



# N A T U R A L   S E L E C T I V I T Y

*Photography by JON WHITTLE*





A land iguana, one of 22 reptile species of the Galápagos, 20 of which are endemic

*Facing page, clockwise from top left: a blue-footed booby; the azure waters of one of the archipelago's bays; a baby seal seeks comfort in the rocks; the undulating texture of black lava on Santiago Island*

THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS' UNIQUE STORY HAS EVOLVED ONCE MORE, WITH A NEW DEVELOPMENT THAT BLENDS SUSTAINABLE SOPHISTICATED AMID THE UNPARALLELED ARRAY OF FLORA AND FAUNA. BY LAURIE KAHLE

**E**arly one clear September morning, as our Zodiac boat idles up to the coast of North Seymour Island, we are the only members of our species in sight. On the footpath past the black lava shore, we are stopped in our tracks by a brawny land iguana sunning himself in the middle of the trail. He doesn't flinch as we angle around him with our cameras centimetres from his head, zooming in on his pebbly, tawny-coloured skin and placid face. We proceed to a coppice filled with frigatebirds, the males ballooning their bright red gular sacs to entice females circling above. Just steps off the path, blue-footed boobies incubate their eggs in nests. "You can see many animals around the world, but the uniqueness of Galápagos is the tameness of the animals and the close encounters you can have with them," says our guide Paulina Aguirre, a native Ecuadorian who grew up visiting her grandmother in the Galápagos. "They see us as part of the natural world, which we are." →

**H**erbert Frei, president of Pikaia Lodge, a new hotel on the centrally located island of Santa Cruz, attributes the placidity of the wildlife to evolution, which the self-described “frustrated scientist” chose as a fitting theme for the first lodge to be built here in more than a decade. Dating to the Cambrian period 530 million years ago, the extinct pikaia was a fishlike creature and an early chordate that is regarded as a common ancestor to all vertebrates, including humans. “The magic of the Galápagos is that the islands were isolated for so many millions of years that the animals evolved with no predator, so they didn’t develop aggressive and defensive behaviours toward human beings,” he explains. “There are very few places in the world where you can get very close to the animals, and it is the same underwater here.”

Frei, an expert diver, should know. Before breaking ground on Pikaia Lodge, he operated diving cruises on two luxe live-aboard yachts, *Galápagos Aggressor I* and *II*, for more than 20 years. Eventually, government regulations made operating the boats more restrictive and a harder sell. Frei also realised that many visitors avoid the archipelago because the traditional cruises and charter boats raise concerns about seasickness, comfort and privacy. In 2005, a ten-year ban on hotel development expired, opening the door for new construction. Frei’s vision was to build an eco-friendly lodge catering to the most discerning travellers, with a serene spa and indulgent cuisine. The project took seven years to complete, five of which were spent conducting environmental impact studies, securing the building permit and finalising the design.

Pikaia Lodge offers three-, four- and seven-night itineraries that blend the best of both worlds – land and sea. One of Frei’s dive yachts, the renamed *Pikaia I*, is now dedicated to day trips. Because the boat was built for live-aboard cruising, it is stable, comfortable and nicely equipped with a galley where meals are served, a lounge area, sundecks and even a hot tub. Day sails include visits to wildlife sanctuaries and beaches, as well as snorkelling in the crystal clear waters of the world’s second largest marine reserve. At-sea days adhere to a tight schedule, as the national park dictates arrival and departure times for boats to prevent overcrowding in any one place. Land explorations are a bit more laid back with visits to a giant tortoise sanctuary and the Charles Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz’s main town.

The itineraries focus on the endemic species for which the area is renowned – tortoises, penguins and sea lions as well as

marine iguanas and other lizards and birds, including Darwin’s finches. “The Galápagos is not a place to come hang out at a hotel and do nothing,” says Frei. “We have exploration packages so guests can have a complete Galápagos experience regardless of their length of stay. It’s a very active holiday for all age groups.”

With 14 rooms and suites, Pikaia Lodge sits on top of an extinct volcano crater providing breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains and Pacific Ocean with virtually no other signs of human development. The spacious, contemporary rooms are appointed with natural wood and stone, and walls of glass capitalise on the panoramic vistas. “In the Galápagos, there is not a typical architecture, so we decided to go for something very modern, minimalistic and comfortable,” says Frei.

He is particularly proud of the hotel’s LEED-certified design, which uses state-of-the-art technologies that make it among the world’s most advanced. While a number of hotels may claim they are environmentally sensitive, few really live up to sustainable standards, explains General Manager Andrew Balfour over dinner in the hotel’s Evolution restaurant, where Executive Chef Norman Brandt’s cuisine reflects a fusion of Peruvian and Ecuadorian influences with locally sourced organic meats and fresh-caught seafood.

