

An Indonesian Odyssey

Venturing deep into the country's outback aboard the newly launched *Aqua Blu*, Thomas Midulla discovers the hidden promise of a world where nature is king and a sense of blissful solitude is guaranteed

Photography by Anthony Do and Ken Kochey



Local Moluccan people greet the *Aqua Blu* from a pair of traditional kora-kora canoes with the forests of Banda Neira in the background

Their mouths gaping slowly and patiently as they lumber through the water, whale sharks make breakfast time a surprisingly civilised affair. These colossal creatures – at up to 54 tonnes, the largest fish in the world – gather each morning to feed in this krill-rich bay, a quiet, secluded spot off Moyo island, a near-uninhabited speck of land in the northern reaches of West Nusa Tenggara province.

You'd be forgiven for not knowing about this Indonesian hinterland, its last terra incognita – a spot so remote that Lawrence Blair, a documentary filmmaker and long-time explorer of the country's 17,000-plus islands, calls it "one of the last wild bits at the bottom of the garden of our world".

The whale sharks swarm the brightly painted boats of the local fisherman, who have been here since the pre-dawn hours to catch krill and squid unawares. The first butter-cream rays of sunrise are a cue for the immense spotted fish, who arrive on the scene just as the nets are hauled in. Man and beast share the morning's spoils – and this aquatic buffet has more than enough to go around.

It is well before 6am as we climb aboard a pair of tenders to witness this rarefied spectacle. Two whale sharks immediately attach themselves to our group. They are a welcome addition to our party, a diverse group of travellers from Australia, the United States, Mexico and Germany – all passengers on the maiden voyage of the *Aqua Blu*. For nearly an hour, it's just us, the fishermen, the fish and the gently undulating water beneath us. Not another soul for kilometres in any direction. As the decade closes in, genuine solitude feels more and more like an impossible aspiration. But today, I become reacquainted with the exhilarating sensation of being alone.

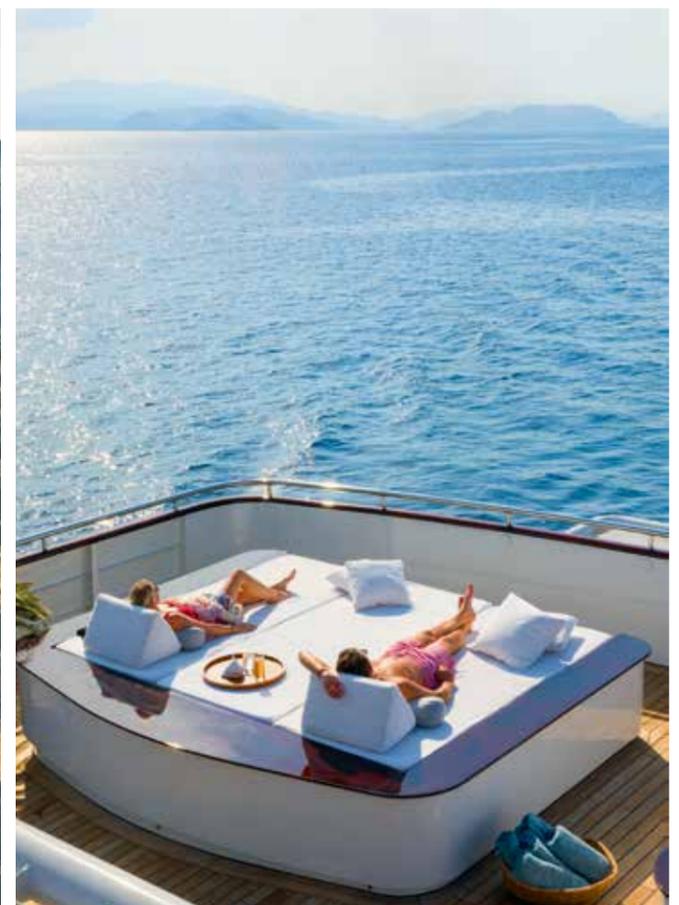
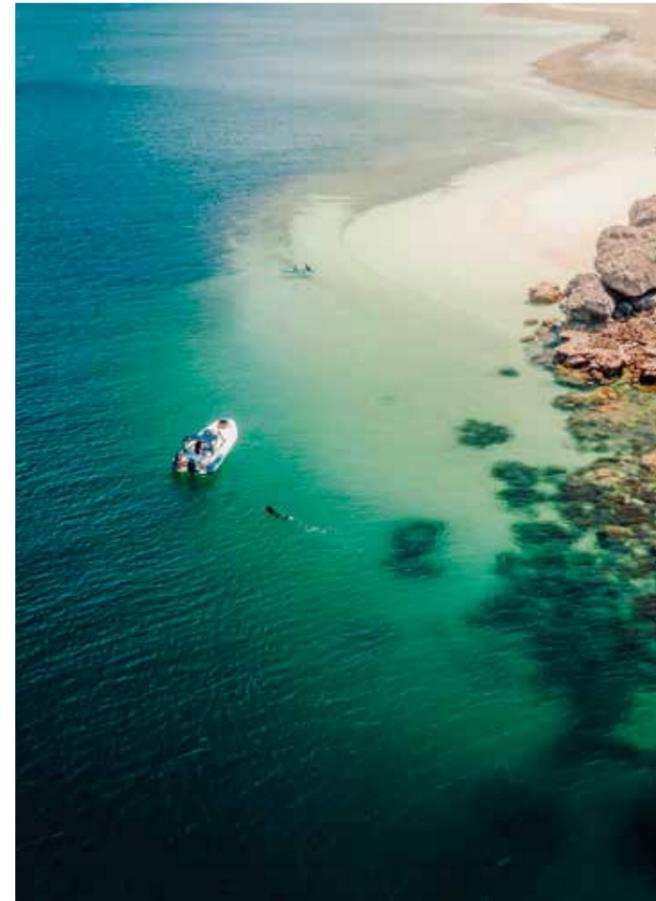
And this is exactly why Francesco Galli Zugaro, owner and CEO of Aqua Expeditions, created his unique venture, which he launched in the Peruvian Amazon with pair of game-changing, custom-built riverboats back in 2008. In 2014, he set a new standard for river cruising in Southeast Asia, debuting once-in-a-lifetime journeys across Vietnam and Cambodia aboard the *Aqua Mekong*. His objectives were always clear: to cater to modern-day explorers with tailored, expert-led, small-group excursions; to offer exceptional service, culinary delights and onboard comforts along the way; and to support and promote conservation efforts in the places they travel to.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: snorkelling along Batubilah island in Komodo National Park; an Abui villager performs a traditional lego-lego dance in Takpala, on Alor island; looking out into sea from daybeds on the *Aqua Blu*; Fort Belgica, a 17th-century structure on Banda Neira island; below: a bird's-eye view of Padar island

