
Condé Nast
Traveller
THE WORLD MADE LOCAL
DECEMBER 2026
WINTER BLUES
OTHERWORLDLY ESCAPES TO POLYNESIA, AUSTRALIA AND JAPAN
Plus
BILL BENSLEY'S TROPICAL THAI HOME
REWILDING THE SELF IN ICELAND
SCOTTISH RETREATS TO FALL IN LOVE WITH
MEXICO'S SUBLIME SECOND CITY

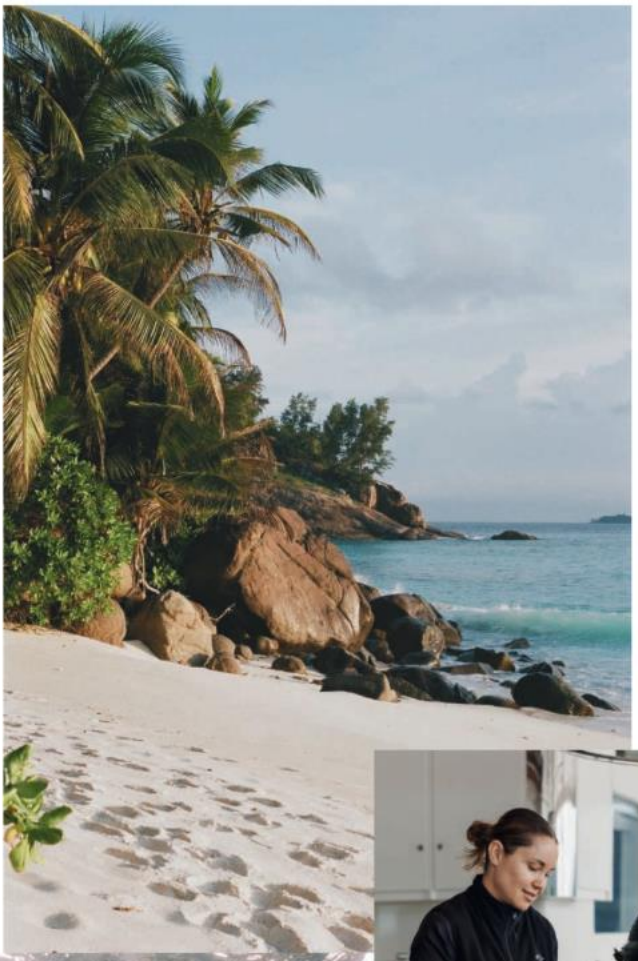
SHIP SHAPE

OUR ANNUAL GUIDE TO THE VERY BEST IN THE WORLD OF CRUISING

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PHOTOGRAPH: BERNARD TOUILLON







FOR CLOSE MARINE ENCOUNTERS

OUTER ISLANDS, SEYCHELLES, AQUA EXPEDITIONS

GIANT TORTOISES OR HUMANS: in the Seychelles, it's a close call as to which population is greater. Around 150,000 of the slow-moving reptiles live on the remote Unesco World Heritage Aldabra Atoll, which is closer to Madagascar than to Mahé, the Seychelles' main island. Visitors to the atoll are few, no more than a few thousand annually. I'm sailing on *Aqua Lares*, a 30-guest superyacht that's bookable by the cabin. Originally an ice-breaker rescue tug, it was extended, converted and spruced up before launching as part of the Aqua Expeditions fleet earlier this year. Now its smart interiors feature teak panelling, Italian quartzite, Minotti sofas and bespoke cream rugs in the social spaces.

My 11-night itinerary is a snapshot of the coralline Outer Islands, and skews towards diving and snorkelling. Here the extraordinary marine life steals the show. There's the prebreakfast sighting of a pod of spinner dolphins that leap out of the water like synchronised swimmers; critically endangered hawksbill and green turtles nesting on the beaches of the St Joseph Atoll; and shimmering shoals of yellow snapper and electric blue fusiliers darting past the reef wall at Astove. Other standout activities include a bird-watching Zodiac ride in the Aldabra lagoon, one of the rare places where frigatebirds and red-footed boobies build their nests side by side in the same trees; and, subject to the tides, an afternoon kicking back on Bijoutier Island with a local SeyBrew beer.

As we wend our way west, an at-sea day means making the most of life on board: documentaries in the cosy cinema, a talk on coral by marine biologist Michelle Solon (highlighting the damaging effects of rising water temperatures), a deep-tissue massage in the spa and dips in the hot tub. In the evenings everyone gathers for communal suppers dreamt up by Karime López, the first female Mexican chef to earn a Michelin star (she previously headed the kitchen at Gucci Osteria da Massimo Bottura in Florence). Her menu includes miso-baked grouper or glazed short ribs followed by flourless chocolate cake.

Arriving in the Mafia archipelago off the coast of Tanzania, there's one final – albeit fleeting – underwater encounter. From a traditional dhow we put on masks, lower ourselves into the blue and swim at speed, attempting to keep pace with the whale sharks below (they are drawn to the plankton-filled Rufiji River Delta nearby). On Chole Island we learn how fishing and seaweed are the main sources of income, and about The Ropes of Hope NGO, which is restoring the reefs in Mafia Island Marine Park. This is a voyage that showcases the untouched, raw beauty of these precious Indian Ocean habitats – and, by default, the importance of protecting them. EMMA LOVE

BOOK IT *Aqua Expeditions' 11-night Coralline Seychelles & Tanzania itinerary from Mahé to Zanzibar on board Aqua Lares departs 2 January 2027, with fares from about £15,912 per person; aquaexpeditions.com*





Clockwise from this picture: dining on *Aqua Lares*; shallow reefs; coral island. *Opposite, from top*: Seychelles beach; chef Karime López; snorkelling with a turtle

TREND WATCH
SINGLE-CABIN CHARTERS

These days it's not only the super-rich spending their holidays on a yacht. Increasingly, small-scale cruise companies are offering a mix of private charters and set departure dates, bookable by the cabin, so that anyone can have an exclusive onboard experience without the hefty price tag. Many vessels are based in a specific region, such as the 20-guest **Hermes Mega Catamaran**, which launched last year in the Galápagos (with top wildlife sightings, from red-footed boobies and albatrosses to iguanas). The 30-passenger **Aqua Lares** splits its time between East Africa and the Arctic; and **Kaiara** has a trio of yachts in the Amazon, the largest of which sleeps 22. The latter's itineraries along the Amazon River and its tributaries include meeting Indigenous riverside communities, walking through primary forest and relaxing on a deserted sandy beach. In Indonesia **Rascal Voyages** runs trips to remote destinations such as Wakatobi in the Coral Triangle for up to 10 like-minded travellers. And on **Silolona**, a traditional Indonesian wooden sailing vessel with five cabins, single reservations are open for Banda Sea adventures next April and October that take in ancient forts, former nutmeg factories and the Gunung Api volcano. EL