

# Hotels vs. Cruise Ships on the Galapagos Islands

Since the onset of tourism in Ecuador's Galápagos Islands in the 1970's, small cruise ships have reigned as the classic mode for touring the unique archipelago. Nowadays, however, new and sophisticated hotels are making their debut as a worthy addition to the cruise experience. Galápagos travelers can now enjoy a land-based stay or a combination of cruise and hotel for the best of both worlds.



2013 will mark the opening of the newest addition to premier eco-luxury lodges on the island of Santa Cruz – Pikaia Lodge. A small and secluded property nestled in a giant tortoise reserve and near the island's best beaches, Pikaia is poised to attract those seeking an ultimate land-based experience. Hotels of every category will open this year in response to the growing popularity of land-based Galápagos exploration.

This trend raises the question of which experience – cruise ship or land-based – to choose. Both options have their pros and cons, and in the end it comes down to each traveler's style, preferences and needs. Here are some arguments for combining both options for a well-rounded Galápagos adventure:

## The Galápagos cruise ship experience

### Pros

The big picture. A cruise is the best way to get a big-picture panorama of the archipelago. Cruises have unique access to remote visitor sites on uninhabited islands with special wildlife viewing opportunities, such as Fernandina in the far west.

Time-efficient. Cruises are best for time budgeting. Ships will be navigating at night, meaning fewer daylight hours are spent in transit.

Convenient. As with cruising in general, the planning work is done. The itinerary is set. Meals are taken care of. Travelers only have to unpack and pack the main suitcase once. Added bonus: constant service. Most cruises have a cruise director and 24/7 service staff on board.

### Cons

Life at sea. Although larger ships and premier catamarans have come a long way in stabilization, a boat navigating the open sea is still a boat. It will rock. This is an important factor for anyone who is sensitive to motion sickness.

Unlikely internet. A few upscale vessels, such as La Pinta and Explorer II, offer internet at additional cost, but most do not. For those who need to be reachable or who get uncomfortable if they aren't, this could become a source of stress.



Confinement. Even on the most luxurious cruise options with wide cabins and plenty of deck space, inexperienced cruise passengers are subject to “cabin fever,” especially for longer cruises of 8 days or more. Restless kids faced with ample downtime on board between site visits are also prone to cabin fever.

## **The Hotel-based Galápagos Experience**

### **Pros**

Flexibility of dates and schedule. Cruises have fixed departure dates that may not fit within your specific vacation window. Hotels, on the other hand, are more accommodating to rigid date ranges. Also, hotel excursions aren't as tied to the strict visitor site schedules as cruise ships, so itineraries are less regimented.

Inland activities. Most cruise itineraries are limited to coastal visitor sites, which can exclude inland highlights like highlands of Santa Cruz, which is where the giant tortoises are found in the wild. Staying on land provides more activity options, such as scuba, kayak, bicycle riding, hiking a volcano rim, shopping, or just relaxing and taking a leisurely walk.

More chances to meet local people. Unlike the fixed schedules of a cruise, a hotel-based stay on Santa Cruz Island gives you the option of spending more time on shore and gaining a better idea of the human side of the Galápagos.



Day excursions by yacht. Land-based travelers will get a sample of “life at sea” and reach nearby visitor sites via small yacht (16–20 passengers), with opportunities for wildlife viewing, snorkeling, nature walks, and even scuba diving.

### **Cons**

More transit time. Land-based travelers spend more daylight hours in transit, either by land vehicle or yacht. Plus, multiple hotels could mean extra check-in, check-out, and bag packing.

Less ground covered. Land-based travelers will probably be reaching nearby visitor sites via yacht, which means a choppier ride than cruise ships. Day trips by yacht simply can’t reach the farthest-flung uninhabited visitor sites and their wildlife viewing opportunities.

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