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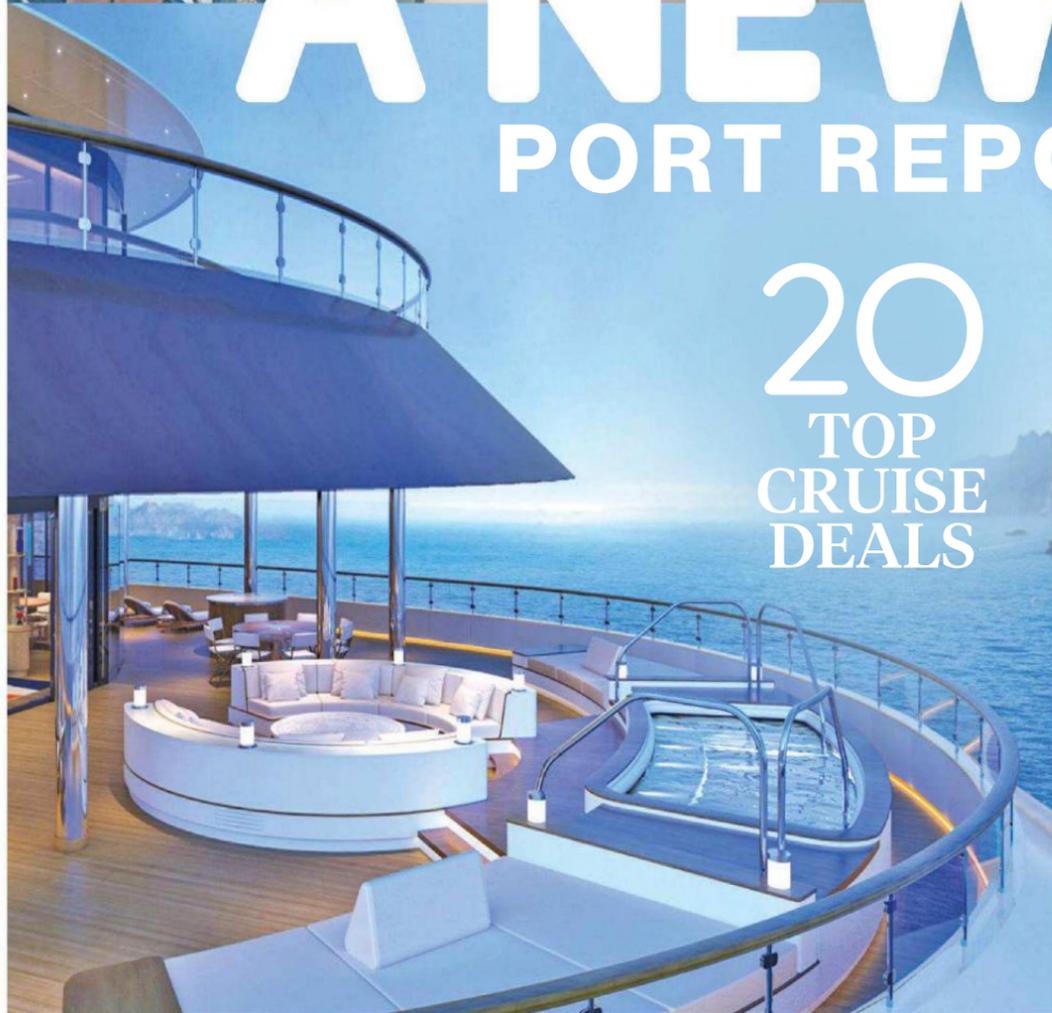


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Aqua Lares in the Arctic. Clockwise from left: render of Four Seasons I; Oceania Vista off Santorini; render of Royal Caribbean's Legend of the Seas.



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Santa Cruz Island



From top: Blue-footed boobies on Santa Cruz Island in the Galápagos archipelago; guests on a Zodiac tour; a land Iguana.



Close encounters of the animal kind

Set your compass towards the remote wilds of the Galápagos and get up close with nature, writes Jana Frawley

Less than a day of my arrival in the Galápagos Islands and minutes into my first time as a birdwatcher, I spot seven blue-footed boobies. A few hours later, 10 turtles are bobbing and weaving their way around my kayak, the occasional sea lion randomly popping their head above the water whack-a-mole style.

On a Zodiac excursion the following morning, I count around 200 marine iguanas basking on a craggy basalt headland, the biggest of the group engaging in some kind of prehistoric UFC battle for supremacy. Sally Lightfoot crabs scutter nearby, their vivacious bright-coloured shells the complete opposite of the perfect camouflage of the reptiles' blackened skin.

