

WANDER LUST

WILDLIFE, WINE,
AND DESIGN:
THREE WRITERS
PEN JOURNEYS OF
BREATHTAKING
BEAUTY



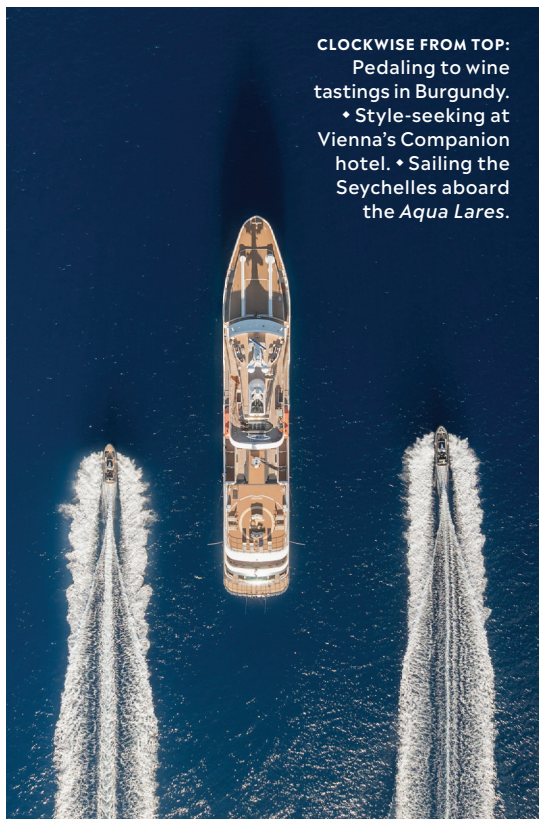
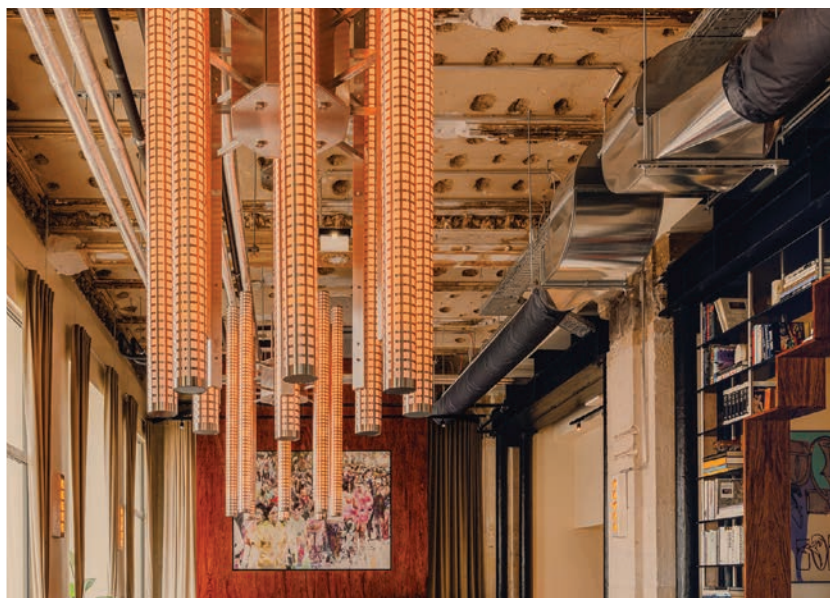
INSIDE MAISON
MARIE DAÂGE'S
NEW TABLEWARE
STUDIO IN
VENDÔME, FRANCE



Bursts of late-season color
light up a village in Burgundy,
turning the region's famed
vineyards golden yellow.

& JOURNEYS

THRILL *of the* CHASE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Pedaling to wine
tastings in Burgundy.
• Style-seeking at
Vienna's Companion
hotel. • Sailing the
Seychelles aboard
the Aqua Lares.



What discoveries await when you *follow your passion around the globe*? Three modern explorers set out for the French countryside, Austria's design-rich capital, and a far-flung archipelago in the Indian Ocean to find out.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) STEPHEN FLEMING/ALAMY; COURTESY OF THE COMPANION
VIENNA; AQUA EXPEDITIONS; (PREVIOUS SPREAD) FRANCESCO RICCARDO IACOMINO/GETTY IMAGES.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kayaking off the coast of Mahé. • Mafia Island’s whale shark excursions. • A sunset toast aboard the 253-foot *Aqua Lares* (shown below). • Lobster aguachile with cucumber ribbons. OPPOSITE: The Aldabra giant tortoise.

TORTOISE COURTESY OF GIVENCHY/AQUA EXPEDITIONS; (OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ANTHONY DO/AQUA EXPEDITIONS; TRACEY MINKIN/AQUA EXPEDITIONS; ANTHONY DO/AQUA EXPEDITIONS; YVONNE KREUZMAIER/AQUA EXPEDITIONS.

Wildlife-Spotting in the Seychelles

Aquatic adventurer Tracey Minkin cruises some of the world’s most remote atolls for rarely seen creatures of land and water.

