

CRUISING ASIA ARISES TRAVEL ICE MAIDEN DINING CHEF COLLABS DRINKS BIVALVE BEVVIES MOTORING PORSCHE GLOW UPS

# Life & Leisure

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CALL OF THE OCEAN

## THE WAY OF WATER

Islands, coastlines and icy fjords  
to add to your holiday hit list





JOURNEY NORWAY

# Polar player

Kylar Loussikian joins a handful of discerning travellers on an expedition at the world's furthest edge.



Main: The 77-metre mega yacht Aqua Lares. Right: A huddle of walrus in the Svalbard archipelago.

A walrus must always be approached silently, and slowly. In this case, it is not one walrus but an entire huddle. It is an apt collective noun. Weighing in at around a tonne each, these mollusc-eating machines are laying about on a low-lying headland jutting out into the bay of Borebukta between two glaciers. We're in Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago about 2000 kilometres northwest of Oslo and about half that distance from the North Pole. The walrus are idly sunning their ridiculous bodies, tusks aloft. They may otherwise have noticed the 17 passengers of the Aqua Lares silently sidling up, directed by three guides armed with high-calibre rifles and flare guns (for the polar bears, not the walrus).

This is cruising, but not in the way you know it. The walrus expedition comes on the last of a five-night trip on the Aqua Lares, a private yacht once owned by former Google chief executive Eric Schmidt and now the latest addition to the Aqua Expeditions fleet. The intent is in the company's name. Aqua Expeditions ferries around small numbers of discerning travellers who have limited interest in sunning themselves by a pool, preferring luxury yachts that journey down the Amazon or the Mekong or, in this case, into the Arctic.

The day had begun in Svalbard's southernmost fjord. Svalbard, home to fewer than 3000 people, was put on the radar by the Dutch, colonised by the Russians and fell into the possession of the Norwegians after the First World War. (A Russian coalmining town is still in operation, along with the remains of a second.)

More than half the archipelago is covered in glacial ice and, given its location inside the Arctic Circle, its annual spell in the

midnight sun was rapidly coming to a close by the time Aqua Lares and its passengers cruised in looking for walrus, polar bears and an assortment of other wildlife. The plan, devised by the guides, who live in Svalbard but are with the ship for the entirety of its journey, was to venture into Bellsund, a sound about halfway up the west coast of Spitsbergen, Svalbard's largest island, in search of walrus colonies.

By the time we arrived, a deep fog had set in. It was time for Plan B.

On any other cruise, it would be on the guides to think quickly. On this occasion, there was a higher power – Francesco Galli Zugaro, the former private equiteer who launched Aqua Expeditions with a single luxury ship down the Amazon in 2007 and remains the company's chief executive almost two decades later, having sold a

majority interest to cruise giant Ponant.

Galli Zugaro confers with the guides, and the captain. The fog will likely remain thick for hours. Perfect for a long, leisurely lunch taken either in an indoor lounge – complete with fireplace – or on an outdoor terrace. (The menu has been arranged by Karime López, who is on board for the

trip and was the first Mexican woman to be awarded a Michelin star. There is also a semi-secret list of comfort foods, like lasagne and hamburgers. Or, as the guests quickly come to find out, the kitchen will make pretty much anything, at any time.)

The fog is not perfect for spotting walrus, however. Plan B comes along quickly. The Aqua Lares will head north, arriving at a late hour at Borebukta, where walrus are almost guaranteed.

Later, Galli Zugaro will raise this last-minute manoeuvre as a perfect example of how his operation is different to the rapidly multiplying vessels that now populate







Above: The ship began life as a Soviet ice-strengthened tug. Right: A stateroom.

the universe of ultra-luxury cruising. Once largely the domain of Celebrity- and Princess-branded hulks (the world's largest ship, Royal Caribbean's Icon of the Seas, cost more than \$3 billion, has 20 decks and can fit 7600 passengers), cruise ships for the ultra-wealthy are becoming seriously big business. Long-time players like Ponant are being joined by brands like Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons, which are launching floating palaces to compete with iconic French Riviera hotels and glamorous Maldives resorts. A standard suite on the Four Seasons 1 yacht, which sails the Greek islands over summer, can run to \$US31,000 (\$44,000) for a week.