What follows over the course of the next week touring with Aqua Expeditions is a bonanza of flora, fauna and marine life so abundant that I realise logging animals one by one is best left to the conservationists who monitor and protect this region. Instead, with the help of the excellent guides, Yvonne and Isabela, I learn that collective nouns are a more useful and entertaining approach to tracking what I see. All those iguanas? A mess. The turtles? A bale, but the giant tortoises, which (very, very) slowly roam the islands are a creep. If I'm lucky, I'll soon be seeing a charm of finches or even a waddle of penguins.

I'm sailing on the 50m superyacht *Aqua Mare* exploring the western side of the Galápagos. The archipelago, formed by volcanoes millions of years ago, is an environmental and scientific colossus full of endemic and biodiverse lifeforms. It was brought to world attention by naturalist Charles Darwin when he devised the theory of evolution and natural selection

after his voyage of the HMS *Beagle* in 1835. The area is now a national park, marine reserve, Unesco World-Heritage site, and obsession of professional and amateur geologists, zoologists, volcanologists, biologists, botanists, and pretty much every other -ist interested in the natural world.

It's also a firm fixture on the destination bingo cards of outdoorsy folk, intrepid travellers and holidaymakers with a penchant for the wild and rare. The islands are remote – 1000km off the coast of Ecuador – and the overall visitor numbers are limited.

Adventure time

The Aqua Expeditions experience is even more exclusive. There are 11 guests on my sailing – with maximum capacity for 16 – and on our first full day on and around Floreana Island, we don't see a single other vessel or person beyond our group. This feeling of isolation is almost constant for the remainder of the journey as tour schedules are coordinated with other operators to ensure we have nearly every stop all to ourselves.

The expedition component of the trip starts daily at 8am or 9am, the Zodiac skippers dropping us straight onto the beach or a handy natural dock of volcanic rock and later in the afternoon doing the same. There is no man-made infrastructure, no signs or docks or souvenir shops, just precious nature. We are led by mainland Ecuadorean Yvonne, a guide with 31 years' experience, and Isabela, a Galapagueña who provides rich detail about the history and current state of her island home.

It's on these coastal treks that we meet the famously nonchalant Galápagos animals. It's predictable that



> **DISCOVER**

The Galápagos Islands are a pinnacle destination for wildlife-lovers and adventurous travellers drawn to remote, natural locations.

Aqua Expeditions' all-inclusive luxury tour of the western archipelago on the *Aqua Mare* superyacht is a seamless way to see islands such as Floreana, Fernandina, Isabel, Santiago, Rabida, Santa, Islands, Seymour Norte and Mosquera.

> **PLAN**

Aqua Expeditions offers year round, seven-night itineraries to the west or east of the Galápagos or 14 nights to both. Seasonality will affect the wildlife on display.

Tours begin at the VIP collection point in Baltra's Seymour Airport, with daily flights on LATAM from Quito and Guayaquil in Ecuador. The maximum time off the boat at any one stretch is about two hours and step counts stay low – 3.5km is our biggest day – but you'll need an element of fitness and dexterity for getting in and out of Zodiacs on mixed tidal and rock surfaces.

> **BOOK**

Seven-night tours on *Aqua Mare* start at \$16,880 per person all-inclusive (flights costs are separate).

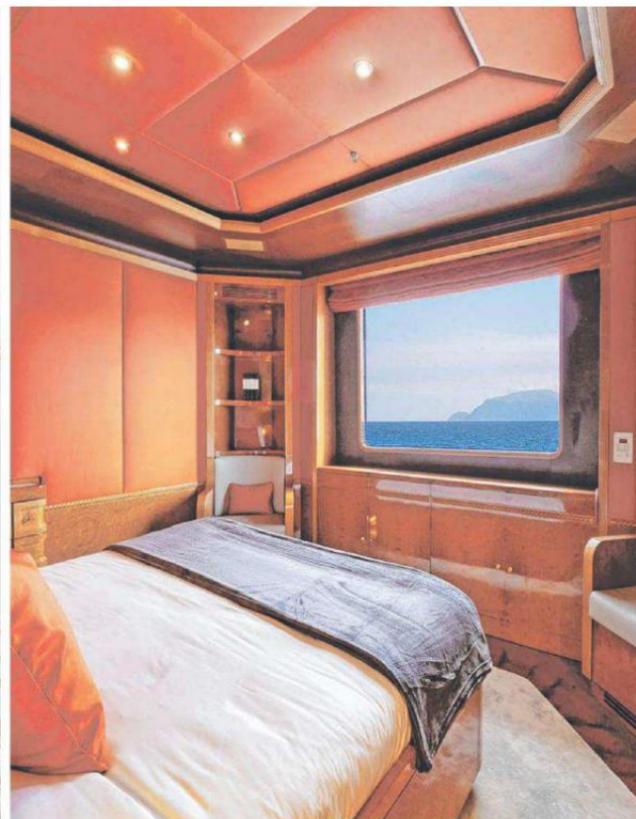
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the heartbreakingly cute sea lions are a favourite of everyone. I estimate we see more than 250 over the seven days. Sometimes they're snoozing in colonies on rocks, the sun drying their oily dark coats golden; other times they're solo, lumbering on the beach crumbing themselves like schnitzel on the sand or barking at a rival trying to take over the harem. They don't bat their dewy eyes at our presence – it's almost as though we're invisible – and one day on Mosquera Islet it's quiet enough that we can hear a pup suckle.

