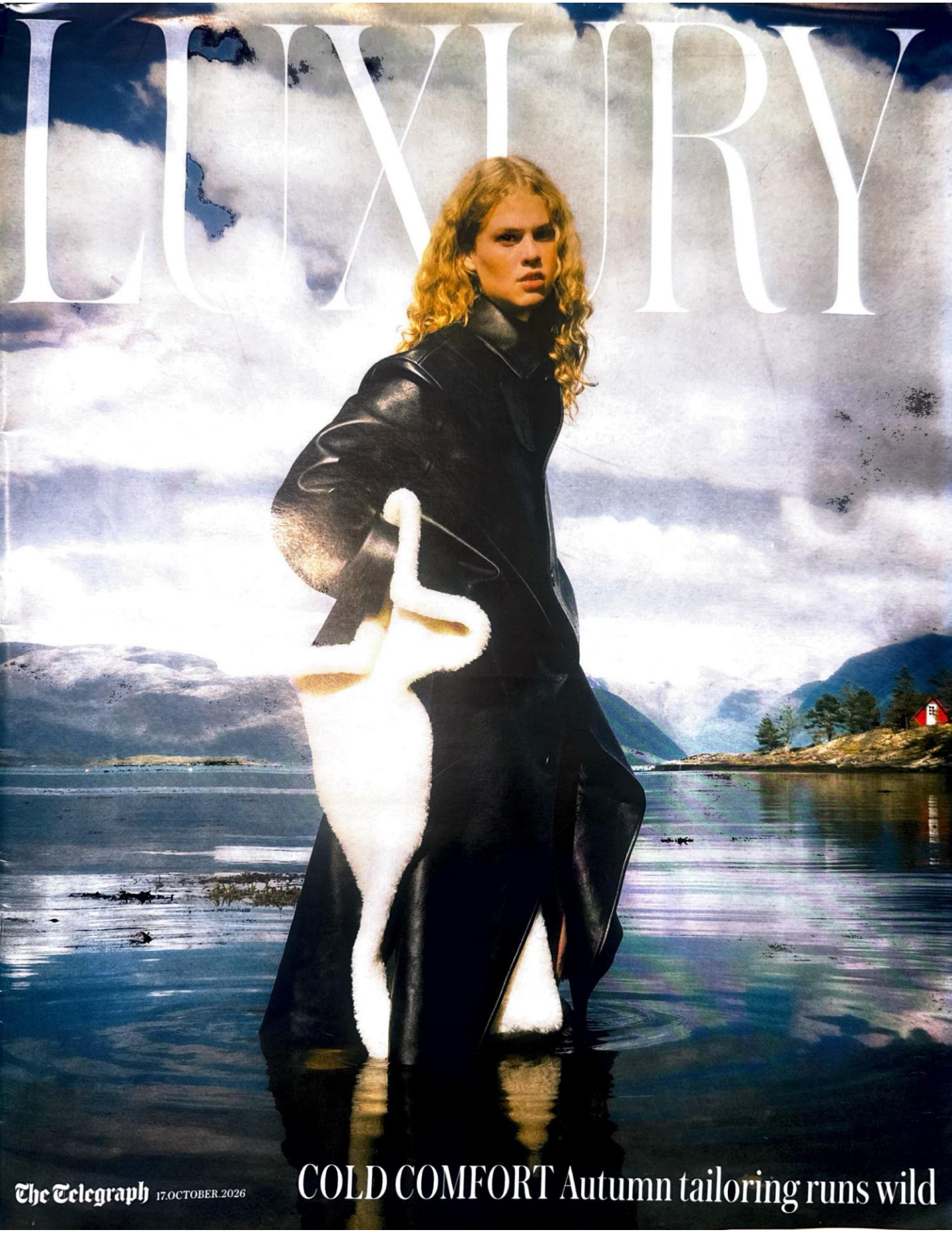


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The Aqua Blu, once a Royal Navy explorer, now a luxuriously appointed 15-cabin cruise yacht



UNCHARTED REALMS

Island hopping through the remote Indonesian archipelago of Raja Ampat, Catherine Fairweather connects with one of the world's least known, most spectacular habitats, accompanied by her husband, renowned photographer Don McCullin, on his last long-haul adventure

