

# Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report<sup>®</sup>

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TRAVELING THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF TRULY ENCHANTING PLACES



FROM THE GALÁPAGOS TO THE ANDEAN CLOUD FOREST

## Dramatic New Ecuador Eco-lodges

Periodically, I feel a need to retreat from civilization. The remote becomes irresistible, and I long for the tranquility of unspoiled nature. Two eco-lodges recently gave me the perfect excuse to decamp to Ecuador, a small country with an extraordinarily rich diversity of natural wonders that includes the tropical Amazonian jungle, the temperate cloud forests of the Andean highlands and, of course, the Galápagos archipelago.

Despite their fame, most of the islands of the Galápagos remain unspoiled and uninhabited. It is true that there is ongoing controversy about the environmental impact of increasing visitor numbers, as well as the growth of Ecuadorian populations on the islands of San Cristóbal and Santa Cruz, but in many places in the

Galápagos you still have the uncanny feeling that you are standing at the edge of the world.

This most recent visit did nothing to dissuade me from the belief that the superlatives heaped upon the archipelago are well-deserved. The situation of these volcanic islands on the equator and at the confluence of three major ocean currents allows an astonishing ecosystem to thrive, one that includes creatures as varied as sea lions, giant tortoises, marine iguanas and the only penguin species found in the tropics. Landscapes veer dramatically from moss-draped forest to cactus-speckled desert, often on the same small island. And because humans discovered the archipelago only about 500 years ago, and most of it is still uninhabited, much of the wildlife has little or no fear


### COVER PHOTOGRAPH

Pikaia Lodge on Santa Cruz Island in the Galápagos

### THIS MONTH


## Back to Nature

After an all-too-brief stay on Santa Cruz Island in the magical Galápagos archipelago, we returned to the mainland of Ecuador and the pristine jungle within easy reach of Quito. ....1-7

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## Boston Revisited

A delightful week yielded some wonderful restaurant discoveries and included a visit to the new Harvard Art Museums. ....8-11

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of people. In the Galápagos, successful nature photography does not require a telephoto lens.

We took a nonstop two-and-a-half-hour flight from Quito to Baltra. At the end of the covered walkway leading to the terminal, a man with a giant grin and a “Pikaia Lodge” sign ushered us into the VIP waiting room, where we had tea and cookies while he took care of entry formalities and collected our checked baggage. Within about 10 minutes, a vehicle whisked us from the airport, driving past green-barked palo verde trees rising from the rugged plains of lava rock and festooned with ribbonlike leaves. We crossed the channel between

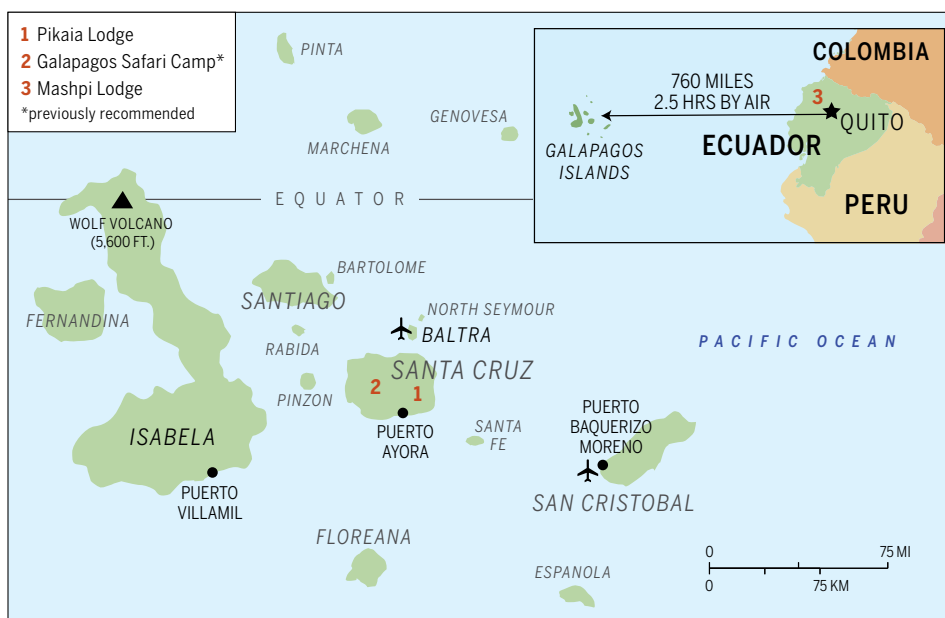
the Baltra and Santa Cruz islands by boat and continued on to the new 14-room **Pikaia Lodge**. The entire transfer took less than an hour.

Staying at a lodge in the Galápagos may seem like an odd choice; most people explore the archipelago aboard a small cruise ship, yacht or catamaran. However, a terrestrial base has significant advantages: The accommodations are likely to be more spacious; there is no risk of seasickness unless you opt for a boat trip; and those traveling with younger children may find the experience a good deal more convenient and relaxing when staying on dry land. A lodge also better suits those with limited time, as cruise itineraries are generally of one or two

weeks’ duration. In contrast, we stayed at Pikaia just three nights, spending what was essentially a long weekend in the Galápagos. The two full days of exploration allowed us to see most of the major animal species — penguins and manta rays excepted, though guests who stayed longer (four- and seven-night packages are also available) made good on these omissions.

Seeing giant tortoises lumbering through the grass and wallowing in mud pools at Rancho El Chato was the highlight of our first day exploring the island of Santa Cruz. We also peered over the edge of two massive sinkholes, each surrounded by the kind of misty scalesia forest that is endemic to the Galápagos, and walked through an immense lava tube. Some sections were smooth enough to resemble a large subway tunnel. Near the main town, Puerto Ayora, we strolled through Seussian stands of tree-shaped prickly pear cacti to the white sand beach fronting Tortuga Bay. There, algae-grazing marine iguanas relaxed in the sun beside a mangrove, and the heads of green sea turtles poked above the surf.

