
TRUTH IN TRAVEL
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NATURE IS ECUADOR'S BRAND.

Even its flag features a distracting array of biodiversity: laurel and olive branches, Mount Chimborazo, and the Guayas River, all overseen by a slightly dopey-looking condor. The country is named not after its oppressor (like Colombia), nor its liberator (like Bolivia), but after the geographic fact of its latitude. Two years ago, for *The New Yorker*, I interviewed Rafael Correa, the current and longtime president of Ecuador. He told me that the central question facing his administration is the stewardship of nature—that is, to what extent he could afford to steward it rather than exploit it. "We tried to interest the rich countries in giving us a fair price for our oil," he said, referring to a 2007 proposal under which Ecuador would forestall drilling in its petroleum-rich Yasuní National Park in exchange for donations equal to half the value of the untouched oil. The deal fell through, and in May 2014 state-run Petroamazonas signed a deal to begin drilling in the region.

"Biodiversity and natural beauty are the most precious gifts of our country, our most precious resource, and we are very proud of it," Correa told me. "But I also have poor people who need to eat." At the end of the meeting, he handed me a gift representing the goodwill of the Ecuadorian people. It was a coffee-table book called *Galápagos: Islands Born of Fire*.

The Galápagos, a chain of volcanic islands 621 miles off South America's western coast, is Ecuador's most lucrative and fragile possession. Lucrative because the province is a world capital of high-end ecotourism; fragile because a good number of the tourists come to see endangered species like the waved albatross and the San Cristóbal mockingbird, species whose appeal to visitors will diminish greatly if they ever cross the line from endangered to extinct. As of now, the Galápagos is one of the few places in the Western Hemisphere with strict and well-enforced environmental regulations. There are no golf courses or chain restaurants; there are impressive stretches of quiet beach and intact coral; imports and exports are tightly controlled. Correa is right that petroleum extraction—or Club Med-style resorts—would yield more profits more quickly. But an economy based on fossil fuels and mass tourism might well be unsustainable, in the fiscal as well as the environmental sense. The question that will shape the Galápagos in coming generations is whether a more gradual strategy, sacrificing temporary gain for long-term stability, suits Correa's ambitions.

Since 1998, nine years before Correa took office, the Special Law for the Galápagos Province—something like a constitution for the islands—has been in effect, delineating everything from the borders of the marine reserve to bans on exogenous species (including raspberries, whose seeds could spread invasive weeds). In June of last year, Ecuador's National Assembly, at Correa's request, approved the first major revision to the law. There was and still is passionate disagreement about how to interpret the changes, but many fear that they will weaken environmental protections.

A few weeks after the new law passed, I flew to the Galápagos to see what a symbol of gradual evolutionary adaptation looks like during a moment of sudden, perhaps irrevocable change. For decades, almost all Galápagos tourism was by boat. Recently, the local government allotted more permits for land construction; in addition to more than 70 cruise offerings, there are now boutique hotels and safari-style glamping operations. I decided to try all three.

AFTER A TWO-HOUR FLIGHT FROM Guayaquil, you land at the world's first completely solar- and wind-powered airport. The dirt is a rich caramel color, and small butterflies and lizards dart through the bushes near the runway—a fairly standard tropical scene, though you can't help wondering how much of it is taxonomically significant. Inside, a sign above the urinals (or, as some cognate-happy translator has labeled them, the urinaries) identifies them as flushless, part of a waste-free system. You pay a fee to enter Galápagos Province and then another fee to enter Galápagos National Park, which comprises 97 percent of the province's landmass. Then you board a van ("Enjoy the nature," the seat covers implore) that takes you to an island called Santa Cruz, home to most of the archipelago's 25,125 permanent residents.