The land iguanas are just as impervious and don't flinch when I zoom my camera close enough to count the scales on their yellowy backs. So tame are the birds that rather than flying off when we approach them they look directly at the lens of my iPhone like a model at a casting call. By the end of the trip I'm basically a wildlife photographer.

The weather fluctuates between cloudless blue skies and diamante water and overcast and choppy, and the early-November weather changes from cool to mild to occasionally hot. The ocean is perfect for a quick refreshing dip but requires wetsuits for the daily hour-long snorkelling tours.

The underwater world is just as lively as on land, with schools of wrasse, surgeon- and angelfish, galaxies of starfish and pencil sea urchin, and the occasional manta ray or white-tipped shark. The most-exciting moment is a sea lion in a playful game of chicken with us, my GoPro capturing it arrowing directly at me before ducking over my shoulder with centimetres to spare.



The superyacht experience

Life on board *Aqua Mare* is effortless. The 16 crew provide premium service, always at the ready with the Galápagos handshake – the sailor's grip for getting on and off the Zodiac – or to present you with a cooling drink or help readjust your fins and snorkel. There always seems to be a spare pair of binoculars for someone who has forgotten theirs and if there's a deviation from the plan, we never hear of it. At cocktail hour on day one, we solve the mystery of the missing swimsuit when we learn our wet cossies are regularly whisked away from showers and returned washed and dried in time for our next snorkel.

The South American-style food, served at a communal table, is exceptional. There's an emphasis on fresh ingredients and traditional recipes done with a modern twist. My highlights are prawn encocado, a traditional coastal Ecuadorean dish made with coconut; Peruvian ceviche; tuna encebollado, a soupy stew; soft tacos and fajitas with all the extras; and slow-roasted pork with Andean potatoes. The Margarita ice-cream and various other tarts and cakes are delicious finales, and the Chilean and Argentine wine and cocktails – Pisco Sours galore! – complement the regional flavours. There's a comfort food menu with familiar favourites, but Aqua Expeditions' stellar culinary reputation is a major factor in guests choosing this tour in the Galápagos.

The laidback-luxury vibe of the ship is another drawcard. The decor is a combination of traditional lacquered cherry wood and contemporary neutrals and the four decks are a mix of common areas for drinking and dining, sunning or stargazing, lounging and sleeping. It's a stylish, intimate space and our group, a convivial mix of personalities and nationalities, become almost instant friends.

Continued next page

Clockwise from top left: Galápagos flamingos wade in a lagoon; a cabin on Aqua Mare; a pair of sea lions are undisturbed by the writer; Peruvian ceviche prepared by on-board chef Jandry; table set for dining on Aqua Mare.



We spend afternoons learning all we can about the biodiversity of the area. The telltale presence of bird poop covering rocks like icing sugar on a cake leads us on a Zodiac tour of the cliff faces at Isabela Island. Here we find five Galápagos penguins, true representatives of Darwin's notion of the survival of the fittest. These flightless birds are thought to have hitched a ride on the Humboldt Current from southern Chile or Antarctica and evolved to the contrasting climate.

Like any good nature documentary, there are moments to reach for a tissue. For us it's seeing a nazca boobie chick pecked by a frustrated male and falling into the sea. Still too young to know how to fly, it floats around helplessly, as we watch on despairingly.

Another moment ripe for a David Attenborough voiceover is watching a squadron of pelicans lit by a golden sunset diving at speed into the water from on high and scooping up fish for dinner.

Birdwatch, look and listen

My interest is definitely animal over vegetable or mineral, but understanding the whole ecosystem is essential and any plant that manages to conquer a bedrock of volcanic rock is to be admired. The prickly pear, lava, and candelabra cactus are the most striking in the arid landscape, while an excursion around the mangroves reveals aerial tree roots that look like sculptures in a gallery.

Thanks to Yvonne and Isabela's eagle eyes, I've seen mockingbirds and a yellow warbler, semipalmated plovers and a variety of finches, eight of the estimated 300 to 500 flamingos in the whole archipelago, and even a rare sighting of a hawk, the island's top predator, but it's on Seymour Norte Island on the last day that my twitching credentials are truly validated.