I wait for the nod from Lalu Aris, divemaster on Aqua Blu, a vintage survey ship converted into a gleaming luxury superyacht plying the vast and varied waterbodies of the Indonesian Archipelago, and redefining the very concept of a liveaboard. On the signal, I clamp a hand over my mask and roll backwards off the Rib. As I bob back up to the surface, beneath a metallic sky, the ocean is choppy in the unsettled period that comes with a supermoon, and a strong undertow tugs at my fins in the swell. This is the Indonesian Throughflow, the current that rushes water from the higher, warmer Pacific Ocean into the Indian ocean, stirring up rich nutrients that fuel a kaleidoscopic marine biodiversity at the heart of the so-called Coral Triangle.

The promised access to some of the best scuba diving and snorkelling – reputedly – on the planet, aboard a sumptuous and intimate cruiseboat, is enough of a lure for me to endure the 20 hours in the air from Heathrow with three stopovers: Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and finally Sorong, Southwest Papua. So it is with some relief, having discarded shoes to protect the elegant hardwood decks, and with chilled face towels and fresh pineapple juice at hand, that we power off at a steady 12 knots. The

monsoon swells hardly register, thanks to the ship's Quantum Zero Speed Stabilisers, for this superyacht is a cocoon with spongy carpeted and cushioned saloons filled with a collection of rare indigenous artefacts and Buddhas. It is also pretty much unique in this region in that you don't have to charter the entire vessel, but can book each of the 15 spacious cabins separately. She can also cover distances – 550 miles on this journey – that the picturesque traditional wooden phinisi or schooner could never dream of.

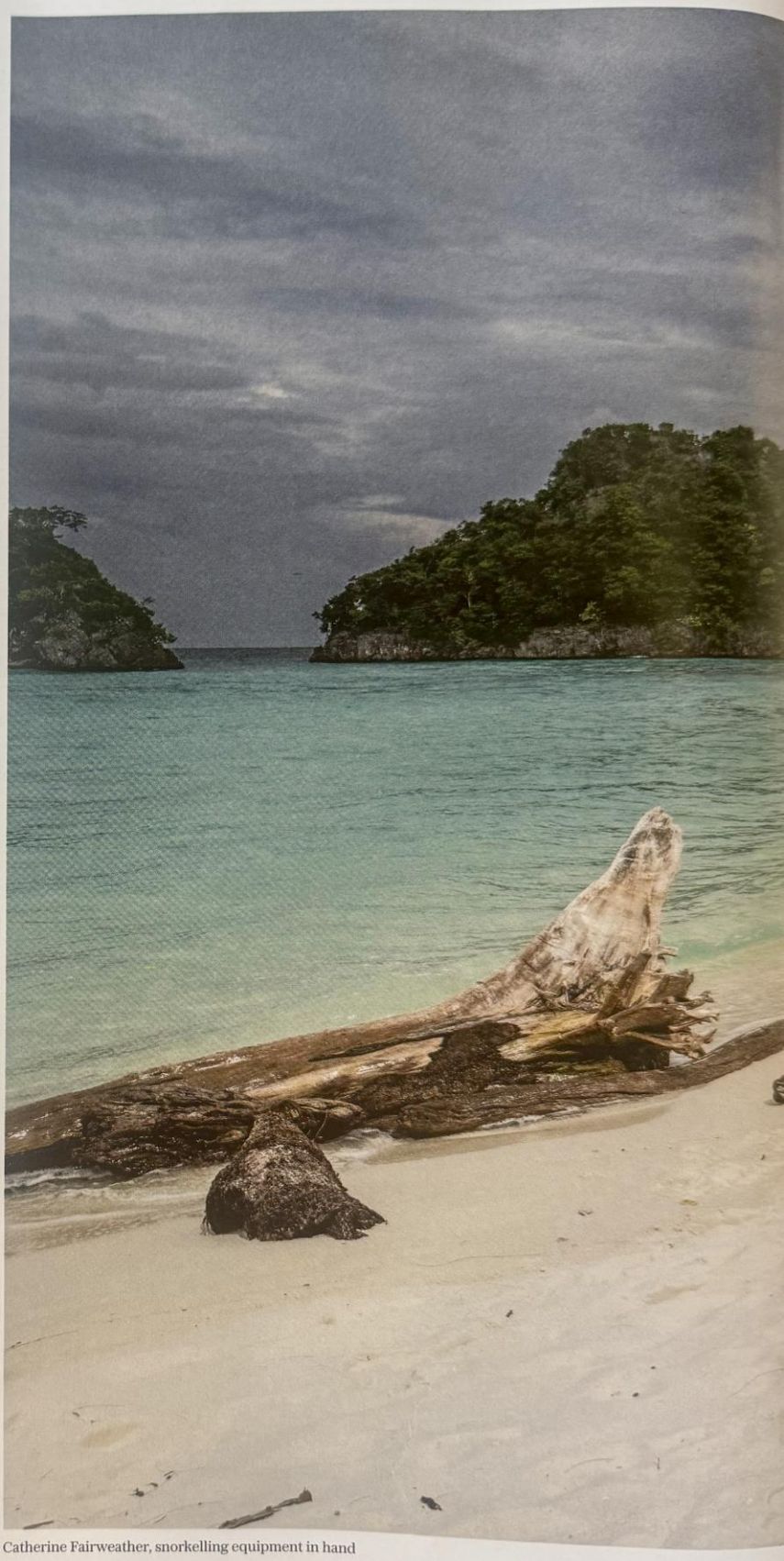
We drop anchor at our first dive site, Yilliet Kecil in Eastern Misool, the farthest edge of the already remote Raja Ampat archipelago, with its scattering of 1,500 karst islands and an equal number of fish species across an area the size of Switzerland. On the explorative sea-maps of old, illustrated warnings – 'Here Be Dragons', – marked these zones on the edge of the watery unknown. Even today, the seabeds, reefs, limestone caves, lagoons, islets and rainforest that make up this region and encompass a Uneseco Biosphere Reserve, remain only partially charted. It still feels like a last frontier. Outlying northern islands are earmarked for further explorative mining for the valuable nickel needed by the burgeoning electric car industry. How will this sit with the environmentalists who understand the effects for entire ecosystems if the reefs are contaminated or destroyed by mining?

