



GALAPAGOS

CREATURE COMFORTS

With long stretches spent on land and short hops at sea, Sasha Slater discovers even the worst sailors can enjoy all that the Galápagos has to offer – and in style

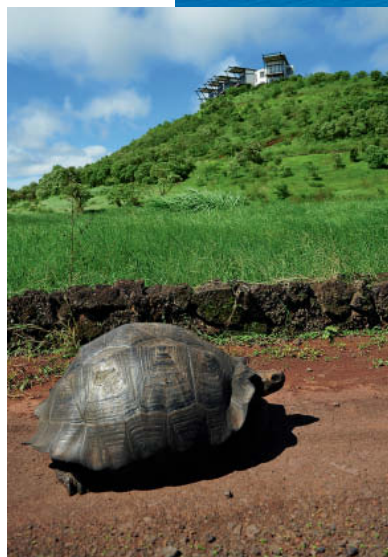
They say the best way to see the Galápagos is by boat. It certainly worked for Charles Darwin, whose HMS Beagle delivered him to the volcanic archipelago off the coast of Ecuador in 1835 in good enough shape to admire all the finches and giant tortoises he could find. It's also how Capt Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe) and his friend Dr Stephen Maturin (Paul Bettany) explored the islands in *Master and Commander*. My expectations before we went were shaped not by Sir David Attenborough's masterly series on the flora and fauna of the islands, but by images of Bettany in a scrubby doctor's wig carrying baskets of specimens across barren lava flows towards HMS Surprise.

But while my husband, George, and 12-year-old daughter, Olga, are perfect in almost all other respects, they are appalling sailors. Embarking on a pedalo in the Med is a risk; a cross-channel ferry wipes them out for a day. I wouldn't put it past them to be sick on a punt. Since the only way I'd ever heard you could visit the islands was on 10-day-minimum cruises with brief touchdowns on land juxtaposed with long stretches aboard ship, I'd always written the adventure off as impossible for us.

Admittedly, bearing in mind just exactly how much water there is and how little land, boats are unavoidable. But with long stretches ashore in between short bursts afloat, it is now possible to enjoy the Galápagos even if your sea legs are nonexistent – and in style.

Pikaia Lodge is an eco-hotel built high on a hill on Santa Cruz island, one of the biggest, and certainly the most populated, of all the 18 main islands. Not that you'd know it. Scanning the horizon from the floor-to-ceiling windows of the amazing Bond villain rooms – all black lava stone

HIGH AND MIGHTY
From top: Pikaia Lodge on Santa Cruz island; the hotel's infinity pool; a giant Galápagos tortoise





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ON THE LOOKOUT
From top: a pool suite at Pikaia Lodge; basking sea lions; blue-footed boobies



'On land, it can be quite a struggle to stop sea lions bagging all the sun loungers'

floors and white walls – there isn't another soul to be seen, nor another building. In the far distance, beyond a huge expanse of prehistoric-looking forest, there's a sea that gleams bright blue where the sun hits it. In the foreground is a red dirt road with a rather handsome gelding keeping the vegetation down and some large boulders, the size of an Ikea ottoman, that have rolled down the hill after some volcanic explosion.

Except. Wait. One of them's moving... The lump of ancient stone turns out to be a giant Galápagos tortoise. One of many that plod solemnly around the fields, forests and roads of Santa Cruz.

Giant tortoises are amazing, and Santa Cruz being wet with highlands, the native tortoises are gigantic – up to 400kg of domed shell and sturdy leg. Drier islands have smaller beasts with shells that have a curve to them, something more like a Western saddle. But come too close to any of them by accident and they'll hiss in alarm and tuck their reptilian heads inside their shells, looking back at you balefully with their blank black eyes.

The rest of the islands' animal popu-

lation is, to me, infinitely more charming, watchable and almost comically easy to get to know. And it's the animal encounters that are, of course, the true magic of the Galápagos. It's a completely different feeling from a game drive in, say, Africa, where you're weirdly invisible in your jeep, but if you fell off the back, you'd be trampled by a hippo or scooped by lions in a heartbeat.

Here, you are on foot, and the animals know exactly what you are and they couldn't care less. No natural predators on land (there are plenty in the sea) mean the iguanas, owls, frigatebirds and penguins only reluctantly sidle out of the way to make room for you. You are not allowed to get within six feet of any Galápagos animal, but it's almost impossible to avoid because they are everywhere: ruffling their feathers, settling on rocks, clucking crossly to each other wherever you try to put your feet.

