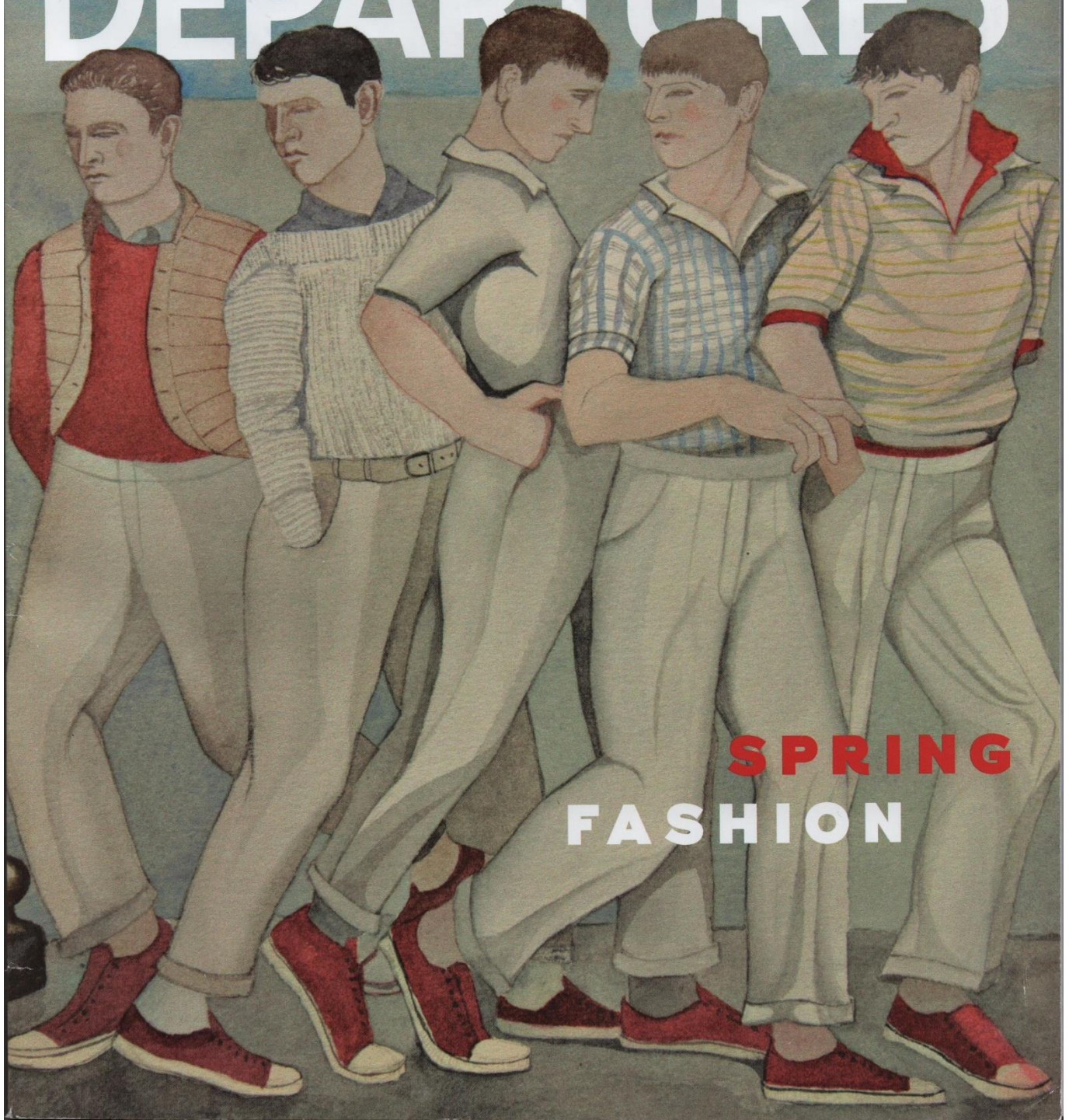
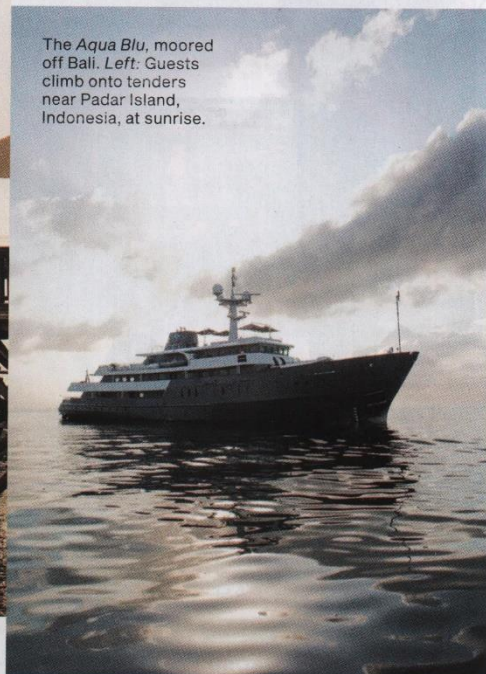


MARCH | APRIL 2020

DEPARTURES



SPRING
FASHION



The Aqua Blu, moored off Bali. Left: Guests climb onto tenders near Padar Island, Indonesia, at sunrise.