Our second day aboard the resort’s well-appointed yacht, the *Pikaia I*, proved even more memorable. Because we traveled in the cooler low season (June to November), we shared the ship with just one other family, though it has a capacity of 16. After a full, cooked-to-order breakfast in the lounge, we disembarked with our guide on North Seymour Island. Red-orange Sally Lightfoot crabs skittered





away across the black lava boulders, and male blue-footed boobies danced, lifting one periwinkle foot after the other, their calls sounding like someone attempting to play the flute for the first time. Many of the boobies had fluffy-feathered hatchlings. Frigate birds watched them carefully, often trying to snatch the fish a parent booby was feeding to its young, but many of the male frigates simply sat in the branches of bushes, their huge, bright red neck pouches inflated to attract a mate.

We snorkeled nearby, spotting myriad tropical fish as well as rays and whitetip reef sharks. Back on board, we went for a dip in the hot tub at the bow before we showered in our private cabin and changed into fresh clothes for a buffet lunch. Afterward, we landed on the island of Mosquera, where sea lions were napping and nursing on a sweep of white sand.

The accommodations at Pikaia Lodge are surprisingly impressive. Perched on a hill amid 75 acres that have been replanted with some 9,000 native trees, the strikingly contemporary hotel has 12 suites with either patios or balconies, plus two larger suites, one of which has a private plunge pool. We opted for a Balcony Room, one floor up from the entry-level Terrace Rooms. In exchange for a negligible price increase, we received higher ceilings and unobstructed views toward the distant coast through floor-to-ceiling windows. Inside, dark bamboo floors contrasted with white walls. A king-size bed was draped with a red coverlet, and in a separate triangular room, a white

leather sofa faced a flat-screen television. Inexplicably, this room lacked a table, which proved occasionally frustrating. The travertine bath contained an ample storage area, a lengthy counter with dual vanities, a spacious walk-in shower and a deep tub beneath a picture window.

Public spaces proved even more striking. In the airy lobby-lounge, a slab of black marble formed the front desk, and floor-to-ceiling windows faced a wide infinity pool that slowly changed color when illuminated at night. A sculpture of a DNA double helix rose like an exclamation point in the center of the adjacent restaurant, and other evolution-themed sculptures stood throughout the hotel. Many were quite beautiful and imaginative, such as a sculpture consisting of a convex mirror surrounded by metal finch heads and branches that was called "Darwin's Insight."

The restaurant (named, of course, *Evolution*) served satisfying if not world-class cuisine. A dish of local cod, for example, came with a delicate lemon cream sauce but also ponderous rolls of yucca and plantain encased in fried egg roll wrappers. The rare tuna teriyaki with al dente vegetables was flawless at lunch one day, but at the final barbecue dinner, the tuna was overcooked. The octopus, chicken, shrimp and local organic beef, however, were all well prepared. Desserts were consistently excellent: I especially liked the creamy panna cotta with fresh berries, meringue and cake infused with local myrtle. After dinner one night, we

## Galápagos Cruises

**L**indblad Expeditions has organized Galápagos cruises for half a century and now partners with National Geographic. Guests can choose between the 96-passenger **National Geographic Endeavour** and **Endeavour II** or the 48-passenger **National Geographic Islander**. Each sails with naturalist guides as well as an undersea specialist. The *Endeavour II* has a glass-bottom Zodiac. *Category 1 Accommodation for 10-day trip, from \$13,180 for two.*

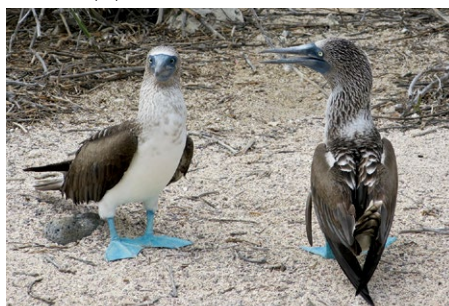
Although Silversea's **Silver Galapagos** holds up to 100 people, it manages to also fit up to 13 naturalists and professors to serve as guides and lecturers. Many accommodations have balconies. Public spaces include two restaurants. *Explorer Suite for seven-day cruise, from \$14,670 for two.*

I enjoyed a week with UnCruise in Hawaii earlier this year, and I have no doubt that the company's new Galápagos itineraries are equally compelling. Its **La Pinta** holds 48 passengers. UnCruise itineraries have an expeditionary feel, but are scarcely uncomfortable. *Captain Cabin for eight-day trip, from \$16,590 for two.*

Like the *Silver Galapagos*, the 48-passenger **Celebrity Xperience** has space for outdoor dining, but like the *La Pinta*, it has a more expeditionary atmosphere. Certain departures are dedicated to families. *Stateroom for eight-day cruise, from \$11,998 for two.*

The most exciting debut in the Galápagos this year was Ecoventura's 20-passenger luxury yacht, **MV Origin**. At 140 square feet, its cabins are smaller than the entry-level suites of the *Silver Galapagos*, but public spaces include a stylish lounge, a barbecue restaurant, an upper deck with day beds and an aft deck with a Jacuzzi. *Stateroom for seven-day cruise, from \$13,500 for two.*

Giant Galápagos tortoise, blue-footed boobies, yellow iguana, and sea lion pup / PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER

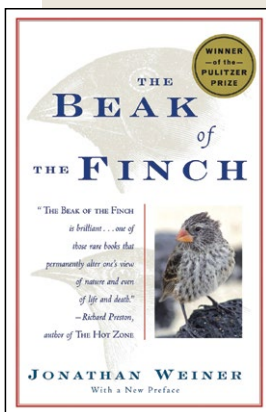




## Favorite Reading

During his voyage, Charles Darwin famously failed to realize the significance of the different beaks of the various Galápagos finches. He visited the archipelago for five weeks in 1835, but it was not until he got back to London that it occurred to him that the finches might originally have been the same species, and that their beaks had evolved in response to the different foods available on the widely separated islands. Darwin's account of his time in the Galápagos Islands in *The Voyage of the Beagle* is

consequently rather matter-of-fact. He certainly had no idea that the small, drab birds he was collecting were going to revolutionize the science of biology. Jonathan Weiner, on the other hand, enjoyed the benefit of hindsight when he came to write *The Beak of the Finch*, for which he won a



