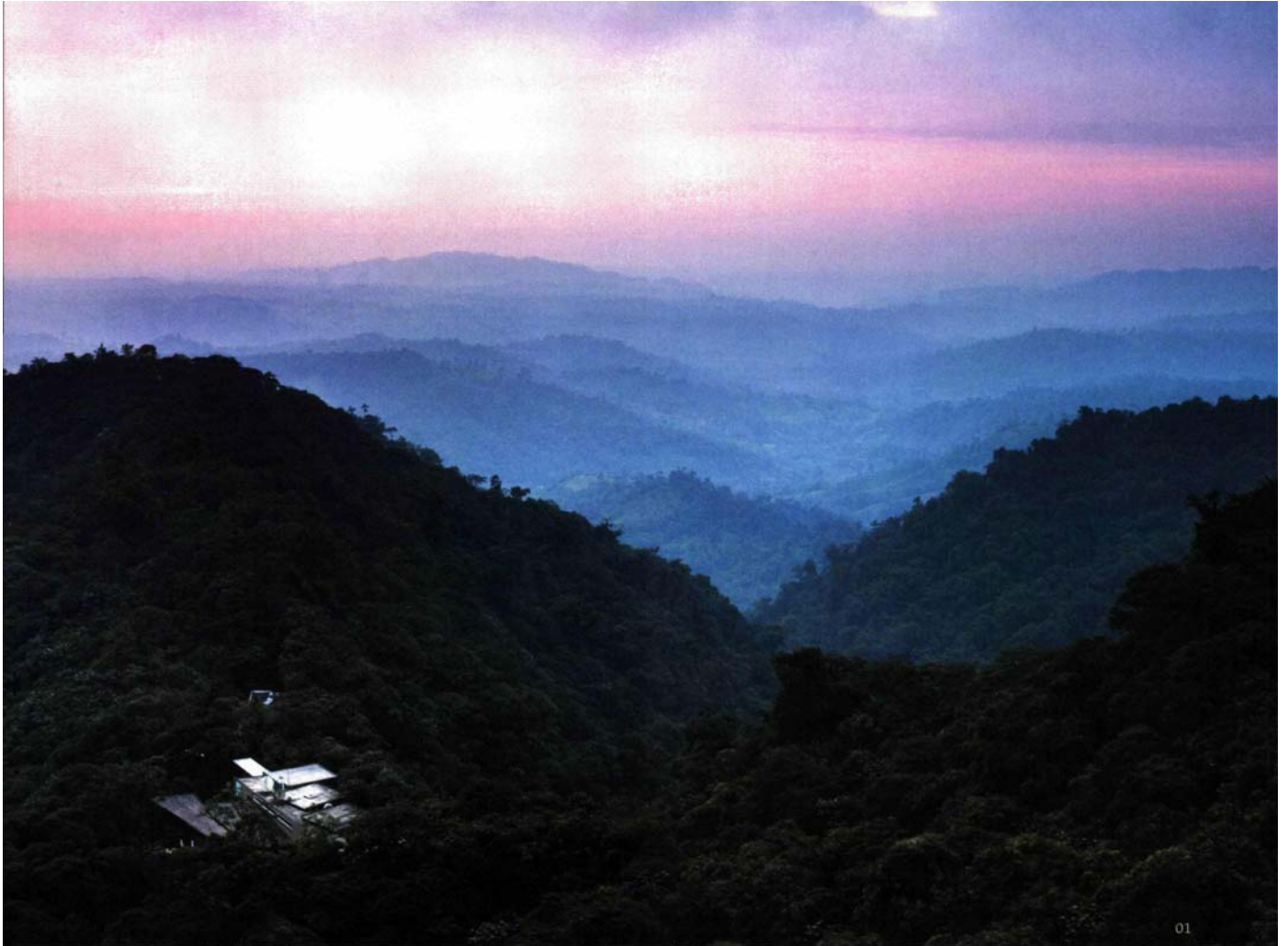


FOR THE LOVE OF NATURE

There's no place quite like the amazing Galapagos Islands, but the wildlife and natural wonders that make this destination so special are just some of the ecological delights in store in Ecuador, as Joanna Tovia discovers.

The minute we clamber out of the zodiac and onto shore, I feel like I've stepped into a wildlife documentary. A large, male sea lion heaves his bulk out of the sea and flops up the hillside alongside us as we make our way up the pathway. It's disconcerting how close he is and, clueless about the finer points of sea lion behaviour, it's difficult to predict what he's going to do next. Is he being aggressive when he positions himself majestically on a sunny rock in front of us and twists his head this way and that, or just posing for the cameras? We've joined a day tour of about 20 people, one of whom is lugging a



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gigantic zoom lens almost the length of his arm – a decision he is surely regretting. On North Seymour Island, one of 13 major Galapagos islands, the wildlife is so close you could reach out and touch it and you have to look where you're stepping lest you disturb a dancing blue-footed booby, sunbathing iguana or young frigatebird testing out its wings.

