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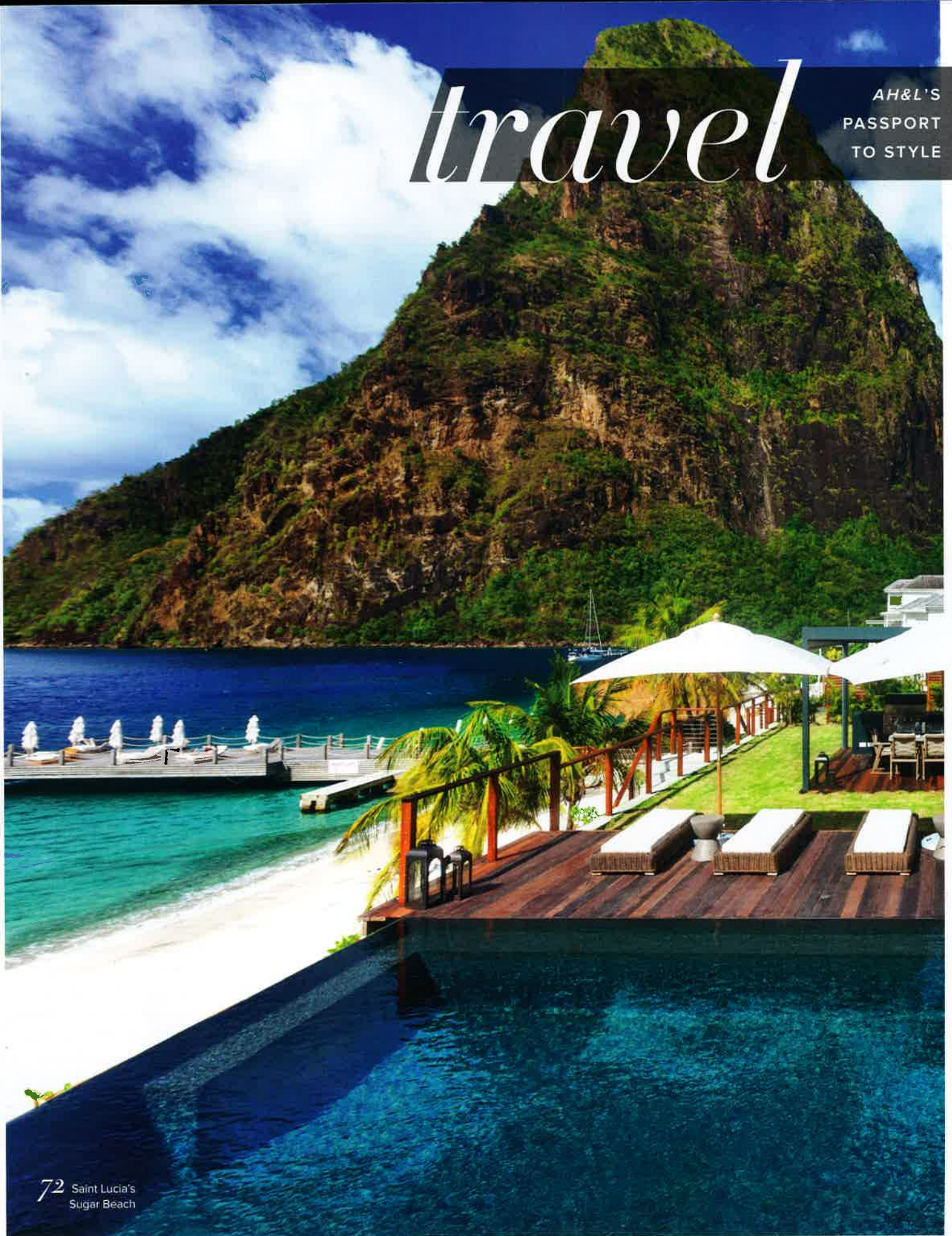
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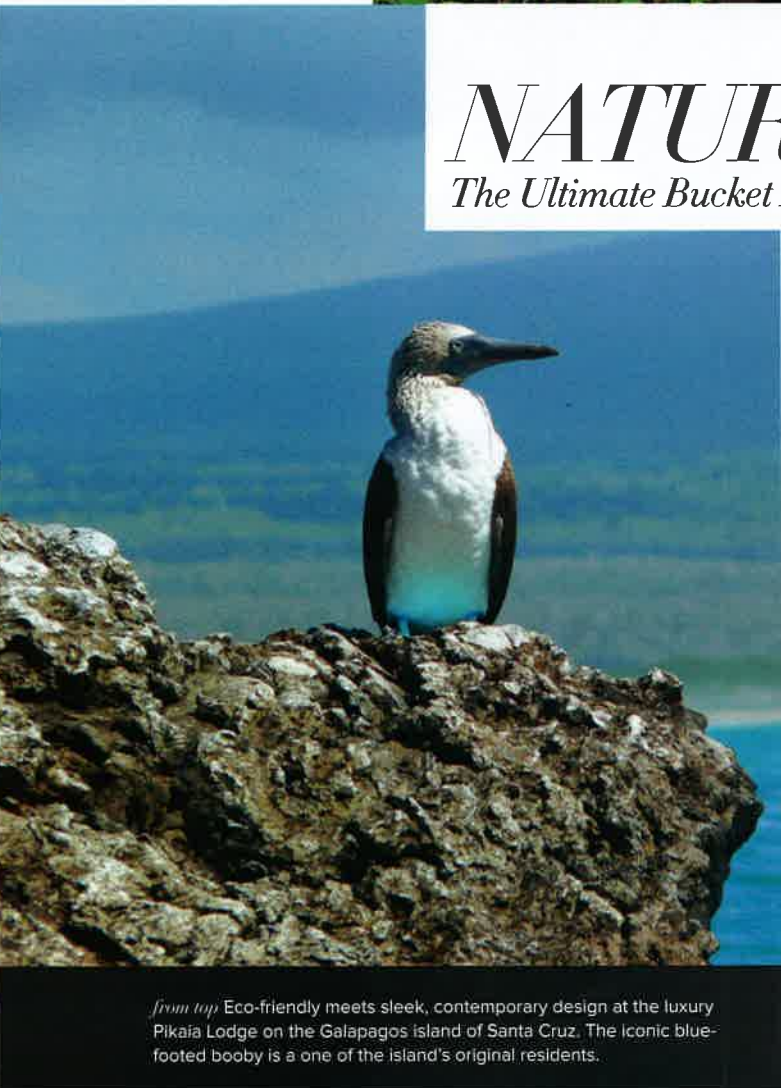