Between Sharks and Dragons

A new ocean cruise through Indonesia takes intrepid travelers into some of the least spoiled waters on earth. *by Chris Pomorski*

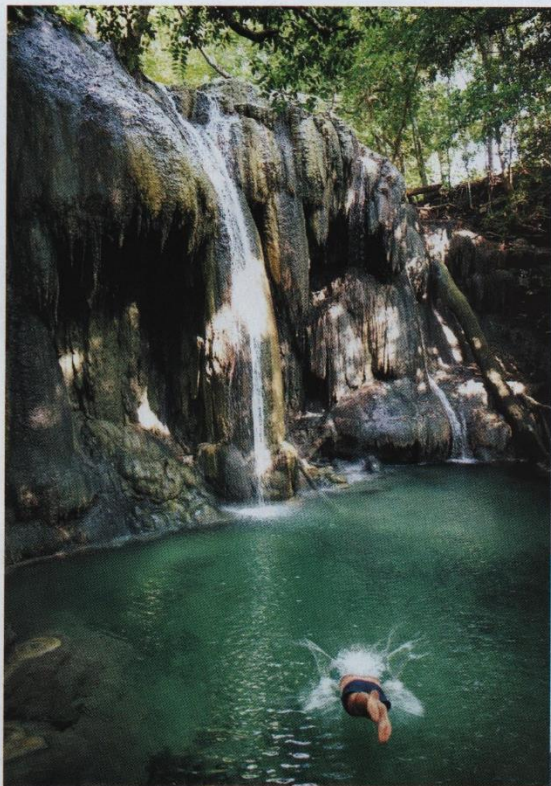
ONE MORNING, WE LEFT before the light came up. There were perhaps 30 of us, all piled into three inflatable, motorized tenders, which we used most days to travel short distances while our ship, a 15-suite super-yacht called the *Aqua Blu*, lay at anchor. We were on the Flores Sea, somewhere east of Bali, where a few days earlier, the ship's 24-night journey had begun. During our trip, organized by the Singapore-based boutique cruise operator Aqua Expeditions, other boats were rarely visible. But this morning, fishing vessels dotted the water. From afar, their pontoons, outstretched like wings, gave them the look of seaplanes. Up close, they suggested a bygone era—wooden, ramshackle, painted colorfully and webbed with netting, crewed by smiling, waving men.

Glen Wappett, *Aqua Blu's* cruise director, a British former marine, had been told that whale

sharks visited these waters, feeding on the tiny creatures that invariably drop from fishing nets. The tenders sped from one fishing boat to the next. At each, Aqua Expeditions' Indonesian guides, at least one to each tender, asked after the sharks. Eventually, they got a thumbs-up. Everyone dived in within seconds, wearing snorkels and masks, sans fins. The water was dark and deep. For some moments we saw nothing.

Then two whale sharks emerged from the murk. Tan and spotted white, the size of small cars, they seemed utterly unfazed by their visitors. Grazing our feet with their backs, they nosed gently through. After 20 minutes, they were gone. Toweling off, several of us remarked that the sharks had made us feel childlike, briefly restoring our capacity for wonder. Among the first back to the tenders, slightly overawed, was Monica, the wife of the CEO of a private university. Once dry, she quickly composed herself, retrieving a stash of cosmetics from a bag she'd left aboard. As she applied foundation, the diamonds in her ears caught the rays of the lately risen sun.

Founded in 2007 by Francesco Galli Zugaro, a former financial risk analyst, Aqua Expeditions got its start providing high-end river cruises in places where nothing remotely of the kind existed: on the Peruvian Amazon and, beginning in 2014, in Vietnam and Cambodia, on the Mekong. In both locations, Aqua developed a winning blueprint for what Galli Zugaro calls "nine-to-five adventure." It's a formula designed



Clockwise from far left: Aqua Expeditions founder Francesco Galli Zugaro on Moyo Island; the *Aqua Blu*'s lounge area; Mount Sangeang, an active volcano in the Lesser Sunda Islands.

to attract travelers seeking challenging cultural and wildlife excursions—piranha fishing, encounters with caimans in obscure reaches of the rain forest, visits aboard small craft to floating markets—but unwilling to forgo the comforts of a five-star hotel: attentive staff, world-class cuisine, robust air conditioning, onboard massages.