Though it took Galli Zugaro more than three years to gather all the necessary permits to navigate these remote waters, the *Aqua Blu* – a five-deck, 60m long-range, expedition-class yacht with just 15 sea-facing suites – seems entirely at home here, the very definition of unobtrusive. She was built 52 years ago and named *HMS Beagle* after the ship that carried biologist Charles Darwin on his history-making voyage. Her career began as a coastal surveyor for the Royal Navy, easing into retirement in 2002 when the soon-to-be-decommissioned vessel was given a new lease on life as a luxury charter yacht and re-dubbed the *MY Titan*.

Her third life began in early 2019. Galli Zugaro purchased the *MY Titan* for upwards of \$12m, and poured some \$2.5m into the refit. *Aqua Blu* is currently the only luxury expedition yacht plying Indonesia all year round, sailing eastwards in the autumn and westwards in the spring (always ahead of the big rains). Aqua Expeditions offers single-cabin bookings for a trio of voyages to either Komodo, Raja Ampat and the Spice Islands on seven-night itineraries departing from Bali, Labuan Bajo, Maumere, Ambon or Sorong. Four times a year, there are unique 12-night voyages that combine all three itineraries.

On 16 November 2019, the *Aqua Blu* is finally ready to embark on her next adventure. We're in Serangan, Bali, and as Lawrence Blair is regaling the first guests with tales of his adventures here in the early 1980s, occasionally quoting lines from his bestselling book *Ring of Fire: An Indonesian Odyssey*, Galli Zugaro is anxiously awaiting one last signature from the port authorities before he can fire up the ship's four Lister Blackstone >





motors and sail – for the first time with a full crew onboard – into the great blue beyond.

A sense of relief is written all across his face as the first waves crash against the ship's asphalt-grey hull. They mark the culmination of an odyssey, years of navigating financial, bureaucratic and logistical obstacles. They also mark the start of a breathtaking journey.

The maiden voyage will take us northeast across the Wallace Line, the faunal boundary between Asian and Australasian ecozones, and down the Lombok Strait, a 35km-wide passage connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans that is known for its extreme currents.