Blue-footed boobies are dopey and unsuspecting on land, apparently defenceless and, yes, absurd, with turquoise feet and grumpy pale-yellow eyes set rather close together. They take on a completely different identity when you watch them fish, transforming into tiny Tom Daleys divebombing into the sea at 50kmph to bob up seconds later and gulping down anchovies.

The sea lions are the stars of the show for me. I am after all a Disney-reared anthropomorphic mammal lover. But still. Nursing mother sea lions feed their cubs so close to the path that you can actually hear the infants suckle. Slip into the sea for a snorkel and the chances are a teenage sea lion will dart out of the shallows to play with you. And once you're back on land, it can be quite a struggle to stop basking sea lions bagging all the sun loungers or blocking the way to a convenient jetty.

The fish stallholders of Puerto Ayora, the main town of Santa Cruz, use sea lions (and pelicans) as mobile waste disposal units, lobbing unwanted scraps to them as they clean octopus and gut grouper. You can tell always where sea lions are even if you can't see them because of the strong smell of nam pla (Thai fish sauce) that accompanies them wherever they go.

So how much of this natural wonderland can you see without getting stuck on a boat? Quite a lot as it turns out. Pikaia Lodge arranges tours with naturalist guides certified by the Galápagos National Park Directorate (GNPD). At Rancho Primicias, for example, there is a tortoise sanctuary



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FRESH APPEAL

Clockwise from right: an octopus dish served at the eco-hotel; snorkelling; a marine iguana makes tracks; one of Pikaia Lodge's private yachts

where the giant beasts lumber around, sinking up to their noses in scummy ponds.

You can admire ancient volcanic craters and crawl through lava tubes hundreds of metres long and stroll through a forest of what looks like trees, but are actually a soaring flora of giant dandelions through which flit Darwin's finches.

You can also visit the Charles Darwin Research Station at Puerto Ayora, which explains naturalists' efforts to preserve and restore a unique collection of habitats that centuries of whalers and the odd prison colony – not to mention the dogs, cats, goats and rats they introduced – did nothing to help.

You can even unwind on some astonishingly beautiful white-sand beaches. I'd vaguely assumed, thanks to Paul Bettany and Sir David Attenborough, that this was an arid and hostile part of the world. A fly-and-flop fan, however, would find what's on offer here as beguiling as anything the Seychelles can boast – with a side order of marine iguanas and lagoons with crab-eating flamingos a short stroll away.

That said, there are excursions that do require a boat. And for that, Pikaia Lodge is well equipped with a former diving vessel, Albatros, on which you get a large cooked breakfast and a cabin to lie down in the cool and dark if watching the piratical frigatebirds following the boat from one of the sun decks – or indeed from the top deck's hot tub – makes you feel too green about the gills. The Albatros took us to South Plaza island to admire land iguanas (ochre, they eat prickly pear cactus)



'Despite our party having seen a shark two bays away, our snorkel was oddly relaxing rather than terrifying'



and marine ones (black, they eat seaweed) and, to our guide Andreas' delight, a hybrid of the two which is, he said, incredibly rare. I don't think we got to the bottom of whether it ate both seaweed and cactus, or something else entirely.

We also visited Santa Fe island for turtle, reef shark and eagle ray action and a snorkel, which oddly, despite our party having seen a large shark two bays away, was relaxing and exciting rather than terrifying. North Seymour Island is where the Pacific rollers hit hardest, and where frigatebirds and boobies nestle amid incense trees that smell just like a Catholic church. Snorkelling here involved sightings of parrotfish and regal blue tang (Dory from *Finding Nemo*), and later on at a lagoon at Bachas we hunted around for turtles and small reef sharks.

Apparently, all of this is more or less what you would expect on a cruise around the Galápagos. Then again, if you were based on a boat, you wouldn't have experienced Pikaia Lodge's astonishingly delicious octopus, organic beef with yucca chips, and ceviche with saffron risotto, followed by lemon crème brûlée. Nor would you have its lavish spa and expansive and underpopulated infinity pool, where the only other regular customer was a short-eared owl. And while you were putting yourself to bed, would the floor be blissfully solid underfoot? As trade-offs go, it was definitely worth it for us. ●

ESSENTIALS

Miraviva (0117 230 0170, miravivatravel.com) offers six nights' at Pikaia Lodge, including full board and all excursions, and one night at Mama Cuchara in Quito on arrival in Ecuador, from £9,350 per person, based on two people sharing. The rate includes international and domestic flights, national park fees, transit fees and private transfers.