For now the ferment is localised, and here in the southern region of Raja Ampat, we are the only charter for miles around, by a vertical rainforest that shoots up from the seabed encladding a spire of limestone, one of the multitude of pinnacles that make an island formation known as the Thousand Temples. The reef drop-off falls from a 15ft coral shelf to a daunting 100ft.

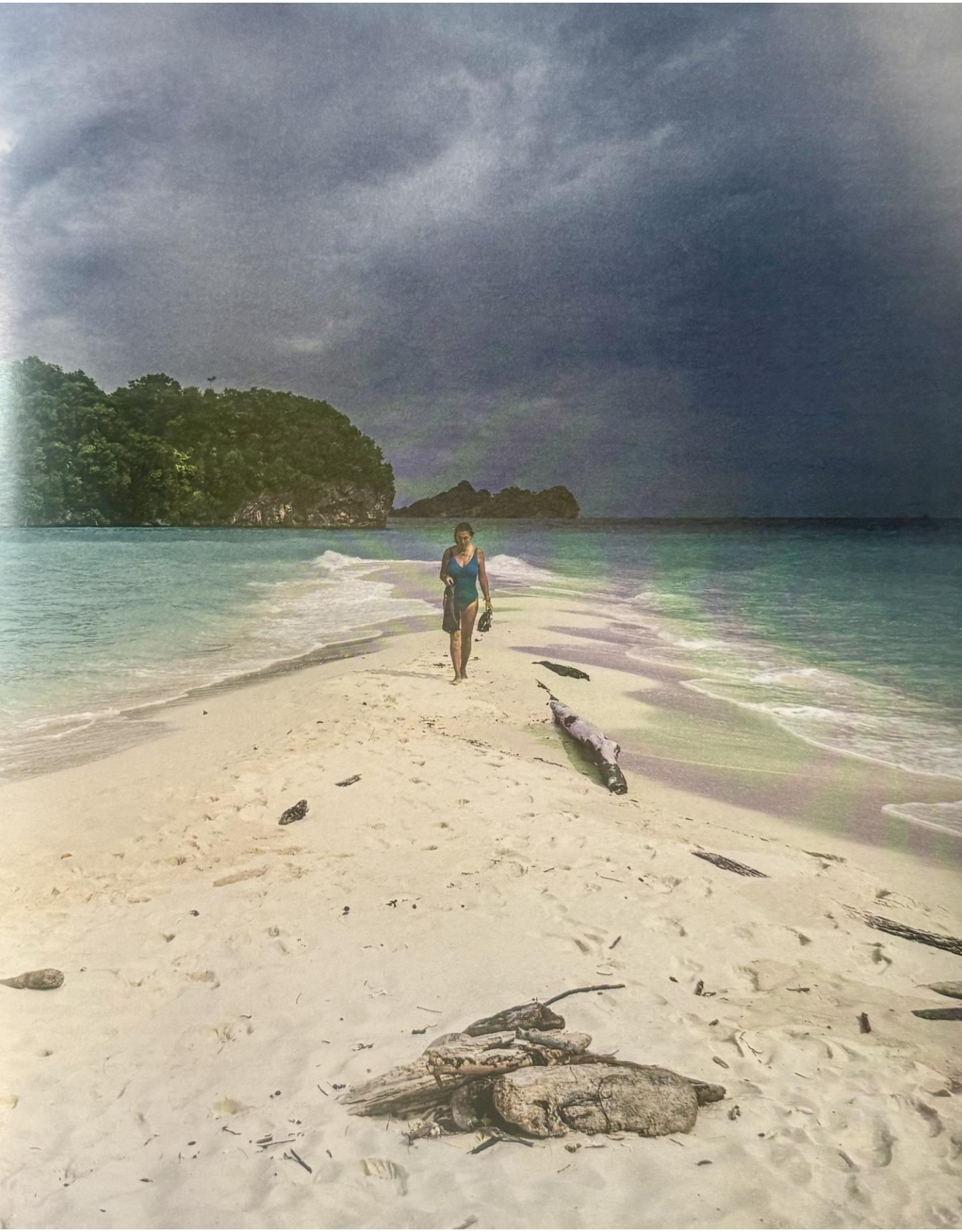
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I haven't dived for a decade. But the water is a warm 27C, as soothing as instructor Aris's voice as he talks me through the safety checks. On the count of three, we descend, deflating our vests, and when I look up it is as if the ocean is drawing a veil across the pallid sun. Below me, a slow, colourful underwater seascape seems to spool to infinity, opening up into an entire universe quite removed from