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NATURAL WONDER

The Ultimate Bucket List: A Trip to the Galápagos Written by CATHY WHITLOCK



from top Eco-friendly meets sleek, contemporary design at the luxury Pikaia Lodge on the Galapagos island of Santa Cruz. The iconic blue-footed booby is one of the island's original residents.

"BUCKET LIST" IS OFTEN BANDIED ABOUT, particularly when it comes to travel. Filled with classic cities and off-the-beaten-path locales, as the world gets larger, the proverbial list grows. And if ever there was a destination you need to see before you die, it's the Galápagos Islands.

Aptly called the "last paradise on earth," Galápagos is an archipelago of volcanic islands near the equator and remains a mystery to most travelers. Recognized for its biodiversity and fragile ecosystem, it's famously known as the place where naturalist Charles Darwin devised his theory of evolution. It is also a sacred spot, where red- and blue-footed boobies, playful penguins and sea lions, and prehistoric-like iguanas and century-old tortoises roam the earth. Designated as one of the Natural World Heritage sites of UNESCO, a visit to the Galápagos offers once-in-a-lifetime sights of animals and terrain as seen nowhere else on the planet.

Travelers can visit this natural history-filled haven by land or by sea. While many prefer a cruise on a chartered boat, perhaps the best way to experience all this wonderland has to offer is a stay at the five-star luxury Pikaia Lodge. Centrally located on Santa Cruz Island and formerly a cattle ranch, the luxury, carbon-neutral hotel sits atop two extinct volcano craters with breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean. Named after the first creature to



above The Galápagos is one of the world's best places for snorkeling and diving. *left and below* Sally Lightfoot crab and iguanas are among the wildlife here. *bottom* A panoramic view of the highlands can be seen from the sleek minimalist Infinity pool at Pikaia Lodge.

have evolved into a vertebrate some 500 million years ago, the 77-acre resort stays true to its roots as a model of sustainability and luxury. Notes founder and developer Herbert Frei: "I bought the land for the location, space, view and, most of all, the access to its beauty. It is hidden in a beautiful place, connected with nature and next to the Galápagos National Park."

Frei chose Ecuadoran architect Humberto Plaza to create the resort's modernist style that harmoniously blends in with the topography. For the interiors, Frei looked to his daughter, designer Maria-Elena Frei-Shepherd. "The philosophy was being environmentally conscious and having a modern and comfortable approach that would contrast the wild nature that was surrounding us," says Frei-Shepherd. This translated into the use of bamboo floors, lava stone from the island, polished Moroccan marble with fossils, Peruvian travertine and wood from the sustainable agroforest for the furniture. Built entirely with recycled materials, imported steel beams capture the rainfall while solar panels and a wind turbine comprise a third of the lodge's power.

The lodge is themed around evolution, and details of the island's most famous visitor are seen in everything from artist Larissa Marangoni's "Big Bang" sculptures and the lobby to the Homo Sapiens Explorer Lounge (complete with screening room), the DNA Bar and Evolution Restaurant where Peruvian and Ecuadorian cuisine are specialties.

Luxury is just part of the experience, as eco-adventures are the order of the day.

Land-based day tours include an up close and personal visit with one of the world's oldest mammals at the private Tortoise Reserve, El Chato Ranch (the island's favorite, Lonesome George, passed away at more than 100 years old). Pay an educational visit with a local guide to the Charles Darwin Research Station. A day at sea on the lodge's 100-foot yacht M/Y Pikaia I includes snorkeling adventures to nearby islands featuring sharks, sea lions, yellowtail snapper, angelfish and the occasional sea turtle. The islands are also known for some of the best diving and surfing in the world, and don't be surprised to see a 15-foot iguana strolling the beach—it's all part of the scenery.

Images and words do not do this unique slice of earth justice; it is to be seen, savored and experienced. A trip to Galápagos will change how you think about nature and the world. pikaialodge.com