HEY, FELLA.” Not the best greeting, I realize, as the words escape my mouth. I crouch at the armored toes of *Aldabrachelys gigantea*—the Aldabra giant tortoise. Its prehistoric kin once tread like slow-motion monarchs upon every continent, minus Australia and Antarctica. While my own latter-day species has flourished, this creature’s has retreated at the hands of evolution and extinction to Aldabra Atoll, a remote ring of coral limestone, white sand, and scrub in the Indian Ocean, where the last wild population endures.

The tortoise retracts its long, leathery neck beneath the thick rim of a massive carapace. Its dark reptilian eye does not meet mine. What should I have said: “*I’m sorry?*” I keep my mouth shut and creep backward. *I’m just grateful to have glimpsed you.*

It’s a moment filled with thrill and humility, that potent yield of exploration—one of many from my journey with Aqua Expeditions on its latest ship, the *Aqua Lares*, on a new itinerary in the Outer Seychelles and coastal Tanzania. Launching from Mahé, the largest of the former’s 115 islands and its hub of luxury-resort island-hopping, I’ve joined a gang of 28 soft adventurers to chart a gently meandering westward course of 12 days among wild and remote islands.

Aqua Lares arrives ready for its new chapter. Built in 1974 for service as a Soviet icebreaker rescue tug, the 253-foot, high-prow, wide-and-open-sterned craft passed through the hands of millionaires both foreign and domestic, gaining luxury improvements and decorating updates (some regrettable) during its life as a private superyacht. But when Aqua Expeditions founder and CEO Francesco Galli Zugaro sought a sixth vessel to add to his boutique international cruising fleet, one that could wrap Indian Ocean explorers in luxury for winter and spring (migrating north to the Arctic Circle for routes in summer and early fall), the adventure impresario spotted a gem in the rough.

The family-run business whipped up *Aqua Lares*’s Cinderella chapter. Son Massimo helmed a deft rebuild of 15 bespoke cabins and commodious gathering spaces, while materfamilias Birgit worked with Milan-based Hot Lab yacht design studio to grant interiors an Italian pedigree that—like outfits that go from day to night—works in the tropics and the poles: tub chairs from

Poltrona Frau, Minotti sectionals, and art that echoes natural history and exploration. The sweetest touch: bespoke dinnerware pieces featuring delicate octopus, jellyfish, and coral imagery from 19th-century explorer and naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace’s notebook watercolors.

The family (including oldest daughter Daria, who oversees the company’s global bookings) is aboard for this voyage. With a trio of onboard conservationists and guides, we spend every day exploring wild places both above and below the sea’s glimmering surface, observing life in pristine and often preserved habitats. We dive and snorkel among thriving coral reefs that feed and shelter prismatic universes of fish, plunge into cerulean spaces threaded by manta rays, and swim through azure channels prowled by zeppelin-like whale sharks. In Zodiacs, we ply a jade lagoon whose stilted mangroves lure high-circling frigate birds and red-footed boobies to roost. We pick our way carefully among lowlands camouflaging coconut crabs the size of lap dogs.

And we tread among the some 152,000 resident leviathans of Aldabra Atoll, whose well-being is fiercely guarded by the Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF). Just our visit is a rarity: A multiple-day sea voyage from Mahé, the atoll (a World Heritage Site) allows just about 1,000 visitors a year. Before we even board our Zodiacs for a beach landing at SIF’s rustic headquarters on the island, its staff boards *Aqua Lares* to painstakingly check and clean—with tweezers—our footwear to ensure we do not track any invasive species of any size onto the atoll.

The process, including a receding tide that forces the slowest of our party to slosh a half mile in knee-deep shallows past benign black-tip reef sharks to reach the Zodiac back to *Aqua Lares*, reminds all of us that exploration—even when in the lap of luxury—is not always predictable, nor should it be cavalier. The lesson echoes sweetly near journey’s end on Tanzania’s relatively more developed Mafia Island, where we drive on dirt roads to meet an aging resident whose life’s work has been to defend the well-being of a local clutch of hippopotamuses. On the marshy edge of a freshwater pond, he whistles through his teeth to catch their attention. Finally, one rewards our patience with a brief peek above the still scrim of the water and a barely audible snort.

And then it’s gone. But for the explorer, that’s enough. ♦

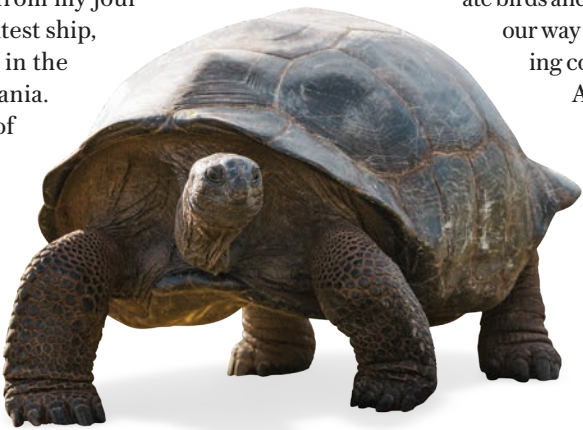


CHART YOUR COURSE

The sixth vessel in Francesco Galli Zugaro’s luxury fleet, ***Aqua Lares*** offers itineraries of 5, 9, 10, 11, and 14 nights in the Seychelles and Zanzibar Archipelago, November through March. Rates begin at \$9,000 per person; aquaexpeditions.com.