

# TECHNICOLOUR DREAM

Imagine flitting around one of the world's most spectacular archipelagos on a meticulously equipped superyacht. One operator excels at refined voyages into the wild blue yonder.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEXANDER BARLOW



EXPLORE



**BUTTERFLY EFFECT**

Explorer yacht *Aqua Lares* skips around the lapis-lazuli waters and remote islands of the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean. Right: a guest, Melissa Fernandes Oliveira, is dinner-ready.



#### YACHT TOPIC

Clockwise from left: the slick lines of the superyacht; a lounge area on board with furnishings from Minotti and Poltrona Frau; plenty of sights to spy with binoculars; topping up at the bar.

The routine was set by day six: pre-dawn on deck, alone, uncaffeinated, waiting for the light. Was it Saturday or Friday? I'd lost track. By now, days didn't matter, only conditions. And this morning was different: the air was light, the sky the faint pink of shells and the sea a deep, silken calm. Up above, a lone frigatebird patrolled the sky as we lolloped forward with a slow, heavy, elephantine lilt, the only sound the soft fizz of parting water and the whirr of engines buried deep within the boat's core. I sat still, inhaled deeply, and absorbed the solitude of the ocean.

By breakfast, we'd anchored on the edge of Cosmoledo, a remote, napkin-sketch of an atoll – a low sweep of green surrounded by ivory sand closer to Madagascar than Mahé. In full sun, its coral fringes appeared a dazzling blue as our tender skimmed across the water towards a narrow break in the reef. As we entered the lagoon, silhouettes of green turtles slipped beneath us. At a small, milk-white beach, we waded through the shallows; in the scrub, red-footed boobies shifted awkwardly on low branches as frigatebirds circled slowly overhead, all angles and quiet patience.

Back on board, the day slipped by: a first snorkel, then lunch – tangy lemon pasta with salmon roe, white fish with pesto, roasted peach. In the afternoon, we returned to the water, drifting slowly over brain coral and bright, flickering reef fish. I'd hoped to see a manta ray again, or a lemon shark, but settled for something less showy: the slow, assured paddling of a green turtle and the quick, abstract shimmy of a picassofish, named for its Cubist-like bands of colour. As the afternoon's light faded, conversation flowed on deck. We sipped a crisp, mineral

chardonnay as the boat upped anchor and began to move, leaving a soft trail of white foam behind us. Everything felt slow, unforced. I stood and faced the last of the day's sun as Rico Wessels, the ship's cruise director, arrived beside me, surveying the horizon. "Mesmerising, isn't it?" I didn't need to answer.

I'd arrived in the Seychelles, the idyllic archipelago in the Indian Ocean, a week earlier, unsure what to expect. Cruises, I'd always quietly assumed, weren't really my thing. But Aqua Expeditions, the "boutique cruising" outfit founded by Italian-American Francesco Galli Zugaro and part of the Ponant Explorations Group, felt different. With river boats on the Mekong and in the Peruvian Amazon, and ocean-going yachts in the Galápagos and Indonesia, its fleet is small enough to allow its guests to do, not just see. I joined a nine-night voyage through the Seychelles' outer islands in mid-March on board *Aqua Lares*, with just 15 cabins and 32 crew.

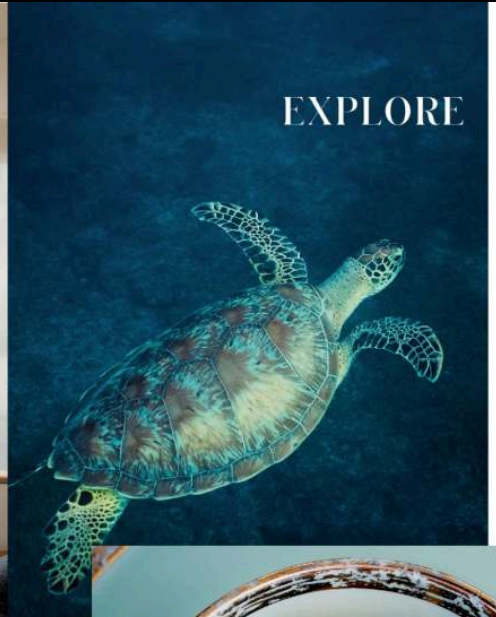
The yacht itself was a big draw: following a £5 million refit overseen by Aqua's design director, Birgit Galli Zugaro, and Milan-based studio Hot Lab, it felt closer to a swish hotel than a superyacht, with glossed teak, flashes of royal blue and ochre, and furniture pieces from Minotti and Poltrona Frau. Everything appeared understated and unshowy; nothing strained for attention. After a Zodiac transfer from Mahé, I stepped into my cabin and noticed the wood-framed drawings on the wall – faded, Soviet design sketches that sent me digging into the boat's history. Originally built in the Netherlands in 1974, *Gigante* – as she was then known – served as an icebreaker for a Cold War-era fishing fleet.

