



FEATURE - 1026202

NATURAL POSERS

THE WILDLIFE OF THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS APPEARS AS UNFLAPPABLE AS IT IS FAMOUS, WRITES **MARK MULLIGAN**. BUT TAKE CARE NOT TO PUSH THE BOUNDARIES.



GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS

Pikala Lodge

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THE SOPHISTICATED TRAVELLER



They say Australians are can-do people, but the Ecuadoreans are no slouches at resolving a problem either. They might wrap it in a bit more drama and colour, but you can forgive that. Having spent centuries enduring colonial brutality and neocolonial interference, war, poverty, military oppression, economic collapse, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, drug wars and now weak commodity prices, they've remained a hardy, stoic nation. And they don't shy from a challenge.

Well at least Diego, our guide on my long-dreamed-of Galápagos Islands adventure, didn't. He was doggedly unfazed by my klutz like loss of critical reading glasses into the eastern Pacific on day one of our week-long trip to the islands. I'd been jumping from a craggy outcrop on North Seymour Island, part of the archipelago, into an inflatable launch when the spectacles dropped into the briny realm.

I'd given them up for good as we were ferried to the main excursion boat, moored about 50 metres away.

Back on board, I told Aleyda, a fixer for our tour company, of my clumsy mishap, and then I informed Diego as he completed the last of the shuttles between island and the mother ship. "Yeah, I saw something fall off you as you got into the launch," he remarked casually. "Was it important?"

"Only for reading, writing, changing my camera settings, using my phone, packing and seeing my food," I quipped, knowing that buying replacements would not be easy in these enchanting, though remote, islands.

"No problems – I'll dive down and get them," he said.

At first I thought he was joking. As he stripped down and returned to the rocky shoreline, crew and guides all assured me he would recover them.

Sure enough, only minutes later, I was minutely examining a delicious on-board lunch of pan-fried fresh tuna, beans and salad through the +2.5 lenses. Incredible. Diego is the sort of guy you definitely want

on your team.

I blame the clumsiness on my constant state of distracted awe on the Galápagos archipelago, a group of about 20 volcanic islands, and countless islets, made universally famous by British naturalist Charles Darwin in 1859 and, more recently, by television's favourite documentary-maker, David Attenborough. I was treated to Attenborough's stunning 2013 Galápagos 3D documentary, made during his fourth visit to the island chain, at the luxury Pikaia Lodge on the evening of my arrival on Santa Cruz, one of the five inhabited islands.

In it, the broadcaster and naturalist describes the Galápagos as "enchanted, volcanic islands where life has played out in isolation from the rest of the world and produced some extraordinary results".

The islands, the youngest of which is only 300,000 years old and the oldest about 4 million, have always been on my list of must-sees. However, despite more than six years working in South America, and an enduring family connection with Chile, I had never made it here.

Since Darwin's observations of the islands' wildlife introduced many to the idea of natural selection in the mid-19th century, the Galápagos Islands have drawn a steady stream of scientists, Ecuadorean settlers and, since the 1970s, tourists.

The island group had already been a haven for smugglers, pirates, buccaneers and privateers since the early 16th century, as well as being rich whaling grounds and a hideaway for all manner of adventurers.

The Ecuadoreans, who took control in 1832, set up penal colonies on a few of the islands. These miscreants did some building in their day: the 100-metre long, 25-metre tall Muro de Lágrimas, or Wall of Tears, near Puerto Villamil on Isabela, the largest of the chain, was erected by convicts. The structure never served any useful purpose and today stands as a testimony to unspeakable cruelty, or a wasted opportunity, depending on where you stand on *crime and punishment*.

Much later, the United States used Baltra, site of one of two airports, as a Pacific base during World War II. Ruins of those installations still dot the island, while



removable materials such as wood have been recycled into housing by locals.

US-Ecuadorean relations have been strained since the 2007 election of popular leftist president Rafael Correa, who immediately set about trying to trim the superpower's influence on the country. In 2009, he kicked the US military out of the mainland coastal city of Manta, a base for drug-trafficking surveillance. Two years ago, Ecuador quit the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act, set up to strengthen the region's institutions in the fight against drug trafficking.

Political tensions on the world stage, however, don't affect the archipelago's main drawcards. Despite straddling the equator, the Galápagos are not tropical islands of the Caribbean or South Pacific variety, but rather quite harsh, often windswept land masses buffeted by trade winds from north and south. They are caught between the frigid Humboldt current that races up from Antarctica and warmer waters sweeping in from the north.

