
LUXURY
PARIS MATCH Mirren Mack's tale of two cities
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ARCTIC ROLE

For the past two decades, Aqua Expeditions has surged ahead with luxurious small-boat cruises to remote locations. Now, its latest boat, Aqua Lares, is heading north to Svalbard. Francesca Syz wraps up and steps out on the ice

The thrillingly remote archipelago of Svalbard in northern Norway may be beautiful but boy is it bleak. So bleak that in the early 17th century, an English trading company, determined to make a territorial claim on the lucrative whale-hunting grounds around Svalbard, persuaded the British government to offer full pardons and financial rewards to convicts due to be hanged if they agreed to live there for a year. Those that agreed took one look and begged to be hanged rather than face an Arctic winter.

Fast forward 414 years and here I am on the rugged beach at Gnålodden in Svalbard's spectacular Hornsund fjord, grinning like an idiot as I watch the cutest little snow-white Arctic fox zigzag its way across the tundra towards me and my companions. When it's about 10 feet away, it stops, glances at us one last time and ambles off.

Overhead, a thousand noisy kittiwakes swoop in and out of the cliffs. It's mid-September and they're about to head off over the Atlantic where, astonishingly, they will spend the winter at sea. We poke our heads inside a lonely trapper's cabin used by Norway's first female hunter and trapper Wanny Woldstad in the 1930s and by scientists today. On the Zodiac back to the ship, we spot two beluga whales bobbing about in the shallows. Unlike the convicts, I am loving every minute.

It's the first day of a five-night Arctic cruise from Svalbard, midway between the North Pole and mainland Norway, to Tromsø, aboard *Aqua Lares*, a 253-foot 1970s Soviet icebreaker turned sleek expedition superyacht, by Aqua Expeditions. Pioneers in high-end, low-impact, small ship and river cruising, which they first launched in the Peruvian Amazon almost 20 years ago, the business, run by Italian-American Francesco Galli Zugaro, his wife Birgit and their children Massimo and Daria, has expanded slowly and thoughtfully.

Today there are six small ships covering different parts of the world, from the Mekong river in Cambodia to the Galapagos. Each is unique in design with a one-to-one staff-guest ratio. *Aqua Lares*, which launched in the Seychelles in February, will spend half the year in East Africa, half in the Arctic. The Arctic route starts in Glasgow, taking in the Scottish Hebrides on its way up. I pop up to Glasgow in May to meet Francesco for a show-around, before joining an actual voyage in September.

'My dad took me on safari to Kruger National Park when I was seven years old and our vehicle was chased by an elephant. I think I've been searching for a thrill to match that ever since,' Francesco tells me as we trot around the glossy ship in our socks (there's a no-shoes policy). 'Mum's side of the family were all in the US Navy. So I've got them to thank for my love of boats. When we first took *Aqua Lares* to the Arctic to scout out the route, I looked at the GPS one day and realised we were the northernmost ship in the world at that moment, which 100 per cent gave me that thrill.'



Aqua Lares is beautiful, even for snobs like me who find most big, expensive boats a bit, well, tacky. Keeping its sturdy, 'working ship' exterior, it is decadently residential within, its 15 guest cabins (12 of them suites and three of those large Owner's Suites) a vision of polished wood and plush cream carpets with excellent beds, powerful showers and roomy wardrobes. Then there are the multiple lounges around the ship, both indoor and out – all warm and inviting, plus the huge on-deck plunge pool, the cinema, sauna and gym. Most people choose to dine together at a long, oval table but you don't have to.

The clever thing is that, with a maximum of 30 guests, you're getting as close as possible to the relaxed, convivial and luxurious experience of being on your own private superyacht for the price of a cabin. None of it comes cheap, but a five-night trip costs from about £8,000 per person based on two sharing, including all food, house wines and excursions, versus £475,000 when chartering the whole thing.

Either way, you'll get exceptional service from the



OPPOSITE The *Aqua Lares*, a former Soviet ice breaker, heads towards the Arctic Circle. FROM TOP A warming fire in the saloon welcomes returning explorers. Aqua Expeditions' founder and CEO, Francesco Galli Zugaro

PHOTOGRAPHS BY YVONNE KREUZMAYR & ANTHONY K DO. COURTESY OF AQUA EXPEDITIONS

'Good evening everyone, I know it's the middle of the night but if you want to see the Northern Lights, get on deck now!'

delightful, multi-national team ('The crew has a huge influence on how our guests feel so we hire amazing, charismatic people,' Francesco says). Ecuadorian cruise director Wendy is the perfect host, always on hand to help and the one who makes important in-cabin announcements through a speaker ('Good evening everyone, I know it's the middle of the night but if you want to see the Northern Lights, get on deck now!').

Then there are our guides, Ivan from Bergen, who ran his own adventure company in Svalbard before joining Aqua, and Jannik, who is German and between seasons with Aqua Expeditions is living among and studying Sámi communities. Not forgetting the unflappable Captain Firas Tarek from Romania, who has to break things to us ('There's a storm coming. This ship can take on any storm, it just wouldn't be much fun for you guys, so we're skipping Bear Island tomorrow to outrun it.').