After the collapse of the USSR, she was acquired by Swiss entrepreneur René Herzog, a former racing driver who went on to pioneer the conversion of

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## TRUE BLUE

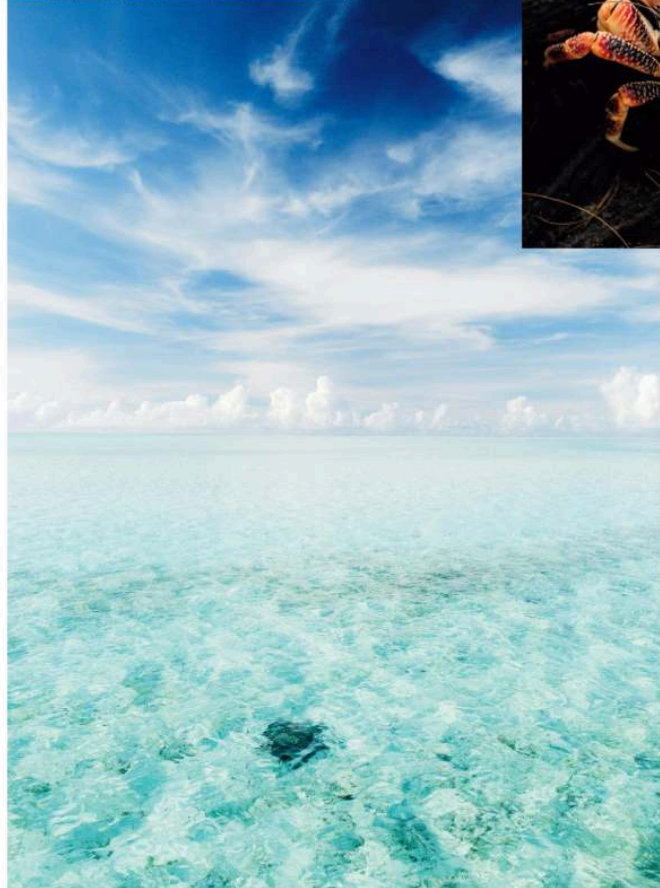
A seating area on deck.  
Clockwise from right:  
hawksbill turtle in motion;  
lemon pasta with salmon  
roe; icy treats; one of the  
fastidiously designed cabins  
with wood veneers and  
Dedar fabrics.



# EXPLORE



**CLUB TROPICANA**  
Clockwise from top left:  
a beachside gathering,  
the vessel in Saint Francois  
atoll; the Seychelles has  
numerous crab species;  
detail of the marble-topped  
bar; the crystal-clear waters  
of Cosmoledo.





**WHAT BLISS**  
Olivera on deck for sundowners. Clockwise from left: post-dive orange sodas, ready for lunch; a perch on Bijoutier Island.

commercial vessels into luxe explorer yachts. Following a refit in the 1990s, the ship was renamed *Legend* and later owned by former Google chief executive Eric Schmidt, who sold it in 2025 for \$40 million. It was then rechristened *Aqua Lares*. Now it's available by charter or cabin for voyages in East Africa and, launching this month, the Norwegian Arctic. (Schmidt himself has reportedly booked out the boat this year at \$1.2 million for a 14-day itinerary.)

But the setting – some of the world's most elite, unsailed waters – mattered just as much. While some new hotels have spread out from Mahé, including Four Seasons on Desroches and a rumoured Qatari-backed development on Assomption, none offers access to the wild remoteness of the Seychelles' outer islands. For almost everyone, the waters around Aldabra, the off-limits raised coral atoll closer to the African mainland than to the rest of the archipelago, held an almost fabled allure. Home to more than 100,000 giant tortoises, access is tightly controlled by a small team of environmental researchers, who work for the Seychelles Islands Foundation and are supplied by only two ships a year.