Pulitzer Prize in 1995. His book describes the research of two Princeton scientists, Peter and Rosemary Grant, who for two decades spent a portion of each year studying the finches on a precipitous rock called Daphne Major. Weiner's story is a thrilling piece of science writing. The Grants observed that the harsh conditions in the Galápagos resulted in frequent catastrophic collapses in the finch populations, which would then be rapidly rebuilt by the few remaining individuals. As a result, evolutionary changes made possible by inherited characteristics were dramatically accelerated and could be observed in a matter of months or years, rather than over millennia. In 2014, the Grants published their own account of their research in *40 Years of Evolution: Darwin's Finches on Daphne Major Island*.



headed to the Homo Sapiens Explorers Lounge in order to watch David Attenborough's "Galapagos 3D" documentary. Alas, technical difficulties prevented us from seeing the program on the immense screen, but we enjoyed it in our own living room instead.

Mrs. Harper also enjoyed a massage in the Sumaq Spa, which has a couple's treatment room, a Jacuzzi with a view and a perfunctory fitness center (no steam room or sauna). Her therapist looked petite but had hands of iron, and she gave a massage that was therapeutic as well as relaxing. However, no water or tea was offered afterward, and the lockers in the changing room lacked slippers.

In general, we had a magnificent time at Pikaia Lodge, but certain details such as the overcooked tuna and the spa oversights were problematic. These were likely not the fault of the staff, who were cheerful and eager to please, but rather the absent management. We met the general manager when we arrived at the property, but for the remaining three days, we never saw him again. With better staff training and

more attention to detail, Pikaia could be an extraordinary property.

Back on the mainland, the 22-room **Mashpi Lodge** provided a sharp contrast. General Manager Marc Bery always seemed to be about, checking in with guests and making the rounds in the dining room during meals. Mashpi makes an excellent companion property to Pikaia, having a similarly contemporary style but an utterly different setting in a cloud forest about three and a half hours northwest of Quito.

After the last of Quito's suburbs had disappeared, we traveled through a landscape of soft mountains covered with dense forests that was interrupted only by an occasional small town. En route, we stopped at the Tulipe Archaeological Site, a series of now-empty sacred pools built by the enigmatic Yumbo people. In the surrounding region stand numerous unexcavated pyramids, still partially concealed by the jungle.

The last 50 minutes of the drive to Mashpi Lodge are along a bumpy gravel-and-dirt road, but once you arrive, there is no need to leave the property. A private 3,212-acre enclave is surrounded by a public reserve of 42,000 acres. These protect a vast swath of pristine cloud forest, part of the larger Chocó region, which ranks among the world's biodiversity hot spots. According to our guide, there are around 95 endemic species of birds, reptiles and amphibians at Mashpi, to say nothing of the hundreds of nonendemic creatures. The reserve started as a logging concession, but because few mature hardwoods were easily acces-

## Pikaia Lodge 94

**LIKE** The extraordinary excursions; the spacious accommodations; the panoramic views; the always-friendly staff. **DISLIKE** The spotty management presence; the occasional overlooked detail; the extremely high price. **GOOD TO KNOW** I regretted not booking the four-night package, which includes two excursions on the lodge's yacht. *Three nights in a Balcony Room, \$8,910 for two; four nights, \$11,880 (all meals and excursions included).* Santa Cruz Island, Galápagos Islands. Tel. (593) 4-371-1670. [pikaialodge.com](http://pikaialodge.com)

## Mashpi Lodge 95

**LIKE** The pristine environment; our good-humored and knowledgeable guide; the superlative birding; the delicious food; the stylish contemporary design. **DISLIKE** The lack of a second armchair in our room; the unreliable Wi-Fi. **GOOD TO KNOW** Yaku Suites have separate tubs; no accommodations have televisions. *Wayra King Room, \$1,460; Yaku Suite, \$1,750.* Mashpi Private Reserve, Andean Rainforest. Tel. (593) 2-400-4100. [mashpilodge.com](http://mashpilodge.com)



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sible, the land has remained essentially untouched.

After a hospitable check-in, we settled into our Wayra King Room. The uncluttered décor focused our attention on the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lush forest. Along a white wall, a teak headboard accented the king-size bed, and a row of vertical teak fins partially shielded a side window, assuring privacy. A teak lattice formed a small chest of drawers and supported one side of a granite writing desk. The slate-tile floor continued into the bath, which contained a single vanity (surrounded by unpolished white-and-black granite) and a spacious walk-in shower. The room wasn't large at 366 square feet, but we didn't feel cramped, and I appreciated the intelligent design.

In the spectacular restaurant and bar, dramatic two-story windows faced the jungle. Torpedo-shaped floor lamps stood among the midcentury modern-style tables and chairs. To one side, a long L-shaped buffet provided a lavish breakfast selection as well as a surprisingly refined set of options at lunch, which featured dishes such as ceviche, steak with chimichurri, and Peruvian golden berry Bavarian cream. Three-course dinners proved equally appetizing: I relished my octopus with mushrooms and white truffle oil, perfectly cooked lamb chops with cilantro and local root vegetables, and passion fruit flan. The bar, in addition to serving cocktails often made with local Ecuadorian spirits, offered a wide range of wines by the glass.

Mashpi also has a full-service spa as well as a large hot tub with jungle views,

which is available to anyone who wishes to reserve it (use of the tub is always private). There is no swimming pool, but I didn't miss one, as we were too busy going on the well-run excursions.

