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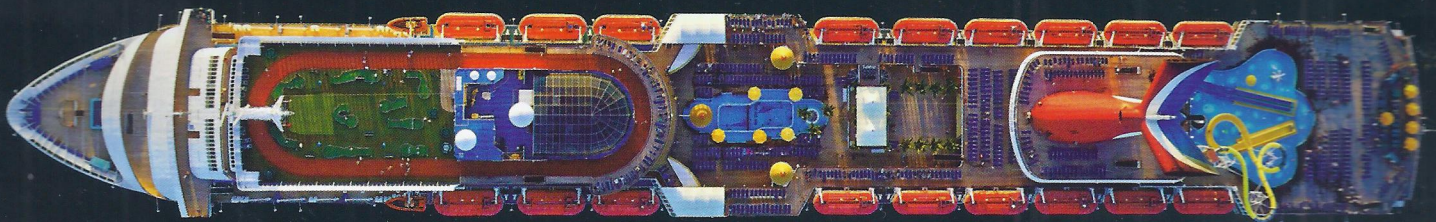
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THE ULTIMATE
CRUISE GUIDE

BEST FOR STRANGE CREATURES

GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

RICHARD WHISTLER GOES ROCKHOPPING
ON A LAND-BASED EXPEDITION IN THE PACIFIC.
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARRY LEWIS & ROB HOWARD

Si *Datu Bua* is the stuff of legend: the shape of a fantastical pirate ship with its tall aft and long bowsprit; gaff-rigged and powered by seven dramatic, rust-coloured sails; handcrafted from some of Indonesia's most prized hardwoods. Both she and her older sister, *Silolona*, ply the waters of the Far East from October to March, spending the rest of the year in the Komodo Islands in the heart of Indonesia. *Silolona*, which has three king-size and two double suites, first set sail in 2004; the other, with three king-size, was launched in 2012.

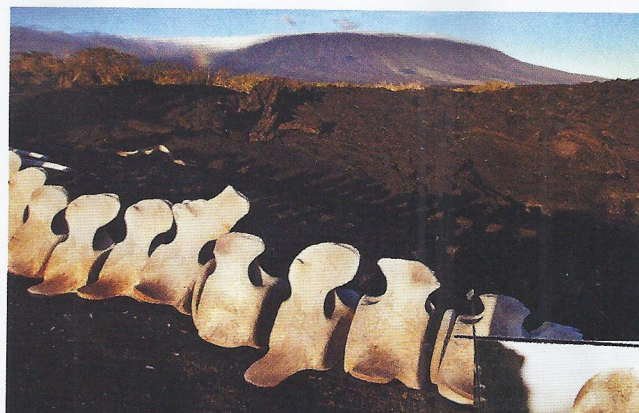
Sailing on these clear jade and turquoise waters, it's soon obvious why the islands were the inspiration for *King Kong* and *Jurassic Park*: they're positively primeval. Smoke billows from volcanic craters. Clouds of enormous bats soar into the evening light. Man-eating Komodo dragons, the biggest lizards on earth, lurk in the undergrowth. And beneath the water's surface are scenes so crazily patterned and so teeming with life – from manta rays the size of small cars to squid-hunting sperm whales and synchronised shoals of rainbow-coloured fish – that it doesn't feel real.

Back on board, cabins are large and air-conditioned, with separate showers, loos, double basins and wardrobes, as well as beds swathed in ethical bamboo-and-cotton sheets, and walls hung with finely woven *ikats*. There's an outdoor sound system connected to iPods for night-time parties and daytime chilling, and big, shaded dining tables for long lunches and candlelit gourmet dinners of Indonesian fish curry, grilled ginger prawns and mango crème brûlée. And, of course, there's a little dive centre where you can hand your wet gear to a smiling shipmate and have it washed and dried while you enjoy a hot chocolate.

On many yachts, living space is restricted, but not here. There are lots of spots to hang out, from a net strung beneath the bowsprit and shaded banquettes on the aft deck to loungers in the sun. The crew are also keen to contribute their local knowledge, pointing out dolphins and sharing traditional myths, and at the end of the day, even playing their guitars in the moonlight.

SAIL AWAY

Original Diving (+44 20 7978 0505; www.originaldiving.com) offers five nights on *Silolona*, all inclusive (excluding alcohol), from £5,600 per person (based on two sharing), including flights, transfers and all activities, with a night at Karma Kandara in Bali. *Silolona* and *Si Datu Bua* can also be chartered for £11,500 and £8,100 per day respectively

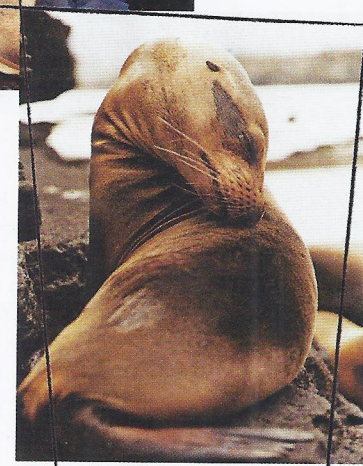


Pootling along in my snorkel, 1,000km out in the Pacific, I came face to face with a surgeonfish. It looked at me with an expression that said, 'Excuse me, you're in my way.' And it didn't budge. A few feet below, five small sharks huddled, dozing. A sea lion swooped in to say hello, then sped off as if flying through the water.

Such are the Galápagos Islands, the isolated archipelago off the coast of Ecuador, where wild creatures retain an innocence lost elsewhere. Nowhere is wildlife so willing to let Homo Touristicus come quite so close.

The traditional way to explore this World Heritage Site has been on a small cruiser – around 97 per cent of the archipelago is designated a national park, most islands are completely uninhabited and hotel options are limited – but changes are afoot, and the land-based cruise is gaining ground. In September, a new hotel, the 14-room Pikaia Lodge, opened on Santa Cruz, the most populated of the islands. Built on the edge of a volcano crater, the lodge has spectacular views, though at certain times of year they can be obscured by cloud.

For years, its owner has operated two live-aboard ships for cruises and diving holidays. One of these, *Pikaia I*, is now dedicated to taking hotel guests on guided day trips around nearby islands. The other is the 100ft-long *Galápagos Aggressor III*, which has four decks and eight double or twin cabins, each with its own shower and proper loo. Excellent food appears from a modest galley; snorkels, wetsuits and fins are supplied, and kayaks are carried on



board. Our guide is friendly and knowledgeable, which is important. In a landscape that in places can be harsh and arid, learning about the wildlife and geology enriches the experience significantly.

Charles Darwin was arguably a pioneer of the land-based cruise; during his epic voyage aboard the *Beagle* in the 1830s, he spent more time on rock than on water. So perhaps it is fitting that Galápagos, which provided key evidence for Darwin, has adopted the Pikaia approach. True, you can't cover as great a number of islands as you might on a pure cruise – returning to base each day takes time – but the food at the hotel is excellent, and the bathrooms alone are the size of a double cabin on a yacht. Plus, the whole thing doesn't move when the wind blows, unless you overdo it at the cocktail bar by the infinity pool. But be warned: because so little can be produced on the islands, much has to be imported, so an end-of-day gin and tonic costs about £11.

SAIL AWAY

Steppes Travel (+44 843 778 9926; www.steppestravel.com) offers four nights at Pikaia Lodge, full board, and two nights at La Casona de la Ronda in Quito, with breakfast, from £4,525 per person (based on two sharing), including flights and transfers