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A Super Natural Selection: Inside The Galápagos Islands' Luxe Pikaia Lodge



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*I solve the key hotel
mystery: Which
rooms are best?*

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There is no Gideon Bible in your bedside drawer at the Galápagos Islands' game-changing new Pikaia Lodge—that space is occupied by a very different creation story: a copy of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Why not? It was the Galápagos, after all, which inspired Darwin's journey to the theory of evolution.

Pikaia Lodge, which opened in October on the island of Santa Cruz, is out to exploit a new niche in the Galápagos ecosystem: wealthy travelers adapted to luxury accommodations. The 14-room Pikaia was an uncommon species on Santa Cruz until not long ago—day- and live-aboard boat-based travel was, by government decree, the rule in the Galápagos. Now Pikaia offers up the Galápagos on a tray: four- to seven-day all-inclusive programs (including transfers, guides and excursions) at roughly \$1,200 per person per day.

The first carbon-neutral accommodation in the Galápagos, the lodge is the vision of Herbert Frei, an Ecuadorian-Swiss investor with a passion for the environment. Pikaia occupies a singular environment itself, the lip of an extinct volcano crater in the cloud-wreathed uplands of Santa Cruz, a landscape that is damp and green, in contrast to the arid lowlands. The moisture, mostly in the form of a mist called the Garua, is a kind of elixir, birthing outbreaks of epiphytes and mutton-chops of moss on trees. There are banana palms and orange trees, and pastures high enough to tickle a cow's belly. (The lodge sources its organic steak from the local herds.) This vegetation is why some of the 6,000 giant tortoises on Santa Cruz plod their way up here for part of the year. From November to June, the wetter season, there are scores of them on Rancho Manzanillo, a refuge only 20 minutes away from the lodge.

Pikaia's 14 rooms line one lip of the crater and are cantilevered over the edge; from down in the valley, they look like small ships docked in a semicircle. The front walls are all glass, and you wake up to a front-row seat on the morning cloud drama right outside before stumbling off to brush your teeth in your gorgeous Peruvian travertine bathroom. There's more travertine just beyond the lobby, cladding the expansive deck with its infinity pool sited to provide a view all the way down to the coast. You get the same view from Evolution, the glass-walled fine-dining restaurant whose centerpiece is a double-helix sculpture in aluminum.

The day excursions aboard the eponymous Pikaia are the means of getting up close to the rest of the evolutionary drama. It has eight cabins (for changing, showering, snoozing), spacious outdoor lounging areas and a very accomplished cook. We arrived at Las Bachas beach on Santa Cruz to witness a sea turtle ménage à trois, a roiling display of gripping flippers and bobbing backsides. Farther along, we walked among blasé marine iguanas and watched flamingos prospecting for crustaceans in the muddy bottom of a salt pond. On North Seymour Island we traversed a giant frigate bird rookery, where these magnificent gliders (with their 7.5-foot wingspan) plop themselves willy-nilly on ottomans of bent branches. The males sit around, red throat sack inflated, and when a female flies over, they bend their heads way, way back in a come-hither display.

On Seymour, as elsewhere, the animals and birds barely acknowledged us, except for a blue-footed booby who walked up to me—I was on the verge of flight myself as I got a look at its powerful bill—and pecked at my shoelace, more in curiosity than anything else.

On another day we went farther afield to Santiago, a geological Rubik's Cube surrounded by a vast lava field with waterside caves that are home to Galápagos penguins, the only wild species found north of the equator. Just across the channel is Bartolomeo Island, likewise a geological freak, its landmark a tilted, 100-foot-high rock in the shape of a pointed tombstone. (It was used as a backdrop for the movie *Master and Commander*.) Here, we snorkeled with sea lions—or rather they rocketed around us—and hovered over undulating schools of razor surgeonfish and burrito grunts. We then climbed 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.

It was a grand treat to come back to the lodge each evening, transitioning from the lava-paved, ruddy coasts to all that lush green, and relax around the pool, with its panoramic vistas. Up here, watching the sunset, drink in hand, you feel that you're on creation's first-class ark.