the wild buffeting of waves and wind above, and the noisy churning of the Rib's motor engine at the ocean surface. I am also more than happy to abandon the swirling snippets of world news that ping alerts on my iPhone, left behind on the bridge. The only sounds are of the bubbles streaming from our tanks, and the regular rise and fall of my breathing.

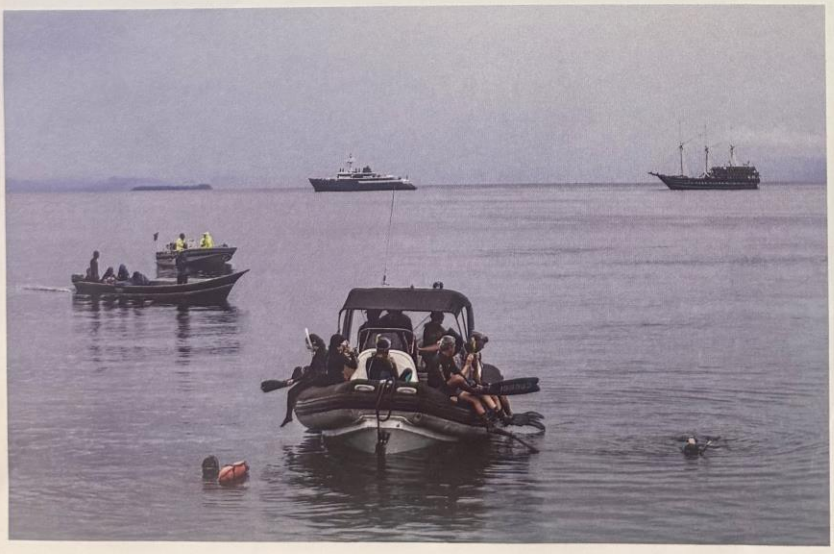
When I was younger, I took up scuba diving for the adrenaline and adventure – swimming with whale sharks in the Banda Sea and off the coast of Tanzania, chasing manta rays in the Maldives, joining the shark highway, the fast drift of the Avatoru Pass in the South Pacific. But today I seem to be less caught up in ticking off the privileged sightings of a stingray, and the endemic, attractive-sounding tasselled wobbegong shark (it actually has all the characteristics and charisma



