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The TRAVEL issue

INTO THE DEEP

Tim Lott takes to the open sea



THE ANIMALS WENT IN TWO BY TWO

Luxury has reached the Galapagos, but being green is at the heart of its agenda, finds **GARY WALTHER**



The bedside-table drawer at Pikaia Lodge holds an edition of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, which seems perfectly natural. Why wouldn't the first contemporary luxury lodge (opened 1 October 2014) in the Galapagos, the place that incited Darwin's journey to the theory of evolution, offer the Victorian sage as bedtime reading?

But is there not a sly allusion here, too? In most hotels around the world, the night table contains the Gideon Bible. Pikaia has replaced it with the book that offers a radically different story of creation, evolution via natural selection. It's that account, the drama of evolution, that the lodge delivers on a platter to guests through four-, five- and seven-day programmes that include room, full board, transfers and land- and sea-excursions led by an expert guide. At roughly £800 per person per day, it's not a bargain, but it is a very good deal.

The 14-room Pikaia Lodge is out to exploit a new niche in the

Galapagos ecosystem, wealthy travellers seeking an eco-luxe resort – Pikaia is the first carbon neutral property in the Galapagos – which also delivers tailored eco-encounters. The latter is done through day-long voyages on the resort's 100-foot-long motor yacht, the Pikaia. The cruises provide the opportunity to swim with sea lions and penguins, walk among blue-footed boobies and marine iguanas, and traverse lava fields and mounds of volcanic ash. (It was the geology of the Galapagos that provoked Darwin's doubt about the age of the universe given in the Bible.) The yacht has eight air-conditioned cabins for changing, showering, or snoozing, spacious outdoor lounging areas, and a very good cook.

Pikaia is the vision of Herbert Frei, an Ecuadorian-Swiss investor with a passion for the environment. He built and equipped the lodge with the intent of receiving LEED Platinum certification (currently in the works). In practice that meant minimising the use of concrete and maximising the use of recyclable materials, steel columns for the

framework and lava stone, all of it hand-cut from National Park Service-approved sites, for most floor and wallcoverings. The hotel also spares the fossil fuels – there is no heat in the rooms, given the location on the Equator – although on a rainy, cold October day, this writer suffered a bit for the hotel’s LEED Platinum ambition.

Pikaia also fixed up its own environment – a former cattle ranch on the top of an extinct volcano in the cloud-wreathed uplands of Santa Cruz Island – by planting 26,000 trees. The landscape here is moist and green, in contrast to the arid lowlands, courtesy of a mist called Garua. Toupées of Spanish moss dangle from tree branches, mutton chops of moss carpet the trunks, and the forks are dense with epiphytes. There are banana palms and orange trees, and pastures grow thick and high enough to tickle cattle bellies. (Pikaia gets its organic steak from herds up here.) The lush vegetation is why some of the 6,000 giant tortoises on Santa Cruz plod their way up here from November to June, the wet season. Then, there are scores of them on Rancho Manzanillo, a refuge only 20 minutes away from the lodge and one of the excursions.

Pikaia consists of 14 rooms in four blocks splayed along one edge of the crater. The rooms, done in a clean, modern style, are cantilevered over the crater edge and, from down in the valley, they look like small ships docked in a semi-circle. The front walls are all glass and, on some mornings, the bed is a front-row seat on Turneresque atmospherics: gauzy tides of mist, sudden shards of sunlight and vistas abruptly emerging as the cloud curtain parts. (The button that retracts the floor-to-ceiling shades is a nice touch in this regard.)

The Peruvian travertine bathrooms are worthy of an Aman Resort (dressing area, walk-in shower, separate loo). Just beyond the lobby, there’s an expansive deck with an infinity pool sited to provide a view all the way down to the coast (when the coast is clear). The glass-walled fine-dining restaurant Evolution, whose centerpiece is a double-helix sculpture in aluminum, offers the same view.

On our first cruise, we arrived at Bachas Beach on Santa Cruz to see a ménage-a-trois among sea turtles just offshore, a roiling display of gripping flippers and rearing backsides. Farther along, we walked among insouciant marine iguanas and watched flamingos patiently prospecting for crustaceans in the muddy bottom of a salt pond. On nearby North Seymour Island, we traversed a giant Frigate Bird rookery, where these magnificent gliders (up to 7.5-foot wingspan) plop themselves willy-nilly on ottomans of bent branches. The males sit, red throat sack inflated, and when a female flies over, they bend their heads way, way back in a come-hither display, courtship as playing the percentages.



