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# Natural Progression

LONG OVERSHADOWED BY THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS, THE ECUADORAN MAINLAND IS FINDING NEW FOOTING AS AN EXCLUSIVE—AND RECLUSIVE—ADVENTURE DESTINATION.

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**T**he sea lions are lively today. I have just tumbled backward over the edge of a dinghy, and already I am surrounded by the beasts, which whip and twirl around me like fat and furry ribbons, somersaulting and zigzagging in and out of my akimbo legs. At times during this majestic dance, we come face to whiskered face, sending me wriggling backward in a state of alarm. But just millimeters before nose-diving into my head or lashing me with the leather-like tips of their flippers, the sea lions spin out of the way, staring at me with their cartoonish round eyes and chattering away in what sound like giggles.

Our underwater encounter, of course, is a quintessential Galápagos Island experience. Floating some 600 miles off the western coast of Ecuador, in a tiny inlet off Floreana Island, I am beyond time and progress. The sea lions have been zipping in and out of this crusted white coral reef for millennia. A passing sea turtle, its wrinkled neck earnestly stretching toward me, appears as though it has been plying these waters for the last century. And ashore, where thousands of dragon-like marine iguanas sun themselves on the warm surface of the volcanic rock, the scene is much the same as Charles Darwin found it in the 1830s.

The illusion passes, however, when I resurface and board the little dinghy that, filled with roughly a dozen other snorkelers, is bound for *Silver*



*Galápagos.* We are on a tight schedule, as the ship's all-aboard call will sound at any minute, ready to ferry us to the next island on our itinerary. Just as we set sail, another ship will take our place, hurriedly deploying its own fleet of dinghies filled with eager snorkelers ready to plunk into the water and swim with the playful creatures below.

The Galápagos Islands archipelago—

a collection of 13 islands and more than 100 smaller landmasses that is home to some of the world's rarest and most fascinating species—is unquestionably Ecuador's main attraction. The islands have long drawn a disproportionate amount of tourism dollars when compared with the country's mainland, and in the last 20 years, travel to the islands has more than

tripled to nearly 200,000 annual visitors. The archipelago's popularity has resulted in stringent governmental regulations that have frozen the number of vessels cruising its waters and installed strict routing itineraries to ensure that just one boat occupies an island or site at any given time. Such tight choreography aims to reduce the threat of overexposure; at times, it also offers a sense of



exclusivity. The more common by-product of this formula, however, is a general sense of packaged tourism, with little freedom to explore and few opportunities to customize the experience.

The debut last September of *Silver Galápagos*, a luxury cruise ship from the Monaco-based Silversea, promised a more refined way to visit the islands. Boasting 50 suites, a spa, two restaurants, and balconies in more than half of its accommodations, the ship is indeed a grand improvement over the barnacled expedition vessels and pint-size yachts sailing the same waters. But while *Silver Galápagos* is elevating the tangible elements of a Galápagos journey, it is confined to the same travel routes as its competitors and thus remains unable to change the Galápagos experience itself.

Travelers looking for a wilderness adventure in Ecuador, however, are not confined to the Galápagos. The country's greatest strides in tourism over the past few years have taken place in a long-ignored locale: the mainland. Fueled by new upscale retreats and a sleek international airport in the capital city of Quito, Ecuador's interior—with its wildlife-filled jungles, soaring peaks, and mighty rivers—is emerging as an exclusive adventure destination.

Set deep within the Chocó cloud forest, some 70 miles north of Quito, Mashpi Lodge is a shining example of Ecuador's new luxury-adventure model. A dramatic glass-and-steel structure wedged between massive ferns and moss-covered copal trees, the lodge opened in 2012 within the 42,000-acre Mashpi Rainforest Biodiversity Reserve. Here, nearly 500 bird species—as well as such mammals as peccaries, ocelots, kinkajous, and pumas—reside among cascading waterfalls and verdant gorges.

Roque Sevilla—a former mayor of Quito and the president and CEO of the country's largest tour operator, Metropolitan Touring—is the man behind Mashpi Lodge. In 1999, Sevilla purchased the land on which the lodge now sits from a fledgling timber company, saving more than 3,000 acres of land from deforestation. A staunch conservationist and orchid enthusiast, he set out to create a new



Above: Quito's solar-powered Casa Gangotena.  
Below: Mashpi Lodge.







A cruise on *Silver Galápagos* (above) promises encounters with (clockwise from above right) Sally lightfoot crabs, marine iguanas, sea lions, and blue-footed boobies.





industry for Ecuador, one that would value its unspoiled land more than the resources that could be extracted from it. He has aided efforts that led the municipality of Quito to declare the Mashpi Rainforest a natural protected area; contributed to a proposal urging the national government to block the tapping of crude oil beneath the country's Amazonian soil; and built Quito's first solar-paneled luxury hotel, Casa Gangotena, before opening his dream lodge.

"When I first visited Mashpi 15 years ago, I had such a magical feeling, surrounded by the lush forest,



Above: A crimson-rumped toucanet.

Right: Mashpi Lodge's Yaku suite.

the mist, and the clouds," Sevilla says. "I thought that this experience had to be shared, but I knew that the quality and infrastructure of any hotel here needed to match the nature around it."

