

Mystery of the deep

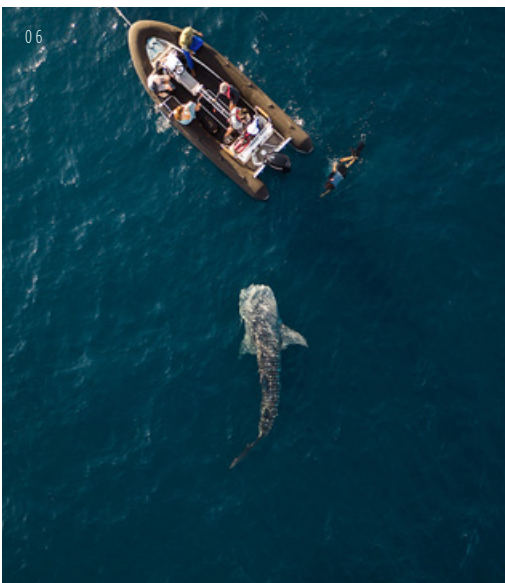
Thirteen strangers, one superyacht-grade ship and Indonesia's most stunning reefs – *Aqua Blu* offers expedition cruising with an unforgettable plot twist, *writes Christian Barker*.



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01 Snorkelling excursion 02 Exploring Raja Ampat 03 Sundowners on the beach 04 Komodo dragon © Stevie Mann 05 Aqua Blu private dining experience 06 Communing with whale sharks 07 Kabui Bay in Raja Ampat

Our first passenger gathering aboard *Aqua Blu* feels like the opening of a *Knives Out* movie – or perhaps an Agatha Christie novel.

A baker's dozen of us lounge around the vessel's tastefully decorated salon, and oh my, it's an idiosyncratic group.

There's the chirpy kindergarten teacher from New York and her Shanghainese mum. A pair of rosy-cheeked, retired Irish architects living in Adelaide. An outdoorsy Canadian veterinarian and her equally gorpcore engineer husband. A Belgian duo – she willowy and elegant, a former

GP; he a big jovial fellow, a prosperous retailer. A couple of tanned and attractive Argentinian honeymooners. Travelling solo: the glamorous blonde Ukrainian COO of a Fortune 500 company; a bespectacled Japanese tech entrepreneur in head-to-toe Stone Island; and an affable, bearded septuagenarian German supercar collector, who says he was in pharma.

Then there's me, the epicurean Australian writer with the oddly unplaceable accent and Mephistophelian mien. (The audience's suspicion surely falls immediately upon this louche character. But it's never the

obvious one, is it?) Our spry, charming British cruise director Dean fulfils the Benoit Blanc / Hercule Poirot role.

What brings us together is not a mysterious murder, but instead, a penchant for killer scuba-diving and snorkelling, plus a taste for fine cuisine. This week-long voyage from the Indonesian island of Flores to Bali is one of a few each year when *Aqua Blu*'s star chef – a former Neil Perry protégé named Benjamin Cross, who now operates several of Bali's best restaurants – is on board, overseeing every dish personally. (Think upscale Indo with a ModOz twist and seafood aplenty, unsurprisingly.)

It's during our daily dives and the delightful meals that bookend them that our group gets acquainted. I've known Aqua Expeditions founder Francesco Galli Zugaro for years – we met around the time of the Global Financial Crisis, when he was launching the company with a single 12-cabin ship on the Peruvian Amazon – and creating a companionable atmosphere aboard has always been Aqua's goal.

Despite its growth – Aqua is now a thriving family business with six ships and around 400 staff – its philosophy of keeping guest count capped at 40 remains ironclad. This deliberate constraint creates a unique alchemy. Because a particular type of person is drawn to expedition cruising, a fascinating mix of worldly, story-driven individuals organically comes together. Within the first couple of days, Francesco says, passengers tend to bond over shared conversation, common interests, convivial dining – and, in my group's case, consumption of copious rosé.