If you are a person of great means or a journalist on assignment, you then arrive at Pikaia Lodge, the most luxurious hotel in the Galápagos, built two years ago atop a dormant volcano. The pool is lit from within, and bossa nova plays faintly from invisible speakers. There are no guests in sight, only staff. It looks like a posh L.A. villa that Drake has rented for the weekend but has not yet arrived at. The hotel is appointed tastefully, if not subtly, in gray lava and white travertine. There are silver Darwin-inspired sculptures, and there are fossils—actual fossils, imported from Morocco—stacked on shelves, protruding from walls, embedded in the reception desk. You assume that "Pikaia" refers to some sort of evolution-y thing, and no sooner have

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you accepted an inaugural glass of blackberry juice than your hunch is confirmed: *Pikaia gracilens* was a primitive sea creature, an important ancestor of modern vertebrates.

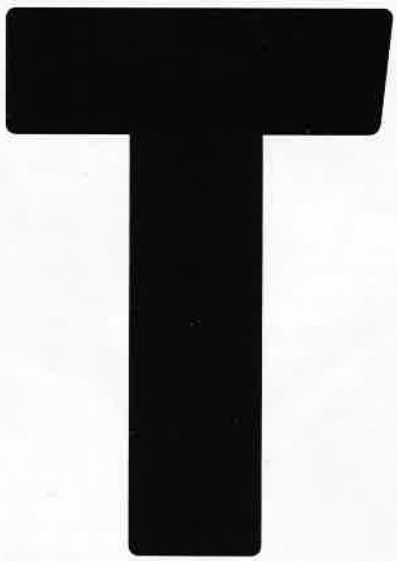
In the drawer of each bedside table, where most hotels would place a Gideon Bible, is a copy of *On the Origin of Species.* The hotel restaurant—called, inevitably, Evolution—serves a hell of a ceviche. In the morning, you leave early to meet Pikaia's extravagant yacht, which will take you to see the frigate birds and blue-footed boobies for the first time. (Or, rather, the first time in real life—you already saw them last night on a huge 3-D flat-screen in Pikaia's Homo Sapiens Explorers Lounge, with David Attenborough providing fervent commentary: "In a lifetime spent making natural history films, I've been to many wonderful places, but none more extraordinary than here.")

These days, we take for granted that there is an inverse relationship between how much attention people have paid to a place and how likely that place is to be healthy, ecologically (though not economically) speaking. Nauru, a rocky island near Australia, was strip-mined for phosphate so thoroughly that most of its land is now uninhabitable. In Hawaii, once a pristine volcanic archipelago like the Galápagos, a startling number of endemic species have gone extinct within the last century. (If "Hawaii" still conjures idyllic images for Americans, some Galapagueños use the word as shorthand for a ruined place, roughly the way New Yorkers say "New Jersey.")

When Charles Darwin got to the Galápagos, in 1835, he wrote in his journal that "it is only within the last six years that a small colony has been established here. The inhabitants are between two and three hundred in number; they are nearly all people of colour, who have been banished for political crimes from the Republic of the Equator." Darwin stayed for five weeks, recording detailed observations about finches and mockingbirds. Years later, those observations would help form the basis of his theory of natural selection; decades after that, the islands' key role in the history of science would inspire an unforeseen market for local tourism. As Kurt Vonnegut put it in *Galápagos,* his novel of dystopia and devolution, "Darwin did not change the islands, but only people's opinion of them."

Before, during, and even after Darwin's time, Europeans largely ignored the Galápagos, which were difficult to get to and seemed to have little worth plundering. "The most dreary, barren, and desolate country I ever beheld" was the impression of Scottish naturalist Archibald Menzies in 1795, and other adventurers and nautico-capitalists, hearing the bad reviews, stayed away. It's an irony reminiscent of a high-school rom-com: The place is now attractive, and thus worthy of wealthy foreigners' attention, precisely because it was an ugly duckling for so long.