"It's the most surreal, beautiful place I've ever seen," said Damien Alphonse, our 28-year-old marine guide, who was once stationed on the island. "Very few Seychellois will ever see it, so it's a mythical place for us, almost unreal." Entry, it turned out, was never guaranteed – even for us. On our fifth evening at sea, we assembled on the upper deck lounge for our daily briefing; there was a faint tingle of anticipation as the sea turned golden in the late-afternoon light. Wessels came in beaming, his usual easy manner noticeably heightened, excitement edged with relief. At that point, no one realised our visit to Aldabra – the marquee stop on the

itinerary – was in any kind of jeopardy. But the previous expedition had been turned away, we were told, because of "bad conditions". "But I'm pleased to say, I've just spoken to the rangers, and we're good to go as planned." I slowly absorbed the news with a sip of chardonnay.

The next morning, the sea heaved in slow, uneven swells. The air was dense, and faint arcs of rainbow hovered in slate clouds. The boat had anchored off Picard, Aldabra's most-westerly island, which from my cabin looked like a thin strip of bone-white sand topped with short tufts of low scrub. After our biosecurity check, we entered the atoll's vast lagoon through the Grande Passe, our tenders rising and falling in the swell, as hundreds of frigatebirds circled overhead like winged vampires. Before lunch, we snorkelled the tidal waters of Anse Mais, the current tugging at us, turtles gliding past, a nurse shark lounging on coral, grumpy-looking potato cod keeping their distance.

In the afternoon, a dozen or so blacktip reef sharks patrolled the clear, shallow waters off the beach as we climbed out for a tour of Picard's village – population 14. Living in simple, Crusoe-esque huts along the beach, the researchers here coexist with giant tortoises, gnarly, fire-orange coconut crabs and the odd red-brown Aldabra rail, the Indian Ocean's last flightless bird. After the tour, I wandered the abandoned old village, a series of ruins up the beach from the research settlement. Perched alone on a bare, wind-scraped branch, a grey heron stood motionless against the soft blur of sea and sky. I looked back at the boat, the light flattened by heavy, black clouds, a steady rain falling through palm trees. It wasn't the weather I would have chosen; still, I felt the warm glow of good

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## SCARLET SUNSET

A dusk worthy of William Turner at Saint François atoll. Clockwise from right: a mask for dinner; red-footed booby; giant tortoise at Aldabra.



fortune for being there. Despite the near-miss of bad conditions, we'd slipped fate's net and made it to Aldabra – but only just. "I can see why you're making the most of it," said Alphonse, as I sluggishly trailed the group back to the tender. "You come here only once in a lifetime." He was probably right.

