



There's a serious face-off underway – a pudgy silvery bronze sea lion with a fine set of whiskers has stopped in front of me on the magenta-coloured beach and is staring intently.

I look to the left; he turns the same way. I turn to the right, and he copies me. Affectionately known as the puppies of the sea, this old doggie seems as intrigued in me as I am in him. Aware of the rules surrounding animal encounters in the Galápagos Islands, which is to keep your distance – he's making all the moves.

Minutes pass and I retreat as he nonchalantly shuffles by and slips into the blue waters of the Pacific, ignoring his buddies sunbaking on the beach and rocks on Rábida Island. It's one of many precious nature encounters during a week in these amazing islands, located about 1,000km from continental Ecuador. Regardless of the books I have read and docos watched, my first steps into this animal wonderland and surreal landscape makes my heart beat a little faster.

There are 13 main islands with volcanic landscapes featuring black lava fields with cartoon-like prickly pear cactus and incense trees, red, black and white sandy beaches, volcanic shields and cones and mountains, craters and cliffs. There's a magic about these islands where time seems to have stood still and I am grateful for this front-row seat to watch nature in all her glory while retracing some of the steps of English naturalist Charles Darwin.

Home for seven nights is the gleaming superyacht *Aqua Mare*. It is the fifth addition to the Aqua Expedition fleet founded in 2007 by Francesco Galli Zugaro, who has followed his dream to bring the first luxury expedition ship to the Galápagos, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978.

He and his wife and business partner, Aqua Expeditions Director Birgit Galli Zugaro, first backpacked here in their early 20s and have never forgotten the exhilaration of its many wonders. "It's a trip that has stayed with us all these years and it's just as thrilling each time you return – you never tire of seeing the wildlife on land and in water and my wish has been to bring a super-comfortable boat to the area where people could retreat after their adventures," he says. For an entrepreneur who is constantly planning, it hasn't been an easy task

with pandemic hold-ups and bureaucratic challenges along the way, but Galli Zugaro, who has luxury boats based in the Amazon, Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia, is determined, ambitious and risk-management savvy. While many would have given up, he didn't.

How does it feel? Galli Zugaro smiles: "It's exciting and I think we have something very special to offer by bringing the best to these islands, while respecting them as well."

ADVENTURE MEETS COMFORT

With only seven suites and 16 crew, the sleek and chic 50m-long *Aqua Mare* is small enough to evoke feelings of ownership – you really feel that you are on your own private yacht with a few friends. Think luxury, service, comfort and attention to detail – that's what *Aqua Mare* is all about and it's a haven after a hectic day of exploring these islands.

Our inaugural cruise itinerary includes excursions to the western islands including Santa Cruz, Floreana, Isabela, Fernandina, Santiago, Rábida, North Seymour and Mosquera that are all different and home to various animal species and

Clockwise from below: Meet curious locals like land iguanas in the Galápagos Islands; The cabins on the *Aqua Mare* feature lavish interiors; Feast on fresh seafood plus Ecuadorian dishes with an Andean twist; The many activities include kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding; The islands boast exquisite bird life.

bird life. There's nothing like returning to *Aqua Mare* after treks across black lava fields or scrub where you spot male blue-footed boobies doing a mating dance, male frigate birds showing off their tomato-red throat pouches to win hearts, giant tortoises lumbering by and land iguanas lazing. Snorkelling adventures include swimming with rainbow-coloured fish, giant turtles and playful sea lions that tumble around you.

As well as luxury, there's an emphasis on learning and discovery. Two excellent naturalist guides, Karen Ascencio and David Paez from the Galápagos National Park, share their knowledge on land and in the water. Both are proud to show their homeland to tourists, emphasising the importance to preserve them for the future. "It is a privilege to showcase these islands to visitors and that they leave with a greater understanding of how special it is," says Paez.

The superyacht was built in 1998 and includes interiors designed by François Zuretti and exteriors by the Italy-based Studio Scanu. The 2021 refurbishment was led by Birgit and Aqua's Bangkok-based designer, David Cole. They aimed to refurbish the



"THERE ARE MANY PINCH-ME MOMENTS ON THIS TRIP."

superyacht in line with the Aqua fleet experience, toning down the colours and creating a casual elegance. These days it's all about understated glamour at its best, and Cole and Birgit have expertly worked their magic.

