

LIFE. EXTRAORDINARY

# SINGAPORE TATLER

February 2020

CRUISE  
CONTROL

Entrepreneurs Francesco  
and Birgit Galli Zugaro  
reimagine luxury on  
the high seas



Aqua Expeditions' latest ship, *Aqua Blu* (left), sails through East Indonesia to destinations such as the Komodo National Park and Raja Ampat; armed with suitcases full of spring/summer 2020 threads (below), the Singapore Tatler team boarded a small vessel at a local port before transferring to *Aqua Blu*



## ALL ABOARD

We spent four intense hours with Aqua Expeditions' **Francesco and Birgit Galli Zugaro** on their newest cruise vessel to capture this month's cover feature

**For this month's cover shoot**, the *Singapore Tatler* crew made our way to Bali, Indonesia to meet with Francesco and Birgit Galli Zugaro, the couple behind boutique luxury cruise company Aqua Expeditions. The air was balmy as we made our way through a local port, where we boarded a tender that took us to *Aqua Blu*, the company's newest vessel.

On board, we showed the couple all the outfits we had prepared for them. Francesco was open to the idea of moving away from the somewhat clichéd linen look for a simple but sharp burgundy turtleneck sweater paired with board shorts. And because style is always an amalgamation of different ideas, he decided to pick his own accessories.

We are guessing Francesco's delight with his new look encouraged Birgit to step out of her own comfort zone. During the shoot, she took directions like a pro, and even kicked off her pumps for a pair of flat sandals—incidentally, one of the chicest trends of the season.

In fact, after spending the morning shooting, Birgit thanked the styling team for helping her to see herself in a whole new light, adding: "I'd never have picked any of those outfits on my own, but now, you've made me want to run to Loro Piana to buy that mustard outfit!" 📷

### ON THE COVER

Photography by Eric Seow, assisted by Alfred Ng. Styling by Desmond Lim, assisted by Joey Tan. Hair, make-up and grooming by Zhou Aiyi/Makeup Entourage, using Revlon Professional and Clé de Peau Beauté. Sweater by Tod's. Accessories by Hermès, Prada and Eres



WORDS: HONG XINYI, IMAGES: AQUA EXPEDITIONS (AQUA BLU) AND JOEY TAN



Birgit wears Stratford cashmere sweater and skirt, both by Loro Piana; sunglasses by Prada; pearl drop earrings by Pendulum Official; Mosaic Nupie suede-trimmed silk-twill sandals by Eres. Francesco wears Skye cashmere-blend turtleneck sweater and Open Walk suede shoes, both by Loro Piana; sunglasses by Prada

# TASTE FOR ADVENTURE

Francesco and Birgit Galli Zugaro met in the US, got engaged in Indonesia while backpacking around the world, and moved from Peru to Singapore to expand their luxury boutique cruise company Aqua Expeditions—all the while making sure their three children retain strong ties to their respective hometowns of Rome in Italy and Quito in Ecuador. The couple (who are pictured aboard the company's latest ship, *Aqua Blu*) continues to be intrepid adventurers, both during their own wide-ranging travels, and when they are curating unique experiences for their guests



SINGAPORE TATLER

# FEATURES

BLU

120

PHOTOGRAPHY: ERIC SEOW, FASHION DIRECTION: BERMOND LUN,  
HAIR, MAKEUP AND GROOMING: CHRIS SIOW, USING REVISON  
PROFESSIONAL AND CLÉ DE PEAU BEAUTÉ





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# Born Voyagers

**Francesco and Birgit Galli Zugaro**

soak up the beauty of East Indonesia,  
the latest destination explored by  
their luxury boutique cruise company  
Aqua Expeditions

**BY HONG XINYI**

PHOTOGRAPHY **ERIC SEOW**  
FASHION DIRECTION **DESMOND LIM**

Couples get to know each other on a whole new level when they travel together, and tiffs triggered by life on the road and constant togetherness are not unheard of. When Francesco and Birgit Galli Zugaro took their first major trip together, however, perfect harmony prevailed. Considering they were backpacking around the world for a year, spanning 1996 to 1997, that harmony was a very impressive achievement indeed.

"He was a great companion. We never got tired of each other," says Birgit. They met as students at Boston College in the US in the 1990s and by the time they embarked on this epic adventure, they had already been in a relationship for six years. They had gone on weekend vacations, visited each other's families (hers in Ecuador, his in Italy), and were living together when Francesco suggested travelling around the world.

