

STARBOARD

STYLE IN TRAVEL



PONANT EXPLORERS • SAGA SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY • AQUA BLU



Aqua Blu

AQUA EXPEDITIONS

Aqua Expeditions expands its fleet with a refurbished British naval explorer set to sail Indonesia's diverse archipelago.

Words: Catherine Martin • Renderings: Courtesy of Aqua Expeditions

When Francesco Galli Zugaro, founder and CEO of Aqua Expeditions, spoke to Starboard ahead of its inaugural publication back in the Spring of 2018, he outlined ambitious plans for expansion, revealing that much of his time is spent scouting new locations as well as searching for boutique vessels that align with the brand's tailor-made ethos.

At the time, the luxury cruise line operated two vessels; Aria Amazon, which takes in sights along the Peruvian Amazon, and Aqua Mekong, sailing on Vietnam and Cambodia's trans-boundary river. Having taken trips to assess waterways across Central and South America, sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, Galli Zugaro was confident he could enter new markets and build on an already loyal client base.

Now, 18 months on, the first phase of his expansion plan is coming to fruition, with Aqua Blu taking its maiden voyage in Indonesia. "We are excited to launch a new addition to our fleet and enter three new destinations, a project that has been three years in the planning," explains Galli Zugaro. "Aqua Blu – Aqua Expeditions' first coastal vessel – is a distinctive explorer yacht with naval pedigree, and will explore Komodo National Park, Spice Islands and Raja Ampat on 7- and 12-night itineraries."

Having fallen in love with small-ship cruising while working in the Galapagos, Galli Zugaro is a hands-on CEO, ensuring every element of the vessel and its itinerary meets

Interiors feature oak parquet flooring and plush carpets along with furniture by Minotti and soft furnishings from Jim Thompson

his exacting standards. He even hosts a number of trips himself, and was in Bali to unveil the results of Aqua Blu's refurbishment to Starboard in an exclusive first-look ahead of the maiden voyage.

Arriving by tender, Aqua Blu is a picture of elegance, its exterior repainted in a chic grey to accompany the pure white of the upper decks. The vessel itself has a rich history, built in 1968 as British naval explorer HMS Beagle before eventually being decommissioned in 2002 and converted to a private yacht. So when Galli Zugaro first set eyes on it in Genoa in 2016, he knew it would make a notable addition to his fleet. "We could have gone for any large, modern explorer yacht but we wanted one that had a history and a legacy," he explains. "The fact that she was a British naval explorer really spoke to me."

Galli Zugaro then went about bringing the ship to Singapore, where it underwent a four-month re-fit to upgrade the vessel to the same level of luxury as Aria Amazon and Aqua Mekong. Having previously worked with Peruvian designer Jordi Puig and Vietnam-based studio Noor, the refurbishment was this time entrusted to Dutch yacht design maestro Cor D. Rover. And while it's clearly of the same family, Aqua Blu is one-of-a-kind with a scheme that honours its heritage yet instils a sense of place. "We don't have a cookie-cutter approach; each vessel has its own distinct personality," confirms Galli Zugaro. "Our products marry elegant contemporary design

with local influences, reflecting and respecting local culture. Details of the décor have a sense of Indonesia, such as the historic lithographic maps of the region, and combine with the best amenities you would expect on an explorer yacht."

In bringing the interiors to life, Cor D. Rover worked with Galli Zugaro's wife, Birgit, as well as long-time collaborator David Cole of DJC Studio, who has been responsible for upgrades and maintenance across all Aqua Expeditions' vessels. "Birgit and I work very closely on all aspects of the interior design while Francesco oversees everything to ensure it is in line with his overarching vision," explains Cole. "The focus is on subtle luxury, comfort and ultimately the guest experience."

The creative team overhauled all 15 cabins in addition to the public spaces, which, despite the challenges associated with a small floorplate, include a spacious salon, dining room, lounge bar and library.

"Aqua Blu is understated and elegant," continues Cole. "We retained as much as possible of the original yacht, such as the wonderful oak parquet flooring, and have upgraded and enhanced other elements. Neutral colours are used to create a calm environment that allows guests to relax and enjoy the surroundings in style and comfort."

Every cabin is different depending on its location on the ship – some have interconnecting rooms for families or group travel, others offer private deck





access. All are sea-facing however and share a similar aesthetic, with natural light, plush carpets and leather headboards along with furniture by Minotti and soft furnishings from silk-makers Jim Thompson. Bathrooms have been completely gutted and now feature spacious showers – a real luxury on a vessel of this size – while locally inspired touches come from the Dutch lithographs hanging on the wall, each dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries and depicting the history of the Spice Islands. Elsewhere, books on local history and culture line the library, and gold leaf tableware by Bali-based Gaya Ceramic features prints from *The Malay Archipelago*, a book by British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace.

Out on deck, there's a hot-tub, work-out zone and plenty of opportunities to take in the scenery as the boat traverses the fabled spice trade route through the heart of the Coral Triangle. Itineraries cover tropical islands where wildlife, culture and age-old traditions reside, with the vessel able to reach sites others can't

thanks to its size, speed and technologically-advanced stabilisers. For the activity-seekers, Aqua Blu also comes equipped with snorkelling gear, kayaks and paddleboards, and there's a divemaster on board to help navigate the best dive sites.

Add to that the operator's 1:1 crew-to-guest ratio, expert-guided excursions and cuisine crafted by acclaimed chefs, and a trip on Aqua Blu makes for quite the experience. "Every Aqua experience offers fresh insights and a unique perspective on the destination, its local wildlife, heritage and culture," concludes Galli Zugaro. "Aqua Blu is the first FIT yacht permanently based in East Indonesia with year-round departures; it enables explorers to go farther and faster in this vast region and in greater safety and comfort."

And there's more to come from Aqua Expeditions. According to Galli Zugaro, a newbuild, 20-suite river boat will launch in October 2020, bringing a new level of luxury to the Amazon. Watch this space.



ON DECK

Route: Indonesia
Owner / Operator: Aqua Expeditions
Flag State: Indonesia
Interior Design: Cor D. Rover;
DJC Studio; Birgit Galli Zugaro
www.aquaexpeditions.com