During the first night, the quantum zero-speed stabiliser earns its stripes, and I'm quite happy I'm not sailing this strait aboard a *phinisi*, those traditional wooden sailboats made by Bugis tribes in Sulawesi, which today are often used to transport tourists around these parts.

"By taking advantage of the boat, we can travel further and faster. Our itineraries can cover two, three or even four spots a day, whereas most boats will do one," explains Galli Zugaro. "The *phinisi* go to one or two places because they're iconic lookout posts or great diving spots, but they don't want to spend the fuel and navigate for ten hours. We can cover a big area that most boats won't – that's our advantage," he continues. "At night you can sleep well, and wake up somewhere totally different."

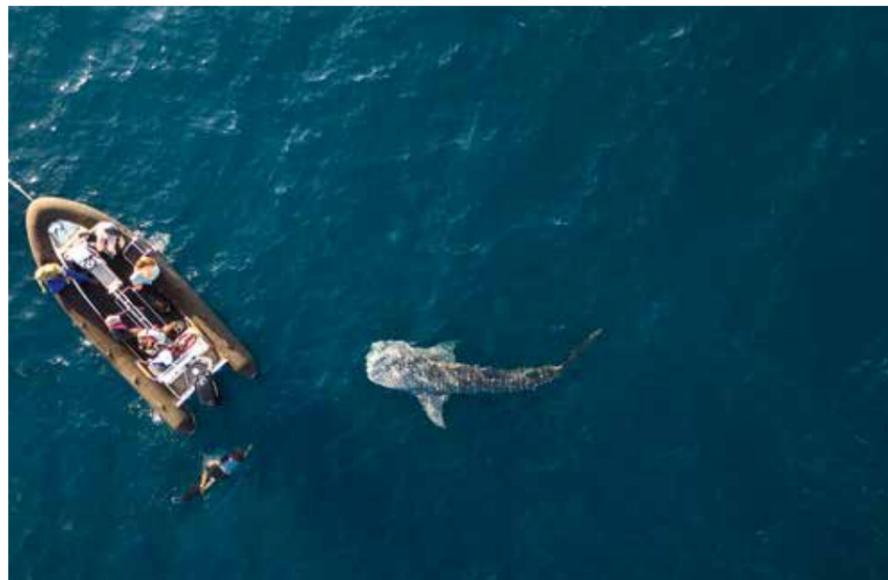
But even the *Aqua Blu* is not exempt from the raw power of nature. Overnight, we travel at a clip no faster than three knots, though we were meant to be travelling at eight. The countercurrent proved too strong. No one appears particularly bothered by the delay as, six hours behind schedule, we set anchor

From left: the Aqua Blu's plush interiors; diving into a pool of green at the Mata Jitu waterfall on Moyo island; below: a whale shark approaches an Aqua Blu tender

along the white-sand beaches of Moyo island. Journeys like this are always a little unpredictable.

"Sometimes you have days where you don't see exactly what you expect to see, but, you know, it's all right," says Galli Zugaro with the joy of man who appreciates nature's unpredictability. "You can look forward to kicking back, chatting with the other guests or guides, having a nice drink, an amazing meal ..." he trails off. "And that could be an incredible wagyu-beef pastrami appetiser prepared 48 hours *sous vide*, followed by an even better smoked short-rib beef *rendang*." (Onboard meals were dreamt up by Bali-based consulting chef Ben Cross.)

Life on board is very laid-back. At the first light of dawn, passengers emerge, barefoot, from their suites wearing T-shirts, shorts or bathing suits, ready for breakfast at the sky bar. Throughout the day you'll find them taking in magnificent views and a cocktail or two from a sunbed or reading in plush deckchairs. Some wander the ship, examining the collection of antique Indonesian maps that lines the walls, while others sip afternoon tea from china adorned with specially commissioned sketches of plants, insects and birds inspired by the work of Alfred Russel Wallace, the famed British naturalist who drew much of the inspiration for his scientific work from the region. It's details like this that remind guests of where they are, even if there's no land in sight.



"We want our guests to be on board and think, 'I feel comfortable, I feel relaxed.' I want them to feel like they can let their guard down," says Galli Zugaro. "It's not a cold cruise-ship kind of feel. During the refit, we just made better use of the space to create a private-yacht feel. We gave it a modern vibe, combining a classic yacht ambience with a more contemporary, toned-down look."

