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Natural Selection

Pikaia Lodge is a highly evolved, non-cruise alternative to experiencing one of Earth's ultimate BUCKET-LIST DESTINATIONS

By Paul Rubio

A visit to the remote Galápagos Islands is a veritable rite of passage for world travelers. Located more than 500 nautical miles west of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean, this ecologically diverse archipelago functions as a living museum of natural history—a mind-boggling foreign landscape where plants and animals have evolved for centuries without human interference.

For the most part, even high-end travel to this remote area has typically entailed elements of roughing it: Pricy-yet-outdated expedition ships showcase Charles Darwin's fantasy islands with an understanding that luxury lies in the destination, not the five-star accommodations. But that's all changing thanks to the boutique Pikaia Lodge, a 14-unit design sensation situated between a pair of extinct volcanic

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THE WELL-APPOINTED PIKAIA LODGE FEATURES AMENITIES LIKE AN INFINITY-EDGE POOL WITH PANORAMIC OCEAN VISTAS (ABOVE), THE JAPANESE-STYLE SUMAQ SPA (UPPER RIGHT), AND ACCOMMODATIONS WITH FLOOR-TO-CEILING VIEWS OF SANTA CRUZ ISLAND (RIGHT). LOOK FORWARD TO EXCURSIONS TO BARTOLOMÉ ISLAND AND THE LANDMARK PINNACLE ROCK (BELOW).



oceanic blues below. The grounds are strewn with artistic nods to Darwin and science, such as sculptures of DNA double helixes and statues of Pikaia Gracilens, the oldest known ancestor to vertebrates, from which the lodge gains its name. Sustainability has been meticulously woven into Pikaia's aesthetic and framework, best exemplified by its natural lava stone floors and walls, rainwater-collecting rooftops, and overall carbon neutrality.

But Pikaia understands that you aren't coming to the Galápagos to simply hang out in a fabulous hotel—though we wouldn't judge should you decide to spend copious hours at the lounge-lined infinity pool or in your en suite Jacuzzi overlooking the cloud forest. Ultimately, you're here for the nature, and it's nature you'll get.

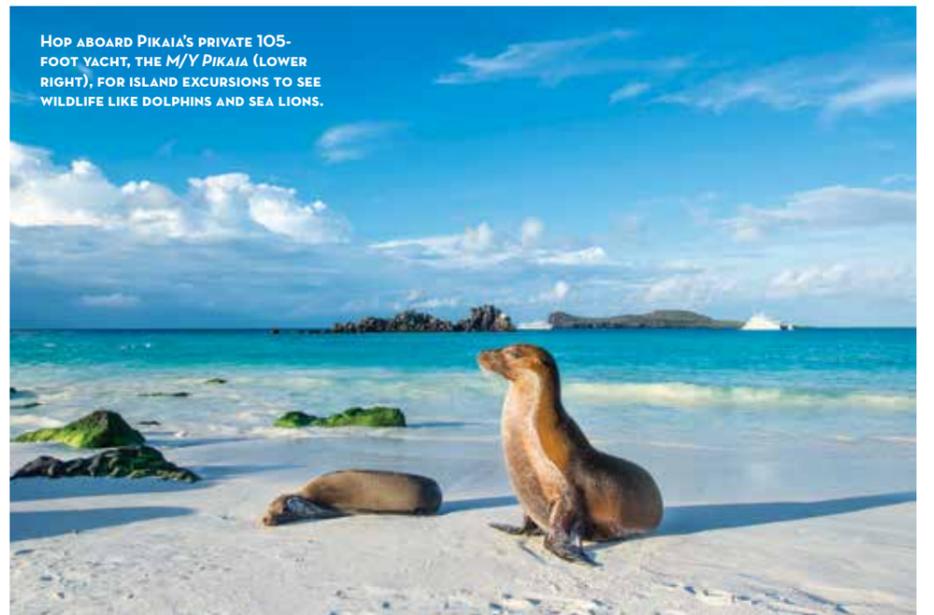
The experience at Pikaia plays out as multi-day, all-inclusive packages—available from as few as four days/three nights to as many as eight days/seven nights—where guests engage in land excursions on Santa Cruz Island, visit neighboring isles on one of the house yachts, and enjoy five-star excess back at the lodge. A typical day may include a sail to North Seymour Island for an extraordinary hike alongside the frigate birds and blue-footed boobies, followed by an early afternoon snorkel among octopuses, white-tipped reef sharks, fur seals, and countless schools of vibrantly colored tropical fish. Another may begin by exploring the craggy, lava-hewn coastline of Sullivan Bay on Santiago Island, then hopping in a zodiac



to search for and swim with penguins and sea lions, before climbing to the top of Bartolomé Island to take in the grandeur of Pinnacle Rock, the symbol of the Galápagos.

Excursions vary by week, as trips to specific islands within national parklands are strictly regulated and assigned with little advance notice for non-cruise ship operators. Regardless, a new adventure beckons every day, alternating between jaunts at sea and on land with a dedicated professional naturalist who remains with the group for the full package duration. At a minimum, expect to snap numerous photos of the many giant tortoises (aka Galápagos, from which the archipelago gains its name) inhabiting Santa Cruz's rolling hills, including the grounds around Pikaia. Look forward to downing a local beer in the town of Puerto Ayora and blowing up your social media with images of red-pouched frigate birds, amphibious marine iguanas, ubiquitous orange Sally Lightfoot crabs, and blue-footed boobies hamming it up for the camera.

Of course, you'd see the same on a Galápagos cruise, but your pre- and post-excursion experiences would definitely not be the same. In lieu of ship cabins and cramped common spaces at sea, a sumptuous home base lends to greater leisure pursuits, from decadent multicourse meals in Evolution Restaurant (of Relais & Châteaux standard, no less) to lengthy treatments in the Japanese-inspired Sumaq Spa. On land, guests don't endure a relentless 5:30 a.m. wake-up call nor the hectic pace of cruise ships' twice-daily



HOP ABOARD PIKAIA'S PRIVATE 105-FOOT YACHT, THE M/Y PIKAIA (LOWER RIGHT), FOR ISLAND EXCURSIONS TO SEE WILDLIFE LIKE DOLPHINS AND SEA LIONS.



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PIKAIA'S COMMON AREAS, SUCH AS THE GARDEN CORNER FIRE PIT (ABOVE) AND THE HOMO SAPIENS EXPLORERS LOUNGE (TOP), ARE PICTURESQUE REPRIEVES FROM FULL DAYS SPENT TAKING IN THE ISLANDS' NATURAL BEAUTY.

excursions. On the contrary, Pikaia offers a slower stride for absorbing the Galápagos' riches.

Pikaia's model works for some but not for others, especially those seeking to discover as much as possible of the archipelago's 18 main islands. Admittedly, Pikaia can only access islands that are within a reasonable distance from Santa Cruz, thereby excluding sights like the nesting colonies of waved albatross on Española Island and the extreme volcanic landscapes of Fernandina Island. That being said, Pikaia succeeds in its mission to avoid the ordinary and create a balance between active and leisurely pursuits. The pampering is best suited to those wanting ample time to reflect on Galápagos grandeur, not necessarily type As hoping to island hop at a rapid-fire pace. Overall, Pikaia opens up one of Earth's greatest destinations to a new generation of travelers seeking a combination of nature and luxury, with an emphasis toward the latter. (pikaialodge.com) ◀◀