

# Traveller

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SHOWCASE

# Small wonder

There's boutique cruising and then there's Aqua Expeditions: its ocean-going ships carry no more than 30 guests.

Started in 2007 by Francesco Galli Zugaro, the company has closely followed its founder's vision of delivering intimate, small-ship expeditions to some of the world's most remote destinations, pairing superyacht-level luxury with serious exploration.

Last year, French cruise company Ponant Explorations Group acquired a majority stake in Aqua Expeditions, raising questions about whether the brand's boutique ethos might change.

So far, it hasn't. Aqua continues to operate independently, with Galli Zugaro and his senior leadership team still at the helm, and its hallmark focus on small ships, low guest numbers and off-the-map itineraries intact.

That continuity is evident in Aqua Lares, the line's newest ocean-going vessel, which launches in February. The ship and its itineraries bear the hallmarks of what has

made Aqua a quiet success in the high-end expedition cruise sector.

At 77.4 metres, Aqua Lares accommodates just 30 guests across 15 suites, including three generous Owner's Suites. More than 50 years after first leaving the shipyards, it has been transformed into a luxury expedition superyacht offering sophisticated decor, generous proportions and a high space-to-guest ratio.

*It's a luxury expedition superyacht offering ... generous proportions and a high space-to-guest ratio.*

Aqua Lares is Aqua Expeditions' third ocean-going vessel, joining Aqua Blu and Aqua Mare, and its sixth ship overall, including three river vessels operating in the Amazon and Mekong.

Its first season will be in East Africa sailing five- to 22-night itineraries through the Seychelles, the Zanzibar Archipelago and along the Tanzanian coast, regions

prized for marine biodiversity, coral reefs and pristine islands.

Later in the year, the ship relocates north for a Norwegian Arctic and Svalbard season, with Scottish Isles itineraries bookending the polar summer.

Guests can expect a superyacht experience in line with Aqua's signature standards: a 1:1 crew-to-guest ratio, expert-led excursions ashore and by Zodiac and great cuisine.

On Aqua Lares, culinary direction is by Karime Lopez, the first Mexican woman to earn a Michelin star for her work as head chef at Florence's Gucci Osteria da Massimo Bottura. Australian chef Benjamin Cross continues to oversee cuisine aboard Aqua Blu, the line's ocean vessel dedicated to the exploration of eastern Indonesia.

"The launch of Aqua Lares marks an

exciting new chapter for Aqua Expeditions," says founder Francesco Galli Zugaro. "East Africa has held a special place in my heart since my first safari at age seven, and it's surreal to now return with our own expedition yacht. This region offers a rare kind of adventure and complements our voyages in the Galapagos and Indonesia."

Interiors on Aqua Lares are by design director Birgit Galli Zugaro, in collaboration with Milan-based yacht specialists Hot Lab. The look is five-star but unfussy, with an emphasis on comfort suited to days spent exploring rather than formal evenings. The ship carries three, 6.5-metre Zodiacs and two 8.5-metre Rafnar tenders along with paddleboards, kayaks, snorkel/dive equipment, and mountain bikes.

From \$US9000 (\$13,200) a person for a five-night itinerary. For those with the means for ultimate exclusivity, Aqua Lares can also be chartered, from \$US385,000 (\$563,000) for five nights. See [aquaexpeditions.com](http://aquaexpeditions.com)

Julietta Jameson