Of course, as is typical for any Indonesian itinerary, diving and snorkelling figure heavily in the programme – the region is, after all, at the very heart of the Coral Triangle, and the colourful display of rare marine life found here is second to none. Still, Galli Zugaro and his team have poured hours into designing land-based activities that are at least as eye-opening as those taking place below the water's surface.

At Moyo, we hop into a pair of Second World War-era Land Rover Defenders and scale a steep incline to the Mata Jitu waterfall. Here, we take refreshing dips into natural emerald-green pools. Waiting for us along the wall of a remarkable limestone cave are freshly cracked coconuts. The next day, we are kayaking across a 4,000-year-old crater lake on Satonda island when we are suddenly flocked by thousands of startled fruit bats.

Later, in the Komodo archipelago, we climb to the highest point on Padar island at sunrise, sharing our appreciation of the stunning panorama with a few white-bellied sea eagles.

"It's about always pushing the envelope and thinking outside the box. What can we do that's different?" explains Galli Zugaro. "That, for me, is the fun part. Going where no one's gone. I call it 'nine-to-five adventure'. People want to go out and sweat and get dirty as long as they can come back to plenty of hot water, nice service, a tasty meal and good conversation."

We make a sharp, hairpin turn into Horseshoe Bay at the southernmost tip of nearby Rinca island. Aboard the tender, surrounded by playing dolphins, we patrol its shores. On a beach far removed from the ranger station that caters to the day tourists, we spot two gigantic Komodo dragons slowly making their way towards the waterline to get a better look at us.

As the sun begins to set, we settle down on Pink Beach, where the crew has already prepared a sort of pop-up beach club for us. There are umbrellas, daybeds and plenty of refreshments, but Galli Zugaro has more on his mind than a sunset cocktail party. Earlier that day, we'd seen a great amount of plastic trash, washed in from the open sea, along the Komodo shoreline – a troubling sight for a man so deeply committed to the preservation of the beautiful landscapes that serve as a stage for all his expeditions.

After reporting the mess to the authorities, he commits to sponsoring a clean-up programme for the park – which is perennially lacking funds – to buttress Aqua's already substantial contributions to the WWF and the Manta Trust. Supporting the local community in conservation efforts has been a practice of Galli Zugaro's in all the places his company operates.

The expedition has opened up a part of the world my fellow passengers and I might never have been able to truly appreciate. For us, these waters, like the whale sharks, dolphins and mantas that call them home, have become a living, breathing organism – one eminently worthy of protection. Glass in hand, my gaze fixed on the brilliant tableau of colours of the sky as the sun casts the day's last light, the importance of the voyage I find myself on – this journey through one of the great gardens of our world – comes into sharper focus. aquaxpeditions.com ♦

PHOTOS FROM TOP: JASON CHILDS, READ MCKENDREE

LAND HO!



From top: horses freely roam the beaches at Nihi Sumba; the resort's Mamole Tree House suite

Whether pre- or post-voyage, these two resorts will perfectly anchor your Indonesian adventure

When in Bali ...

It's been nearly 25 years since its unveiling, but **The Legian Seminyak's** star still shines brighter than ever, offering up a handsome clutch of 67 suites – each with striking sea views – created by legendary Indonesian designer Jaya Ibrahim, a handful of seasonal dining outlets championing French-Asian fusion and a lavish spa administering treatments informed by local curative traditions. ihm-hotels.com

Beyond Bali

Set on the lush west coast of the remote isle Sumba, the award-winning **Nihi Sumba** has been topping best-of lists for years – and that with good reason. Its 27 grass-thatched villas draw heavily on local design practices, boasting elegantly crafted teak-wood furnishings, gorgeous Sumbanese artwork, massive four-poster beds as well as private

pools. There's a quintet of intriguing restaurants, including Kaboku, for fresh-caught seafood served *omakase*-style, and the sandy-floored Ombak, for à la carte breakfast and convivial sunset barbecues. There's also a near-endless roster of tailored activities – from horseback-riding and boogie-boarding to a unique chocolate-factory tour – that allow guests to connect more deeply to the resort's spectacular natural environs. Guests are also invited to embark on a "spa safari", an indulgent island adventure that begins with a twilight hike, a scenic treetop breakfast, a trip to a local village and is followed by full day of pampering treatments, from organic facials to body wraps. The more active-minded can't miss the resort's legendary on-site wave, a challenging – yet undeniably rewarding – surf ominously dubbed "God's Left". nihi.com