

Life & Leisure

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LIVING WITH ART

The collectors who found immeasurable value at Sydney Contemporary



A *White Lotus* scriptwriter could not have asked for a more promising set of characters. Thrown together willy-nilly for seven nights are:

- A Russian glamour puss and French venture capitalist* on their honeymoon. (Back home in Paris, she keeps her Birkin handbags in a bank safe because of the migrants flooding the city.)
- A leftie couple who run an eco resort in Spain and their precocious 13-year-old. (The father wears a keffiyeh in sympathy with the Palestinians; the daughter plies everyone with card tricks and is writing a novel.)
- The 13-year-old's doting grandparents – ultra-fit, lively and well-travelled 80-something-year-olds based in Geneva.
- A workaholic bankruptcy lawyer from Delaware and his charming wife.
- And a retail property investor, his wife and their tweens from Montana – embracing their best life after his 11th-hour escape from death by colorectal cancer thanks to a miracle drug still awaiting FDA approval. (They booked the trip when the oncologist called with the all-clear.)

Oh, and me, your correspondent.

We are on a seven-night West Galapagos cruise aboard Aqua Expeditions' 50-metre superyacht the Aqua Mare.

Outfitted for a maximum of 16 cossetted guests with lashings of walnut panelling, Italian marble, plush carpeting, plump cushions, extravagantly fluted pillars, and a top-deck jacuzzi and bar, it's the perfect setting for a murder mystery, as the 13-year-old notes over one of our first meals together around the dining table on the upper back deck.

"I'll be the murderer, of course. I'm Russian!" volunteers the honeymooner.

Which is generous of her – except, rather than a murder mystery or comedy-drama a la *The White Lotus*, we are taking part in an altogether more extraordinary saga, featuring the strange and wonderful creatures that inhabit these islands 1000 kilometres off the coast of Ecuador.

Take the first stars to trundle into view under an atmospheric misting rain in the highlands of Santa Cruz island: the giant tortoises. Mascot of the Galapagos, they floated here from the mainland on drifts of vegetation carried by the current (or so it is believed). Then they supersized. The dome-shelled males, the biggest of the 15 species scattered around the islands, weigh up to 350 kilograms. Their closest living relative, the chaco tortoises endemic to South America, weigh around three.

They've also achieved the holy grail of the biohacking bros: longevity. "There is no exact data to know how long they live", reads an information board, but 150 to 180 years is the estimate. Perhaps they live



so long because they take things so slow; perhaps it's their strictly herbivorous diet of up to 50 varieties of plants. Either way, they're definitely not sweating it.

Next up on our odyssey: sea lions. We will coo over these playful (and plentiful) denizens of the Galapagos many times during the voyage. But our most thrilling encounter happens while we're snorkelling off Floreana Island. Despite being on the equator, the sea is freezing, thanks to the Humboldt current that sweeps up from Antarctica at this time of year. We're bobbing along in full wetsuits, just about ready to pack it in, when a raft of young sea lions zooms up to play. They twist and twirl around us, so close one nudges my snorkel with its nose as it backflips acrobatically over and over. The cold forgotten, I try to capture them in action on my mobile and fail hopelessly. The 13-year-old kindly shares her videos over WhatsApp.

Back on board the Aqua Mare, under the relaxed but expert ministrations of cruise director Tania Aiellano and her crew of 14, things are mostly going swimmingly.

The grandparents, who gave the 13-year-old this trip as a Christmas present, have the Swiss habit of perfect punctuality and are always seated first for meals, waiting patiently for the rest of us. The 13-year-old's mother has to restrain herself from jumping up to help the crew clear the table. As the hardworking owner of an eco resort, being served hand and foot is out of her

TRAVEL CRUISING

Wild and wacky

Charis Perkins meets some curious creatures in the Galapagos – and some interesting animals too.

comfort zone. The Russian often pitches late, and is most put out one morning when the boiled egg she ordered arrives out of its shell, rather than in it.