Fresh water is a particularly precious commodity in the islands, so the hotel uses its roof to gather rainwater. Separate tanks hold the collected rainwater, recycled water from treatment that is used for toilets and landscaping, and water from

a desalination plant that is safe for drinking and cooking.

Beams of recycled steel frame the structures of the buildings, which are designed to maximise energy efficiency. Floor plans are configured to take advantage of cross ventilation from the abundant breezes, reducing the need for air conditioning. A wind turbine and 124 solar panels provide nearly half of the electricity. “All the systems that require a lot of energy are programmed to work between 10 and 3 o’clock when we have the most sunlight, so the solar panels compensate for energy consumption,” says Balfour. Another goal is to be carbon neutral, so the lodge planted around 6,000 endemic trees and plants to help compensate for its carbon footprint.

“The idea is to show the world that with technology and goodwill, you can have a luxury operation – which is normally resource intensive – and do it in a sustainable way,” says Frei. “Another key point of Pikaia Lodge is social responsibility. We have provided jobs for the local people, and we use local transport and food sources as much as we can.” →

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Clockwise from above: the red gular sac is the distinguishing feature of the frigatebird; marine iguanas gather beneath a Galápagos prickly pear cactus; a local riding through the verdant vegetation; a deserted beach; examining the cacti that somehow manage to grow amid the desolation of the islands' lava fields





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Left: a work of art depicting the evolution of man adorns the wall of the lodge's restaurant; right: Pinnacle Rock, the outstanding geological feature of Bartolomé; a Sally Lightfoot crab

Facing page: the modernist structure of Pikaia Lodge, perched atop the tree-covered slopes of a dormant volcano; a cliff-top plateau



Frei commissioned Ecuadorian artist Larissa Marangoni to produce evolutionary-themed artworks, including an aluminium sculpture of a DNA double helix that climbs to the ceiling at the centre of the restaurant. Another piece on the wall depicts the evolution of man, and an aluminium “tree of evolution” in the lobby traces the origins of vertebrates from the prehistoric Pikaia to Homo sapiens, represented by a single golden leaf. In addition, the lodge’s art collection includes hyper-realistic paintings of lush rainforest scenes by Ecuadorian artist Servio Zapata as well as fossils harvested from Morocco’s Atlas Mountains and hand-carved by artisans there.

These treasures were almost lost – along with furniture, building materials and other supplies – when the cargo ship carrying them from the mainland ran aground and partially sunk, a misfortune that delayed the lodge’s opening. The company dispatched divers to rescue what they could, including the fossils. “It was quite ironic,” says Balfour. “All the fossils that originally came from the bottom of the ocean 600 million years ago made their way back into it.”

Frei’s artistic choices reflect his desire to bring a scientific aspect to the project, to make it more than just a hotel with excursions. “There is a deeper purpose that is reflected in its art and decoration,” he explains. “We would like our guests to dedicate a few thoughts to evolution and gain a deeper understanding of the wonders of nature.”

Charles Darwin naturally comes to mind as we traverse the vast black lava field at Sullivan Bay on the southeastern coast of

Santiago Island. Pahoehoe lava forms intertwining ropey coils and undulating waves that look like hardened flowing cake batter, creating a desolate moonscape that contrasts sharply with a neighbouring white sand beach, aquamarine waters, and a backdrop of Bartolomé Island’s landmark Pinnacle Rock jutting from the sea like the tip of a spear.

When the young Darwin visited Santiago in 1835, he discovered pieces of a circa-1684 marmalade jar embedded in another flow. While the barren landscape may seem eternally preserved in its textural basalt coating, Darwin recognised hints that the island’s fauna had adapted to survive in particular environments. During his five brief weeks exploring the Galápagos, Darwin detailed slight variations in finches from the different isles. The giant tortoises also exhibited differences depending on which land mass they inhabited. These observations provided the seeds for his theory of evolution published in 1859’s *On the Origin of Species*. “The natural history of this archipelago is very remarkable,” Darwin wrote in his journal. “It seems to be a little world within itself.”

Indeed, we feel as if we have experienced another world as we cruise back from Bartolomé to Santa Cruz for dinner at the lodge. A flock of frigatebirds with their long scissortails trailing behind them escorts us, gliding and weaving on the air currents above, some landing on the boat to rest along the way. As they perform their mesmerising mid-air ballet, the tangerine sun gets pulled lower into the Pacific, and dusk settles on the Enchanted Islands. [pikaialodgegalapagos.com](http://pikaialodgegalapagos.com) ●