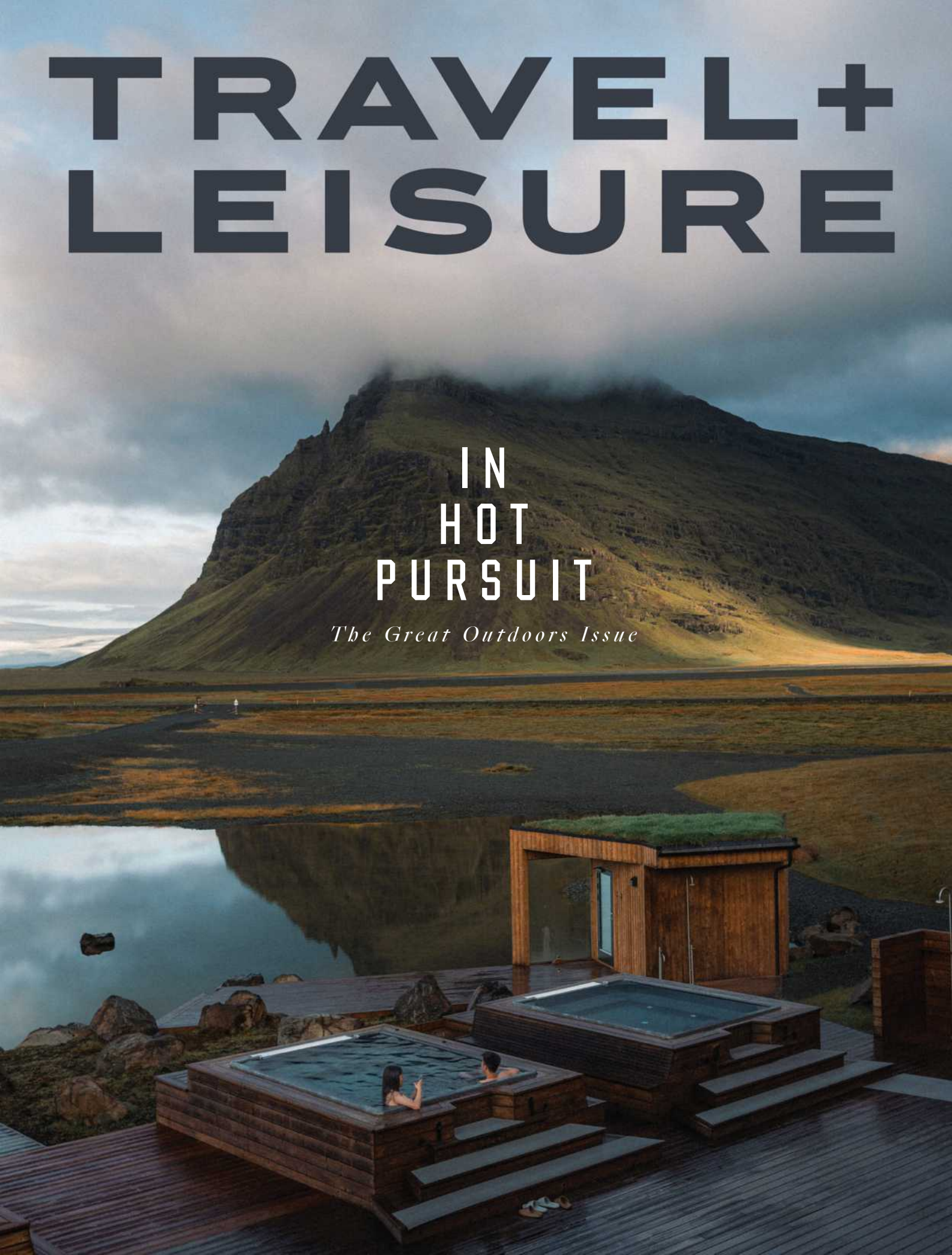
TRAVEL+ LEISURE



IN HOT PURSUIT

The Great Outdoors Issue

Islands in the Stream

Adam Erace *sails the famed turquoise seas of the Seychelles—and considers staying forever.*



DARREN CAMILLE/GETTY IMAGES

NOT 24 HOURS after boarding *Aqua Lares,* a 253-foot ship traveling through the Seychelles, I was ready to disembark and never return.