After donning hefty rubber boots provided by the resort, we set off on our first hike down to the Copal waterfall, named for a tall hardwood with menthol-scented sap. Along the way, our guide pointed out brown dwarf iguanas, red lady's slipper flowers and a rare black umbrellabird, resting on a branch not 50 feet away. Ferns, mosses and epiphytes flanked the silvery ribbon of a waterfall, which emptied into a shallow pool. On another hike, we descended to the equally beautiful Cucharillo waterfall, following its stream through a narrow valley that seemed straight out of the Jurassic. Our goal was Mashpi's new aerial tram, an open-air cable car extending two kilometers through the jungle canopy and

across deep, verdant gorges. Gliding in near silence above the forest, spotting birds and butterflies fluttering across the treetops, was an experience I won't soon forget.

On our last morning, our superlative guide, Oscar, convinced me to meet at 6:30 a.m. in order to try the resort's unique "Sky Bike," a pedal-driven cable car for two that passes through a different section of the jungle canopy. Oscar gamely pedaled me along the cable so that I could observe the awakening forest. Before the sun peeked above a ridge, the jungle remained shrouded in mist, giving it a mysterious, almost ominous character. By the time we had finished, the sky had become a radiant blue. From the platform of an observation tower next to the bike, I could see the tops of nearby hills poking through the clouds below, like jungle islands in the sky. The view could scarcely have been more beautiful. **HR**



Crimson-rumped toucanet / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

watching hummingbirds at a designated feeding area (20 minutes from the lodge by car). We observed green thorntails, empress brilliants, with feathers resembling shiny reptilian scales, and violet-tailed sylphs, with showy tail feathers of cobalt and bright purple. A striking crimson-rumped toucanet (mostly acid green and periwinkle blue, in fact) also paid us a visit. I can think of only a few other places in the world where I've seen so many spectacular birds at such close range.

## Birding in the Cloud Forest

Even if you have no intention of keeping a "life list," it's impossible not to feel excited by the incredible variety of gorgeously colorful birds in the reserve around Mashpi. I arose early one morning to join my guide and other guests on the hotel's terrace, overlooking a forested valley. There, we spotted tanagers in both lemon-rumped and blue-gray varieties, tropical kingbirds, a tricolored brush finch and a cinnamon becard. After breakfast, I lost track of time



# Quito's Atmospheric Boutique Hotels

Quito ranks among South America's most underrated cities. Surrounded by towering green mountains and snowcapped volcanoes, Ecuador's capital enjoys a surprisingly mild and pleasant climate. The center retains its colonial splendor. Ornate mansions line the narrow, sloping streets, which periodically open onto plazas fronted by grand municipal buildings and elaborately decorated churches.

The most spectacular is the 17th-century Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús near Plaza Grande (also known as Plaza de la Independencia). The interior is a riot of gold, with golden Moorish-style latticework encrusting the nave's barrel vault and golden grapevine-clad columns framing niches with life-size statues of saints.

Some of the mansions in the historic center — a UNESCO World Heritage site — have been converted into hotels. A new addition is the chic 12-room **Carlota**, a five-minute walk from the Plaza Grande and Plaza San Francisco. Built in 1905, the immaculately renovated building has a pink-and-white Beaux-Arts façade and rooms surrounding a small but bright internal court. Owner Renato Solines sat down to chat with us on the panoramic rooftop deck, and over cocktails he told



Rooftop deck of Carlota hotel / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

us that he was born in the house, where his grandmother, Doña Carlota Echeverría de Moreno, had lived. He and his wife, an architect, started the conversion in 2013, and the hotel opened to guests just a few months ago.

The design is undeniably striking: An exposed-brick wall backs the reception desk, which faces an atrium supported by slender stone columns. Between the atrium and the street is the stylish *Bistro*, with polished concrete floors, a textured leather banquette and a dramatic black accent wall. And on the rooftop deck, dozens of brightly colored pillows engender a cheerfully festive atmosphere.

We booked one of the largest accommodations in the hotel, a Loft Suite. Windows overlooking the street punctured a double-height exposed-brick wall. The living room had understated but attractive contemporary furnishings and décor, and the wood-and-

metal loft supported a queen-size bed.

It was an attractive space, but not as comfortable as I would have wished. The suite had no storage space of any kind — a small rack at the top of the loft's metal stairs was the only place to hang clothes, and we had nowhere to put our luggage. I loved the bath's black-and-white painted tile floor and slightly irregular white wall tiles, but it felt cramped, and the rectangular sink afforded no counter space. There was no turndown service, nor climate control. I wish I could recommend this hotel — the staff were warm and unfailingly helpful, and Solines' story is an engaging one — but the small bath and lack of storage proved too irritating.

Our next stop was the 14-room **Mansión del Angel**, located between the historic center and La Mariscal, a newer neighborhood with numerous restaurants, galleries and the freshly renovated

View of the San Francisco Church from the roof terrace, table in the *Restaurante Cedrón*, and Plaza View King room at Casa Gangotena / VIEW AND RESTAURANT PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER



National Museum. The former home of a tobacco magnate, this Italianate property is resolutely traditional, with an extravagant Victorian-eclectic décor.

The hotel kindly upgraded us to a Deluxe Suite, which had high ceilings with crystal chandeliers, parquet floors with Oriental rugs and a pretty white mantelpiece framing what once had been a woodburning fireplace. Seating surrounded the moss-green canopy bed, including a wingback chair and ottoman, two small Chesterfield chairs and a large sofa upholstered in green silk damask.

Unfortunately, the bath proved dated and small, and the décor did not achieve the intended sense of opulence. An arched niche faced the bed, but the faux fresco inside it looked cheap, as did the faux oil portrait above the fireplace. And at night, unfortunate lightbulb choices gave the public rooms a vaguely clinical pallor. Alas, friendly service couldn't quite make up for the aesthetic errors.

