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Alex Polizzi, host of The Hotel Inspector P. 17

TRAVEL

Hidden treasures of the Caribbean

Just a short hop from the region's major hubs lie alternative islands full of quiet hotels, empty beaches and inviting old-school charm, says Nigel Tisdall



The joys of escaping the British winter for a sun-dappled holiday in the Caribbean need little selling, but as a frequent visitor to this balmy region for almost 30 years, I've learnt one thing – you now need to work a little harder to feel its magic.

Mass tourism has left its ugly mark: new airports are popping up on once-unlinked islands, old airports are being expanded and more picturesque ports than ever are being swamped by mega-cruise ships disgorging thousands of passengers. Laid-back Barbados now has traffic jams, Jamaica is relentlessly opening huge all-inclusive resorts, and once-remote beaches from Antigua to Tobago are being gobbled up for new luxury developments.

But all is not lost. In fact, for those of us keen to seek out the Caribbean as it used to be, the answer is simple: take advantage of the plentiful direct flights from the UK to the most popular islands (Antigua, Barbados, Grand Cayman, St Vincent, St Kitts and the Bahamas), then push on to their smaller and quieter neighbours. Many can be reached on a short connecting flight or ferry ride, and all offer the chance to relax and explore away from the hordes.

Here are 10 glorious options – tiny, overlooked islands where you can stay in characterful, often family-run properties, soak up a slice of everyday local life, and enjoy everything from rainforest hikes and sensational diving to strolls on white-sand beaches and sailing trips on vintage sloops – all without battling queues, crowds or inflated costs.

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▲ Small wonder: the quiet beaches of Bequia in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines are a glimpse of the Caribbean of yesteryear



Aqua Blu
From naval vessel to sublime superyacht

This 30-passenger ship from Aqua Expeditions plies Indonesian seas with all the class and calibre of an ultra-luxury cruiser, says James Litston

Based year-round in Indonesia, small-ship line Aqua Expeditions' 60m ship is stunning. Aqua Blu began life in 1968 as the British Naval Explorer HMS Beagle, before being decommissioned and transformed into a private yacht. In 2019, courtesy of a reimagining by Dutch yacht designer Cor D Rover, it evolved into Aqua Blu. Now an exquisite, ultra-luxury, 30-passenger expedition cruiser, it offers itineraries to East Indonesia's bucket-list destinations: the Spice Islands, Raja Ampat and Komodo National Park.

Comfortable, chic and well-equipped with water sports, Zodiacs and diving equipment, Aqua Blu provides a memorable base from which to explore this region purposefully, with all excursions and activities included in the fare.



EN KOCHEY

Style and character
10/10

With an elegant superstructure painted in gunmetal grey and off-white, you can tell that Aqua Blu is classy even before you board. This is no typical cruise ship: the vibe is more akin to a boutique yacht, with interiors done up in tasteful tones of ivory, cream and brass.

The cabins and public spaces are spread across five decks, of which the highest is the sun-deck, complete with vintage-style wooden deckchairs and loungers. This same respectful blend of heritage and modern luxury continues ship-wide, all of which gives Aqua Blu a superyacht's sense of refinement, blessed with plenty of personality and flair.

Cabins
8/10

There are 15 cabins, of which the three in Category III are entry level. Spread between the lower and main decks, these are rather bijou and feature twin beds and a neutral décor of cream, brassy accents and pale polished wood. Porthole windows allow ample daylight into the cosy space while bathrooms have walk-in rain showers and organic hair and bath products.

The four Category II cabins are noticeably more spacious and have king-size beds, while the eight in Category I are larger still, with sofas that become extra beds. Families preferring not to squeeze in together can connect two pairs of cabins (301 and 302, or 401 and 402) into suites.

Food and drink
9/10

There is just a single restaurant, as is expected for such a small vessel, although it does offer both indoor and outdoor dining space, plus an open-seating policy where guests convene for convivial, fixed-time, family-style meals.

All menus are crafted by Australian chef Benjamin Cross, who has created more than 160 recipes inspired mainly by Indonesian and Mediterranean cuisines (highlights include the 48-hour beef short-rib rendang and grilled fish with Balinese sambal). Beers and house wines are included at mealtimes, but sundowners, pre-dinner cocktails and drinks served onshore – at the ship's pop-up beach club on Komodo's Pink Beach – cost extra. Room service is not available.

Telegraph expert rating

9/10

Service and facilities
9/10

A cruise on board Aqua Blu is very much an active experience, which





means the ship doesn't need a lot of diversions. There's not much beyond a library, lounge, a tiny spa and an open-air hot-tub; but that's compensated for on the launch deck with kayaks, stand-up paddleboards and everything you need to go diving and snorkelling, including wetsuits.

Hands-on, twice-daily activities lend themselves to meaningful interactions

▲ Into the Blu: *clockwise from main image*, catch some Indonesian rays on the top deck after a dip in the hot tub; lounge areas feature elegant modern design; expedition cruiser Aqua Blu started life in the

Entertainment and excursions
9/10

As befits an expedition cruise, excursions are where Aqua shines. Highlights of a Komodo itinerary, for example, might include kayaking on a crater lake or hiking to Padar Island's highest point (and being rewarded with unmissable views), while guests on a Raja Ampat itinerary might visit a pearl farm or see birds of paradise. But most of all, these cruises are about engaging with the underwater world.

For peace of mind, rescue Zodiacs are deployed whenever guests are in the water. There are also two larger vessels for zipping ashore or conducting water-based tours such as spotting Komodo dragons on the wild beaches of volcanic Rinca Island.

With early starts and busy days, there's little appetite for evening entertainment. Relevant documentaries are screened in the TV room throughout the day, adding further insight and inspiration to your adventures.

Value for money
9/10

Aqua Expeditions' cruises are not cheap, but the experience is extraordinary and conducted at the highest standards. It's genuinely, in my opinion, worth every penny.

The all-inclusive experience covers meals, drinks (when served at mealtimes), excursions, the use of all equipment (including diving), Wi-Fi, laundry service and local transfers. Gratuities are not included; Aqua suggests in the region of $70-95 (£51-70) per passenger, per day.

ACCESS FOR GUESTS WITH DISABILITIES?

Alongside its small size and far-flung destinations, Aqua Blu's stair-heavy layout and lack of dedicated accessible cabins mean that the ship and its itineraries are not best suited to guests with impaired mobility.

with the guides, who ensure that everyone gets the most from each experience. The rest of the crew (there's a ratio of one staff member per guest) are just as hard-working in their efforts to maximise guest comfort – the thrice-daily housekeeping is a good example.

British Navy

FAMILY-FRIENDLY?

The ship isn't equipped for toddlers, but older children (recommended for ages seven and over) would find this experience remarkable. Families have the option of booking interconnecting suites.