But these ships are still large compared with Aqua's. The Four Seasons 1 is 207 metres long and has 95 cabins. The Aqua Lares has 15 (including three luxury cabins known as owner's suites). Galli Zugaro says it's for well-heeled travellers

"who think of themselves as adventurers".

"I think I am actually a perfect kind of reflection of what our guests do or don't want. If I genuinely get excited about something, I think I have a pretty good pulse on the interest of our guest profiles. So far, it's been six ships and I've gotten that right. Every ship has delivered something unique. Here it is about the expanse of the tundra of the Arctic," he says.

"When you look from a purely experiential side, [the question is if] it gets that adrenaline pumping. When I first bought this ship a year ago, I took it up to the Arctic and I spent a week on it. As we kept going, heading north, I was, like, 'How cool is this to be able to say that you're the northernmost boat?' That kind of wow factor is what our guests are looking for. They are looking for something unique, they're looking for bragging rights."

The growing popularity of luxury at sea

is arguably being fuelled by a bigger trend, one that has long been attributed to the long, lean years of the pandemic, which kept travellers at home counting down their days. Experiences that are harder to find or replicate – or, in the lingo, experiential travel – are cruising's growth engine these days.

In a 2025 survey of travel agents by the Cruise Lines International Association, 42 per cent reported growth or significant growth in bookings on so-called expedition cruises. Among luxury cruises, that number was 53 per cent. Just 25 per cent reported growth in what the sector calls contemporary cruising – that is, the mainstream, big-ship operations charging up to \$500 a day.

At 77 metres, the Aqua Lares is a certified mega yacht, an important distinction in this world. Delivered in 1974 as a Soviet ice-strengthened tug (named the Gigante), it was sold to Swiss businessman Rene Herzog before changing names to the Legend and being sold to Schmidt.

After a considerable refit and another rebrand, it has an outdoor jacuzzi, several lounges and dining areas, and a sauna and massage room. Between February and April, it sails the waters off the eastern coast of Africa from Madagascar to the Seychelles. In the northern summer, it heads to Norway.



Aqua Expeditions founder Francesco Galli Zugaro. PHOTO: YVONNE KREUZMAYR



#### Need to know

**Fares** From \$US10,450 (\$15,000) for a five-night Arctic voyage departing Longyearbyen on September 10 for Tromsø. Aqua Lares will then redeploy to East Africa before returning to the Arctic Circle in June 2027.

**Getting there** Longyearbyen is a three-hour flight from Oslo. From the airport, Aqua Expeditions takes guests by van to Longyearbyen Harbour, where they will board Aqua Lares.

On this trip, a year after Galli Zugaro took delivery, the Aqua Lares had travelled past Scotland to Tromsø, and headed to Bjørnøya, a tiny speck in the Barents Sea, before arriving in Svalbard proper. It was a trial run, of sorts, except with guests.

On board are four Australians, a couple from South Africa, another from Hong Kong, and a handful of Americans. Many have racked up the miles with Aqua Expeditions, travelling on its fleet in Indonesia, the Galapagos and through the Mekong and Amazon.

"People feel comfortable on this ship," Galli Zugaro says. "They don't feel like it's a competition of who's wearing what. Everybody here is successful. Many of them can afford anything. But they can come here, relax, have an adventure, have family time, and know that they're with like-minded guests."

"A lot of our guests fly privately and then book a nice cabin so they don't have to charter the whole ship. Why pay €600,000, €700,000 for the week when you can take an owner's suite and have the same service? These are people who have gone everywhere, they've been gorilla trekking, they've been to Antarctica. They are well-travelled people who are looking for something different." **E&E**

*The writer was a guest of Aqua Expeditions.*