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NEW FRONTIERS

A river runs through it

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For Francesco Galli Zugaro the world is not enough. As of 2021 he operates four explorer vessels that ply the Mekong River, the Spice Islands and the farthest reaches of the Amazon River. The greatest adventure? It has just set sail. His latest launch, *Aqua Nera*, stalks big cats and scarlet macaws in the Peruvian rainforest wetlands.



Francesco Galli Zugaro owns four explorer vessels ranging from 15 to 20 suites. It's no surprise to discover that he was a born pioneer. "My mother is American, while my Roman father spent years as a company director in Iran and Mexico." There was a second reason for Galli Zugaro's peripatetic childhood. "My stepfather was bureau chief for *Time* magazine. So every two years we shifted from Britain to Germany, from Israel to Lebanon." Galli Zugaro learnt to pack a sense of adventure and a good book.

In spite of his airport lounge upbringing - or perhaps because of it - Galli Zugaro found a role in financial risk management in London. The stable job in the Square Mile was followed by a private equity position in Ecuador. "This firm had the opportunity to purchase a luxury tourism business in the Galapagos," recalls Galli Zugaro. "So I sourced a second-hand supply vessel in Spain, then took it to Fort Lauderdale for conversion into an expedition yacht." The sense of adventure returned.

Galli Zugaro and his Anglo-Peruvian wife witnessed how coastal cruising could ignite a destination. They could snorkel with Galápagos penguins one day. Spot Bryde's whales from deck the following morning. Then scuba with a thousand hammerheads the next. "A private yacht was the perfect way to see wildlife in distant National Parks. Although keeping a remote expedition yacht supplied was an education in logistics."

The world's most remote National Parks lie in mainland South America. Amacayacu in Colombia is a case in point. It's alive with cougars, manatees and Amazonian river dolphins - yet it can only be reached by boat. Galli Zugaro saw first-hand how capitalism meets conservation in the form of Douglas Tompkins. The founder of outdoor clothing company The North Face had slowly purchased 810,000 hectares (2 million acres) of isolated land in Argentina and Chile, which was originally slated for logging or development. Tompkins gifted the land back to each state as conservation areas and National Parks.

IMAGE Luxury river explorer *Aqua Nera*.



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After much research Galli Zugaro pinpointed Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon. It remains the largest city in the world to remain inaccessible by road. “Around Iquitos is the Pacaya Samiria National Park,” he explains. “This seasonally flooded forest feeds the Amazon River,” which contains a third of all recorded animal species. Galli Zugaro hired a speedboat then spent ten days exploring. “I knew a shipyard. I hired an interior designer. I added a world class chef. And kind of put this river exploration dream together.”

That dream has now doubled. In July 2021 Galli Zugaro launched *Aqua Nera*, the larger sister of *Aria Amazon*, which launched in 2010. Both river explorer vessels are custom built to cruise the Amazon in six star luxury while emitting minimal noise or wake. Both can be chartered as full-boat cruises with Camper & Nicholsons.

Aqua Nera and *Aria Amazon* each host naturalist guides, rooftop viewing platforms and low emission explorer skiffs. The latter are used to see coatis, king vultures and scarlet macaws, plus South America’s elusive large cats. Amazonia infiltrates each yacht’s fine dining salons. Recipes like river fish ceviche with cocona lime juice were crafted by consultant ‘jungle chef’ Pedro Miguel Schiaffino from Malabar in Lima, which ranks among San Pellegrino’s World’s Best Restaurants.

Galli Zugaro’s other yachts mirror the concepts found in his Amazon adventures: wildlife, world-class dining, a cultural component and a crew-to-guest

ratio found in the world’s best hotels - all priced on an all-inclusive tariff. *Aqua Mekong* was launched in 2014 to navigate between Vietnam and Cambodia. It has bikes, kayaks, a plunge pool and a Michelin-starred consultant chef famed for his Indochinese cuisine. *Aqua Blu* launched in 2019. It was refitted to cruise Indonesia’s farther corners with a PADI dive centre, cetacean spotting guides and Balianese masseurs.

His destinations may be dreamlike, but Galli Zugaro is a pragmatist. His yachting USP is to deliver the sole luxury vessel in a uniquely inaccessible location. “Perhaps you’ve seen *Fitzcarraldo*?” he asks. “It’s the Werner Herzog film where a guy sails a river boat up the Amazon River to Iquitos, with the logistical nightmare that entails.” Finance not romance is the Italian’s style. “Some entrepreneurs fall in love with the idea of a luxury hotel in a romantic location,” he explains. “I call that a ‘build it and they will come’ attitude. Our model involves logistical and financial planning to serve adventurous clients already familiar with Antarctic adventures and Indian tiger safaris.”

Due diligence has gone into Zugaro’s current address. “After much research we decided to base our businesses in Singapore,” he explains. “My work sends me to exotic locations yet I want to come home to good schools, great security and business transparency.” The same maxim applies to his four expedition ships. “Our guests can enjoy a 9-5 wildlife adventure but they expect high pressure showers and fine dining on their return.” It’s a sense of adventure, with modern luxury weaved in.



PREVIOUS PAGE *Aqua Nera*'s Amazonian-inspired indoor lounge. One of the vessel's 20 suites.
THIS PAGE Expert naturalist guides lead daily shore excursions.