



BEYOND BALI

TRICIA WELSH MEETS SPECTACULAR WILDLIFE
ABOVE AND BELOW THE WAVES ON A FIVE-STAR
EXPEDITION CRUISE AMONG INDONESIA'S
REMOTE AND MAGICAL ISLANDS.



The thrum from our tender's outboard breaks the early morning silence over Saleh Bay off the island of Sumbawa. From our *Aqua Blu* expedition ship we are making a beeline for one particular *bagan* – a traditional Indonesian fishing boat – brightly lit on the horizon as the sun breaks crimson through broody clouds.

We are on a mission and have the GPS coordinates to meet certain fishermen before they depart for the day, having hoisted their overnight nets filled with anchovies and squid from the deep, clear waters below. This daybreak ritual has become a magnet for giant whale sharks that feast off the spillage.

Our plan: to swim with these gentle monsters. Masks and snorkels on – and over the side we go. There can be five or six whale sharks at this location, we are told, but this morning there is just one. We're thrilled nevertheless.

Suddenly I'm eyeball-to-eyeball with one of the biggest fish on the planet. At more than 5.5-metres

long, this magnificent dark-grey spotted behemoth glides gently around our naked legs, occasionally brushing us with its rough 15cm-thick skin. It's an eerie feeling as we float mesmerised for timeless minutes as this female juvenile gathers the residue of the catch – before swimming off into the still, dark waters.

Back aboard *Aqua Blu*, we are briefed on this slow-moving member of the *rhinocodon hypus* genus that can grow to 18m long and has a lifespan of some 130 years. Local fishermen hunt them for their meat, skin and fins; perfume is made using their oil. But gradually conservation efforts such as Aqua Expeditions' gesture to pay fishermen so tourists can interact with them are proving effective.

This awesome encounter is just one of many highlights during our week-long, 898-kilometre expedition cruise through the pristine waters of Indonesia from Labuan Bajo, on the island of Flores, through myriad islands and bays of the Komodo National Park, around Lombok and the Gili Islands, to Bali.

Earlier, we were welcomed on board by cruise director Glenn Wappett, a former British Royal Marine Commando, who has been with the ship since it began cruising here in 2019, its schedule is still being fine-tuned as more secrets are discovered in this archipelagic nation of 1,700 islands scattered over three time zones.

On this barefoot cruise, we are just 16 guests aboard the five-level luxury motor yacht *Aqua Blu*, a former Royal Navy survey vessel, *HMS Beagle*, built in 1968. After reconstruction and refurbishment overseen by a leading Dutch yacht designer, she has morphed into one of the most luxurious small vessels afloat, with just 15 individually designed en suite cabins and spacious, comfortable indoor and outdoor social and dining areas. Gleaming brass stair rails, plush carpets, massed cushions and sink-into loungers set the classy tone, while regional artefacts and beautiful art pieces lend an innate sense of place.

Having settled into our air-conditioned cabins, we meet for sundowners on the top Sun Deck, from where we spot dolphins and pass our first volcano as the sun sets, turning the sea the palest blue tinged with soft pink ripples. We later learn this whole region is part of the so-called Ring of Fire – a horseshoe-shaped region of the Pacific where earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are prevalent.

Dinner on the first evening sets the culinary bar high: tuna ceviche followed by melt-in-the-mouth rendang of slow-roasted beef short rib, organic Javanese prawns and Balinese urup salad with pineapple, followed by ginger tarte tartin and ice cream for dessert. All meals, apart from buffet breakfasts, are served *en famille* at huge round blonde-wood tables.

With six different nationalities to please, it could prove a difficult task, but consulting chef Ben Cross understands his brief well. Having honed his skills in the kitchens of Neil Perry's Rockpool, Cross runs his own restaurant, Mason, in Bali. For *Aqua Blu*'s menus he has taken inspiration from the nearby



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Spice Islands and the cuisines of India, Morocco and Indonesia. He uses locally grown cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg in flavour-bursting dishes such as his 48-hour slow-cooked beef rendang, braised oxtail, grouper in Shaoxing broth, Moroccan spiced chicken and charred chermoula tuna. Each superb meal seems to top the previous one. House wines and beer are complementary, with a good spirits and reserve wine list available.

Founder and CEO of Aqua Expeditions Francesco Galli Zugaro makes a point of providing fabulous food on board his five luxury vessels. On those in the Peruvian Amazon and the Galapagos, food is overseen by Peru's first Michelin-starred chef, Pedro Miguel Schiaffino; his riverboats on the Mekong and the Irrawaddy boast menus designed by Thai cuisine maestro David Thompson.

Life aboard *Aqua Blu* is relaxed and low-key. With an average age of around 45, guests actively participate in all activities. I'm not really a diver, snorkeller or swimmer, but I snorkel every day and even try scuba diving – such is my trust in the well-trained, delightful and intuitively attentive crew. At full capacity, the ratio of crew to passengers is 1:1.

There are dive and snorkel sites aplenty, with usually the chance to explore the underwater sea life at least once a day. Sites have been chosen for their different examples of soft and hard coral, the variety of tropical fish and the likely presence of rays, turtles, large reef fish and bluefin tuna. One site is aptly called 'Shotgun', where the fast-moving current carries snorkellers along: just lie back and drift along. So good was the first drift, we rode Shotgun again – seeing a hawksbill turtle, a blue-spotted stingray



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In Horseshoe Bay, we are on the hunt for Komodo dragons, the largest monitor lizard in the world, as a tribe of macaque monkeys bounds over the rugged terrain above the water's edge. These cheeky-faced primates make tasty snacks for dragons. Soon we spy deer, one of the dragon's main food supplies, grazing in the undergrowth. Dragons only come to the beach to ambush their prey as they drink at waterholes.

The chances of seeing dragons on the beaches can be hit and miss according to Glenn, but with 20 pairs of eyes scanning for these rock-shaped prehistoric animals, it isn't long before a gentle cry goes out: "Over there!"

The dragon ambles along under the shade of ancient trees. The whole scenario of gentle mountains covered in thick jungle growth reminds us of *Jurassic Park*. The giant lizard walks with a confident swagger, its forked tongue whipping in and out to sense the air.

Soon we spy another being followed by a family of wild boar. "Here comes breakfast," someone suggests. But the mother and three babies wander off nonchalantly into the undergrowth to live another day.

On Komodo Island, we visit a rangers' compound where two dragons have come to visit. It's a new

inclusion, Aqua favouring a more natural setting rather than one with countless visitors and tourist stalls.

In this little-known part of the world, every day brings new experiences, new islands and magnificent sunsets punctuated by active volcanoes. A new modern-day destination, these waters and islands are steeped in ancient history and age-old culture and beg to be explored.

The rest of the world might know Bali, but wait till they discover what's just around the corner! 

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