This is a precious experience not to be rushed so we take our time trailing our guide along the track that winds its way around the island. Giant-winged birds soar and swoop, their graceful forms in silhouette against a bright sky. It's actually an elaborate mating ritual as

single females shop around for a mate. The eligible bachelors on the ground are easy to spot – their puffed-up red throat pouches are enormous.

Blue-footed boobies on the lookout for love are busy strutting their stuff, too – the males march, duck and turn around in a mesmerising mating dance designed to show off their bright blue feet; those with the bluest feet are hot property.

Charles Darwin at work

One of the best things about visiting the Galapagos is learning how Charles Darwin pondered theories of natural selection right here 200 years ago. The conclusions he later came to

about evolution were drawn from his studies here, and would change our understanding of life on earth forever.

Three different cold-water currents converge on the Galapagos and trade winds mean the land that faces south is green and lush, but any north-facing areas are dry and barren – it was the perfect spot for Darwin to study how different species evolved in isolation from one another. Mockingbirds, in particular, captured his attention and he collected specimens from each island to compare them. The 13 major volcanic islands lie either side of the equator almost 1000km off the Ecuadorian mainland and range in size from 14



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to 4588 square kilometres. As for humans, the Galapagos was first run as a penal colony but is now home to 25,000 people committed to preserving the precious wildlife populating these islands.

Wowed by wildlife

More adventure awaits on the island of Santa Cruz, home to the Charles Darwin Research Centre and a prime spot for snorkelling and flamingo spotting.

Pikaia Lodge, the luxury eco-hotel where we're staying, has provided wetsuits for us, but most of us go without; the water is a wonderful way to cool down after walking in the hot sun in search of flamingoes. They prove elusive until day's end when the guide spots a solitary flamingo feeding on the far side of a freshwater lagoon. Its feathers are

so pink I wonder if I'm looking at the plastic garden variety but it soon moves and makes its way slowly, slowly around the lagoon edge until it's just metres from my poised lens.

In the afternoon we explore a private ecological reserve populated by giant tortoises. These grass-munching curiosities live for 100-plus years, sleep 17 hours a day, have a resting heart rate of three to four beats a minute, and take their time when copulating - the deed takes about four hours.

Into the cloudforest

More delights await on the mainland at Mashpi, a National Geographic Unique Lodge of the World. Built in the middle of the Cloudforest between the Andes and the coast, Mashpi is a dream destination for anyone wanting to

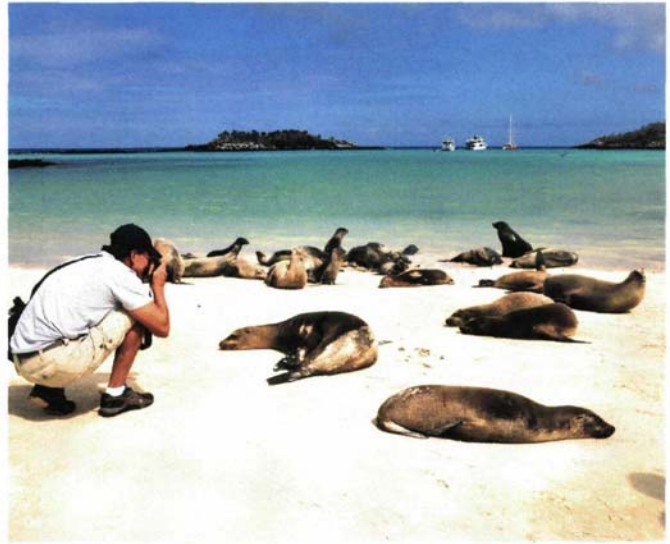
immerse themselves in the bio-diverse wonders of Ecuador. The many walks out into the forest are superbly organised, the friendly guides are scientists, and the pace is spot on.

Each day we head out, our gumboots (correct size and all) are ready for us, picnics appear out of nowhere, and we relish the adventure of tramping along tracks deep in the forest to birdwatch, swim under waterfalls or ride the aerial bike suspended over the forest canopy.

We leave our sleek rooms early each morning for coffee and cookies and nature galore. I rejoice in the wonder of busy hummingbirds, cleverly disguised butterflies, and colourful toucans, and don't mind a bit that we don't stumble upon the sloths, puma and monkeys that call this forest home. This has been the eco-adventure of a lifetime. ♦



Mashpi eco lodge - Luxurious Pikaia Lodge
Galapagos spa - Fearless sea lions - Blue-footed
boobies - Ancient giant tortoise - A flamingo feeding



Travel file

Accommodation

In the Galapagos: Pikaia Lodge offers luxury accommodation and takes guests exploring the islands on its own 105-foot yacht.

www.pikaialodgegalapagos.com

In Mashpi: Eco-minded Mashpi Lodge combines rainforest adventure with top-notch accommodation, dining and spa treatments.

www.mashpilodge.com

Getting around

Luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent offers tailor-made journeys to Ecuador and throughout South America. For more information, call 1300 590 317 or visit www.abercrombiekent.com.au

Getting there

LAN Airlines operates seven one-stop flights a week from Sydney to Santiago, Chile, and onward connections to the Galapagos. www.lan.com