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LUXURY LATIN AMERICA

Pikaia Lodge — Galapagos

Santa Cruz Island, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador

Can reality live up to the serious hype that followed the opening of this luxury highlands hideaway in Ecuador's top tourist destination?



You know the feeling. You check into a hotel that's garnered pretty much nothing but raves with a mix of giddiness and dread. Are your sky-high expectations impossible to meet? Will you rave too or will you check out feeling duped by the hype? That was me as I checked into the Pikaia Lodge recently.

Opened in August of 2014, the 14-room hotel is the most luxurious hotel offering in the Galapagos Islands to date. Perched on the top of a dormant volcano about 1,200 feet above sea level, the location provides sweeping views of the coastline of Santa Cruz Island. Offshore islands and islets poke their noses out of the ocean. Vibrant yellow warblers flit around the brilliant blue pool.

The Pikaia, which was named after an ancient organism that exhibited the first vertebrae, has an evolution theme. In less nuanced hands this would be hokey. At the Pikaia, however, evolution takes the form of an astounding collection of 500-million-year-old ammonites and fossils from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Evolution-inspired modern sculptures and architectural elements throughout the hotel include a giant DNA strand sculpture in the

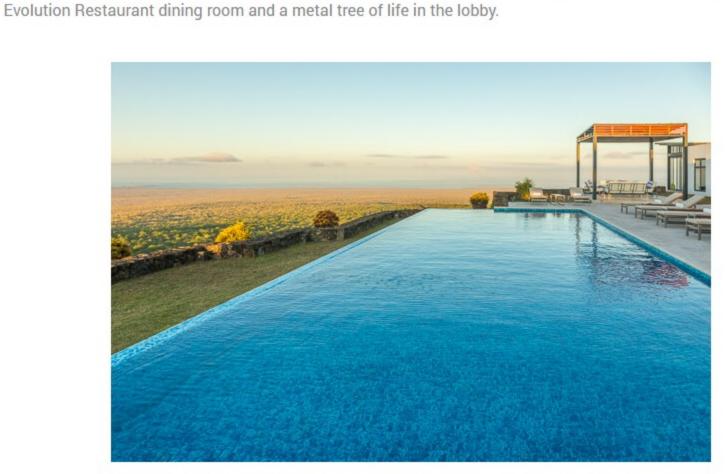


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The library, called the Homo Sapiens Explorers Lounge, is full of books about the natural world plus a 98-inch, ultra-HD TV which can play 3D material with special glasses for viewers. I watched an inspiring David Attenborough hosted program about the Galapagos in 3D. A copy of Darwin's "The Origin of Species" is in your bedside table drawer instead of a bible like you may have seen in this hemisphere.

The Pikaia's 12 standard rooms are located in separate two-story buildings (even numbered rooms are on the top floor) and are identical, each offering huge bathrooms that have bathtubs with views and oversized Sumaq amenities made exclusively for the hotel and the spa in Ecuador. There's a walk in closet, an ample patio with chairs and gorgeous bedding including runners and other textiles made exclusively for the Pikaia. The mini fridge is stocked with complimentary soft drink and Ecuadorean Guitig sparkling water.



The hotel's two suites have all that plus additional art, a true entry way, a couch, and extra square footage that make them feel more like a home. The pool suite has a private plunge pool while the garden suite has petite private garden. Though, honestly, the 12 rooms are so spacious and plushly appointed that an upgrade is hardly necessary.

The hotel spa has a sunny treatment room and a Jacuzzi in a separate solarium with lounge chairs. There's also a sauna, a Vichy shower, and a small but serviceable workout room. It has Life Fitness machines including a stationary bike, a treadmill, and a climber plus a fitness ball and free weights. Spa treatments run the gamut from facials to massages to body wraps to manicures and some treatments use local ingredients like Galapagos volcanic ash.

You can forget any misgivings you may about all-inclusive food. At the Pikaia the chefs obviously take pride in their work. Menus are varied and change frequently with lunchtime offerings like gazpacho, ceviche and burgers. Dinner is a well-crafted affair with many fish, meat, and vegetarian dishes to choose from and wait staff, mostly English speaking, are adept at remembering previous preferences. Breakfast, perhaps the most important meal of the day in such an active destination, is vast and varied with homemade breads, homemade jams, fruit, quality cheeses, and meats including prosciutto. Then you can load up on waffles, eggs, French toast, and other hot dishes made to order.



But the Pikaia wasn't built with just your needs in mind. Mother Earth is accommodated with a range of aboveand-beyond environmental measures including bamboo flooring, 124 solar panels, a wind turbine that provide 50% of the electrical needs of the hotel, rain water reclamation, and an on-site waste water treatment facility. The developers planted more than 9,000 endemic trees to re-forest the former pasture land around the hotel.

Breezes are almost constant at the volcano-top location and the hotel's architects designed the buildings themselves to grab those breezes, minimizing the need for energy-sucking air conditioning. That is only found in guest rooms and the spa, along with super-efficient ceiling fans and screened windows that encourage opening.

There were a few moments of disappointment at the Pikaia. The lighting over the sinks in the bathroom is unflattering and dim and the magnifying mirror has a motion sensor which turns the light on at the slightest movement. There must be a more elegant way to block the view between neighboring rooms than the weathered bamboo fences that are currently in place. In-room bathrobes and slippers are standard issue and ill-fitting.



Also, most guests at Pikaia sign up for a multi-day stay which includes day excursions from the hotel on land and on water. The water excursions are done on one of two yachts. The one I took day excursions on was a former dive boat and far from luxurious. Comfortable and sea-worthy, yes, but coming from the opulent arms of the Pikaia the boat was a let-down. It also felt stingy, at these prices, not to include at least domestic beer and some

Still, none of these stumbles were enough to take the shine off my stay at Pikaia Lodge. Ater trepidation over all the magazine hype (including some from junior NYC editors who never set foot in the place), I checked out raving.

Web Address: Pikaialodge.com

Total Number of Rooms: 14 including two suites

wines in room rates; no alcohol is included.

Published rates: from \$8,115 double occupancy for three nights in a terrace room to \$20,370 double occupancy for seven nights in the pool suite. All rates include meals, transfers and excursions.

Review by Karen Catchpole and photos by Eric Mohl.





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