

3 fish recipes
you must try

2015 Golf Forecast

Sure-bet predictions

Lexus beefs up
with **RCF Coupe**

MIAMI

Quite a cultural
bonanza now



PRIVATE Clubs

A C C E S S T H E L U X E L I F E

WINTER 2015

**4 Rivers
Floating Lodge,**
a luxury eco-resort
on Cambodia's
Tatai River

Where to Go NEXT?

RURAL CAMBODIA • LADAKH, INDIA
KYUSHU ISLAND, JAPAN • SRI LANKA
URUGUAY • COLOMBIA • AND MORE

PLUS: John Senden's ball-striking secrets
Gehry museums Tasty tapas with a twist





Island Beauty

A striking new lodge raises the bar on luxury in the remote, creature-rich Galapagos islands

BY PAUL RUBIO

mENTION THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS, and several things come to mind: Charles Darwin, finches, tortoises, bucket lists – and tired cruise ships. Since the advent of modern tourism, the latter have been the sole means for exploring sanctioned tracts of this pricey, far-flung destination, often lending to an action-packed, experiential journey, albeit with some elements of roughing it.

But in this cradle of natural selection, a new land-based species of luxury was just classified last fall, reinventing the Galapagos experience and adding components of high design, sleep-ins, gourmet dining, and pampering to the Darwinian fantasyland. The game-changer – the ultraluxe, 14-unit **Pikaia Lodge** – showcases the Galapagos as more than a “Go! Go! Go!” destination for wildlife viewing and solidifies a new five-star destination status for the islands.

A landmass of 3,093 square miles, the Galapagos remains 97 percent protected and 3 percent inhabited, as human populations are restricted to sections of just four of 18 principal islands – Santa Cruz Island hosting 20,000 of the Ecuadorean islands’ 30,000 residents. Atop an extinct volcano crater in the cloud forests of southern Santa Cruz, separated by miles from its nearest neighbor, Pikaia rises almost 1,500 feet above sea level, offering a panoramic vista of the island’s arid north and other surrounding volcanic islands and limestone monoliths.

A true design opus, Pikaia imbues a wow factor at first sight. An enclave of oversized glass panes; arched, oblong white walls; and prolific open-aired common spaces fusing the indoors and outdoors, this minimalist marvel seamlessly blends with the proximate lush foliage and oceanic blues below. The expanse is strewn with sculptures of DNA double helixes, statues of Pikaia gracilens – the oldest known ancestor to vertebrates, from which the lodge gains its name – and other edgy, artistic nods to Darwin and science. Sustainability has been meticulously woven into Pikaia’s aesthetic and framework, best exemplified by its natural lava stone floors and walls, rainwater-collecting rooftops, and overall carbon neutrality.

With today’s sybarite in mind, Pikaia has also integrated myriad creature comforts into its haute hilltop, unveiling amenities rather unknown to this remote patch of the Pacific Ocean. Think: a lounge-



PERSONAL PERCH: Left, Pikaia Lodge. Above, from left, the view from a Pikaia room, native wildlife, Pikaia’s pool

MANUEL TAMAYO (PIKAIA)

lined infinity pool, glass-encased hot tub, full-service spa, fitness center, “Homo Sapiens” Explorers Lounge with a mammoth 5-D HD television screening educational videos, and expansive en-suite rain showers and Jacuzzi tubs overlooking the cloud forest. Opposed to ship cabins and cramped common spaces at sea, having a sumptuous home base fosters greater pursuits of leisure, lending to Pikaia’s winning recipe that measures equal parts nature and luxury.