Perhaps because of the likelihood of unsettled weather in September, my trip is less than half full. My fellow travellers are all British or American. There is a nice mix of characters, including two retired couples, and three female medics travelling together who are good company and have much better seasickness tablets than mine, which they share. All have been on Aqua Expeditions before. Given the intimate group size even when full – and the demographic – is it just luck I don't get any dreadful show-offs?

'I find our trips attract like-minded people who are well-travelled and genuinely curious about the world, which tends to weed out the big egos,' Francesco says. 'We get UHNW CEOs more than A-listers. My favourite guests are the ones who actually save up – the school teacher, the fireman. You know it's a probably once-in-a-lifetime experience, which makes us even more determined to make it perfect.'

Highlights of my trip, apart from the Northern Lights, include a morning in the bay of Samarinvågen, famous for its calving glaciers, where we hop into Zodiacs and kayaks to glide past vivid blue icebergs and then just sit in silence, sipping hot chocolate and taking it all in. There's a freezing polar plunge before retiring to the hot tub, and expert talks on everything from the race to the North Pole to the history of Svalbard by Ivan and Jannik. I also enjoy a gravlax-making lesson with the chef, Ben, and a drive through reindeer-filled hills to the wind-lashed North Cape, the most northerly tip of mainland Norway.

My favourite moment, though, is a meeting young Sámi reindeer herder Mihkkal Aslat Ivvar Sara (and his reindeer) in a wind-swept field above the town of Hammerfest. Any concerns I have about this being an awkward, staged experience go out the window when he emerges from his *lavvo* (teepee-like tent). He tells us that sharing the story of the plight of the Sámis with tourists for money means he can carry on being a reindeer herder.

Around a campfire, he explains he has grown up following his herd for half the year, continuing the traditions of his ancestors. His brother Jovsett Ánte Sara has too and took the Norwegian government to court in 2016 over a state-mandated reindeer-culling order which said no herder could have more than 75 reindeer to prevent overgrazing – except no herder could survive with that few, which would lead to the death of the traditional Sámi culture. Each day in court, their sister, artist Máret Anne Sara, who recently had an installation in the turbine hall at Tate Modern, would turn up with a protest art piece – 400 reindeer skulls with visible gunshot wounds, stacked up outside the court building. Jovsett ended up taking the case to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, won in 2024 and it became a symbol of indigenous resistance in Scandinavia.

A big part of me thinks that given the alarming rate at which ice cover in the Arctic is shrinking, we should leave the area to the scientists doing vital climate change research and the people that actually live there, but if you choose to visit – and it is without question one of the most life-affirming trips – you need to do it as responsibly as possible. So, for example, by booking trips on small-to-medium-sized ships such as *Aqua Lares*, that are members of The Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators and adhere to strict guidelines on the number of people allowed ashore at any single site and the importance of taking nothing away and leaving nothing behind.

'It's always on my mind that we are taking people to some of the world's most fragile biodiversity hotspots,' says Francesco. 'But our ships have a lighter footprint than most and no permanent presence. We produce our own water and treat it with reverse osmosis before it goes back into the river or sea. We use minimal plastic. And because we are small, we can source food and other items from local suppliers in small ports as we move from place to place. That's the beauty of these small ships.'

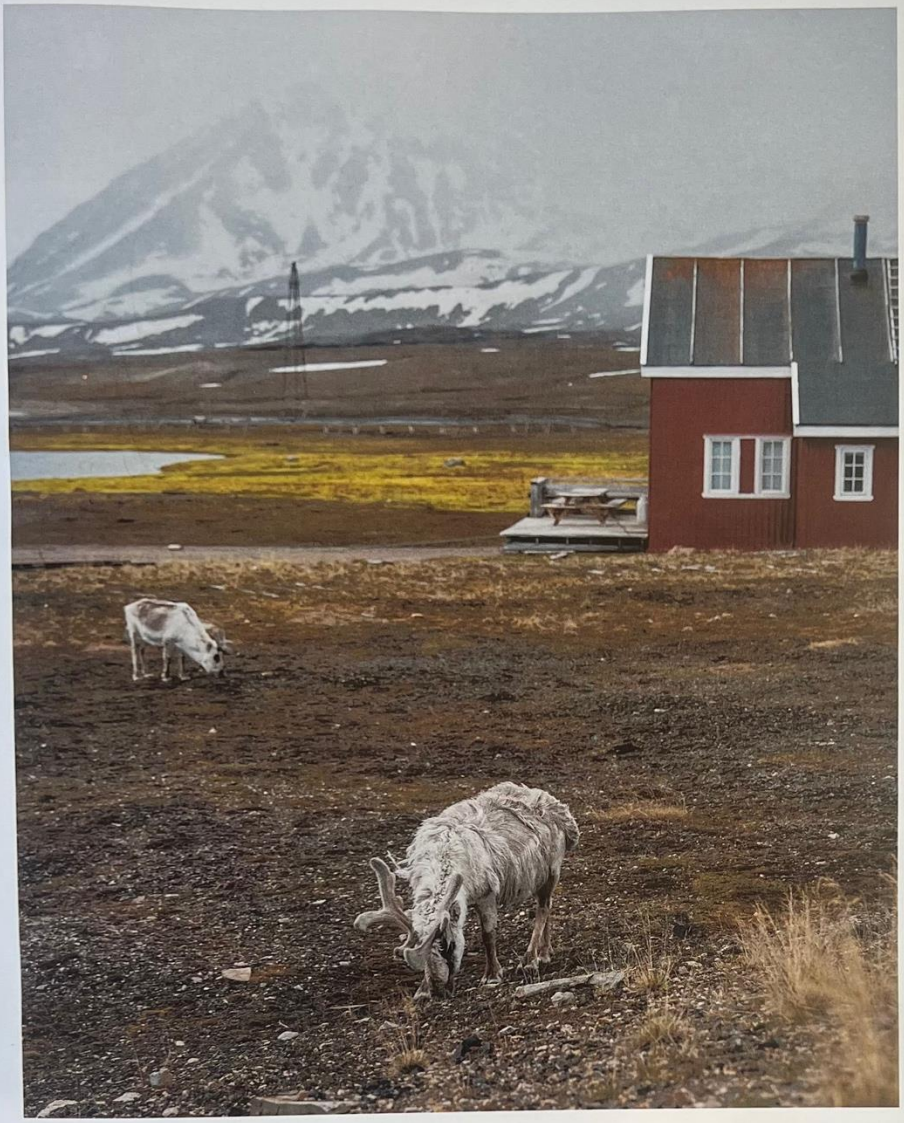
Five nights from Longyearbyen to Tromsø from £7,410 per person; a seven-night charter from £473,800 (aquaexpeditions.com/cruise-ships/aqua-lares)







CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW A waterfall seen during a tender excursion in Norway. A local community in the Arctic. Reindeer grazing. The majestic Arctic landscape. The *Aqua Lares* at sea





CRUISE NEWS

POLE POSITION
Can't decide which pole to do? This ultra-luxury all-suite cruise line has just revealed details of the new 'Pole to Pole: Grand Expedition' – a 94-day adventure aboard 264-passenger Seabourn Venture sailing from the high Arctic to Antarctica, departing on 17 August 2027 from Reykjavik in Iceland and finishing up in Buenos Aires in Argentina. It costs from £79,199 per person, based on two sharing a Veranda Suite, which as the name suggests, has its own private terrace. *seabourn.com*

SOUTH BOUND
Global expedition cruise brand Silversea has just added another string to its bow: the world's southernmost hotel, The Cormorant at 55 South in Chile's Puerto Williams. Transforming what would otherwise be a functional overnight stay into a first night of the adventure in its own right, this contemporary hotel has beautifully designed bedrooms, a properly good restaurant inspired by the flavours of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago in which it sits, a bar offering pisco sour-making masterclasses and expert-led hikes, nature walks and kayaking into the local Patagonian wilderness. *thecormorantat55south.com*

WORLD HERITAGE TOUR
The newest offering from Cunard, *Queen Anne*, which launched in 2024, will embark on its maiden voyage to South America on 10 January 2027 and the 82-night itinerary is mind-blowing. Taking in no fewer than seven Unesco World Heritage Sites across Brazil, Chile, Peru, Uruguay and Argentina, highlights will include a four-day overland journey to Machu Picchu, an overnight stay in Buenos Aires and another in Rio, to coincide with the Carnival. *From £26,999 per person, based on two sharing a Princess Grill Suite (cunard.com)*

OCEAN OVERTURES
The world's leading culinary-focused luxury cruise line is launching a new ship in 2027, *Oceania Sonata*. Its inaugural season will feature 22 sailings, between August 2027 and April 2028, with the first half spent in Europe – taking in everywhere from Valletta in Malta and Paros in Greece to Funchal in Madeira and Istanbul in Turkey, before crossing the Atlantic for the tropical season, beginning in Miami and moving on to the likes of the Cayman Islands, Cartagena, Costa Rica and Mexico. Foodie experiences on board will include the world's first La Table par Maîtres Cuisiniers de France at sea and Nikkei kitchen, a celebration of Peruvian-Japanese cooking. *The Mediterranean Glory nine-day Oceania Sonata cruise sailing from Trieste to Barcelona has Veranda Staterooms starting from £4,379 per person (oceaniacruises.com)*

PARIS AT CHRISTMAS
Les Bateaux Belmond, the global hospitality brand's collection of luxury canal- and river-barge cruises, has just announced something brilliant it is launching in 2027. The beautiful, newly vamped *Marguerite*, A Belmond Boat, which sleeps eight in four cabins, is offering an exclusive-use, two-night package Marguerite: Paris at Christmas over the festive period. Boarding at the Eiffel Tower, your itinerary will include tootling up and down the Seine on your bateau with fine dining all the way, an exclusive shopping appointment at one of the LVMH maisons, private visits to the Galerie Dior and Notre-Dame and a secret Parisian food tour. Stay tuned for more information. *belmond.com*