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Aqua marine

MARY LUSSIANA VISITS REMOTE CORNERS OF THE DIVERSE INDONESIAN ARCHIPELAGO ON THE INAUGURAL VOYAGE OF EXPEDITION YACHT *AQUA BLU*

Spread across the three decks of the handsome *Aqua Blu* are 15 spacious cabins, essays in muted gold and grey. In each one is a small green and white plate. It sits on the table beside the sumptuous beds and is ideal for dropping rings or earrings onto as lights are turned out and sleep sought.

Above, on the bridge, the captain pilots the expedition yacht under the night skies past palm-fringed islands where dragons roam; between the Spice Islands, where warm winds carry the fragrance of nutmeg, mace and cloves; and to the far-flung, turquoise-hued Raja Ampat Islands, whose waters contain the highest marine diversity on earth. Here, too, is an extraordinary salt-water lake to swim in, swarming with stingless golden medusa jellyfish. As dawn breaks on the many small and densely forested islands, such as Gam, birds of paradise perform their courtship dance, high up in the jungle canopy.

This is the sort of adventure I read about in childhood, with a torch under the bedsheets late at night, dreaming of treasure islands. But here it comes laced with luxury and worldly sophistication, on a yacht where the crew-to-guest ratio is 1:1. Dinner might be organic Javanese prawns with lime, while sundowners – sometimes enjoyed with our feet in the white sands of a deserted island, or on the top deck of our yacht – were unfailingly accompanied by a brazenly beautiful sunset.

But back to that green and white plate, which features a reproduction of a watercolour painted by British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace in 1855, while he was exploring this paradise of biodiversity. It is of a flying tree frog. This was the creature that persuaded him of the theory of natural selection, about which he published a paper with Charles Darwin that preceded the latter's *On the Origin of Species*. Wallace spent eight years documenting the flora and fauna of the Malay Archipelago and Indonesia, proposing what is now known as the Wallace Line, marking the biological discontinuity between the Asian and Australasian faunas. His book, *The Malay Archipelago*, is among the most celebrated travel writing on this region.

Wallace's sketches and watercolours were a starting point for the designer David Cole and Birgit Galli Zugaro, the wife of *Aqua Blu*'s owner, Francesco Galli Zugaro, when they were planning

how to overlay the work of Dutch yacht designer Cor D Rover. They asked Bali-based ceramics company Gaya to create a range of plates and dishes based on Wallace's artwork. Francesco tells me that, coincidentally, Wallace also spent time in the Amazon, which is where Francesco launched Aqua Expeditions in 2007. It fast became a leader in luxury small river cruises and soon expanded into the Mekong, building on its

trademark blend of local heritage, wildlife, fine food, along with contemporary design. But *Aqua Blu* is the group's first venture into coastal cruising.

There are more than 17,000 islands in the Indonesian Archipelago and *Aqua Blu* concentrates on three main areas within the Coral Triangle, running seven-night round-trip cruises around each throughout the year, as well as occasional 12-night cross-destination cruises that take in both the Spice Islands and Raja Ampat. The first cruise, departing from Bali, is around Komodo Island where the eponymous dragon remains a lure; then to Banda Island, or the Spice Islands, where old forts and colonial houses serve as reminders of the 16th- and 17th-century wars between European powers for control of the spice trade; and lastly, Raja Ampat, an unequalled aquatic paradise where coral boxfish and feather stars, giant clams and unicorn fish, black-tailed humbugs and red-toothed triggerfish became my underwater playmates.

Sailing in December for 12 nights, I was on the yacht's inaugural voyage, going from Flores to Raja Ampat to begin its season there. So the route was unique, giving me a teaser of both the Spice Islands and Raja Ampat, without the full experience. But what I saw – and the way in which I saw it – catapulted the trip onto my all-time favourites list. It was not just the enticing underwater world, rarer and more colourful than I have ever seen, but also the remoteness of where we were. For on *Aqua Blu*, the first expedition yacht permanently based in the Indonesian archipelago, we saw no passing traffic. It was the excitement of arriving in places like the Forgotten Islands, which outsiders last visited, the locals said, in 2005. It was seeing cashew nuts growing on trees, picking nutmegs off branches, or finding the islanders on Arborek in West Papua creating cribs for their homes for Christmas, toddlers playing at their feet – a familiar tradition in a foreign land. Unquestionably travel at its life-affirming best.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A voyage on *Aqua Blu* offers unforgettable experiences, including the chance to swim with whale sharks. With hidden lagoons and turquoise waters, the Raja Ampat Islands are some of the most beautiful in the world. Colourful style on the Forgotten Islands. Offering only 15 suites, *Aqua Blu* is an intimate way to see the wonders of the Coral Triangle. Banda Island's 17th-century Fort Belgica. Children on the Spice Islands. The Forgotten Islands archipelago stretches over 1,000km in length. *Aqua Blu*'s sundeck. Seeing Komodo dragons is a highlight. Fine dining on board. Guests can enjoy swimming and snorkelling from the yacht

Ways and Means

Mary Lussiana was a guest of Original Travel (020 3582 4990; originaltravel.co.uk). A 12-night voyage on *Aqua Blu* costs from £10,780, based on two sharing, all-inclusive, including flights and transfers □