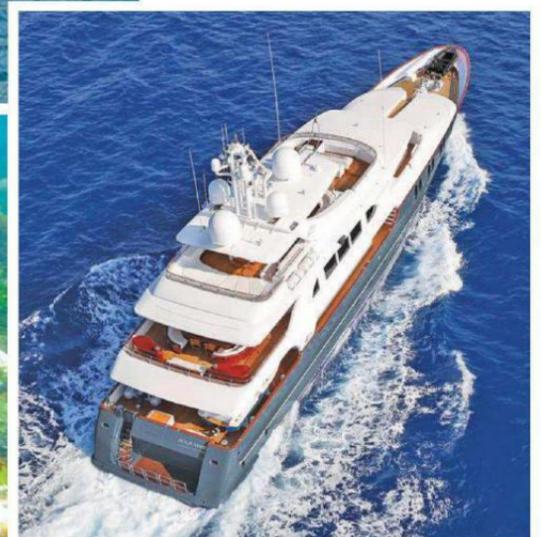
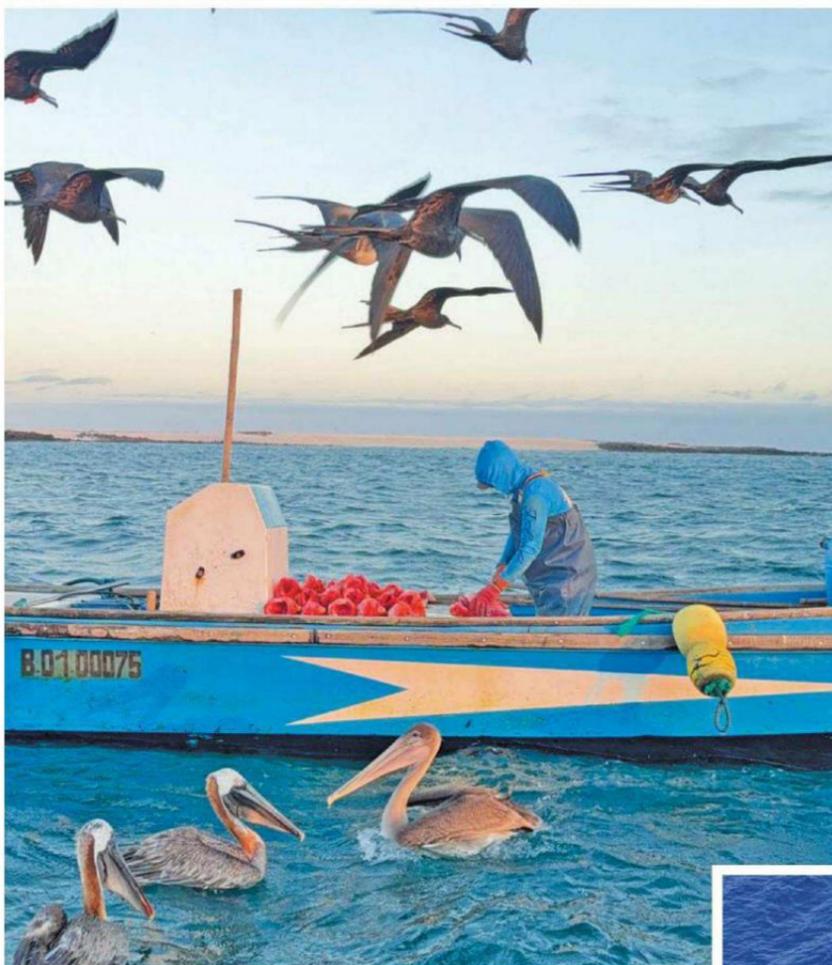
It's nesting season and the island is full of new bird families. As soon as we're on land we see and hear swallow-tailed gulls and blue-footed boobies watching over their chicks and magnificent frigatebird males inflating their striking red throat pouch.

Returning to *Aqua Mare* after the last Zodiac tour of the trip, we see a fisherman bobbing around on his boat cleaning his catch while a squadron of frigatebirds hover above and pelicans float close by, waiting patiently for the offcuts. It's a cinematic ending to my Galápagos adventure and I'm sure a doco maker would include a profound narrative about the current state of humans and the environment, but for me it's an exclamation point on one of the most extraordinary trips of my travelling life.

The writer was a guest of Aqua Expeditions



To prepare for this trip Jana read *The Galápagos: A Natural History* by Henry Nicholls and Kurt Vonnegut's satirical novel named after the archipelago.



SCAN TO WATCH JANA SAIL THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS ABOARD AQUA MARE.

From top: Guests explore the lavascape on Punta Espinoza; a fisherman cleans his catch while frigatebirds and pelicans wait for offcuts; a green sea turtle off Santiago Island; *Aqua Mare*.

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