The ship had brought me to Anse Mondon, a deserted beach on Silhouette Island—my first stop on a five-night sail last April. The wind whipped as I hurtled across the Indian Ocean on a Zodiac, with nature guide Damien Alphonse sitting on the bow. "This is the first island I set foot on after I left home," he said, while we approached the mountain-backed shore and the sea bottom rose to meet us, the water shifting from cerulean to a luminous cyan. "This place…*this place*…"

The extraordinary beauty of the Seychelles, a nation of 115 islands about 700 miles northeast of Madagascar, is well chronicled, having inspired James Bond adventures (Ian Fleming retreated here to cure his writer's block in 1958) and hosted high-profile honeymoons, including those of Prince William and Princess Catherine, and George and Amal Clooney. But seeing firsthand how untouched the landscapes remain to this day, encountering no people on many of them…yeah, *this place.*

"There's a stream that comes down from the mountain," Alphonse said after we'd landed, as I followed him to a clear spring carving ripples through the sand. "If I remember right, it's quite cold. My friends and I would bring a couple beers and a bottle of rum, and stick them in the water to chill."

He remembered correctly; the stream bit my toes. I retreated into the warm ocean and remained there for an hour, floating and content, while fruit bats with osprey wingspans alighted from surrounding caves and circled overhead, hunting for mangoes.

Just maroon me here, I thought. *No need to go back to the ship. I've watched enough* Survivor *to get by.* But Alphonse shooed me back onto the Zodiac, promising there would be much more to explore during the five-day sail ahead.

LEFT *Anse Source d'Argent Beach, on La Digue island in the Seychelles.*

Africa is a new destination for **Aqua Expeditions**, best known for its Amazon and Mekong riverboats.

From November to April, it runs Seychelles journeys lasting from five days to two weeks *(from $9,000 per person),* some also including Tanzania. Each cruise departs from Victoria, the archipelago's capital city, on Mahé, its largest island.

Because getting here from the U.S. can take 24 hours or longer, most travelers spend a few days acclimating on land before the cruise. I'd arrived earlier in the week and spent my first night at **Mango House Seychelles** *(from $582),* on Mahé. The waterfront property, part of Hilton's LXR Hotels & Resorts collection, treated me to my first glimpse of the country's famous turquoise waters when I opened my suite's drapes, revealing a glittering bay tucked between rugged green mountains. It was a brief preview of what was to come. Soon I was back at the airport and on a prop plane to Platte Island, home of the two-year-old **Waldorf Astoria Seychelles Platte Island** *(from $1,966).*

The island is also home to the slow-moving Flintstone Squad, a family of five Aldabra tortoises named after the illustrious cartoon caveman clan. The reptiles are popular pets in the Seychelles, and after their owners pass away, they're commonly moved to sanctuaries that can support them. On an ecological tour with Athina Antoine, the resort's environment coordinator, I got to see them. One of the adult females ignored me until I was close enough with my camera. Then she lifted her sand-crusted head off the ground, looked dead into my camera lens, and—I swear—posed.

Antoine spent six years working on coral restoration in the Seychelles before moving to Platte, only a third of which has been developed by Waldorf Astoria, its sole occupant. The property generates 70 percent of its power from solar panels, prohibits single-use plastics, recycles its gray water, and desalinates seawater. All 50 of its villas are set back from the beach and screened by lush greenery, a choice that's both aesthetic—I loved the privacy of my infinity pool—and government-regulated. (In the Seychelles, new builds are typically required to have an 82-foot buffer between construction and the shoreline.)

The next morning, I took another puddle-jumper back to Mahé to set sail aboard *Aqua Lares.* The white-and-navy ship, originally built in 1974, contains 15 cabins, two Jacuzzis, multiple lounges, a cinema, and a spa with a sauna and a cold-bucket shower. I stepped aboard to find interiors paneled in gleaming woodwork, layered with Italian textiles, and detailed with geometric art-deco designs.

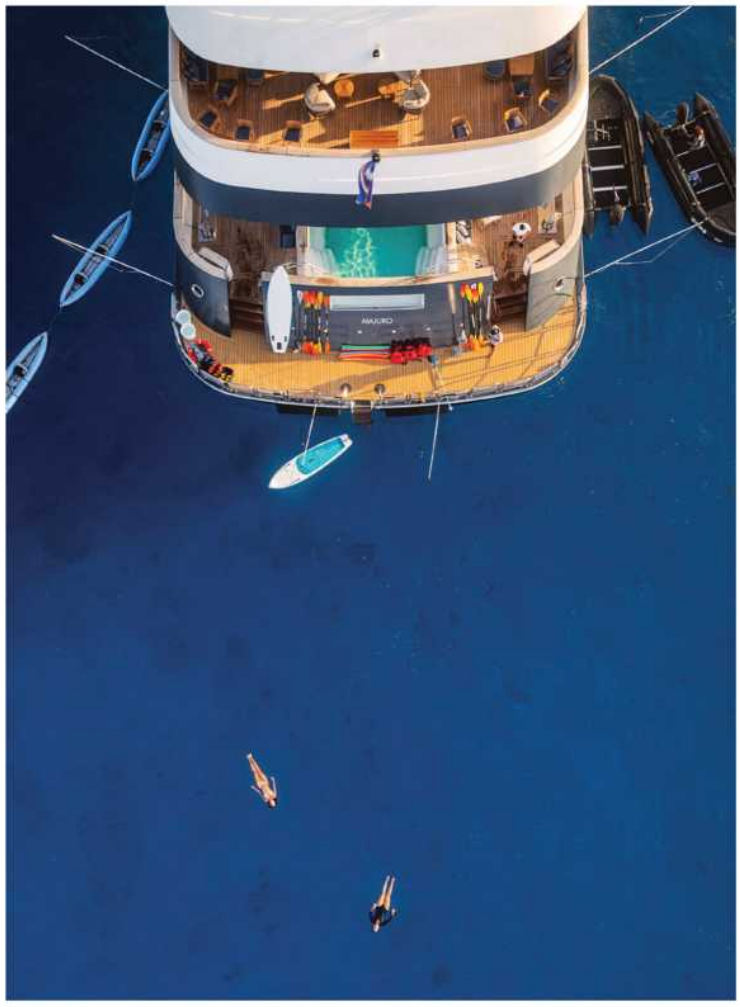
The vessel made a luxurious setting for five days that followed a summer-camp cadence: breakfast, morning activity, lunch,