The tweens and the 13-year-old have discovered the "comfort food" menu – an all-day alternative to the fish-forward, Ecuadorian/Peruvian-slanted daily dishes prepared by chef Michael Mendez and his team. Their favourite comfort food is the quesadillas served with lashings of guacamole. Barman Edison Nuñez shows us how to make pisco sours, a cocktail I order henceforth on my travels in the region.

There's not much time for lying around drinking pisco sours on the Aqua Mare. The itinerary is a whirl of Zodiac rides, wet and dry landings, walks, snorkelling, paddleboarding, kayaking and debriefs from our guides, the naturalists Yvonne Mortola and Grace Loza. No activity is compulsory, of course, but the fantastical creatures of the Galapagos keep calling.

The islands, as everyone knows, found international renown thanks to the influential role they played in Charles Darwin's 1859 bombshell, *On the Origin of Species*. But the description of their marine iguanas published in a 1826 naval account by Captain Lord Byron (cousin of the romantic poet) resonates best: "Our party ... landed among an innumerable host of sea-guanas, the ugliest living creatures we ever beheld. They are like the alligator, but with a more hideous head, and of a dirty sooty



Need to know

Seven-night West Galapagos Expedition Cruise
2026 departures from \$US11,900 (\$16,700) a person, based on double occupancy. 2027 departures from \$US12,470.

Cruise dates for the next six months November 6-13, December 4-11, January 1-8, February 26 to March 5, 2027.

Clockwise from main: A giant tortoise; the Aqua Mare; sea lions sunning themselves; cocktails in the Panoramic Lounge; a blue-footed booby.
PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



black colour, and sat on the black lava rocks like so many imps of darkness."

Underwater, though, swishing their tails or chomping happily on algae, they could almost be friendly extras in *Finding Nemo*.

The Galapagos island are more scrappy than beautiful, and the sunsets are a damp squib, but all around us, nature does its wondrous thing. On Isabella Island, we sidle past yellow land iguanas catching the sun's rays and snap photos of the pale pink flamingos fishing in the lagoon. Elsewhere, we glide through emerald waters teeming with turtles and rays, and watch crimson-legged sally lightfoot crabs scuttling over black rocks.

Among the humans, a few tensions have emerged. Already irked by the keffiyeh he wears, the honeymooning hubby loses his rag over the book the eco lodge owner is reading (a science fiction novel by Octavia Butler). The guides are battling with the honeymooners' refusal to stay with the group on our island expeditions, as required by the regulations governing tourism in the Galapagos. The wife of the property investor is reeling over the Russian's declaration that she feels sorry for the men of a certain religion because "their wives are all fat and ugly".

It's both brilliant and absurd to be among strangers united by adventure for a week, and many of Aqua Expedition's passengers return again and again. As founder Francesco Galli Zugaro told the *Financial Review's* Kylar Loussikian on an Arctic expedition: "Everybody here is successful. Many of them can afford anything. But they can come here, relax ... and know that they're with like-minded guests."

And if the occasional guest is not like-minded, comedic possibilities abound.

The drama of day six returns our attention to the real story. At Seymour North, back on Santa Cruz Island, we step gingerly over dozens of fluffy white booby babies awaiting their blue-footed parents' return, and admire the puffed-up red pouches of the magnificent frigate males. "Female frigates are very shallow, in my opinion," sniffs Mortola. "They go for the best pouch."

On our way back along the shore, we come across a sea lion pup trapped between two boulders. Its mother is frantic. Mortola tries to move a boulder with her walking stick, but it's too dangerous to be this close to the mother, and in the end we have to walk on. Luckily, a pair of burly male guides coming in the other direction promise to see what they can do.

"We are not supposed to interfere but of course we have a heart and it will be a horrible way to die," says Mortola.

I hope they managed to free the pup. I really do. **L&L**

*Names withheld for privacy reasons. The writer was a guest of Aqua Expeditions.