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with

Words JULIA ZALTZMAN

the most exhilarating way to see the natural wonders of the world from the water

the

A lifelong thirst for travel and adventure led to the founding of Aqua Expeditions,

flow

Perhaps it was a childhood spent moving through 16 countries as his stepfather followed postings as bureau chief for *Time* magazine, or the years visiting his father in Central and South America that provided an initial spark of inspiration. Whatever the reason, Francesco Galli Zugaro, founder and CEO of Aqua Expeditions, recognized the appeal of authentic remote river cruising long before expedition travel became fashionable.

"I wanted to bring a premium safari-like river experience to affluent explorers looking for immersive wildlife-focused expeditions," says Zugaro. Following seven years running sales and marketing for a company that owned and operated two expedition ships in the Galápagos Islands, he founded Aqua Expeditions in 2007.

He homed in on the Peruvian Amazon, which at the time was on travelers' radars following Orient-Express Hotels' tantalizing train journey that rumbled across the yawning Andes. "What remained lacking was a high-end river cruise, so I hired an architect and a chef, and my wife and I built our first boat, Aqua Amazon, which was a 12-cabin ship," he explains.

Key to the setup were two principal pillars that remain true to the offering today: firstly, that guests are always accompanied by a world-class naturalist guide in intimate groups no bigger than five couples per guide. And secondly, that Aqua Expedition ships (the largest carrying just 40 guests) serve as floating basecamps that possess locally inspired contemporary design and world-class fine dining that "brings destinations to life through the palate."

In the Amazon, guests venture off on skiffs into seasonally flooded forests and winding creeks in search of pink dolphins, anacondas, and howler monkeys, before returning to their ship—which has relocated along backwater tributaries—for warm showers, air conditioning, and gastronomic feasts. It's what Zugaro coins "the Garden of Eden meets Jurassic Park."

This winning formula has allowed the company to steadily grow over the past 20 years, now spanning three purpose-built river cruise ships on the Peruvian Amazon and Mekong Delta, and three ocean cruise ships—all explorer yacht conversions and locally flagged—that journey to the Galápagos, East Africa, Indonesia, and, most recently, the Arctic. The latest offering, Aqua Lares, is an icebreaker superyacht open to both charter and cabin bookings that will transport guests to the higher



latitudes in search of roaming polar bears, basking walruses, and the deafening cacophony of puffins and guillemots.

"We're not expanding for the sake of growth but identifying iconic rivers and biodiversity hotspots where we can bring high-end custom-curated experiences," explains Zugaro, who continues to scout each new itinerary first-hand. It's his efforts to build hard-earned relationships with small communities and local partners that differentiate Aqua's itineraries as responsible, immersive, knowledge-rich experiences.

"Our guests are seasoned world travelers who look for something beyond lounging by a hotel pool," says Zugaro. Ultimately, it's this blend of rugged wilderness and uncompromising luxury combined with Zugaro's spirit of adventure that remains the company's driving force.

PHOTO: JAMES PAGE; GALLI: GUY / CORBIS SYGMA; AQUA EXPEDITIONS / JVLK; ANTHONY VOI

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Ripple effect

Francesco Galli Zugaro (above left); cruising on board the Aqua Mekong (above).



Five of Francesco's favorite adventures

01

The Aldabra Islands

Seychelles, Africa

These islands are the Galápagos of the African continent. The atoll comprises four uninhabited islands—Grande Terre, Malabar, Polymnie, and Picard—which surround a vast lagoon and are home to more than 100,000 giant tortoises. The only way to get there is by boat, which is why I made Aqua Lares the first of our ships to split its time between two sides of the world—the Arctic Circle from June to September and East Africa in the offseason—because these islands are hard to access, but so worth experiencing.

02

Damaraland desert

Namibia and Angola, Africa

I did a solo 300-kilometer (186 mile) bike ride on the northern border of Namibia and Angola, cycling along dry riverbeds through the rugged, ancient expanses of the rocky red Damaraland desert. I had a pickup truck behind tailing me with a cab, tent, and necessary supplies, and it was an epic journey that took four days to complete. It was the ideal way to navigate the harsh environments safely.



04

Mekong Delta

Vietnam and Cambodia, Asia

When I moved to Asia 14 years ago, the mad gold rush was all about the Irrawaddy—Myanmar's principal river and most important commercial waterway—and the Mekong. I settled on building an experience on the Mekong because I wanted to find Asia's equivalent of Machu Picchu—which is Angkor Wat and the Mekong Delta—and was drawn to life on the river. Travelers visiting Siem Reap, Cambodia, were staying in hotels like Aman and Raffles, but there was no premium offering on the river itself. We're the only cruise experience with a fleet of private speedboats whose excursions are all water-based.



03

Sumbawa Island

Indonesia, Asia

My life is all about aquatic exploration, be it freshwater or saltwater, but waking at first dawn anchored off east Indonesia's Sumbawa Island to snorkel with whale sharks for an hour is up there with some of the best experiences. Saleh Bay is one of the world's premier destinations to swim with the gentle giants, and it is famous for its crystal-clear waters and striking volcanic backdrops. It's also close to Moyo Island, which is a national park with stunning waterfalls and a vast nature reserve.

05

Botswana

Africa

I love combining a Botswana safari with trekking to see the mountain gorillas in the volcanic highlands and misty forests of Uganda and Rwanda. My first trip was part of a recce looking at getting a boat on Lake Kivu, the massive freshwater lake spanning the border of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. I'm yet to make it an Aqua Expeditions reality, though I did help a friend build the Zambezi Queen, a five-star floating boutique hotel on the Chobe River offering up-close wildlife viewing.

Julia Zaltzman writes for RobbReport and Centurion, and is editor of SuperYacht Industry