

VIRTUOSO

THE MAGAZINE



TO THE SEA

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Adriatic immersion at Brsec Beach in Croatia. Photography by Owen Tozer/Kintzing.

12 March April 2026

Buoyed Up

I HAVE SPLASHED in the Caribbean, floated on the Mediterranean, communed with clownfish in Tahiti, and breast-stroked across an infinite number of infinity pools. It's a generally balmy swimming CV, as I prefer. So no one was more surprised than I was by my recent cold-plunge conversion.

At a beach near my home in Seattle, a cute mobile cedar sauna pops up several mornings a week, inviting hardy souls to alternate between teeth-chattering dips in the Puget Sound and chatty sauna sessions. It sounded appalling – the plunge, at least. But after a friend hyped it up recently, I found myself, one December morning, cursing as I waded into the 50-degree chop, then hustled across the sand and into the sauna's blazing embrace.

I was hooked. The experience shocked me out of my winter doldrums. A full-body thrill, shared with a group of strangers? Automatic bonding, automatic release.

There's a reason "just add water" makes things so much better, including vacations: Being in, on, or near a body of water is *fun*. Which is why we've dedicated this issue to water-based holidays. Whether your heart goes pitter-patter for crashing waves off the British coast (our story on walking across southern England serves up sea views for days), a cruise through Indonesia in search of Komodo dragons (an Aqua Expeditions voyage has your back), or deserted beaches on the Balearics' least-touristed island (see senior editor Josie Sexton's romp of a pilgrimage to Formentera), water is an age-old ingredient for an escape from routine. It's a chance to be buoyed by a force that's wild, precious, and bigger than ourselves, allowing us to reflect on what matters and where we fit in on this planet.

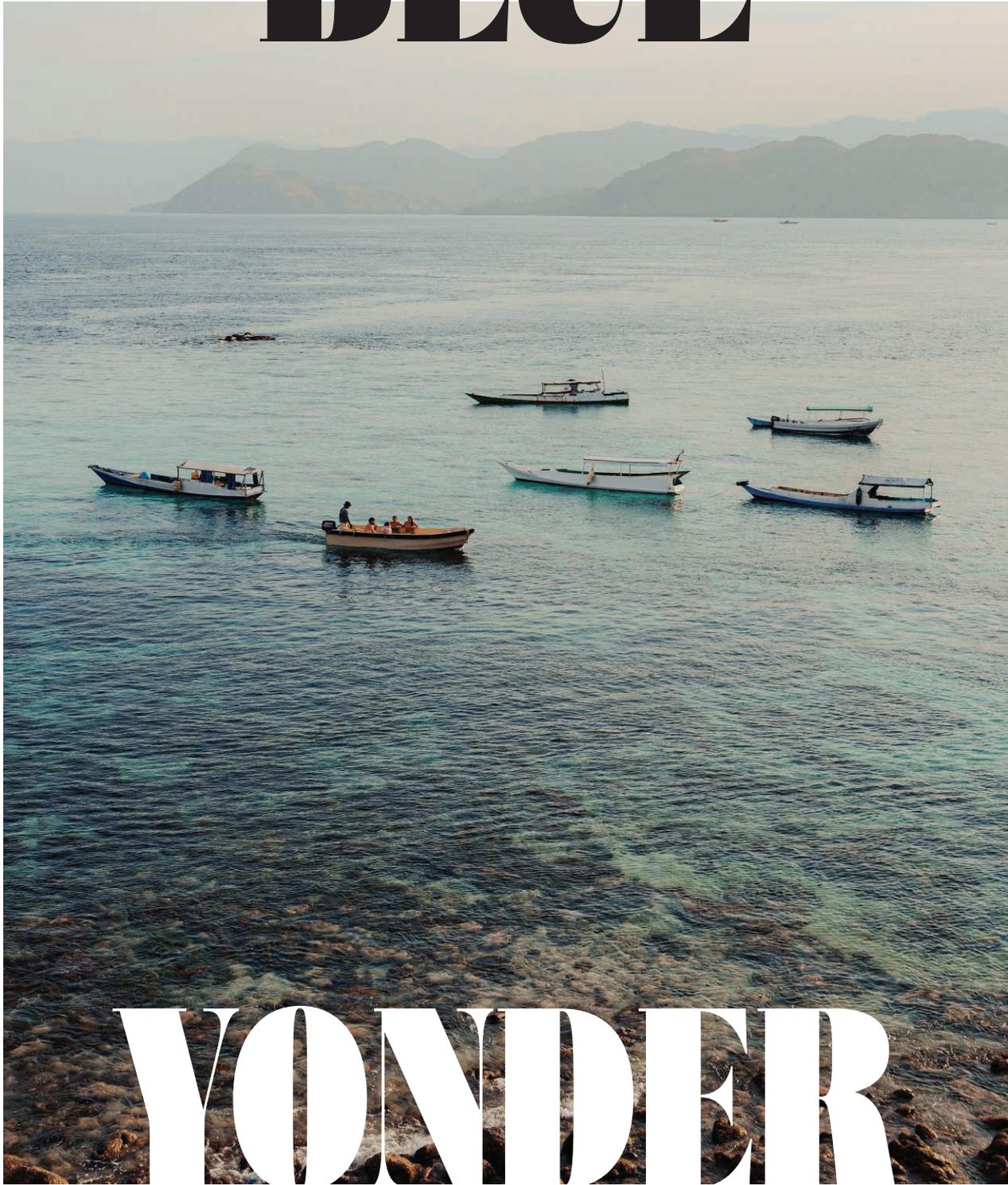
Read on for inspiration, and when you're ready to take the plunge – whatever kind suits you – your Virtuoso travel advisor will help make it happen. You might just find a perfect moment when you least expect it.