The result of this unique geography is a nutrient- and plankton-rich marine park that absolutely teems with life – a line-fisher's paradise where nets are prohibited and fish and sea mammals are allowed to flourish.

Tourism and scientific research are the two economic mainstays of the islands these days, the latter of increasing importance as Ecuador looks to reduce its reliance on oil exports amid commodity price weakness.

So important is tourism, the government even forked out about \$US4 million for a 30-second commercial slot during the 2015 February US Super Bowl final, the most expensive piece of advertising real estate in the world. The spot, based on the country's bespoke adaptation of The Beatles' *All You Need is Love*, made Ecuador the first foreign country to buy commercial space during the popular sports event.

Ecuador's economic diversification drive pops up constantly in conversation around the country.

A spacious new airport in the capital Quito, opened less than two years ago, and another for port city Guayaquil testify to the commitment to this under the mandate of Correa. Under his watch, public investment

in infrastructure, health and education has almost doubled, helping slash unemployment and infant mortality.

Once the playground of wealthy yacht owners and high-end cruisers, the Galápagos Islands have steadily become more accessible and so more popular, helped in part by the improving transport links. According to official figures, they hosted more than 200,000 tourists in 2013, compared with 145,000 in 2006 and 40,000 in 1990.

Ecuadoreans, most of whom were once too poor to make the trip, now make up about 35 per cent of the visitors. Although good for the economy, the islands' expanding popularity has drawn criticism from environmental groups, and the government is looking to at least slow the flow and more tightly control growth in the permanent population.

It's not just the increasing number of footfalls across the islands' delicate ecosystems that concern the greenies; exogenous plants and animals brought in over the centuries continue to threaten the native flora and fauna. The Ecuadorean government set aside some of the islands as wildlife sanctuaries as early as 1934, but it wasn't until 1959, the centenary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, that the Galápagos were officially declared a national park.

The construction of the Charles Darwin Research Station on Isla Santa Cruz began soon after, and it started operating in 1964 as an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to conservation. Today, researchers and volunteers from around the world work on a range of conservation projects.

UNESCO declared the archipelago a World Heritage Site in 1978. Scientists come here to study the unique wildlife, while the tourists are here to just gawp at it.

Either way, they are privy to fauna so perfectly evolved, so serenely adapted to its environment that the thin but constant stream of camera-toting tourists appears not to bother the animals – within reason. In fact, at risk of anthropomorphising, I'd say some almost appear to be posing for selfie posterity.



Indeed, just precisely who runs North Seymour, and all the other Galápagos Islands, was made abundantly clear to me a few hours before the glasses spectacle.

Excited to be within metres of a sea lion, land iguana and great frigate bird within seconds of setting foot on the rocky shore, I'd strayed off the marked path and too close to a nesting blue-footed booby, easily the islands' most emblematic bird, even if it was Darwin's study of the slight variations in finches' beaks between the different islands that inspired parts of his *On the Origin of Species*.

The bird immediately let out a guttural cry of protest and all hell broke loose. This is not the gull-like creature whose proud presentation of almost fluorescent blue webbed feet is perhaps the islands' best-known dance. Rather, it was an angry bird to rival an Australian magpie in November.

Admonished by Diego and bird alike, I stuck rigidly to the carefully marked paths for the rest of the 90-minute island excursion, happily snapping away at the co-operative menagerie along the way.

Aside from the boobies (derived from the Spanish "bobo", meaning stupid or clownish), the islands' most famous residents are giant tortoises, the likes of which can only be found here and on the islands of the Seychelles. They are not present on North Seymour, but can be found wandering around Santa Cruz, Urbina Bay on Isabela and San Cristóbal.

One place where sightings are guaranteed is the El Chato Tortoise Reserve, south of Santa Rosa on the south-west of Santa Cruz, where dozens if not hundreds roam the clearings and hang out in mud pools. The virtually catatonic, prehistoric-looking reptiles are everywhere, including often on the track into the park. The place is photography heaven – even the smallest tortoises don't move very fast – and there's a tourist-ready example of lava caves, which are found all over the islands. For twitchers, the El Chato reserve is also a good place to spot short-eared owls, Darwin's finches, yellow warblers, Galápagos rails and paint-billed crakes.