How much can Ecuador profit from the attention before Santa Cruz turns into Maui? The paradox of nature tourism is that tourism, like any industry, depends on customers, but nature abhors people. "Tourist boats have been around for years, but on a small scale," Andrew Balfour, Pikaia's manager, told me as I sat near the pool, drinking red wine on an intimidatingly white love seat. "There were guidelines, and they were enforced: no more than, say, 100 passengers each, no more than 90 boats at a time. In the past few years, the government has started to allow land-based programs—ours and a few others, though of course no one else at our level." Balfour grew up in the Galápagos, the child of an Ecuadorian mother and a British father; he studied in the United States and speaks English with a charmingly unplaceable accent. "Now there are strict regulations on which materials may be imported, how the environmental feasibility of each project must be documented—which is all to the good, except that not everyone complies with the rules. It's a strange time." It is, in other words, a permissive time, which allows Pikaia to exist but perhaps threatens its long-term solvency. As soon as twenty-first-century travelers start using words like *dreary* to describe the Galápagos, as eighteenth-century travelers did, the islands will start disappearing from people's bucket lists, and the Pikaia Lodge will go the way of *Pikaia gracilens.*



THE GALÁPAGOS'S MAIN ATTRACTION is its biodiversity—where else, other than at the zoo, can you see penguins and tortoises on the same trip?—and the best way to see a lot of diversity is to cover a lot of distance, on a cruise. You're ushered aboard the 16-passenger *Ocean Spray* by Ricardo, the ship's cruise director, who wears rectangular Transitions lenses and whose eagerness to put you at ease makes you uneasy. Then you gather in an air-conditioned internal seating area near the bow, where Ricardo, delivering a PowerPoint presentation, shows you photographs of the cafeteria where you have just eaten lunch and the space in which you are currently sitting. There is a preview of the daily schedule. (It includes a lot of snorkeling, which seems to please the crowd.) The passengers are a genial bunch, mostly retirees from affluent anglophone countries. One of them, an olive-skinned Australian doctor, was born in Greece—"I'm actually a Lesbian!"—and, perhaps because of some inborn affinity for small islands and body-temperature water,

he cannot stop smiling. He smiles during beef Stroganoff, during lectures about plate tectonics, during the lifeboat demonstration.

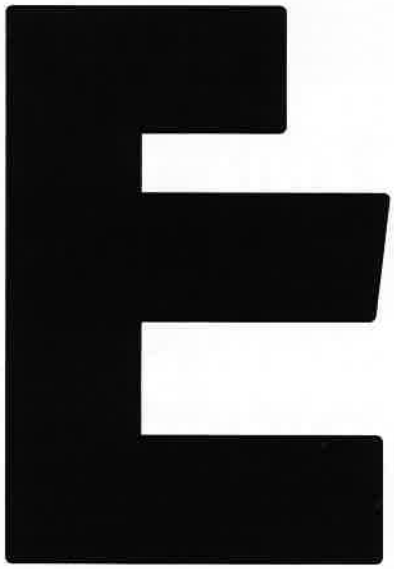
After cruising for more than an hour, we disembark at Lobos Island and walk up to a vantage point dense with ocean spray. Frigate birds struggle against the gales, their Dizzy Gillespie throat-pouches vibrating; sea lions sunbathe on flat rocks at the top. The Lesbian doctor's grin expands into a loopy Christmas-morning smile. Beneath us, shelves of rock form a natural spiral staircase down to the ocean. Sea lions clamber up the staircase awkwardly, flopping onto one rock shelf at a time, until they reach the clearing at the top; then, when they have warmed themselves and need to fish again, they slide down on their bellies and plop headfirst into the ocean. It's a charming sight, like something that would happen in a Pixar movie but not in real life—certainly not in a place that can be so quickly reached by a cruise ship stocked with Diet Coke. I find myself smiling as brazenly as the Lesbian. Behind me, a woman from San Francisco says, "I live near the Embarcadero. It's hard for me to get excited about sea lions."