Handwritten signature of Marika Cain in black ink.

MARIKA CAIN
EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

BLUE



Yachting through East Indonesia and among Komodo Island's giants.
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS SCHALKX

Komodo Island finds: Pink Beach coral and (opposite) the day-trip fleet.





IT WAS 4:30 AM, STILL DARK,

but I was wide awake, zipping through Indonesia's Saleh Bay in a rubber tender. The water lay flat and inky, broken only by the lights swinging from the wooden arms of the *bagang* fishing boats that drifted ahead of us. The men out there fished for anchovies, krill, and small squid, but they weren't the only ones on the prowl. Beneath the glow, I was told, circled the planet's largest fish.

Finding one, however, wasn't as straightforward as it sounded. Even at up to 30 feet long, whale sharks can be frustratingly elusive, slipping between the surface and the ocean's depths like ghosts. We idled from *bagang* to *bagang*, while our naturalist guide, the ever-chipper Refly Karuntu, sat crouched on the tender's bow to scan the water for movement. "They come up to eat," he said, explaining that when the nets are hauled in after a night of fishing, the sharks surface to gorge on the spill. "Here," he added with a grin, "they've learned where the breakfast buffet is."

It wasn't until the morning sun streaked the horizon in pale orange that we found one. A juvenile, Karuntu said, though it was still the size of a moving van. It hung just below the surface, tilted almost upright, with a back freckled white like a starry constellation. I slid into the cool water to swim beside it and was mesmerized by its strangely small eyes and the ear-crackling whoosh of plankton filtering through its enormous gills.

I'd boarded Aqua Expeditions' *Aqua Blu* in Bali two days earlier, and this wouldn't be the only giant I'd meet on my weeklong voyage to Flores Island, about 300 nautical miles to the east. With a stern-to-bow span of almost 200 feet, the 15-stateroom *Blu* is one of the bigger yachts plying these East Indonesia waters, and its steel hull makes it a breeze to cross the Lombok Strait's turbulent chop. The smell of fresh orchids lingers around its communal lounges, while tribal masks, spears, and feathered headdresses hint at the other routes it sails each year: the Banda Sea's Spice Islands in October and November, the coral labyrinths of Raja Ampat from December through March, and soon, the swampy mangroves and riverine jungles of New Guinea. Up top, there's a bubbling hot tub, and daybeds circle a bar pouring punchy G&Ts at sundown. Yoga mats and dumbbells await, for anyone up early enough to catch the blush of dawn.

Over communal meals, which ran the gamut from sambal-bright seafood to poke-bowl buffets and Indonesian stir-fries, our 20-strong group, a global hodgepodge of Americans, Russians, Indians, and a family from Luxembourg, quickly broke the ice. There were cruise veterans and first-timers, and none of us, it turned out, were divers. Had there been any, they'd have peeled off for their daily scuba excursions

Clockwise from top left: Happy hour on *Aqua Blu*, dragons among us, Javanese prawns on board, and guide Refly Karuntu.

while the rest of us snorkeled – one of the many flexibilities Aqua weaves into its journeys.