The hotels I recommended on my last visit to Quito remain my favorites in the city. The 31-room **Casa Gangotena** has converted its colonial building with more design savvy than the *Mansión del Angel* and more attention to comfort than the *Carlota*. Its rooms tend to be smaller than at the *Mansión del Angel*, but they have high ceilings, attractive décor and marble baths. An airy, flower-filled lounge serves afternoon tea and cocktails, and the *Restaurante Cedrón* presents upscale renditions of traditional Ecuadorian recipes. Service remains unfailingly helpful and gracious.

At the 15-room **Hotel Plaza Grande**, the suites and baths are spacious, and the location couldn't be more central. The two restaurants and four of its suites overlook Quito's main square. The hotel offers accommodations that provide an international level of comfort, but I prefer the décor of the *Casa Gangotena*. The *Plaza Grande*'s furnishings feel heavier and less stylish than those at its competitor.

In addition, the service at the *Plaza Grande* sometimes proved disorganized. Nevertheless, the comfort of the rooms, the splendid view and the warm (if sometimes befuddled) staff make it an excellent alternative. **HR**



## Unexpected Dining Discoveries

Lima is South America's food city of the moment, but Quito has started to catch up. Its restaurants benefit from local produce and meats sourced in the surrounding highlands, as well as seafood from the nearby coast. On this visit, I discovered two restaurants worthy of note (outside of those in the hotels I recommend).

### Zazu

French-trained Ecuadorian chef David Picco helms this stylish establishment, which features a light gray interior that's accented with bouquets of red roses. Those who make the effort to take a taxi here will be rewarded with sophisticated and beautifully presented interpretations of classic recipes. We opted for the \$70 per-person eight-course tasting menu (a five-course menu and à la carte options are also available). My favorite dishes included a sweet tangerine-marinated stone crab claw accompanied by a crab-filled roll of avocado and cucumber topped with caviar; savory suckling pig served atop a crunchy spiced-corn cracker and a purée of *tomate de árbol* (tamarillo); and tender herb-crusted lamb chops with quinoa tabbouleh. The wine pairings, while ample and well-priced, did not always hit the mark (prawns in peanut sauce overwhelmed a Chilean Pinot Noir, for example). The English-speaking staff were highly accommodating and professional. *Mariano Aguilera 331. Tel. (593) 2-254-3559.*

### Lua

Peruvian-born chef Alexander Lau served as executive chef at *Zazu* before opening his own restaurant in 2013. We had lunch on the shady patio behind this pretty converted house after browsing galleries in *La Mariscal*. I liked my slightly spicy appetizer of *langoustine tiradito* (something of a cross between crudo and ceviche) with scallion, sesame oil and mandarin orange zest. My substantial main course of *lomo saltado* was composed of sirloin tips and roasted tomatoes atop rich Parmesan risotto. The beef was tender and the risotto appropriately al dente, but still, I expected something with a little more flash for \$32. *Pontevedra N24-422. Tel. (593) 2-511-2570.*

### Casa Gangotena 92

**LIKE** The well-considered integration of period details and contemporary comforts; the fine restaurant; the always-helpful staff; the central location. **DISLIKE** The present construction on the plaza in front of the hotel. **GOOD TO KNOW** The hotel has fine views other than that of the plaza, notably of El Panecillo hill, which is topped by a tall statue of the Madonna. *Luxury Plus Room, \$510; Balcony Junior Suite, \$570. Bolívar Oe6-41, Quito. Tel. (593) 2-400-8000. casagangotena.com*

### Hotel Plaza Grande 90

**LIKE** The peerless central location; the impressive views over the Plaza Grande; the spacious accommodations. **DISLIKE** The occasionally disorganized service; the heavy décor. **GOOD TO KNOW** Protests sometimes draw crowds to Plaza Grande, as occurred on our recent visit, but the hotel's main entrance on a side street remained easy to access. *Royal Suite, \$450; Plaza View Suite, \$550. Calle García Moreno N5-16, Quito. Tel. (593) 2-251-0777. plazagrandequito.com*



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Back Bay and the Charles River

FINE HOTELS, CIVILIZED PLEASURES

## Boston: Back Bay to Beacon Hill

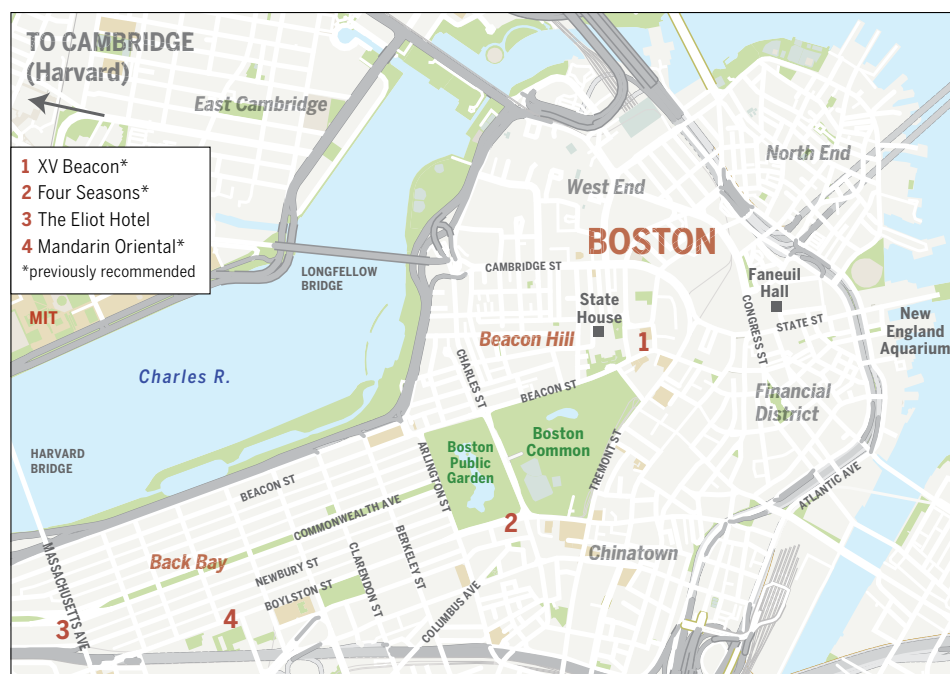
Boston is one of those cities that strikes a pleasing balance between size, manageability and richness of metropolitan pleasures. Founded by the Puritans in 1630, today it seems a relaxed place. Many people are being drawn back to the center by the town's livability, which ranks very high; I particularly enjoy its walkability and easy-to-use public trans-

portation. Boston is also a city of lovely neighborhoods — areas such as Beacon Hill, Back Bay, the gentrifying South End and the emerging Fenway — all of which have a wealth of enviable townhouses comparable to those in neighborhoods such as Georgetown and Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. or Greenwich Village and the Upper East Side in Manhattan.

