

TRAVEL

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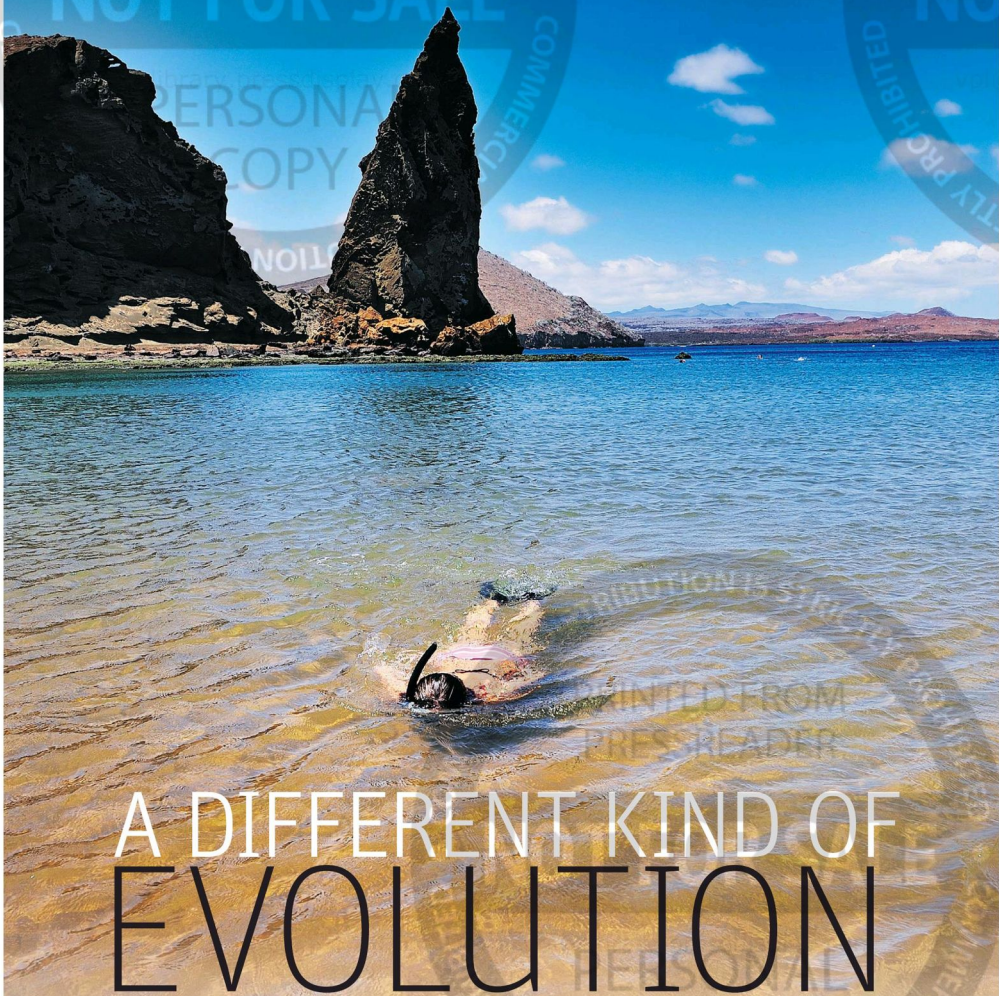
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GALÁPAGOS



A DIFFERENT KIND OF EVOLUTION

Deluxe new Pikaia Lodge marks the arrival of true eco-luxury tourism in archipelago

SHANNON MELNYK
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Four flights and a ferry have left me bedraggled and delirious, but I take a moment to digest my good fortune upon finding myself plumb in the centre of the equator's Galápagos Archipelago, otherwise known as Darwin's living laboratory.

The term bucket list is thrown around generously when it comes

to these Elysian islands. Only minutes into my journey through fertile vegetation sits for a moment a crimson pájaro brujo; a bird so rare, it is said to be auspicious to spot one.

I hold my breath. Rarity is a theme here, and the Galápagos is called the last paradise on Earth for a reason: While the islands are known for flourishing endemic species, this utopia is at considerable risk as the delicate balance of

the ecosystem is constantly challenged by everything from climate change, to a population increase, to a seemingly innocuous visitor that arrives with a blackberry seed on the bottom of his shoe.