The guide on board the *Ocean Spray,* a Galapagueño whom I'll call Kenny, has been a naturalist for decades. Kenny has chosen to cope with the particular curse of his profession—the need to repeat the same facts on an endless Beckettian loop, with no perceptible loss in enthusiasm—by inflecting every sentence with ironic buoyancy, as if the words had air quotes around them. "Welcome to another afternoon in *paradise,* Galápagos Islands!" he says after lunch. "We are preparing for a *wet landing,* so bring your *reef shoes!* Today, we are going to see flamingos, Nazca boobies—and some *amazing rock formations!*"

Off duty, sipping a beer as the sun sets, Kenny sounds more human. In fact, he sounds indignant. "We had a law here, since 1998, and it protected us," he says. "Now, our sweet president in Quito, he threw our law in the garbage. He lowered the minimum wage, and he took away all the regulations that protected our environment, so soon big hotels will come in and destroy this delicate place. I heard that his sister wants to buy protected land and build a big golf course there, so he changed the law for her benefit. A golf course!"

"But Correa won't let this place be ruined," I say, "if only out of economic self-interest. If the Galápagos loses its biodiversity, the tourists will stop coming. Right?"

Kenny had a one-word rebuttal: "Hawaii."



"EVERYONE IS WAITING TO SEE how the new law will be implemented," Michael Mesdag, co-founder of Galápagos Safari Camp, tells me. "For instance, until we know how to interpret the law, it's not fully clear how much we are allowed to pay those we hire. Not to mention other, more existential questions."

We are sitting at a rough-hewn wood table eating a dinner of local ingredients—fish with red-wine sauce, a root vegetable called melloco. The decor suggests a rustic farmhouse, but we are in an airy common space with a cut-lava-rock floor and doors open to the warm night. Galápagos Safari Camp is an agglomeration of nine luxury tents, each set on a cedar platform in a private area of the woods. At night, the guests gather in the common area for dinner before returning to the darkness of their individual tents for stargazing and seclusion.

When the Mesdags bought the property in 2004, it was a working cattle farm surrounded by overgrown brush. Over time, they've built not only the tents and the central building in which we're sitting but also a rainwater collection system, a greenhouse, a swimming pool, and a small cocoa farm. The couple raised their son and daughter on the property. "They were jungle children—they used to ride around on the back of wild tortoises," Michael says. "I'm sure that's against some regulation, actually, now that I mention it."

Katrien, the Safari Camp's manager, takes me on a tour of the property the next day. Just before sunset, we end up at a wooden observation deck that rises incongruously out of thick green brush. "I read the new law," she says in a wary but measured tone. Katrien was born in Belgium and is now a permanent resident of the Galápagos, having married a local, and she oversees the hotel's operations with warmth and efficiency. "It looks very nice and responsible, the way they word it. *We'll take care to research things before implementing them,* and so on. But it's politics, and anything political has a potential to turn nasty. It just makes you realize how powerless you really are."

Birds chatter in the trees as the sun sinks lower, and a land tortoise rustles some bushes below.

"You hope the people in charge will be wise and protect what we have, for the good of everyone, but you just have to hope," says Katrien. "In nature, you know that things will follow certain laws. The strongest sea lions will survive, and the others will die off, and their species will adapt, and balance will eventually be restored. With humans, you can't be so sure." ◆

HOW TO DO IT

WHEN TO GO

Give or take a few inches of rainfall, the weather in Ecuador is warm and pleasant year-round. Time your visit to which species you most want to see: For instance, the waved albatross's courtship ritual tends to happen in October, while giant tortoises hatch between December and April.

GETTING THERE

Fly to Quito or Guayaquil in Ecuador; from either, regular nonstops serve the Galápagos, landing at Baltra Island or San Cristóbal Island.

EXPERT ADVICE

Haugan Cruises arranged the author's cruise aboard the ***Ocean Spray;*** accommodations were booked through **Pikaia Lodge** and **Galápagos Safari Camp.** For help with planning, call on Galápagos gurus like Allie Almario of Myths and Mountains, Eric Sheets of Latin Excursions, or Tom Damon of Southwind Adventures.

THE NEWEST SHIPS

The recently refurbished **M/Y *Pikaia I*** runs snorkel-and-swim day-trips from Pikaia Lodge. The 12-passenger **M/Y *Passion*** feels like a private yacht and does weeklong sails—as does the ***Petrel,*** a super-stable catamaran ideal for those worried about motion sickness. For details on the **MV *Origin,*** see "Travel Intel" (page 101).