sea and there are options to suit all tastes. If new is what you want, look no further than leading cruise operator

Silversea (www.silversea.com), whose Silver Galapagos launched this September and is the only luxury expedition ship offering socially and environmentally responsible ecotourism to the archipelago (fares start at £3,550 per person per week all-inclusive based on double occupancy).

The more intrepid should consider Metropolitan Touring (www.metropolitan-touring.com) – commonly referred to as 'the heritage brand of the Galapagos'. Metropolitan Tours has been plying these waters for more than 60 years, even mapping out some of today's routes, and the newest of their boats, La Pinta, is smart and sophisticated while retaining the spirit of adventure the brand is known for.

It's worth noting that all cabins on La Pinta have floor-to-ceiling windows for a fully immersive experience, day or night.

Alternatively, if you're looking for a real Darwin-esque voyage, Another World Adventures (www.anotherworldadventures.com) has a swashbuckling trip sailing from Ecuador's mainland aboard the famous Mary Anne, the only three-mast vessel to sail the islands. These trips are especially great for singles, involving onboard activities including cooking lessons and Spanish classes, and no single-

occupancy supplement.

LAND-BASED LUXURY

Billed as 'the next step in the evolution of luxury eco-adventure', Pikaia Lodge (www.pikaialodgegalapagos.com) is due to open in early 2014 and offers the first carbon-neutral accommodation option in the Galapagos.

Occupying a precarious perch on the rim of an extinct volcano on the central island of Santa Cruz, the lodge is the epitome of eco-chic. Personalised day trips aboard Pikaia's elegant private motor yacht are notably lacking in any 'tour bus' mentality and guides are knowledgeable, discreet and unpushy.

At the lodge, guests can relax in the bar with a cocktail before dining alfresco around the softly lit infinity pool, enjoying panoramic views of the mountains. Bedrooms are spacious and elegant, with well-stocked mini bars and probably the islands' highest thread count. Bathrooms are airy and marble-clad, and there's a 'no sleeveless shirts' policy in the restaurant – in short, it's posh.

For those who need to offset their luxury guilt, it's worth noting that Pikaia's award-winning social responsibility programme includes providing teachers for the local school, undertaking maintenance work on the islands and applying for no more than 15 work permits for

non-islanders.

EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION

Paying homage to the pioneer of Galapagos research, the Charles Darwin Research Station is one of the most popular attractions on the islands. Thanks to the London-based Galapagos Conservation Trust (www.savegalapagos.org) and some much-needed 'green' investment from the City, the centre has undergone a huge revamp. A new interpretive centre with interactive displays is due to open early next year alongside a redesigned shop featuring locally made artisanal jewellery, artwork, clothing and souvenirs

AN ECUADORIAN ADD-ON

Trips to the Galapagos Islands generally leave mainland Ecuador from Quito or Guayaquil, so consider a journey on the newly renovated

Tren Crucero (www.trenecuador.com/crucero) along the way. This brightly painted steam locomotive links the capital to the coastal city, travelling through lush scenery in elegant vintage style.

The 400km route was only reopened this year and transports its 54 passengers through the snow-capped peaks of the Avenue of the Volcanoes and the plains of coastal Ecuador, taking in the natural, cultural and culinary diversity of the region en route. **Rainbow Tours** (www.rainbowtours.co.uk) operates a four-day train trip with accommodation as part of a longer itinerary.

Getting there: *Lastminute.com* has non-direct return flights from London Heathrow to Baltra Galapagos from £839 in January. www.galapagosislands.com



Steam powered: Take a four-day trip aboard the colourful Tren Crucero



Set sail: La Pinta's cabins have floor-to-ceiling windows for great views



SIVERSEA GROUPES