The stars, however, are the giant reptiles: megafauna which survived the glacial period of the Pleistocene Age because they were

already safely on the Galápagos Islands after a journey that started when South America and Africa formed the one continent. When rising seas split the two great southern land masses, the mighty Andes were hardly hillocks, and the tortoises inched across from what is now known as the Atlantic coast to the Pacific side. From there they were either carried by rafts of vegetation or hopped across now-submerged islands to their current home.

At the entrance to the sprawling Charles Darwin research facility, in Puerto Ayora, we spot a small marine iguana, another unique Galápagos species. The world's only sea-going lizard, its tail has evolved to serve as a powerful propeller.

These strange, dragon-like reptiles thrive everywhere, having millions of years ago learnt to eat seaweed instead of the dense foliage of the Central American jungles from whence they arrived. They also learnt how to hold their breath for up to an hour and developed special glands for ejecting filtered seawater from their nostrils.

Viewing so much spectacular wildlife, you'll want a good night's sleep. Five-star eco hotel Pikaia Lodge is perched 400 metres above sea level on the rim of an extinct volcano; it's one of the few extreme high-end resorts on the islands. The accent in the spacious, 12-room, two-suite hotel is on tranquil contemplation of the majestic views (when the highland mist clears, that is) from the infinity pool or spa, and also on enjoying the delicate, modern Ecuadorean-Peruvian creations in its restaurant. Built to 100 per cent carbon-neutral standards from low-impact, recyclable materials, including Galápagos lava stone and Peruvian travertine, the solar-powered lodge captures and reuses every available drop of precious fresh water.

Its only shortcoming, which goes for all the islands, is an internet connection that ranges from tortoise slow to non-existent. While this should not be the focus on a unique range of islands celebrated for their remoteness, it does make it harder for business operators and hoteliers trying to attract the sort of high-end clientele who rely on fast connections to conduct business while kicking back.

Aleyda says this is being rectified, while singing the praises of President Correa. She says his huge infrastructure drive has reached



the Galápagos and points out road signs on Santa Cruz that didn't exist a few years ago.

Nor was it so long ago that Galápagos schoolchildren thought Alberto Fujimori, the President of Peru between 1990 and 2000, was Ecuador's head of state, because the only television news they saw was transmitted from the neighbouring country.

Despite the quotidian complications of life 1000 kilometres off the coast of a small, developing nation, locals make much of the fact there is no crime and no real poverty on the islands. In a country – and continent – where both are rife, this is almost as unusual as the flora and fauna that flourishes here.

Having had some unfortunate experiences around South America over the years, I still had my doubts, until yet another of my absent-minded episodes occurred at Seymour Airport, on Baltra. Inspired by the marvels I had lived among over the previous three days, I pulled out my laptop to begin this narrative.

No sooner had I opened it, than a flustered Aleyda rushed in to inform me the rest of the group was sitting in the VIP lounge on the other side of the crowded little boarding area. Noting her panic, I grabbed my recently purchased Ecuadorean hats and laptop case and strode over to assure her I was fine where I was. She was keen for me to rejoin the group.

As soon as I was reunited with the travelling party we were called to the gate to board. It wasn't until I was jamming my hand luggage into the overhead bins that I noticed the briefcase was lighter. My laptop was still in the terminal. "Se me quedó el laptop en el terminal," I yelled.

"Yes, yes, I saw it in there," a fellow passenger was swift to inform me.

Some panicked exhortations to the cabin crew ensued, followed by a walkie-talkie exchange with terminal staff.

Within minutes the cursed thing had been located and I had it back on my lap. Had this been the mainland – or any number of developed nations – I probably would have given it up for gone within seconds of my overhead discovery.

If the Spanish had thought the beautiful, perfectly adapted boobies foolish, who knows what they might call me.

The writer was a guest of Abercrombie & Kent and LAN Airlines.

TAKE ME THERE

ABERCROMBIE & KENT

Abercrombie & Kent runs three luxury trips to complement its private and small-group cruises to the Galápagos Islands. abercrombiekent.com.au

Pikaia Lodge, Galápagos: The three-night terrace room package includes Quito-Baltra-Quito airfare, VIP lounge access at Baltra Airport, return transfers to lodge, all guided land and marine exploration programs, use of sporting equipment (wet suits, snorkelling gear, mountain bikes and helmets), all meals, non-alcoholic beverages at meals and park fees. From \$6920 per person twin share.

Mashpi Lodge, Ecuador: Three nights in a Wayra room, return private transfers from Quito, guided activities and all meals. From \$2795pp, twin share.