My previously recommended Boston hotels are grouped close to the Public Garden and Boston Common. I used to recommend **The Eliot Hotel** in Back Bay, but after an unsatisfactory visit about five years ago, I decided to drop it. However, several complimentary reviews from readers recently persuaded me to take another look. Set on the corner of Commonwealth Avenue — one of the most beautiful urban thoroughfares in the country — and Massachusetts Avenue, The Eliot Hotel enjoys a location that puts it just steps from Newbury and Boylston streets, both alive with restaurants, shops and galleries. Back Bay's top attractions are also within easy walking distance, including the beautiful Boston Public Library, Copley Plaza with its high-end shopping, and the Hynes Convention Center.

The Eliot Hotel's handsome 1925 neo-Georgian brick building with stone accents houses 95 rooms and suites. The diminutive black-and-white marble lobby, which descends to the reception area, feels like that of a small European hotel. And elsewhere, hallways lined with fine woodwork help to sustain the impression.

Our suite was decorated with an understated color scheme of creams and browns, and I especially liked the mix of fabrics, with ikat blending well with the more pervasive toile in both the bedroom and sitting room. The latter proved a





congenial place to relax after a day's sightseeing, with a couch, armchairs and a desk for sorting out maps and planning activities. Well-placed lamps gave the room a nice, cozy glow. I also liked having a small, separate pantry area, which featured a bar and a coffee machine.

French doors with scrim curtains separated the bedroom from the sitting room. Recently redone in Italian marble, the bath was rather small, with a single pedestal sink, a walk-in shower and a mirrored dressing area.

The Eliot Hotel does not have extensive public areas, the lobby being tiny with limited seating, but what it does offer is a superb restaurant, *UNI*, which is under the direction of star chef Ken Oringer. Initially, *UNI* occupied an intimate space off of the reception area and functioned as a sushi bar, while the larger dining area, accessed from Massachusetts Avenue, was inhabited by the popular restaurant *Clio*. Taking a risk, Oringer and the owners of the hotel melded the two spaces to create a lively and creative Japanese restaurant with a focus on seafood. With skillful lighting, coffered ceilings, patterned walls and well-spaced tables, the look of *UNI*

matches the sophistication of its cuisine.

We ordered a series of exquisite small dishes that included the signature Smoked Uni Spoon, which is a generous dollop of sea urchin roe with quail egg yolk, chives and a zesty dash of yuzu sauce; grilled king crab served with black lime butter; a selection of sushi that included spicy salmon roll with red curry and uni from Hokkaido; and wagyu gyoza. The preparations could have appeared in a Tiffany & Co. window, the effect being enhanced by plates and bowls selected for each dish, in keeping with Japanese tradition. But this is not a strictly Japanese experience: You'll also see creative innovations such as ruby slices of mackerel topped with a light peanut butter cream. Sounds odd; tasted great. Our server could not have been more informative and helpful in navigating us through the menu.

This time around, I thoroughly enjoyed The Eliot Hotel. Its facilities may be limited — those who want to exercise can obtain a free pass to the nearby Boston Sports Club — but given its fine Back Bay location and superb restaurant, I endorse it for your next Boston stay without hesitation.

Exterior, lobby, and details of our suite at The Eliot Hotel / EXTERIOR & LOBBY: © ERIC ROTH / ROOM PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER



“The Eliot Hotel is steps from Newbury and Boylston streets — both alive with restaurants, shops and galleries — as well as the attractions of Back Bay.

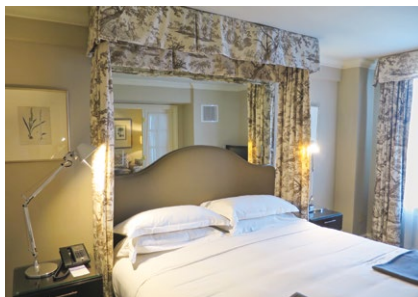


PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

## Harvard Art Museums

In late 2014, three of Harvard's notable museums were brought together in a beautiful new facility designed by Renzo Piano. One striking glass roof now unites the collections of the Fogg Museum, the Busch-Reisinger Museum and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum. This reinvention involved expanding the Fogg's original building into a new structure that provides 40 percent more gallery space than before. We spent a wonderful morning exploring the assembled riches, taking time to admire the Impressionist holdings in particular. Highlights from the Busch-Reisinger Museum include remarkable works of German art, while the Arthur M. Sackler Museum contributed an unusually deep Asian art collection; I particularly admired the Japanese screens. We meandered with no set purpose. Depth and diversity are why I love museums such as this — for their unexpected pleasures, and not just the obvious masterpieces. 32 Quincy Street, Cambridge. [harvardartmuseums.org](http://harvardartmuseums.org)

## One to Miss

In recent months I have stayed in Langham hotels in Sydney and Chicago, and I have been favorably impressed on both occasions. On my recent trip to Boston, I decided to try The Langham there, which is housed within the former Federal Reserve Bank building in an ideal downtown location. On arrival, the large and rather soulless lobby was full of flight crew. Having just driven from New York, I headed to the lobby restaurant, *The Reserve*, for a late lunch. There, the service was dilatory, and the clam chowder was cold. In the evening I decided to try *BOND* restaurant, but the noise was so cacophonous that I turned and fled. The next morning the breakfast buffet in the *Café Fleuri* was littered with crumbs, and the scrambled egg was elderly and congealed. Rooms have a staid traditional décor and tend to be on the small side; suites are much more desirable. The hotel's indoor pool looks striking in photographs but is much less impressive in reality. Overall, a return visit is not high on my list of priorities.



