



WE SAIL ON... Aqua Lares Seychelles

Andrea Black embarks on an extraordinary superyacht adventure where on-board luxuries complement nature's riches

Bobbing up for air while snorkelling around Ave Maria Islet in the Seychelles, our diving guide Damien Alphonse draws our attention to a "turtle fiesta". The green turtles are peacefully gliding through the water, as well as honeycushion moray eels, angelfish and silver trevally. I'm on a five-day sea safari in East Africa, exploring the inner Seychelles from the island of Mahé return aboard Aqua Expeditions' new superyacht, *Aqua Lares*, and cannot get enough of this underwater ballet.

Aqua Expeditions' small-ship expeditions are designed to explore remote destinations with the flexibility to shape itineraries according to weather and sea conditions. We are visiting the islands of Praslin, Cousin, Curieuse, La Digue, Grande Soeur, Ile Cocos and Aride in no particular order. Like land safaris, this adventure involves twice-daily wildlife spotting, in this case snorkelling and diving, and come late afternoon, sundowners on the sun dock of the six-deck, 77.4m long vessel.

This is no run-of-the-mill superyacht. Originally built as a Russian tug, *Aqua Lares* splits its time in East Africa (Seychelles and Tanzania) and then the Arctic, where she can cut through ice. Expeditions in East Africa sail annually from November to April when the ocean waters are calmest.

THE LOWDOWN

The feel aboard this 45-cabin superyacht is casual luxury. Aqua Expeditions' design director Birgit Galli Zagaro and interior designer David Cole worked with Milanese architects to re-dress the superyacht after acquiring it from former Google CEO Eric Schmidt.

The redesigned vessel now features Italian marble, sofas and chairs by Minotti and B&B Italia and pure wool carpets underfoot.

There's a classic maritime theme throughout. Attention to detail is paramount. Even the octopus- and jellyfish-inspired crockery is custom-made (by Bali-based Gaya Ceramics). There's a barefoot policy on board and each guest is given a pair of blue velvet slippers emblazoned with an octopus should they want footwear.

THE CABINS

Aqua Lares features 12 suites and three twin cabins across five categories, including three Owner's Suites sized between 39 and 66 sqm. The remaining cabins are between 13 and 30 sqm. Each is individually designed and custom-furnished and features classic wood veneers, as well as wallpaper and fabrics sourced from Italian design house Dedar.

My cabin on deck 3 features portholes and a spacious marble bathroom. There's ample cupboard space and complimentary laundry and pressing services. A real temptation at any hour (and right next to my cabin) is a bar's pantry with lollies, snacks, soft drinks and a coffee machine.

DINING

There are communal dining tables both indoors and out for the 30 guests (on my sailing guests were from Switzerland, Germany, the US, the UK and Australia) to debrief over a meal. There are also tables for two. At lunch and dinner, we sit down to a menu devised by Michelin-starred chef Karime López. The Mexican-

born, Italian-based chef's dishes range from the best grilled lobster I have tried and glazed short ribs to self-serve tacos and poke bowls. Breakfast is buffet style, from caviar topped blinis to yogurt and fruit. There's also a menu of made-to-order dishes.

EXCURSIONS

The sailing not only offers access to hidden coves and lagoons across East Africa, the small group adventures are led by local experts who have a passion for the Seychelles. Highlights included a hike exploring the Unesco-listed Vallée de Mai Nature Reserve on Praslin, home to the coco de mer palm, kayaking around the smoothed granite rocks at La Digue's Anse Source d'Argent and a conservationist-led walk on Cousin Island to spot rare birdlife. Snorkelling and scuba-diving equipment is provided, though often no wetsuit is needed in water that's 25C-27C. The vessel has a fleet of five tenders, along with paddleboards and kayaks.

ON-BOARD ACTIVITIES

The heli-deck is transformed into a workout area for yoga and meditation at sunrise. A popular perch is the jacuzzi on the back deck, and there's also a sauna and spa treatment room. After dinner, you can curl up with a book from the library, play backgammon over a nightcap, or take in a movie in the velvet-lined theatre.

The writer was a guest of Aqua Expeditions. Rates start at \$US9730 per person twin share, which covers all meals, non-alcoholic drinks, selected house wines and beer, daily excursions, wi-fi and national park fees. aquaexpeditions.com

WHAT'S HOT

On-board camaraderie, especially over a sundowner and a meal, makes this sailing great to take solo. Nightly briefings from the crew on what awaits the next day are more discussions among friends where we all agreed on a suitable time to get out and explore.

WHAT'S NOT

As this was a shorter sailing we didn't get the opportunity to try a barbecue party on the deck, though I heard that the Big Green Egg cooker gets fired up on the 11-day Zanzibar & Seychelles voyage.



From top: *Aqua Lares* sails the Seychelles from November to April; a handsomely furnished deck 2 cabin covers 30 sqm.



Aqua Lares's heli-deck is also a sun lounge.



THE VERDICT 10/10

This is a warm-weather superyacht adventure that is equally as glorious on board (the food! The design!) as it is exploring nature on land and underwater with experts.



The expedition vessel's spa.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SARA WERN