The latter is a dangerous introduction, and the explanation for an explosion of blackberry bushes now attempting to overrun Galápagos' second largest island, Santa Cruz. Scientists are trying to find a fungus that will eradicate it.

I amble my way along Santa Cruz to Pikaia Lodge — a 15-year concept, structure and eco-luxury dream that's had a much more arduous journey than mine.

It's the result of a vision for the first carbon-neutral accommodations in the Galápagos and one of the most advanced green lodges in the world.

It not only required environmental innovations due to scarcity of water and being run entirely on

alternative energy sources — but also a plan obligated to adhere to the strictest government policies on the planet.

When you realize that even baby chicks must be 24 hours old or less to be allowed onto the islands, meeting endless requirements for everything from building materials to the food is a complex task.

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Tourists can see a vast variety of animal species on the islands, ranging from seabirds to giant tortoises and crabs. In all, there are 30,000 species on the island.

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A different kind of evolution

The tranquil, unimposing Pikaia Lodge is nestled on top of an extinct volcano crater on 30 hectares of pristine land complete with private beaches and roaming giant tortoises.

Only months ago, a container ship ran aground off the coast of Guayaquil, Ecuador. It was en route to Pikaia and carrying everything from organic eggs to original artwork, custom-made Ecuadorian teak doors, and priceless fossils.

Andrew Balfour, lodge general manager, talks about the recovery operation with grace and humour.

"It's quite ironic," Balfour says.

"All the fossils that came from the bottom of the ocean 600 million years ago — all of

a sudden made their way back down there."

As Balfour spent his formative years in the Galapagos, he knows all too well the challenges of living and operating a business in the islands.

The end result is a stand-alone new experience for the high-end tourism market. In the spirit of the land famous as the inspiration behind Charles Darwin's Evolution Theory, Pikaia Lodge is named after pikaia gacilens, believed to be the first creature to evolve into a vertebrate during the Cambrian period.

The motif of evolution is everywhere ... large installations by renowned Ecuadorian artist Larissa Marangoni, fossil plates; even the clever

placement of Darwin's The Origin of a Species in my suite's nightstand where a holy book can usually be found.

The 14-suite property is constructed from recyclable steel, glass and natural stone and is furnished with sustainably-cultivated Ecuadorian teak wood furniture and bamboo wood floors.

Modern, sleek and welcoming with an infinity pool and spa used to luxury lodgings would easily be unaware it's being operated with solar and wind energy, repurposed sewage and roof-collected rain water, among many other sustainable initiatives.

Guests here get to discover the Galapagos aboard Pikaia's

own private yacht, M/Y Pikaia I, complete with sundecks, a hot-tub, personal cabins and a chef along with Zodiac drivers and exceptional guides.

Our day excursions are what make for memories that will last for at least another paleozoic era. We sail to North Seymour to hike the land and see species new to my naked eye. Male frigates show off their big red bibs to the females, all while thinking nothing of stealing babies' food right from their mouths.

The famous Disney-esque blue-footed boobies are a curious sight, with their sky-hued webbed little clompers; they're also increasingly rare, as their population has declined by 50 per cent in the past 10 years

due to a sardine shortage in the waters surrounding the islands.

Bright red Sally Lightfoot crabs, basking marine and land iguanas, flamingos, mischievous sea lions and the Galapagos penguin are seen as each new day and island yield discoveries.

We walk the ancient formations of the lava fields, snorched the stunning Pinnacle Point to see blowfish, white-tipped sharks, parrot fish, moray eel and king angel fish and lavish on the empty, white sand beaches.

On the yacht back to Santa Cruz, 10 frigates follow along with their 2.5-metre wingspans, hovering only metres above us in magical formations. As we return to the lodge, I see the

odd giant, 204-kilogram tortoise lazing in the fields, posing as boulders.

There are 30,000 of these prehistoric creatures that roam the Galapagos — roughly the same number of residents who inhabit the islands. Those human inhabitants are farmers, countrymen and shopkeepers.

I indulge in the happy juxtaposition of my days of wildlife wonder and savvy, comfort-filled nights.

While the Galapagos is like trekking back in time, The Pikaia experience offers a modern, sustainable adventure. It's like I'm seeing yesterday — but in a new way. I wonder if Darwin would have approved.

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