## New Recommended Restaurants

On trips to Boston, I always know that we will eat well. The city has long attracted innovative chefs, who are drawn by the cosmopolitan audience, a long culinary tradition and the wealth of fine local ingredients, with the seafood being of particular note. In addition to *UNI* in The Eliot Hotel and *Mooo....* in XV Beacon, here are the restaurants I recently enjoyed.

### *Atlantic Fish Company*

Close to the Boston Public Library on lively Boylston Street, this restaurant makes no secret of its focus. The beautiful polished woodwork could have come straight from one of the great liners, and the art on the wall depicts scenes of nautical prowess. A handsome bar gathers a convivial crowd. The menu changes daily to reflect what is freshest, and the clam chowder is widely considered to be among New England's best. I found it to be faultless: briny and at just the right consistency, with good-sized morsels of clam. The house crab cakes are made with Jonah crab rather than the common blue (Jonah has a stronger flavor): They came with very little binder and a delicious side of corn soufflé. If the weather allows, the outdoor seating is appealing. 761 Boylston Street. Tel. (617) 267-4000.

### *Bistro du Midi*

Overlooking the Public Garden, this lovely restaurant ostensibly celebrates the cuisine of southern France, but there's more to it than that. We strayed from Provençal orthodoxy with rewarding results: The starter of squid-ink tagliatelle came embedded with tasty chunks of lobster as well as sea beans and chopped arugula, and my grilled pork chop with grilled peach was wonderfully succulent. Do not resist the potato purée with olive oil. Downstairs, a sweeping zinc bar with posters evokes a French bistro in style and ambiance — it's particularly nice for lunch on a fine day when the front windows are open to the garden — while upstairs serves as a more intimate dining room. 272 Boylston Street. Tel. (617) 426-7878.

### *Menton*

Barbara Lynch's culinary star has long illuminated the Boston dining scene. I have recommended her *No. 9 Park* for many years, and I now happily endorse this excellent restaurant. With a spare, sophisticated interior, its big windows overlook the lively Fort Point neighborhood. The name comes from the French town of Menton, just by the Italian border, and the menu draws on culinary traditions from both nations. We began our lunch with heirloom tomatoes with crisped goat cheese, chili-inflected rhubarb and za'atar spice. This was followed by a delicious striped bass with leeks, miso and mustard. Service was attentive, informative and friendly throughout. I look forward to returning, especially for dinner, at which there are four-course and seven-course options. 354 Congress Street. Tel. (617) 737-0099.

☞ Visit [AndrewHarper.com](http://AndrewHarper.com) to find out more about the four other restaurants that I currently recommend in Boston.

Mackerel with peanut butter cream at *UNI*, and sea bass at *Menton* / PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER



Boston Common Studio room, and bath at XV Beacon



ALL PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER

Although I am continually in search of new properties, I try to spend a portion of each trip revisiting hotels that I have already recommended. **XV Beacon** has long been a favorite with readers, and it is the closest the city offers to a true hideaway. Beacon Street runs along the southern edge of the elegant Beacon Hill neighborhood, and the hotel's location at 15 Beacon Street puts it within easy walking distance of the government center, Quincy Market and many other prominent sights. The 1903 iron, brick and limestone Beaux-Arts exterior would suggest a traditional interior décor, but in fact the hotel's lobby has a distinctive style — black walls, white floors and zebra-patterned rugs — that successfully combines old with new. A birdcage elevator takes you up to your room.

The 63 rooms (including four suites) are decorated in a barista's dream palette of creams, espressos and mochas. We loved our Boston Common Studio, a generous open space with a king-size bed, a spacious desk, a gas fireplace and a sitting area with a full couch. Large windows allowed light to wash through the room during the day. The bath was clad in Italian marble and came with a wide vanity, custom toiletries, a whirlpool tub and a rainfall shower. We made a selection from an appealing menu of





aromatic bathing salts, and our choice was hand-delivered promptly.

On the roof, XV Beacon offers a small workout space with an adjacent hot tub, as well as a terrace with chaises longues and sweeping views of the Boston skyline, most notably the golden dome of the nearby Massachusetts State House.

Just off the reception area, the clubby steakhouse *Moos....* — I find the name annoyingly twee — has fine woodwork and large, shaded lighting fixtures. The latter are set far too low, and along with many of our fellow diners, we resorted to using the light on our phones in order to read the menu. It missed none of the expected staples of a good steak place, but we particularly loved a starter of yellow tomato gazpacho with yellow watermelon and chunks of jumbo lump crab, all topped with a dollop of avocado sorbet. I opted for the 10-ounce Creekstone Farms Prime New York Sirloin, plus excellent creamed spinach, and potato tots elevated with bacon and Parmesan. Service throughout was both professional and congenial.

Elsewhere, the front desk staff and concierges were consistently helpful and unfailingly cheerful. Overall, it was a pleasure to return to XV Beacon. The hotel's continuing popularity with *Hideaway Report* readers is certainly not hard to explain. **HR**

## A Stroll Through Beacon Hill

Our stay at XV Beacon gave me the chance to revisit one of the most beautiful urban enclaves in the country: Beacon Hill. Built on land that was the original seat of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Beacon Hill was part of Trimountain (later "Tremont"), so named for the rises of Pemberton Hill, Mount Vernon and Beacon Hill. In the early 1800s, the first two were leveled to permit development.

Prominent citizens quickly viewed Beacon Hill as a highly desirable place to live, though some migrated to the newly fashionable neighborhood of Back Bay when it emerged in the 1850s. During Beacon Hill's 19th-century heyday, leading residents included Daniel Webster, Wendell Phillips and Henry Thoreau.