In Indonesia, Aqua Expeditions is making its first foray into oceans, offering a variety of 7- and 12-night itineraries, each built largely around one of three discrete (though more or less contiguous) regions of the country: Komodo National Park, the Spice Islands, and Raja Ampat. The trip for which I joined them was the *Aqua Blu*'s inaugural voyage, encompassing all three destinations on a passage that ended roughly 1,200 miles from its point of embarkation. The route crossed waters generally seen only from rickety fishing and dive boats: north of the Lesser Sunda Islands and across the Banda Sea, up to the otherworldly equatorial islands at Indonesia's remote eastern limit, where the ocean teems with some of the richest marine biodiversity on earth.

Galli Zugaro acquired the 50-year-old former British Royal Navy ship that is now the *Aqua Blu* in 2018, overhauling it in sleek modern style with

assistance from the Dutch yacht designer Cor D. Rover, who applied a dignified wood-and-ivory decorative theme to the interiors. In the evenings, we returned from our adventures to suites outfitted with plush carpets and elegant teak cabinetry. The *Aqua Blu* has four tiers of outdoor spaces with sun beds, wraparound sofas, and a Jacuzzi. As dusk approached, we ascended for cocktails to the upper deck, where sunsets turned the sky to tangerine beyond distant silhouettes of sparsely inhabited islands. Afterward, we gathered for communal, Asian-influenced meals prepared by the Australian chef Benjamin Cross.

Presiding over the trip was Galli Zugaro himself, along with his wife, Birgit. Joining them were some 44 guests, a roster made up largely of veterans of previous Aqua cruises. Dinner conversation often turned, unsurprisingly, to travel. Between us, the globe had been pretty well covered. Christopher Wilmot-Sitwell, the witty director of a luxury travel agency, recounted a South American expedition that turned out to be run by a drug dealer. Lew Coleman, a former Dreamworks CFO, spoke knowingly about the evolution of Tanzanian safaris. Jon Haseler, an Australian developer, described a visit to Everest base camp and diving with great white sharks. The group shared an obvious hunger for experience.

The ship moved frequently but slowly, cruising through deep blue water that blushed turquoise as it broke around the islands. Early on, we disembarked at a village of some 600 residents, where small children chirped greetings in the streets. As a local teacher distributed snacks of tropical honey and halved coconuts, two men in shiny tunics performed a martial-arts-influenced welcome dance. Some days later, on another island, we took a bus up a mountain road, winding up under jackfruit and cashew trees through hillsides terraced for farming. Eventually, we reached another village, where women from several generations demonstrated traditional ikat weaving.

One morning, on the island of Rinca, Komodo National Park guides led us on a long hike, watching the underbrush for cobras as monkeys howled in the trees. Each carried a bough of hibiscus, in case we needed to repel the park's eponymous dragons. But the day was hot and dry, and the great leathery lizards lay in the dusty shade, too lethargic to hunt.

Few if any days passed without opportunities to get in the water. Those of us who chose to snorkel (the majority) saw coral whose shape and color

suggested the imagination of Lewis Carroll, while our more intrepid, scuba-diving companions descended steep oceanic walls to swim with reef sharks, polychrome fish, manta rays, and enormous moray eels.

Amid all the life we encountered, we also saw segments of reef bleached by rising sea temperatures or blasted by dynamite, beaches scarcely visited by humans mottled with plastics—evidence that lent a strange sense of urgency to our recreation.

Guests who had previously traveled with Aqua told me that in terms of social dynamics—a crucial element, given the level of intimacy—the Indonesian trip much resembled those on the Amazon and the Mekong. To me it felt, eventually, less like a traditional cruise than a gathering of friends—or perhaps friends of friends. The Galli Zugaros made warm MCs, presiding with the air of holiday hosts in Napa or the Adirondacks.

One evening, in a shallow, quiet cove rimmed with pink-hued sand, we disembarked a few hours before dark. The crew had set up chairs, a bar, and white tasseled umbrellas ahead of our landing. The women drank white wine or margaritas, the men crisp Indonesian pilsner or gin. Several occupied themselves with a surprisingly competitive game of bocce, while three local boys commandeered our party's beach-tennis paddles with impunity. The sun began to set, as usual, in glorious fashion. His customary Negroni in hand, Galli Zugaro regarded the scene, evidently pleased with what he had brought about.

"Who needs St.-Tropez?" he said.

The interior of the Aqua Blu.



THE SHIP

Built in 1968 for the British Royal Navy and refurbished in 2019, the Aqua Blu features 15 luxury suites across four decks.

THE CRUISE

Seven- and 12-night itineraries through Komodo National Park, the Spice Islands, and Raja Ampat are available from \$7,525 at aquaexpeditions.com.