Catherine Fairweather, snorkelling equipment in hand



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE The fishing community of Arborek Jetty. BELOW Entering the water from a Rib, or rigid inflatable



of a shag-pile rug, doing nothing more interesting than flap a fin and drape itself across a rocky ledge) than I am in this newfound awareness of, and delight in, my deep diaphragmatic breathing. It's a balm that settles the central nervous system and stills the mind, like meditation. If you can control your breath, you can control your mind, and if you can control your mind you can control your life. This realisation is the revelation of the week.

Aris teaches us that if we find this equilibrium for long enough over a coral head and take our time, we can start to notice the small things – the real magic of the reef – such as the filigree perfection of a fan coral, how a sea cucumber breathes from its bum, the changing colours of certain fish when they are spawning, the showbiz exoticism of a nudibranch.

The slowing down, which goes hand in hand with a massive endorphin release, at once relaxing and exhilarating, is addictive, I find myself signing up for two dives a day. This is the most dive-heavy itinerary of any of the Aqua Expeditions cruises, with almost equal numbers of snorkellers and divers – 22 in all; my husband is the only loafer or abstainer among us. An engaging and efficient crew of 30 tends to our needs, refreshing our large cabin



Days settle into a rhythm dictated by the tides, currents and weather – dives and snorkel sessions, kayaking in cathedral-like caves...

with its many portholes, leather-bound classics and bathtub, three times a day, returning our laundry each evening folded in a wicker basket. Febri mixes fresh juice cocktails for the after-dive, while the mostly Balinese chefs in the scarlet galley concoct inventive menus, low in carbs and high in flavour, served with flair at breakfast, lunch and dinner. This is mood-boosting, happy food with its zing of ginger, lime, chilli and peanut, the emphasis always on lightness, texture and freshness (although there are comfort-menu favourites for those who pine for their burger). When Wagyu stocks run low, Glen Wappett, our resourceful cruise director, a former British marine, concocts ingenious schemes to get supplies, via Bali, stashed on a traditional phinisi.

Days settle into a rhythm dictated by the tides, currents and weather. When the ferment between government, environmentalists and local mining over nickel in the north makes accessing that area impossible, Wappett, with his knowledge of the region, puts together a new itinerary without hassle. Dives and snorkel sessions, morning and afternoon, are enlivened with excursions; kayaking in cathedral-like caves, climbing a steamy jungle cliff face that swoons over a heart-shaped 'love lagoon', swimming, paddleboarding and enjoying 'happy hour' off what must be one of the most remote sand spits in the world.

One morning, we motor out on the Ribs beside a pearl farm whose floating platforms, illuminated at night, draw a line along the horizon, to explore the secret bays and inlets of the Thousand Temples. When our Rib threatens to beach on the reef in low tide, the head of the pearl-diving community rescues us in his motorised wooden skiff and guides us to a cool saline lake hidden in the limestone bay, so secluded and remote that the colonies of jellyfish, without predators, have lost their sting. We snorkel for an hour watching the pulsating ballet of these golden jellied orbs.

Back on board, Aqua Blu herself is such a 'beamy', superlatively comfortable yacht, you want to linger on her decks. A grand 200ft in length, she was built in the late 1960s as HMS Beagle, one of the last wooden-decked yachts commissioned by the Royal Navy to survey and chart seabed activity from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea and Arctic. She was decommissioned in 2002 and reincarnated as a pleasure cruiser for the Garavoglia family, heirs to the Campari empire. In 2018

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE 'Happy hour' on the sand spit after the day's adventures. BELOW Fishing around the Thousand Temples archipelago

she was acquired by Aqua Expeditions, known for its intimate, pioneering exploration of the world's great rivers and oceans, from the Amazon to the Mekong, from the Galápagos to the Seychelles and the coast of East Africa, on the new Aqua Lares. Aqua Blu, despite being refitted as a five-deck cruiser with Jacuzzi and sundeck, adorned with brass and ivory accents, a little over six years ago, is due another multimillion-dollar refit following a merger with the French cruise specialist Ponant.