Luxury has landed at one of the final frontiers: the Galapagos. But because these islands are so special, every care has been taken to minimise negative ecological impact, using the maximum amount of recyclable materials possible, plus the non-use of fossil fuels





On Seymour, as elsewhere, the animals and birds barely acknowledged us, except for the immature blue-footed booby that walked up to me – I was on the verge of flight as I got a good look at that powerful bill, adapted for snatching fish – and lightly pecked at my shoelace, more out of curiosity than anything else.

On another day we went farther afield to Santiago Island, a geological Rubik's cube of ash mounds skirted by a vast lava field. It is pocked with waterside caves (old lava tubes), now the suburban homes of Galapagos penguins, the only wild species found north of the equator.

Just across the channel is Bartolomé, an equal geological freak show headlined by a tilted, 100-foot-high rock in the shape of a pointed tombstone. (It was used as a backdrop for *Master and Commander*.) Here, we snorkeled with sea lions – or rather they rocketed around us – and hovered over undulating (and quite blasé) schools of Razor Surgefish and Burrito Grunts. We concluded by climbing a boardwalk to the 450-foot summit of an ash mound for a panoramic view, and on the return had to shoo a pod of sea lions off the landing stairs with determined clapping.

It was a relief to come back early each evening to all that lush green from the lava-paved, ruddy coasts, and relax around the pool. Aside from the usual amenities, it offers a singular one: A God-like perspective on the landscape that gave rise to the true understanding of creation. Up here, watching the setting sun, drink in-hand, fresh from a day of adventure, you feel that you're on an all-first-class ark. ■

Rates start at £2,440 per person, based on a three-night/four-day exploration package, which includes accommodation, transfers, meals and excursions outlined in the programme. +593 4371 1670; pikaialodge.com

ECO TRAVEL

TRENDS & HOT SPOTS

1 SMALL FOOTPRINT, LOW IMPACT That's the new luxury lodge mantra. Two that exemplify the approach are Mashpi Lodge in Ecuador and Fazenda Catuçaba in Brazil.

2 LUXE AND GREEN... are not antonyms, as Botswana's Zarafa proves: ultra-luxury tents, but a camp run on solar power and recycled cooking oil.

3 HOTTING UP IN AFRICA Zambia, especially South Luangwa National Park, is the up-and-coming spot in southern Africa, according to Brad Horn, managing director of Epic Private Journeys. He recommends Bilimungwe Camp, Kuyenda Camp and Chamilandu Camp, all in the national park, as well as Chiawa and Old Mondoro camps in Lower Zambezi National Park.

4 SAFARI BY CHOPPER The helicopter is the new Land Rover. 'Our clients are seeking new ways of seeing wildlife, so we're taking an increasing number of them on safari by helicopter,' says Horn. 'Not only is an aerial perspective of the Serengeti migration in Tanzania or the coastal Daintree Rainforest in Australia amazing, but a helicopter allows you to cover so much more ground.'

5 A SENSE OF PLACE... is what guests are after most, even if it means cutting some creature comforts. Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, for instance, has part-time electricity.

6 GREEN DEFINES DESIGN Old lodges are being redone to make them greener and it is greenness, not high luxe, that's defining the design of new lodges.



ORLA KIELY
Birdwatch strappy green dress, £80.
peopletree.co.uk



PIPPA SMALL
Opal ring, £5,500.
pippasmall.com



BOTTLETOP
Paris Black Multi, £145.
bottletop.org



BEAUMONT ORGANIC
Carly T-shirt, £43.
beaumontorganic.com



LUVAHUVA Simone Black Eyelash bamboo jersey and lace bra and brief set, £59. luvahuva.co.uk

GO GREEN

Planet-friendly fashion



REFORMATION
Babet alpaca sweater, £164.
thereformation.com



CHRISTOPHER RAE BURN
CR X Porter rucksack, £249.
christopherraeburn.co.uk



LALESSO
Faruta bikini, £120.
gatherandsee.com



SEASALT CORNWALL
Sailor shirt, £29.95.
seasaltcornwall.co.uk



WOMSH Bask Zebra trainers, £115. womsh.com