

ANDREW HARPER AT SEA

A GALÁPAGOS GAME CHANGER

There's no more exclusive way to tour this extraordinary archipelago



The prospect of exploring the Galápagos Islands, where it feels as if you're standing on the far edge of the world, always stirs a thrill within me. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1978, this remote archipelago of 21 islands and more than 100 islets off the coast of Ecuador seems like another planet, since the animals dotted around shrubby lava flows, surreal cactus stands and gleaming beaches

haven't developed any fear of humans. Iguanas, boobies, sea lions and giant tortoises all go about their business, often next to or on top of footpaths, seemingly unbothered by camera-toting tourists just a few feet away.

What drew me back this time was a new 164-foot-long superyacht, the *Aqua Mare*, which made its inaugural voyage in June 2022. We've had wonderful cruises with other Aqua Expeditions ships along

the Amazon and Mekong rivers, and the idea of a week in the Galápagos aboard an exclusive seven-cabin vessel was irresistible.

Our itinerary actually began on the mainland, with an Aqua Expeditions staff

Above: *Aqua Mare* superyacht. Opposite, clockwise from top: *Aqua Mare* zodiac, Galápagos land iguana and blue-footed booby

member greeting us at Quito's Mariscal Sucre International Airport. She ushered us past the general security lines to a side entry that we effortlessly breezed through and on to our flight's gate. On arrival at the airport on Baltra Island, we were escorted to a VIP lounge to meet our two naturalist guides, as well as the other passengers with whom we would

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be spending the seven-night eastern Galápagos cruise (the *Aqua Mare* holds a maximum of 16 guests). The group's wide age range, from 10 to about 70, didn't prevent it from quickly becoming convivial.

With its contemporary silhouette and sleek tones of gray and white, the *Aqua Mare* looked quite striking as we approached by tender. Greeted by our cruise director with glasses of fresh fruit juices and cool towlettes, we entered the grand, panoramic main lounge, which is centered by a huge U-shaped sofa and surrounded by floor-to-ceiling picture windows. The warm welcome and the ship's elegant yet unpretentious décor made an excellent first impression.

Unusually, the smallest cabin, comprising 172 square feet, is on the highest deck. The main deck includes the expansive Owner's Suite, with 861 square feet, and a second cabin of 280 square feet. One deck below are four



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more accommodations, each measuring 301 square feet. Our cabin, one of the latter, featured polished walnut-veneered

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lined walls, Jim Thompson fabrics, thoughtful lighting design (managed with intuitive switches) and marble and brass finishings. The design kept both relaxation and functionality in mind,

and clever storage solutions maintained the room's uncluttered feel after we unpacked. Waking to arresting views of cerulean waters and dramatic volcanic contours through our window was a consistent pleasure.

The 1:1 crew-to-passenger ratio helped assure that our every wish was fulfilled — even those we didn't know we had. Housekeeper Jayro was always thorough and discreet; we never encountered him while he serviced our cabin. Sergio quickly learned our cocktail preferences and went out of his way to make each drink more interesting and creative than the last. Our tender driver, Darwin, enthusiastically described the history of the islands and was always the first to spot dolphins, penguins and sea turtles from afar. And our young naturalist guides, Isabela and Federico, impressed us at every turn. Their passion for the islands was contagious, and despite their years of professional experience, they



expressed obvious joy as we observed honking sea lions protecting their babies, male frigate birds inflating their startlingly bright-red gular pouches to attract females, sunbathing black marine iguanas piled on top of one another and waved albatrosses flapping their enormous wings.

Our days soon took on a pattern, starting with 7 a.m. breakfasts of fresh fruits, eggs and Ecuadorian pastries, followed by morning expeditions exploring islands on foot. After lunch back on board, we would meet to change into wetsuits and fins for snorkeling excursions. Evenings began with well-earned drinks in the main lounge, paired with recaps of our adventures presented by our dynamic naturalist guides, who also explained the agenda for the following day. We would then savor delicious meals created by chef Erick Arreaga, under the consultation of renowned chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino. The imaginative Nikkei (Japanese-Peruvian) cuisine was beautifully presented on bespoke dishes



From left: Owner's Suite, alfresco dining and panoramic lounge aboard the *Aqua Mare*



by Bali-based Gaya Ceramic, which creates the crockery for all Aqua ships. We would often end our evenings at the stern to observe sharks schooling below.

However, our days were never repetitive. Each island in the Galápagos has its own distinctive features. One morning, we trekked across jet-black lava fields that had solidified into great ripples on Santiago Island. On another, we hiked past sea lions basking on the sandy shores and mangrove-lined lagoons of Isabela Island. The wildlife also varies greatly, especially since many species are endemic to a single landmass. The hybrid iguana, for example, can only be found on South Plaza Island. Each day offered ever-changing landscapes and unique wildlife sightings.

One reason the animals have a lack of apprehension is due to the strict rules set by the Galápagos National Park office. Ships have carefully regulated routes, and a certified national-park guide must accompany all visitors. Snorkeling is confined to certain areas and times, and

on shore, one must keep to the marked paths. The regulations require guests and crew of the *Aqua Mare* to take punctuality quite seriously.

One passenger mentioned that the continuous rush to the next activity reminded him of summer camp as a kid, and indeed, the packed itinerary left little time for recuperation. Eventually, we took an unscheduled break, skipping a paddleboarding outing just to lounge on the teak-wood sun deck and admire the breathtaking vistas and frigate birds soaring overhead. As we relaxed, in turn, in the hot tub, on the deck loungers and in the main lounge, we felt as though we had our own private yacht. It was a luxurious afternoon later augmented by a memorable snorkeling excursion: We encountered a Galápagos shark nonchalantly swimming by just as a penguin zipped past and a sea lion emerged from behind a large rock to swim around our group.

Our week aboard the *Aqua Mare* flew by and left us craving more. We understand why the 14-day combined east-and-west itinerary is so popular. The superyacht stands out for its stylish and contemporary design, its low

passenger count and, most important, its incomparable service. The wonderful crew deserves special commendation. I've been to the Galápagos several times, but this exclusive and immersive journey aboard one of the most luxurious vessels in the archipelago was my favorite. **HR**

Note: Aqua Expeditions provided this cruise on a complimentary basis to our editor.

AQUA MARE

LIKE The thoughtful design of our cabin; the gourmet cuisine; our exceptional guides who brought the Galápagos to life; the no-shoes-indoors policy.

DISLIKE The strictly regulated schedule left little unstructured time to enjoy the ship itself. We would have preferred meeting the full crew on our first day, rather than on our last night.

GOOD TO KNOW The western itinerary can have rougher seas; the yacht is available for full charters.

CABIN TO BOOK The 860-square-foot Owner's Suite is one of the most luxurious cabins aboard any ship in the Galápagos.

BENEFITS One complimentary massage per person (exclusions apply) and a private dinner with one bottle of sparkling wine.

RESERVE Call the Travel Office to book your cruise at (800) 375-4685.