Most itineraries are not as dive-orientated as ours. In Indonesia's Spice Islands there are volcanoes, ruins and a cultural heritage to explore on the back of the nutmeg trade that shaped empires; Komodo offers dragons; the eastern islands of Asmat are a window on a way of life that resists change, which is why visits are limited and numbers controlled. My photographer husband, Don McCullin, remembers travelling there in the 1980s with the late Mark Shand, the Queen's brother, on an adventure that became the travelogue *Skulduggery*. Irian Jaya, as it was then, was so under-the-radar, it was marked 'relief data incomplete' on maps. Warfaring nomads were Don and Mark's hosts and guides back then. They had a reputation for cannibalism. Our fellow travellers today







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on Aqua Blu, fortunately, are a congenial and worldly multi-generational bunch from Europe, America and Australia, individuals who have evidently found success and now want to gather experiences they never had time for before. Many are returning Aqua Expeditions guests.

While I spend time swotting up on the fantastical names of the fishes of 'my' reefs – oriental sweetlips, cherry barbs, bigeye trevally and the humphead or Napoleon wrasse (the one with the Mick Jagger profile), my husband, taking the pictures for this piece, amuses himself observing the dynamics of our fellow guests and crew. Among strangers in a relatively confined space, the new friendships that are forged, the first impressions and assumptions that can be upended, all feed narratives and scenarios that are every bit as entertaining as what goes on under the water, as gripping as an episode of *The White Lotus*.

There are quiet spots to get away from the chatter; a lone smokers' bench on the upper sundeck, the library (invariably empty), a Jacuzzi, useful for rinsing the salt off after a dive. By day three there did seem to be a gravitational pull towards the handful of tables for two under the stars. I started creating Agatha Christie scenarios against the only anti-social couple, who consistently 'bagged' one of these tables hours in advance.

For Don it was a welcome respite to find terra firma at Arborek Jetty, a fishing village with a cluster of charming homestays. Located in the Dampier Strait (named after the buccaneering explorer William Dampier, who charted the region at the turn of the 18th century), it is where the biologist Alfred Russel Wallace discovered birds of paradise. One enthusiastic group woke at 5am and traipsed through jungle to ogle the mating displays of these outrageously plumed blackbirds.

But personally, I couldn't wait to be reunited with the reef, to commune with the clusters of batfish, curious and cartoonish as Pixar's Nemo, which nudged the window of my mask, while reef sharks nosed through the shallows like puppies. I spotted Don on the pier, in a parallel set-up, surrounded by eager children, just as playful as the batfish, pulling faces at the camera. Missionaries have had some success converting the locals, judging by the presence of a church and Sunday school, and Don was nostalgic for the days before missionaries and tourism, when the indigenous people were still allowed to live in longhouses and sport *kotekas*, or penis-shields. The government suppressed these, insisting on a more homogenised nation and cultural uniformity.

And, inevitably, places that were once un-got-at have found themselves on Instagram. The beautiful Kali Biru on nearby Waigeo Island is a river of mineral-saturated, bright aquamarine fresh water that is sacred to the locals, who close off the upper reaches to visitors. Yet, village girls are dressed up in grass skirts and feathers at the water's edge. Is this a celebratory gesture of individualism and identity, or is it to attract visitors? Is it any more jarring than an influencer in a natural pool – my first sighting of the species in Raja Ampat – pouting at her selfie-stick in a thong?

You can tie yourself up in knots about it, suggested my Australian diving buddy, or you can let yourself go. So we jump into the bright water, and part swimming, part floating, and laughing like drains, we slide downstream along this dream-like unravelling of the ribbon of blue. When we eventually emerge into a halo of butterflies, blinking in the striped sunlight on a soft sandy beaching at the mouth of the Blue River, it feels like a rebirth. ●

From £8,300 per person for a 7-night Raja Ampat sailing aboard Aqua Blu (aquaexpeditions.com)