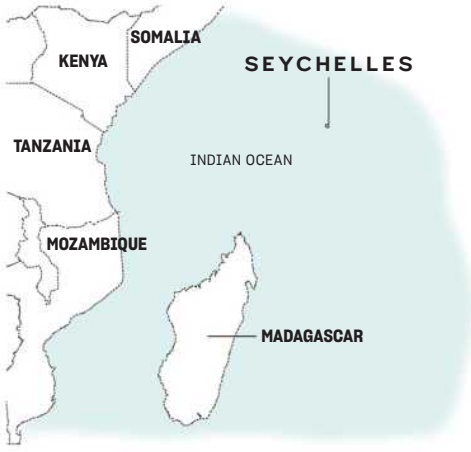


FROM LEFT *Dinner with a view aboard* Aqua Lares*; snorkeling off the ship.*

FROM LEFT: GWEN LIM/COURTESY OF AQUA EXPEDITIONS; YVI K. & ANTHONY DO/COURTESY OF AQUA EXPEDITIONS







FROM LEFT: GWEN LIM/COURTESY OF THE SEYCHELLES TOURISM BOARD; ADAM ERACE. ILLUSTRATION BY BASHEL LUBARSKY

sail to our next location, afternoon activity, sunset cocktails, nature lecture, dinner. Chef Marko Sterlicchi served some of the best food I've had at sea, including curried prawns, poke bowls, and Wagyu steaks rubbed with Zanzibar vanilla and nutmeg.

There were 13 passengers, from Canada, France, South Africa, and the U.S. Most of our activities took place on the water. A pair of retired army vets and a New Hampshire dairy farmer scuba-dived every day, while the rest of us snorkeled.

Diverse arrays of sea life greeted us at each island, whole worlds just beneath the surface. Off Grande Soeur, I trailed a hawksbill turtle being chaperoned by a secret service of glimmering silver jacks. Neon-blue and highlighter-yellow fusiliers and playful batfish surrounded me off Silhouette Island. At St. Pierre, where the 1998 and 2016 El Niños had turned the seafloor into a coral boneyard, a honeycomb moray eel wriggled through the wreckage, its fluid body rippling like a streamer. It was the only predator I saw, though tiger, lemon, and reef sharks do skulk around the islands.

Onshore at Cousin Island, a forested 67-acre private nature reserve, white-tailed tropic birds soared overhead, their long, forked tails like kite strings, while their puffball chicks nestled in tree hollows. A 145-year-old tortoise named Gandalf munched roughage so slowly, I could make out the taste buds on his tongue. A curious bronze-colored skink poked its head out between two beach cabins.

FROM LEFT *Swimming off the back of the ship; a hawksbill sea turtle hatchling.*

The most memorable animal encounter turned out to be the tiniest. On the beach, we ran into a pair of young eco-volunteers huddled over a shallow, sandy crater. Carefully they scooped away a layer of sand, and a hawksbill hatchling poked its head out. Then another. Within a minute, more than a hundred baby turtles were bumbling down the shore and over volcanic rocks pockmarked with tide pools, all wide eyes and fluttering flippers.

Statistics say very few of them will make it, but statistics also say it's rare to witness a nest hatching in broad daylight, so we were already beating the odds. I suppose the Seychelles are, too. "Just look around us: we are the only big vessel here," Alphonse said during his lecture on shark migration that night, and it was true. During my time on *Aqua Lares,* I saw no ship larger than a standard-issue sailboat—and very few of them. "The Seychelles are still a little bit hidden, even though we're well known," he continued. "Where we are right now, hopefully we can stay."