"We were around 23, 24 years old and I thought it was a good time to drop all our responsibilities," he says. Birgit was up for it and they set off after saving enough money. Starting off in the Americas, they moved on to the South Pacific, Australia, Asia, and then ended the journey in Europe. Along the way, they relied on *Lonely Planet* guidebooks and stuck to a shoestring budget. The only place they splurged on a nicer hotel was in Bali, Indonesia, and it was by Francesco's design—that was where he proposed to Birgit.

"Looking back, it's the best money we've ever spent," he declares of the whole trip. And while their travel budgets are considerably more generous these days, "that sense of adventure lives in us now more than ever". Indeed, Francesco has always had a serious case of wanderlust. Born in Switzerland, the Italian-American lived in 14 countries growing up due to his stepfather's job as bureau chief for an international magazine. Later, he worked in New York and London before spending a decade in Ecuador, where he was vice president of marketing and sales for a cruise operator.

In 2007, eager for a new challenge, he launched Aqua Expeditions with financial backing from Birgit's father, and decided to base this boutique cruise line in Peru to capitalise on an untapped market for luxury Amazon river expeditions. "I was on board from the get-go. I knew it was his passion," says Birgit, a director of Aqua Expeditions. "Our three children were young then, and it was quite easy to pick up and go. I thought if he was ever going to start his own business, that was the time to do it."

They spent five years in Peru, before relocating to Singapore in 2012. Aqua Expeditions wanted to launch new cruises along the Mekong river, and Francesco picked Singapore over Hong Kong as the company's new global headquarters after being courted by the Economic Development Board. "Singapore is the perfect

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## "SINGAPORE IS THE PERFECT HUB IN TERMS OF SAFETY, EFFICIENCY, EDUCATION FOR OUR CHILDREN, AND ITS TRANSPORT LINKS TO THE REST OF THE WORLD"

— Francesco Galli Zugaro

hub in terms of safety, efficiency, education for our children, and its transport links to the rest of the world," he says.

Adjusting to life here turned out to be even easier than their move from Ecuador to Peru, where the family lived in the capital Lima. "We expected those two places to have more similarities, since they both have Latin American cultures. But the society in Lima was more closed," says Birgit, who is Peruvian-British, but had never lived in Peru prior to that stint. "Everyone in Singapore, locals and expatriates, has been very welcoming," Francesco agrees, "It's been a very soft landing."

## CRUISING FOR ADVENTURERS

In 1996, around the same time the couple were traipsing around the world, American author David Foster Wallace published an essay titled *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, about his experience of a seven-night Caribbean mega cruise on board a ship named *Zenith*. In the essay, which is fairly well-known, he renamed the vessel *Nadir*. "There is something about a mass-market Luxury Cruise that's unbearably sad," he wrote. "Like most unbearably sad things, it seems incredibly elusive and complex in its causes and simple in its effect: on board the *Nadir*—especially at night, when all the ship's structured fun and reassurances and gaiety-noise ceased—I felt despair. The word's overused and banalified now, *despair*, but it's a serious word, and I'm using it seriously."

The piece made such an impression on me when I read it years ago that I've never felt any inclination to go on a



Cashmere turtleneck  
sweater by Tod's;  
printed swim shorts  
by Etro; Panama brisa  
hat with grosgrain  
ribbon and Ever Chaine  
d'Ancre bracelet in  
silver, both by Hermès;  
sunglasses by Prada;  
Traveller Walk leather  
sneakers by Loro Piana







Cargo-style playsuit  
in cotton gabardine  
and Chaine d'Ancre  
Enchainée bracelet in  
silver, both by Hermès;  
sunglasses by Prada

cruise, I confess to the couple. Being very nice people, they say they completely understand but are quick to point out that the travel experience Aqua Expeditions offers is very different from that of a mega cruise. In fact, Francesco says most of their guests are first-time cruisers precisely because they are not drawn to typical cruises.

"The size of the ship dictates the type of guest," he explains. "In a 500- to 2,000-passenger ship, the vessel becomes the principal attraction, and guests could care less if they are going to the Bahamas or Bermuda. Our guests are looking for authentic adventures. So in our case, it's the destination that is the attraction."