As envisioned, Mashpi Lodge is as exclusive as it is scenic, featuring just 22 modern and expansive guest rooms that look out onto the forest through floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Sevilla refused to cut down a single tree during the lodge's construction, something I appreciate upon admiring the view from my Yaku suite. From its glass-enclosed corner, a valley of ferns stretches endlessly into the mist, and treetops an arm's length away are filled with squawking swallow tanagers and Choco toucans. The vistas are equally immersive from the restaurant (where I dine on a lunch of traditional *locro* with fresh avocado) and the sprawling rooftop terrace.



But it is not until I set out with my guide, Sebastián, that I realize how far removed from the mass tourism of the Galápagos Islands Mashpi Lodge really is. Hugging the edge of a steep hill, we descend a muddy trail no wider than my rubber boots. Gingerly stepping inside Sebastián's footprints, I look up from time to time as my companion narrates the highlights of our surroundings. To the left, a brown toad no larger than my pinky nail sits motionless and utterly camouflaged on the mud wall. To the right, a rare monkey-faced orchid stares up at us from a dewy thicket of green. And above, an Andean cock-of-the-rock croaks and

croons, his brilliant scarlet bouffant angled awkwardly as he flaps his wings.

Our mud-slicked path rises and falls until we arrive at our destination: the lodge's sky bike, a dangling contraption suspended from a slender wire high above the forest floor. I strap into the front seat and set out, pedaling furiously toward the tree-filled oblivion as the ground moves farther and farther away.

"Look at the trogons," Sebastián cries from the backseat. "And over there, a blue morpho!" But just as we begin to pick up speed, a great fog rolls in, descending upon us like some heavenly body until it envelops us completely in a sheet of white. Deprived of any visual stimulus, I am suddenly more aware of my immediate surroundings. The zipping whirl of the bicycle's fastener seems louder as it races along the wire, and the tiny droplets of dew forming on my hands feel like giant raindrops. Flying through the clouds, the breath of the wind slapping my cheeks, I suspect this is exactly the kind of experience Sevilla had in mind.



Sevilla is not alone in attempting to elevate the Ecuadoran travel experience. Last year, the rail company Tren Ecuador launched Tren Crucero, a renovated mid-20th-century steam train that travels from Quito to the coastal city of Guayaquil via the Andes Mountains. The three-night itineraries pass through cacao and rose plantations and include stops at Cōtopaxi (one of Ecuador's most active volcanoes) and Mount Chimborazo (the country's highest peak). By day, travelers enjoy the scenery from the train's first-class lounge and dining cars and open-air observation terrace; by night, they check in at adventure lodges and upscale haciendas.

From top: The Mashpi Rainforest Biodiversity Reserve is home to rushing waterfalls, Amazon wood lizards, and elegant trogons.



Also last year, Amazon Voyagers' 18-suite *M/V Anakonda* made its debut on the Ecuadoran Amazon, sailing from the river city of El Coca to Yasuni National Park on three-, four-, and seven-night cruises. Along the way, passengers can canoe on the river, trek through jungle trails, and spot pink river dolphins and squirrel monkeys. They might also be so fortunate as to visit with some of the forest's indigenous inhabitants. Features aboard the 148-foot ship include an observation deck, a fine-dining venue, and minimalist staterooms with floor-to-ceiling windows.

Ecuador's recent push toward more exclusive adventure travel is even making its way beyond the mainland, to the country's most-trafficked tourist destination. Before leaving the Galápagos Islands, I disembark *Silver Galápagos* on Santa Cruz Island to meet Andrew Balfour, a Galápagos native who is attempting to create the archipelago's first true luxury experience in the least likely of places: on land. We hop into a taxi and head for the highlands, where the new Pikaia Lodge—a striking recycled-steel structure propped magnificently atop a volcanic plateau—is



under construction. Bouncing along a winding road surrounded by mist-covered rain forest on both sides, Balfour tells me how Pikaia will elevate the way travelers see the islands.

"The Galápagos have been sold mainly on the cruise base," he says, "with these very tight and regimented schedules that, by the end of the week, leave you absolutely confused. With Pikaia, we want to infuse a bit of comfort into the equation."

Scheduled to open in October, Pikaia is indeed an upward shift, catering to discerning travelers with a spa, a gourmet restaurant, an infinity-edge swimming pool, a bar, and an explorer's lounge. Fourteen spacious rooms with bamboo floors and expansive private terraces overlook a beach and a turtle sanctuary. According to Balfour, however, Pikaia's primary appeal will be in how it changes the way people experience the islands.

"The park does what it can to help control the islands and respect their diversity," says Balfour, who will offer a 100-foot yacht equipped with eight staterooms (as well as a hot tub, a dining room, and a sun terrace) for day trips to local attractions. "But we have managed to work around the tight scheduling while still remaining cautious with the environment."

Balfour and I arrive at Pikaia just as the sun peeks out from behind a cluster of clouds and showers the hills below in an effervescent glow. It is utterly quiet, aside from the faint rustle of leaves and the occasional crunch of a nearby nibbling tortoise. In the distance, just off the pink sands of a secluded beach, the sparkling sea is tranquil and empty. R

**Amazon Voyagers**, 866.725.3255, [www.amazoncruise.net](http://www.amazoncruise.net); **Mashpi Lodge**, +593.2.400.4100, [www.mashpilodge.com](http://www.mashpilodge.com); **Pikaia Lodge**, [www.pikaialodgegalapagos.com](http://www.pikaialodgegalapagos.com); **Silversea**, 877.276.6816, [www.silversea.com](http://www.silversea.com); **Tren Ecuador**, 888.589.7245, [www.trenecuador.com](http://www.trenecuador.com)