While as a guest you won’t endure 5:30 a.m. wake-up calls and the hectic pace of cruise ships’ twice-daily excursions, there’s still plenty of immersion into the wildlife-strewn, *Land Before Time* landscapes. In fact, the experience at Pikaia plays out as multiday, all-inclusive packages – from four to eight days – where guests together engage in Santa Cruz Island excursions, visit neighboring islands as day trips on the *M/V Pikaia I* house yacht, and enjoy five-star excess back at the lodge, including decadent three-course meals in “Evolution” Restaurant. A highlight of my own five-day sojourn included a sail to North Seymour Island for an extraordinary hike among the frigate birds and blue-footed boobies, followed by an early afternoon snorkel among octopuses, white-tipped reef sharks, fur seals, and schools of vibrantly colored tropical fish. Another experiential day began exploring the craggy lava-hewn coastline of Sullivan Bay on Santiago Island, then hopping in a zodiac raft to search for and swim with penguins and sea lions, and then finally climbing to the top of Bartolomé Island to take in the grandeur of Pinnacle Rock, the Galapagos’ iconic symbol.



Excursions vary based on Pikaia’s mandated island-hopping itinerary, a schedule strictly regulated by the National Park to prevent significant impact to these fragile islands. But regardless of specifics, every day a new adventure beckons, alternating between jaunts at sea and on land with a dedicated professional naturalist, who remains with a group for the full package duration. At a minimum, expect to hone your photography skills on the many giant tortoises of Santa Cruz’s rolling hills, down a local beer in the town of Puerto Ayora, snorkel with sea lions, and fill multiple memory cards with images of blue- or red-footed boobies, frigate birds, land and marine iguanas, and blazing-orange Sally Lightfoot crabs hamming it up for the lens.

By and large, Pikaia succeeds in its mission of escaping the Galapagos ordinary and creating a balance between active and leisurely pursuits. The pampered experience is best suited to those wanting ample time to reflect and relish, not necessarily type-A’s hoping to island-jump at a rapid-fire pace. Embracing a highly evolved love match between nature and luxury, Pikaia opens the Galapagos’ brave world to a new generation of jet setters. From \$3,700 per person. 011-593-4371-1670; pikaialodge.com ■



NATURE’S LURE:

On the Galapagos Islands, absorb the beauty of the terrain (above) and wildlife, such as a frigate bird (below, left).



Get Spoiled at Sea, Too

Frills tend to be the exception instead of the rule when it comes to the few dozen ships sailing the Galapagos Islands: A fixed number of permits for navigating national parklands has tenured ships for 20-plus years, allowing most to rest on the laurels of the natural surroundings for consummating the Galapagos experience. However, if you want luxe at sea – not on land at Pikaia – you can now sail aboard Silversea’s **Silver Galapagos**, which debuted a major refurbishment in October. The all-suite ship, a head-to-toe reinvention of the 1990-permitted *Galapagos Explorer II*, raises the bar on expedition-ship chic, its 50 cabins and public spaces delivering hallmark service and amenities of the award-winning brand.

Embark on one of its weekly seven-day voyages for contemporary suites with butler service, Pratesi bed linens, marble bathrooms, as well as verandas (in most cases), plus an elegant piano bar, an Explorer’s Lounge, and an alfresco restaurant where meats and vegetables are cooked over volcanic rock. 877-276-6816; silversea.com

If Galapagos-Bound, You’ll First Overnight in Guayaquil or Quito

All flights to the Galapagos’ Seymour Airport originate in Guayaquil or Quito on the Ecuador mainland. Given the early morning flight schedules of both carriers to and from the Galapagos – LAN Ecuador and Tame – it’s often difficult, if not impossible, to connect directly from an international flight, mandating a layover in one of Ecuador’s two biggest cities.

If flying through Guayaquil: Check into the **Hotel Oro Verde** in downtown Guayaquil, the highest-end accommodation in the city (relatively speaking...) as a place to rest and recharge your physical batteries. On the upside, it’s close to the airport and at sea level (vs. Quito at 9,350 feet). But don’t expect to find much exploring the downtrodden downtown. From \$119. 011-593-4-2327-999; overdeguayaquil.com/en

If flying through Quito: Check into world-class **Casa Gangotena**, an imperial mansion in the heart of Quito’s historic center, distinguished by its jaw-dropping marble spiral staircase, central atrium, expansive lavishly appointed rooms, and surreal rooftop overlooking Plaza San Francisco. Spend two nights – if not more – exploring Ecuador’s fairytale colonial capital! From \$375. 011-593-2400-8000; casagangotena.com