This is the combination Aqua was founded upon: a daytime itinerary delivering raw, immersive adventure, managed to rigorous safety standards, followed by a return to ship that boasts world-class dining, chic design and the top-tier comfort guests expect of any luxury hospitality experience. Together, these factors transform a small, eclectic group of strangers into a tight-knit unit.

My experience at sea is limited – I once spent a few nights on a 33m yacht off Ibiza, and a couple of years ago, travelled on a state-of-the-art luxury icebreaker (coincidentally, the flagship of Aqua's new partner, Ponant: *Le Commandant Charcot*) for a week-long expedition through our planet's frozen north. The icebreaker carried a maximum 200 passengers





08

but for our journey, was only half full. The yacht in the Balearics, meanwhile, accommodated just six, plus crew. Comparing those two previous journeys, *Blu* felt much closer to the yacht. Which makes sense when you learn that this vessel was, in its previous incarnation, the family sloop of Italy’s Garavoglia family, proprietors of the Campari group. *Blu*’s capacity is 30 passengers across 15 cabins; our journey ran at 50 per cent occupancy, creating a crew-to-passenger ratio of roughly two-to-one. The 60m ship is big enough for open seas, yet small enough to nose into secluded bays and uninhabited islands along the route from Labuan Bajo, via the Komodo Archipelago, to Bali.

As an editor, I get a pitch a week from writers wanting to cover this region – and now I know why. The scenery is spectacular, the diving incredible. Having lived in Singapore for many years, I’ve visited the Maldives some 20 times; nice as they are, those reefs literally pale beside the technicolour underwater world here. The coral was the most diverse and vivid I’ve seen, offering hope these organisms haven’t *all* been bleached out by rising ocean temperatures. I had one of the longest, most meaningful turtle encounters of my life – and after all those Maldivian trips, I’m no stranger to the Chelonioidea family. Magical.

We trekked Komodo National Park, getting up-close to the resident dragons – the largest, deadliest lizard alive. Oddly, this wasn’t at all frightening, while swimming with seven-metre whale sharks at dawn another morning had my usually calm snorkel-breathing edging toward hyperventilation. Rationally, you know these gentle giants pose no threat – but their scale, those mammoth mouths approaching, trips panic impulses in the cerebral cortex regardless.

‘Awesome’ gets thrown around indiscriminately, but this experience was genuinely awe-inspiring – and handled with real sensitivity and eco-consciousness by *Blu*’s guides. That’s another hallmark of Aqua: operating in delicate ecosystems including the Galápagos, the Arctic and the Amazon, the company not only follows local regulations but pushes for greater scrutiny of practices, employing local guides invested in protecting their home territories.



09



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11



12

08 Hidden paradise 09 Aqua Blu expedition yacht 10 Fine dining at sea 11 Aqua Blu Design Suite 12 Date night on board

They’re equally adept at protecting guests. Ages on my voyage ran from early 30s to mid-70s – I sat squarely in the middle – with even the most senior passengers relatively hale and hearty. Still, guides stay quietly attentive to who can manage what (scaling Komodo’s steep, dragon-patrolled hillsides isn’t for everyone) and look after anyone happier to sit an adventure out. As the demographic on this sort of voyage trends younger, with more guests juggling careers back home, Aqua has responded with excellent Starlink Wi-Fi, so no one need fully disconnect. Unless they want to.

By the time we docked in Bali, the whodunnit has resolved itself. Everyone did it. From the highly experienced scuba divers to the uncertain swimmers who bobbed about in life jackets. From the passionate recreational hikers to those of us with bunions and rickety knees. Everyone showed up curious, game for unfamiliar experiences, willing to push beyond their comfort zone. We broadened our horizons and made a round of new friends along the way – the only mystery remaining, why we hadn’t ticked whale sharks, dragons and the world’s best reefs off our bucket lists a darn sight sooner. aquaexpeditions.com ☎