Our spacious stateroom has a spa bath and sauna tucked in the en suite, while the spacious bedroom has lots of hanging space, a bed that beckons you to linger, and all the trimmings. But it's out on deck that I love the most – either sitting at the bow, watching birds divebomb into the inky seas or at pre-dinner drinks when the skies turn cerise as we toast another day in paradise.

The Panoramic Lounge, with horseshoe couches and elegant décor complete with Jim Thompson fabric cushions with a subtle pattern reflecting lava and ash strata, is the scene of nightly debriefs, pre-dinner drinks, lectures and documentaries.

Cosy window seats are ideal for curling up and reading a book from the thoughtfully curated library of



FAST FACTS

Aqua Mare has seven suites over five categories and three decks, including a sumptuous 80m² owner's suite.

There's a swim platform off the rear and a beach club area for relaxing. Snorkelling gear is supplied. aquaexpeditions.com

titles on exploration, the Galápagos, birds, animals and plants selected by Birgit. Delicate antique prints feature on the walls including a Galápagos flamingo that Birgit and youngest daughter, Alessia, 18, found at Argosy, a New York antiquities bookstore.

Days are filled with excursions, Zodiac rides, treks, snorkelling, stand-up paddle boarding and kayaking and it's no wonder it's so easy to fall asleep and dream of Galápagos adventures.

DELICIOUS DINING

Fresh Ecuadorian recipes with an Andean twist have been created by Peruvian Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, who has championed Amazonian cuisine, leaves a memorable impression. Weeks later I can recall those fresh tastes and exquisite flavours from our daily feasts.

His recipes are replicated by the affable Erick Arreaga, an Ecuadorian chef, who twirls his moustache in

Poirot fashion as he takes centre stage in a cooking class making Ecuadorian cerviche. The menu features shrimp encocoda, nigiri sushi, lobster lettuce wraps, delicate potato llapingachos, tuna crudo, tender beef and fresh seafood. Casual meals include the best poke bowl, burgers, tacos and a barbecue, followed by sweet taste sensations of passion suspiro, fresh fruit and the lightest chocolate mousse made with the world's best Ecuadorian cocoas. Homemade churros dipped in chocolate are simply decadent.

An Aqua Bloody Mary, made with high Andean mashua and tree tomato in place of the traditional horseradish and tomato, is popular onboard and South American drops feature on the impressive wine list. Each Aqua boat has its own special plateware designed by Birgit and Cole and made by Gaya Ceramic in Bali: for *Aqua Mare* it is decorated with the flora and fauna of the archipelago with golden streaks.

MOMENTS OF AWE

The longer you spend in the Galápagos the more you want to know about the mysteries of these islands where animals are not fearful of visitors. I'm smitten by those giant tortoises moving ever so slowly, the pinky orange flamingos with their spindly legs 'hoovering' food along the shore and the nimble Galápagos penguins. Even the iguanas are fascinating: after arriving on *HMS Beagle* in 1835, Darwin referred to them as "hideous-looking creatures", but in the water swam "with perfect ease and swiftness". We retrace his steps on a climb to a lookout over Darwin Lake on Isabela Island for spectacular views and a sense of awe descends: it's a place where the magnitude of the landscape takes hold and a sense of the need to preserve takes over.

There are many pinch-me moments on this trip of a lifetime, from dining under a starry sky canopy in the shadows of these islands, a chance sighting of flying giant mantr rays and that rendezvous with the cutest sea lion ever – it's a place of wonder, made even sweeter on board the *Aqua Mare*.

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Auckland Zoo has done its part in helping to preserve Galápagos tortoises with five tiny tortoise hatchlings emerging from their shells. mindfood.com/zoo-turtles

AQUA EXPEDITIONS

Lizard Lounge

Relax in luxury on board the first true superyacht in the Galápagos Islands before exploring the incredible fauna and flora of this legendary locale.

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