That said, Aqua Expeditions' ships are no afterthoughts. There are three in its current fleet, and one more will be ready by the end of this year. Each has a maximum capacity of 40 guests. The latest to launch is *Aqua Blu* (where the couple is photographed for this story), which began plying the waters of East Indonesia in 2019, with itineraries that feature the Komodo National Park, Spice Islands and Raja Ampat. Like its sister vessels, *Aqua Blu* is designed to convey both contemporary elegance and a specific sense of place.

"This ship was a former naval vessel, and the main thing we confronted was what to keep and what to change," says Birgit. The former bag designer has been very involved in the interior design and retail selection of Aqua Expeditions' ships since the company's inception. "We decided to retain its beautiful Italian parquet floors, because they don't make them like this anymore. I also found some beautiful antique betel nut-crackers for the ship. Its history and the destination really inspired me. It became about striking a balance between keeping the ship's soul and bringing it more up to date," Francesco adds, "Every ship we design has a personal feel—everything from the decor to the plates is carefully curated and customised; nothing is cookie cutter."

Besides being well-appointed, these smaller vessels also have the advantage of being able to ply inland waterways. "No big ship can go where we go," Francesco points out. "The biggest challenge in mainstream cruising today is they are running out of ports, everybody is doing the same itineraries. By choosing coastal and river routes

and visiting smaller ports of call, we can access more authentic places and experiences, which attracts a younger and more active audience."

CEO Francesco dubs himself the company's chief exploration officer, since he is often the one discovering these adventures first through personal research. Once he deems these experiences special enough for guests (for example, swimming in a lake with pink dolphins), local guides will lead guests on these adventures. This relates to another aspect of their business model that the couple is very proud of.

"We hire locally, purchase products and services locally,

and all our ships are locally flagged, which means we pay local taxes," Francesco explains of Aqua Expeditions' operations in Peru, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and Singapore.

"It's very important for us to be seen as a local operator, and to build long-term relationships with local communities and give back."

The company is also conscientious about adopting eco-friendly practices, which range from eliminating single-use plastic items to responsible waste management measures. Sustainability is a personal passion of Francesco's. He spent several years managing a business in the Galápagos Islands, which is well-known for its environmental conservation. Increasingly, the well-travelled guests of Aqua Expeditions also expect rigorous sustainability standards.

"We want to help protect

these destinations and being a smaller company can be helpful," he says. "Any decision that gets made today can be implemented in a matter of weeks. We are very good listeners. If guests tell us we should be doing something, we can respond quickly. Innovation fuels our growth."

## CULTURAL ANCHOR

What does growth look like for this boutique company? Already, the age range of its guests begins in the late 40s, which is a fair bit younger than the typical cruise clientele. "And it's getting younger by the day," says Birgit. That said, the other end of that range has guests in their 70s. "We cater to people from multiple generations who are affluent explorers," says Francesco. While its main markets are the US, Canada, UK, Australia, Mexico,

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Brazil and Japan, Aqua Expeditions is using its Singapore base to develop its Asian markets, and demand from Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong is growing. In June, the company will announce a new destination. But the focus on affluent explorers and a meticulously curated approach will remain. “We are not a big volume business,” says Francesco.

As for their personal travels, believe it or not, there are still plenty of places in the world Francesco and Birgit have not yet visited, or at least not visited together. Nepal and Mongolia are on their wish list, and “Namibia is one place I’ve been to that I’d like to take her,” says Francesco.

With two of their children now in university in Europe, family vacations can be a bit more logistically challenging than before. When the kids were younger, however, some of the first places they visited as a family were Francesco’s and Birgit’s hometowns in Italy’s Rome and Ecuador’s Quito, respectively. “We want them to connect with these places, so that our favourite restaurants when we were growing up become their favourite restaurants,” says Francesco. “Language is also a priority for us,” adds Birgit. “We have always made sure to speak to them in Spanish and Italian at home.” So even for these practiced nomads who have learned to make home wherever they are, there are still ports of call where they find a unique resonance. 📍



Skye cashmere-blend turtleneck sweater and Open Walk suede shoes, both by Loro Piana; sunglasses by Prada

HAIR: MAKE-UP AND STYLING: CHRIS SIOU, USING REVORH PROFESSIONAL AND CLE DE PEAU BEAUTE; PHOTOGRAPHY: ASSISTANT ALFRED NG, STYLIST JOY TAN