Casa Gangotena, Quito: Three nights in a luxury room, plus return private airport transfers, a full-day private sightseeing tour of Quito, full-day private tour to Otavalo and the markets and breakfast daily. Prices from \$2420pp, twin share.

LAN AIRLINES

LAN Airlines flies seven one-stop (Auckland) flights between Sydney and Santiago a week, and four non-stop flights on code-share with Qantas.

Galápagos Islands: LAN runs regular direct flights between Santiago and Quito, the Ecuadorean capital, and Guayaquil, the main port city. There are several daily flights between these two centres and the islands' main airport, on Baltra. Flights to the second airport on

San Cristobal are less frequent and often booked solid with locals.

Dreamliners: LAN recently introduced its new 787-9 fleet to its trans-Pacific routes. The new model sports windows that are up to 40 per cent larger than the average, making views of the Antarctic as you soar across the bottom of the world all the more spectacular. lan.com/en



BONUS READ
Top chef Christine
Manfield writes about her
Ecuadorean adventures on
afr.com/lifestyle



LEFT: Sea lions are unfazed by the camera. TOP: Diego the unflappable guide. ABOVE: A Sally Lightfoot crab.



TOP: The blue-footed booby is the islands' most emblematic bird. ABOVE: Pool suite at Pikaia Lodge.



WINGS OF DESIRE

MASHPI'S CLOUD FOREST IS A BIRDWATCHERS' PARADISE.

It's almost 9pm in the restaurant at Mashpi Eco Lodge (about a three-hour drive north-west of Ecuador's capital, Quito) and most of the guests have retired to their rooms for the evening.

Exhausted after a day of birdwatching, trekking and myriad other activities in the lush Ecuadorean cloud forest – which rises and descends around the modern, airy accommodation – they'll be up early the next day for some more twitching, to check out the magical butterfly house, take a dip in a crystalline waterfall or test their vertigo on the fascinating Skybike, a tandem cycle suspended 60 metres above the main valley floor running under a 200-metre cable.

Breaking the quiet of the expansive restaurant, however, is a group of Ecuadoreans chatting excitedly over the remnants of their meal. They are young and old, bearded and clean-shaven. What they have in common is a passion for their surroundings – a unique slice of the semi-tropical rainforest and temperate cloud forest that has all but disappeared in Ecuador.

Bought in tranches from landholders by former mayor of Quito and wealthy environmentalist Roque Sevilla, this 1200-hectare expanse in the Chocó region incorporates a former cattle estate and areas once marked out for logging. Since 2001,

the affected parts have been replanted with native flora in a bid to recreate the lush canopy-covered forests of yore.

According to locally based scientists, less than 24 per cent of Chocó's natural habitat remains. Most of it has been sacrificed to logging, small-crop farming, livestock and large scale mono-agriculture such as coffee, bananas and palm heart cultivation.

The winding, long drive from Quito (only 40 kilometres away as the crow flies), provides an insight into the deforestation. Saved by Sevilla from the chainsaws, gigantic kapok trees as old as 200 years still

reach for the heavens in the park. Staff have marked out a network of trails, embedding them with milk crates to make the often slippery, steep going a bit easier.

The park is a birdwatchers' paradise, offering the chance to observe more than 400 species (25 per cent of the nation's total bird offering), from flamboyant toucans and frenetic hummingbirds to the more common finches and seeders. One of the lettered gents holding court in the lodge's restaurant tonight is Juan del Hierro, an Ecuadorean academic who spends a lot of time at Mashpi's hummingbird

observation centre. He's writing a book focused on the link between their movement and structural changes in the colour of their plumage.

Another is Mashpi's young resident biologist Carlos Morochz. During a short lecture he outlined his observation of the elusive ocelot, also known as a dwarf leopard, via night-vision camera traps. Watching the footage felt like spying on strange nocturnal neighbours. The cameras have even captured the odd puma, another of the country's many endangered species.

