

AQUA LARES
THE SEYCHELLES

Set sail on a boutique yacht
through this Indian Ocean
archipelago for an African
safari of the sea.

Paulo Furcote





Yvi K. & Anthony Do

Story by Andrea Black

“It’s like Gaudi’s Sagrada Família down there,” says fellow snorkeller Nicole as we surface off Praslin Island in the Seychelles. She’s describing the scene under us, the coral and granite rocks resembling the tapering towers of Barcelona’s famous cathedral. “And then there’s the ballet of the honeycomb moray eels gliding through,” she says. What must these graceful eels, angelfish, silver trevally and the occasional green sea turtle think of us, a coterie of flipper-wearing humans watching them from above?

I’m off the coast of East Africa, on a five-night floating safari in the Seychelles, a nation of 115 islands in the Indian Ocean. The return voyage from Mahé, aboard Aqua Expeditions’ *Aqua Lares* (aquaexpeditions.com) sails around the isles of Praslin, Cousin, Curieuse, La Digue, Grande Soeur, Ile Cocos and Aride, and like African land safaris, includes twice-daily (sea) animal-spotting excursions. Come 5.45pm, it’s drinks on the sun deck of the 77-metre-long vessel.



There's a barefoot policy onboard this six-deck superyacht acquired by Aqua Expeditions last year. The cruise line's design director, Birgit Galli Zugaro, worked with Milanese architects Hot Lab for a complete rejuvenation, using Italian marble and custom-made lounges and chairs by Minotti and Poltrona Frau. Framed lithographs sourced from Argosy Book Store in New York line the walls and tableware is adorned with images of octopus and jellyfish made by Gaya Ceramic. The result is a satisfying blend of luxury and comfort. "I love it if I see a guest asleep on the sofa – it means they feel at home," says Galli Zugaro,

wife of Francesco Galli Zugaro, founder of the small-ship cruise line. "You can put your feet up and relax."

And that's exactly what the 30 guests – from Switzerland, Germany, the United States and Australia – do after each day's adventures. The cabins, such as the 66-square-metre Owner's Suite 303, feature solid wood veneers, wallpaper and fabrics sourced from Italy's Dedar and soft woollen carpets. There are 15 cabins in five categories, all with windows or portholes for sunrise sealife-watching. There's also a one-to-one crew-to-guest ratio, including local guides. After an expedition off-ship, the

crew lines the deck to welcome us back with fresh juices and face towels.

Our trip on *Aqua Lares* revolves around nature. As well as snorkelling and diving, we kayak along a beach on La Digue, loll in the Indian Ocean at Curieuse and SUP from the yacht's deck. No wetsuit is required as the water temperature on this late February sailing is between 28°C and 30°C. At night, we dine on renowned Mexican-born, Italian-based chef Karime López's menu, ranging from grilled lobster with sauteed asparagus to self-serve poke bowls. After meals, there's a game of bridge or reading books in the library.

On Cousin Island, a Special Nature Reserve, conservation warden Akash Paunikar walks us through a former coconut plantation, pointing out white-tailed tropicbirds nesting and a sooty tern feeding its chick a tiny sardine. We stop to listen to the melodic song of the Seychelles warbler. "At one stage their population was thought to be only 26. Now there's over 3000," Paunikar says of the island's intensive long-term conservation efforts. At the end of the trail, he looks across the water towards the pastel sunset, the chorus of warblers' song behind him. "Living here," he says, "sometimes feels like a dream." 🌅