Exiting XV Beacon, you will see the stately Boston Athenæum. One of the earliest libraries in America, the Athenæum's current building opened in 1849 and has a noteworthy collection of paintings, books and busts that includes George Washington's personal library from Mount Vernon and a first-edition copy of John James Audubon's *Birds of America*.

Continuing west, you pass the Massachusetts State House, topped by a gleaming golden dome. At Walnut Street, turn right and then left on Chestnut Street.



The State House / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER



Louisburg Square / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

There you will find yourself surrounded by enviable Federal-style brick townhouses. Now protected by law, they remain under the watchful eyes of the Beacon Hill Civic Association and the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission. The original residents of these opulent homes were notoriously dubbed the "Boston Brahmins" and an "untitled aristocracy" by the polymath Oliver Wendell Holmes. One of the principal architects in the area was Charles Bulfinch, and it was

for him that a famous pub took its name, the *Bull & Finch* at 84 Beacon Street. It is now known as *Cheers*, having provided exterior shots for the classic sitcom.

At Willow Street, turn right and then left onto Acorn Street, an atmospheric cobblestone reminder of Boston's heritage. Afterward, head to the incomparable Louisburg Square, an oasis of green surrounded by a wrought-iron fence and lined with exquisite townhouses. Its famous residents have included Louisa May Alcott and painter John Singleton Copley. Today the square is home to Secretary of State John Kerry.

### The Eliot Hotel 91

**LIKE** The homey atmosphere of our suite; the superlative restaurant. **DISLIKE** Although the reception staff is well-informed, there is no concierge. **GOOD TO KNOW** On each floor avoid the rooms ending in 03 due to elevator noise. Premier Suite, \$485; Two-bedroom Suite, \$860. 370 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA. Tel. (617) 267-1607. [eliothotel.com](http://eliothotel.com)

### XV Beacon 94

**LIKE** The overall aesthetic, which is a pleasing balance between traditional and modern. **DISLIKE** The controls for some of the room features are confusing; the dim lighting in the restaurant. **GOOD TO KNOW** The hotel has chauffeured Lexus limousines that can take you about town. Executive Classic Room, \$620; Studio Room, \$795. 15 Beacon Street, Boston, MA. Tel. (617) 670-1500. [xvbeacon.com](http://xvbeacon.com)



preceding a rating, denotes an officially recommended hotel that will be added to The Andrew Harper Collection. Visit [AndrewHarper.com](http://AndrewHarper.com) for information on these and our other recommendations in Boston: **Four Seasons (92)** and **Mandarin Oriental (91)**. **The Langham (86)** was not up to the required standard.





Yellow-edged giant owl butterflies in the Life Centre at Mashpi Lodge, Ecuador / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

## New and Noteworthy

### Manhattan Boutique Debut

The end of the year will see the opening of The Whitby Hotel. Located on West 56th Street at Fifth Avenue, this will be the second New York property of the British company Firmdale Hotels. The group's first U.S. venture, Crosby Street Hotel in SoHo, a favorite of *Hideaway Report* readers, opened in 2009. The new hotel will have 86 rooms and suites, plus a restaurant, library, courtyard, orangery and cinema. The property will doubtless also display owner Kit Kemp's vibrant style of interior design.

### Alvear Palace Upgrade

The Alvear Palace Hotel in Buenos Aires is traditional, gracious and ideally located at the end of the Avenida Alvear in the elegant district of Recoleta. At the end of a tiring tour of Patagonia, or a spell in the Argentinian Andes, it has always been a refuge to which I have returned with a sigh of relief. My next visit promises to be even more enjoyable thanks to the addition of 15 new rooftop suites with floor-to-ceiling views, plus a new cocktail lounge, an indoor pool and a solarium.

### New Bath Townhouse Hotel

An addition to Bath's roster of luxury hotels has arrived in the form of No. 15 Great Pulteney, a 31-room property made up of three neoclassical 18th-century townhouses. Great Pulteney Street links the eastern Bathwick district to the center of the city via the Robert Adam-designed Pulteney Bridge. The interior of the hotel is the work of Martin Hulbert, whose previous projects have included the wonderful new treehouse suites at Chewton Glen, the perennial Harper favorite in Hampshire's New Forest.

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## Bargain Britain

A favorable exchange rate can be a strong incentive to travel, particularly to those places that have long been dizzyingly expensive. For many years, the prices in Japan were breathtaking, even for residents of Manhattan. Then, the yen declined significantly against the dollar, and many Americans took the opportunity to make their long-planned trip to Kyoto. Generally, I don't take too much notice of exchange rates because fluctuations tend to be short-lived, or at least unpredictable. However, the recent decline of the British pound against the dollar — a result of Brexit, or the country's impending departure from the European Union — seems to be a singular case. At the time of writing, the exchange rate is 1.22, and in the past few days it has been as low as 1.12. This means that London, normally one of the most expensive cities on the planet, is all of a sudden unexpectedly reasonable. Although I don't claim to be an expert in such matters, this situation looks likely to continue. The fall in the currency's value has been triggered by uncertainty about what Brexit will actually entail and its likely effects on the British economy. As the U.K. will not formally leave the European Union until March 2017, ushering in at least two or three years of acrimonious horse trading between the British government and its erstwhile partners in Brussels, it would seem probable that an exchange rate favorable to U.S. travelers will be with us for the foreseeable future. Personally, I am very fond of London in the run-up to Christmas. Yes, it is dark by 4 p.m. and rain is a distinct possibility, but the atmosphere of the city is festive, the illuminations on Regent Street obliterate any hint of gloom, the restaurants are packed, Harrods is seething, and the British have cast aside their reserve in favor of a jovial Pickwickian persona fueled by roast pheasant, Stilton and Claret. I have long subscribed to Samuel Johnson's dictum that "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life," but the fact that the city is now much less expensive is undeniably an added inducement to travel.

*Andrew Harper*