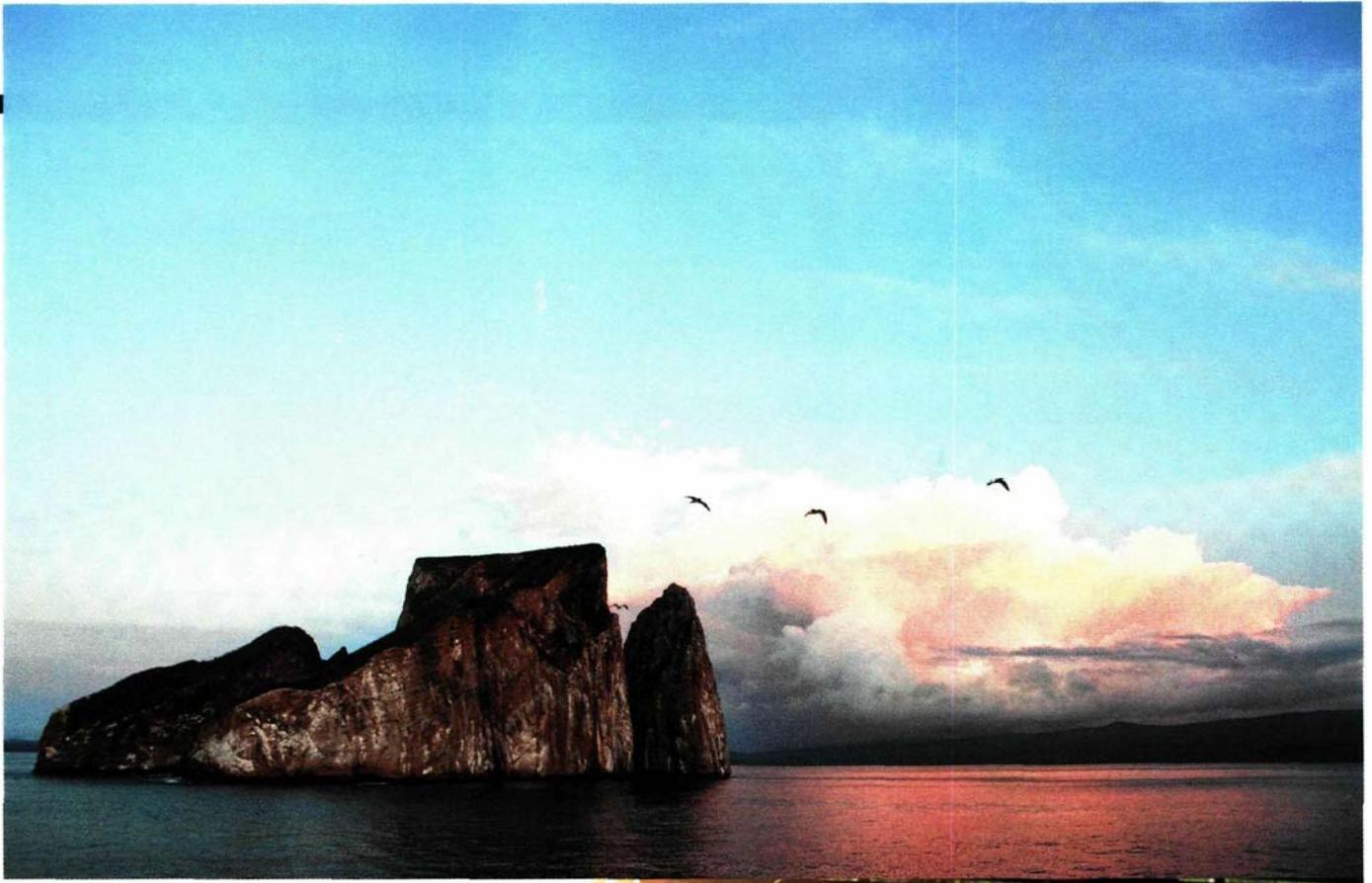
Despite the damage already wreaked on Ecuador's native animal population, myriad mammals, rodents, insects and reptiles flourish in Mashpi.

The accommodation is understated eco-luxury, from the ceiling-to-floor windows offering unimpeded views into the forest from each of the spacious 22 rooms to the wellness area, featuring a jacuzzi open to the elements and treatments incorporating local clays, herbs and leaves.

Cool face towels and fresh juices are given to each returning excursion group in the natural-light-infused lobby.

The food in the restaurant is fresh, delicious and simple, drawing on Pacific seafood, imported red meats and local fruit and vegetables. Like all Ecuador's high-end hotels, the cuisine tends towards national with a Peruvian flair.

FROM TOP: Bird's-eye views from the Skybike; bird species abound; the handsome lobby of Mashpi Eco Lodge.



TOP: Rock and awe. RIGHT:
A sea lion is at home on
Santa Cruz island.