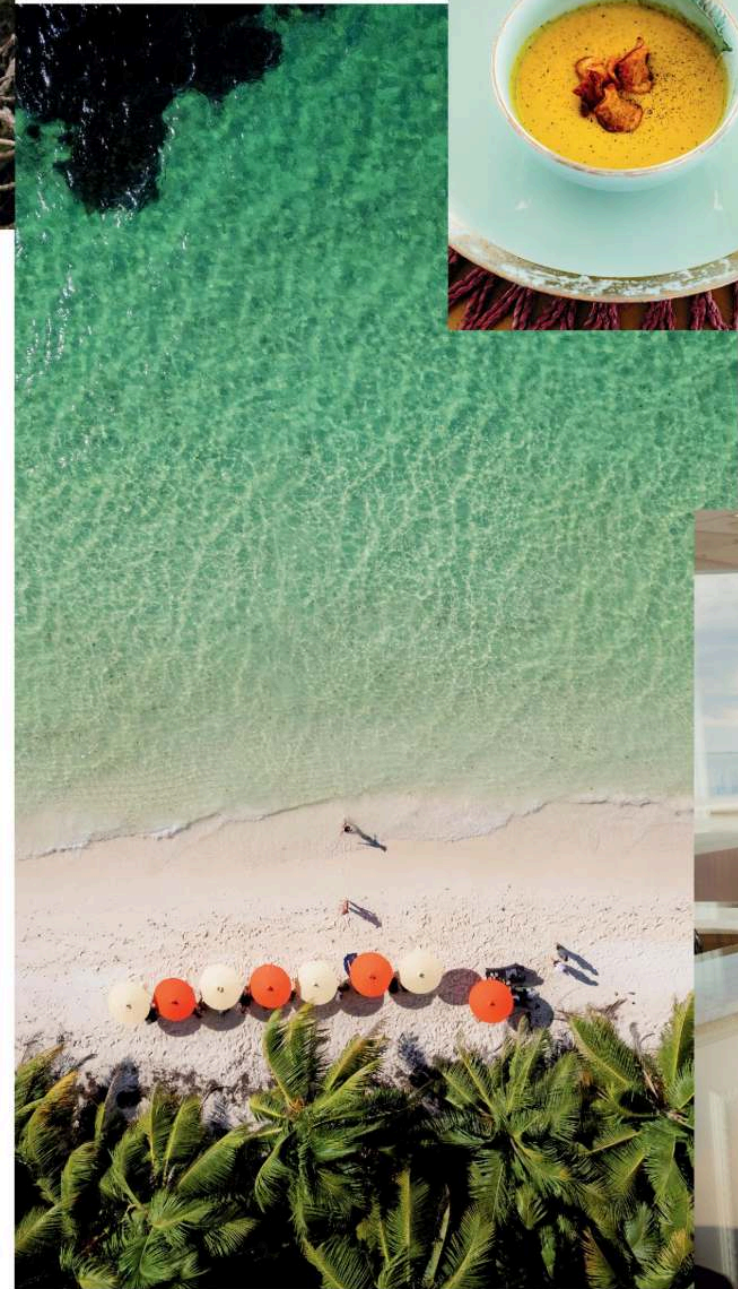
We never saw rain again. After Aldabra, we sailed overnight to Cosmoledo, then further north to Saint-François atoll, a low, shifting geometry of sandbanks and reef constantly redrawn by the tide. Its showpiece was the tiny islet of Bijoutier, a barely-there sandbar crowned with coconut palms visible on the horizon from the breakfast table. Enough snorkelling, enough doing – I was ready for a do-nothing day on a beach so remote and untethered from the world it felt unmapped. From the tender, my bare feet sank into the soft, warm sand as we made our way towards a line of red-and-cream parasols, white clouds scudding across a bright-blue sky. I'd made a deal with myself: no beer from the improvised beach bar until at least one lap of the island. So I wandered slowly to its far side and sat beneath the palm trees, staring into the distance, priming myself for a swim – alone, save for the skittish apparitions of tiny sand crabs. If not in miles, it felt as far from home as we'd come. I couldn't help but smile.

That night, as the voyage drew to a close, we gathered for dinner of lobster spaghetti and miso black cod on the deck's long maple table and shared highlights from our busy days. For me, it was Astove, day four, where we snorkelled around the "wall", a vast, vertical coral canyon where lemon sharks moved with quiet economy among hawksbill turtles, followed by a slow parade of giant, ink-black manta rays and a small shoal of painted sweetlips and zebra-striped, clown-yellow

rubberlips. We spent time on the beach beside *Shangri-La*, a "ghost" yacht wrecked here some time in the 1980s, its story largely lost to seafaring lore. For others, it was Cosmoledo and its luminous lagoon or Bijoutier or Île au Cerf and its bumphead parrotfish – and, of course, Aldabra itself. One guest had been waiting decades to see it – her first attempt in the 1990s had to be cancelled because of pirates.

But for me, there was one final highlight to come: a long, lazy afternoon on a strip of beach on Desroches Island. As ever, the crew had gone ahead, setting out a line of parasols. Music played softly as we wet-landed on shore, free to wander along its stretch of unpeopled coastline, swim in its warm waters or lie undisturbed beneath slowly swaying palms to the light clink of glass in ice. Normal life beckoned, but for now, no one seemed in any hurry to return. In the purple-pink evening light, we made our way back to the boat that had begun to feel entirely our own.

As had become the custom, we noticed Zugaro's subtle design touches, including dainty napkin rings set against eggshell-blue Gaya ceramics. After a farewell to the crew, the ship slipped quietly into calm seas, heading north to Mahé. Dinner fizzed with conversation and the reluctant acceptance that the voyage was ending. Attention turned to *Aqua Lares'* next season: Svalbard, where the boat's ice-breaking capabilities would be put to use exploring Norway's Arctic archipelago. We made the usual empty promises to reunite there as the evening came to a close. I headed to the helideck and returned to my other routine: lying flat on a daybed, watching the stars appear then vanish behind slow-moving clouds. **T**  
*The writer was a guest of Aqua Expeditions. Its nine-night Aldabra & the Coralline Seychelles sailing starts at \$US16,200 per adult. aquaexpeditions.com*



**NEW HORIZONS**  
A seating area on deck for blue-sky thinking. Clockwise from below: the outdoor bar; Desroches Island; squash soup for lunch.