Unlike the majority of Indonesia's liveaboards, *Aqua Blu* also focuses on above-sea adventures. On Moyo Island, after being showered in flower petals by a gaggle of neatly dressed girls and watching a martial-art dance performance by two men at least half a century older, we followed a forest trail to Mata Jitu, a multitiered limestone waterfall, where we swam in emerald pools shaded by a tangled jungle canopy. On Satonda Island, a ring of rock north of Sumbawa, we kayaked across a saltwater crater lake, flooded during the record-shattering 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora, whose bowled peak loomed before us. And with a group small enough to fit into just two tenders, we often had our excursion sites – lakes, jungle trails, and snorkeling spots – all to ourselves.

Finding such solitude in Komodo National Park was trickier. When we sailed into its waters on day four, the horizon was flecked with other vessels, from hypermodern yachts to rustic *phinisi*-style sailboats. An upgraded airport in the town of Labuan Bajo now connects this once-remote park directly to Singapore and Malaysia, turning it into a weekend detour (to combat overtourism, in April the Indonesian government will implement a cap of 1,000 visitors a day).

“It's easy to reach now, which means more people and more boats,” said Glenn Wappett, our sailing's cruise director. “The challenge is avoiding the crowds.” The work-around comes down to timing: “We visit popular spots like Gili Lawa early, before the day-trippers arrive, and we're gone by the time they do,” he explained. And Aqua has dropped Pandar Island's endlessly photographed bays, still Komodo's postcard sight, altogether. “It takes away from the magic when you're jostling past hundreds of people,” Wappett said.

We reached Loh Buaya, one of the park's main visitor centers, when the late-afternoon light had turned syrupy and



**We followed a forest trail
to Mata Jitu, a multitiered limestone waterfall,
where we swam in emerald pools
shaded by a tangled jungle canopy.**



Cooling off at Mata Jitu and (opposite) Aqua Blu's lounge.



Indonesia dreaming.

Dive into Indo

Aqua Expeditions' 30-passenger *Aqua Blu* cruises from Bali to Komodo's Labuan Bajo (or the reverse) on seven-night journeys filled with underwater expeditions and up-close encounters with some of Indonesia's most celebrated wildlife, from Komodo dragons to gentle whale sharks. *Departures: Multiple dates, April 4 through August 1.*

Aman Resorts' *phinisi*-style liveaboard *Amandira* (which sleeps up to ten) explores the waters around Komodo at a leisurely pace on **Remote Lands'** five-night expedition. Guests spend days diving and snorkeling, hiking volcanoes, or lounging on pink-hued beaches – the yacht's 14-member crew is at the ready to make it happen. *Departures: Multiple dates through 2026.*

G Adventures' 14-day small-group tours mix culture with nature: Indonesia trips kick off with a week of temple-hopping in less-visited corners of Bali and follow with a week of snorkeling and spotting wildlife around Komodo's coral-ringed islands. *Departures: Multiple dates, July 17, 2026, through October 15, 2027.*

the day-trippers had already cleared out. Between folds of hills tufted with tall grasses and tamarind trees lay its headline act: a Komodo dragon, the world's largest lizard, sprawled out half asleep in the warm sand. Though the lethargic beast looked less menacing than local legends would suggest, the horned buffalo skulls littering the ground reminded us that you wouldn't want to meet one in a hungry mood. But we needn't worry, said our guide, because they typically only eat once a month.

Moments later we were back in the water. Even though we stayed close to the surface, Komodo's reputation as a world-class diving destination held up. We spent most afternoons floating with the current in "wau-blau" water (as my German shipmates had dubbed the perfect aquamarine hue), snorkeling above reefs bursting with life. Dense fields of lettuce-shaped and bubblegum-pink corals teemed with damselfish, Moorish idols, and clouds of fusiliers that shimmered like confetti. At Batu Monco, juvenile blacktip sharks patrolled the shallows, and another day, at Rainbow Reef, we spotted a large hawksbill turtle munching on hard coral, tearing apart lumps of it with its front flippers while small fish flitted around to pick off the scraps. That evening, stretched out with a drink on the top deck's loungers, I watched bottlenose dolphins dance around the ship's frothy wake.

We ended the voyage on Komodo's so-called Pink Beach, which turned out to be more rosy white than candy pink, but was beautiful nonetheless. The crew set up a makeshift beach club, complete with tasseled umbrellas, beach mats, and a cooler of frosty Bintang lagers. "Born to Be Alive" streamed from a speaker, and we spent a lazy afternoon in a blissful haze of salt and sunscreen. When the day had drained away and the tenders came to pick us up, we left the island the way it's been for a million years: quiet and shaped by the tides, watched over by giants and dragons. ♡