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EDITED BY PETER BROWNE

EXCLUSIVE FIRST REVIEW

A NEW BREED

The latest Galápagos hotel is the first one you'd actually like to stay in. By Horatio Clare

FROM MY ROOM, the giant tortoise in the marsh below looks no bigger than a large woodlouse, the network of his trails through the bright vegetation like seams in green velvet.

I'm watching him from the newest and most luxurious hotel in the Galápagos archipelago, Pikaia Lodge. Occupying one of the more quietly spectacular spots

on earth, it is balanced on the cone of an extinct volcano on the eastern edge of Santa Cruz island. On every side the gradients drop steeply away, most vertiginously into the crater, which once bubbled with lava and now seethes with elephant grass snaking in the wind. In the hotel's 31-hectare private reserve, Darwin's finches hop about your feet and giant tortoises, technically wild ➤

WHERE TO STAY



➤ animals (though you never saw less wild a beast), come and go as they please.

So singular a location, with views of the ocean on three sides, and the mist-shrouded highlands of Santa Cruz on the fourth, and such emphatic architecture – the rooms are designed like the bridges of ships, steel beams supporting sloping roofs which act as rain-catchers – give Pikaia the appearance of a watchtower.

There is nothing else like it on Santa Cruz, where most hotels are old-school establishments for Ecuadorians. Solar panels, recycling and a wind turbine allow the lodge to generate up to a third of its own power and to make the best use of water, the most precious resource on Galápagos.

But guests won't notice any significant differences from a conventional hotel, except perhaps in the soundscape. A particular ventilation system in the

high-ceilinged rooms is designed to obviate the need for air-conditioning. This, combined with the south-east trade winds, gives Pikaia the most memorable audio effects you are likely

THE HOTEL GIVES VISITORS A RARE INSIGHT INTO WHAT IT MIGHT BE LIKE TO LIVE HERE

to encounter on land. The whole structure wuthers, whistles, sings and sighs.

Although the top of the crater is only a few hundred feet above sea level, this is the place to experience Galápagos weather in all its various majesty. On misty nights, which are numerous, this must be one of the eeriest hotels in the Americas. The turbine moans, fog billows up over the

crater like smoke and condenses in hissing precipitation. The lowing of cattle on a neighbouring ranch, and in the distance, towards dawn, a cock-crow, give an insight which is not common to most foreign visitors to Galápagos: the feeling of what it might be like to live here.

Hitherto most non-Ecuadorians have transitted across Santa Cruz on their way to meet boats at Puerto Ayora. On my first visit to these parts several years ago, I assumed that Santa Cruz, where most of the 25,000 islanders live (it is one of only five inhabited islands in the archipelago), was the least interesting part of the Galápagos, but then I lacked the company of Luis Rodriguez, my guide at Pikaia and surely one of the most enthusiastic, knowledgeable and passionate of his profession.

'People say it feels like a Jurassic world,' he tells me. 'But actually, it is



The bar at Pikaia Lodge. Right, a Sally Go Lightly crab. Opposite, from left: a courtyard at the lodge; a land iguana



pre-mammalian.' We spend a day together, boating and exploring North Seymour island, where we walk through colonies of nesting frigatebirds, and step around basking sea lions. 'No land predators, so no fear,' he says. 'That is what amazed Darwin, that a mockingbird was not frightened of him. Of course, Darwin came here after the peak of the whaling, when Galápagos was in a terrible mess. What you see now is probably the best state the islands have been in since the whalers came.'

We watch blue-footed boobies perform courtship dances, and later we snorkel with angelfish, splendid in purple and orange livery, and yellow-tailed snappers and young barracuda. Three whitetip reef sharks pass slowly beneath us.

Later the same afternoon, after lunch on Pikaia's dive boat, a splendid cruiser on which guests have their own cabin for the

day, we stroll along a sand bar, the ocean rolling on its windward side while young sea lions attend surf school in the waves. 'They're just teenagers having fun,' says Luis, who then explains that their mothers must return with deep-water fish for them to eat within 10 days, or they will starve. 'There is no shared parenting, no adoption, and they will not eat the fish here, so everything depends on the mother.' The dance of life and death has never seemed so urgent, so various, so compulsively involving and at hand as it does on Galápagos.

A cruise around the islands is a dramatic way to experience them in their diversity, and encounters with whales and other sea life are obviously more likely on a boat. But staying on land imparts a depth of experience which is truly rich, partly thanks to Luis's expertise. We had wonderful

lectures on everything from a furry non-vascular plant (Adam's pine, one of the islands' oldest organisms, described as 'dinosaur food') to the challenges facing the Ecuadorian government in managing Galápagos and balancing the needs of the archipelago's wildlife and human populations.

On my last night a moon rose, lava-red, from the sea; bats hawked over the pool, and I felt as though I was watching the rebirth of this extraordinary world, and that I had lived in it and with it. **T**

Miraviva (+44 20 7186 1111; www.miraviva.travel.com) offers a 10-day/nine-night itinerary from £5,950 per person sharing, with seven nights at Pikaia Lodge on a full-board basis, including all excursions, and an overnight bed-and-breakfast stay at the Oro Verde hotel in Guayaquil, plus international flights with KLM, domestic flights and transfers