

PERSPECTIVE



MAN ON A MISSION

Aqua Expeditions founder and CEO Francesco Galli Zugaro has just added a second superyacht to his charter fleet. He talks with *Asia-Pacific Boating* about life after Covid and his plans for the future

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STORY BY RYAN SWIFT

Francesco Galli Zugaro founded Aqua Expeditions 15 years ago to begin exploration of South America by luxury river boat. Since then, his company has steadily expanded across the Pacific and South America, with three river boats and a superyacht dedicated to Indonesian exploration. Aqua has just announced the launch of its second superyacht, *Aqua Mare*, dedicated to luxury charters in the Galapagos Islands, part of Zugaro's native Ecuador.

Aqua Mare continues Aqua's blend of single cabin and whole-yacht charters, which open up remote locations in Asia and South America.

From his base in Singapore, Zugaro, who says that he is in the "luxury small ship expedition business", is optimistically getting back into stride after Covid and is planning Aqua's expansion across the



From left: Francesco Galli Zugaro has built a fleet of yachts plying waterways in Indonesia, Indochina and the Amazon; *Aqua Mare* in the Galapagos Islands



Pacific, including the coveted destination of Galapagos.

“I had been thinking, dreaming, and working towards a yacht in the Galapagos Islands for a long time,” explains Zugaro. “Ever since I left Ecuador in 2006 with the clarity to build my own business, I have wanted to return to the Galapagos Islands with our very own luxury expedition ship. It has been 15 years since we ventured to Peru as a family and then onward to Asia, and now we have finally come full circle with *Aqua Mare*, back to where it all started.”

Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands, famed for their unique biodiversity and connection with biologist Charles Darwin, are slated to be a popular cruising destination post-Covid and Zugaro believes Aqua Expeditions offers an experience that’s a little different.

“We’re catering to a niche audience with small-ship expeditions that present a blend of design, attention to detail, personalised service, and adventure,” says Zugaro, who started his career working on expedition and tour vessels in the islands. “So, in that sense, we are carving out a new path in a destination that holds personal significance.”

The interior vision for *Aqua Mare* came mostly from Zugaro’s wife and director at Aqua Expeditions, Birgit.

In collaboration with interior designer David Cole, they pared back the existing interior decorations without losing the luxury of the yacht. Now the finishings are soft and elegant, with textures and hues resembling the lava and ash strata indicative of the Galapagos.

Zugaro’s favourite feature is the owner’s suite, something he describes as “truly a luxury,” and which sprawls over 80sqm. “I also really enjoy the bridge with its Italian leather sofas and open bridge format to allow guests to

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↓ **Below:** Contemporary luxury
aboard *Aqua Mare*





From left: Aqua Mare is the company's newest vessel; Aqua Expeditions yachts are known for the modern design and creature comforts

experience navigating between the islands while enjoying a cup of freshly brewed Ecuadorian coffee. We also have a beach club located at the aft of the lower deck at water level, equipped with a wraparound sofa and large panoramic window for guests to come together and relax while enjoying amazing sunset views.”

Aqua Expeditions spends a lot of time on its yachts’ interior design and art to ensure that every space on board has

been carefully thought through so that the company’s guests feel like they are entering “their own private home at sea”.

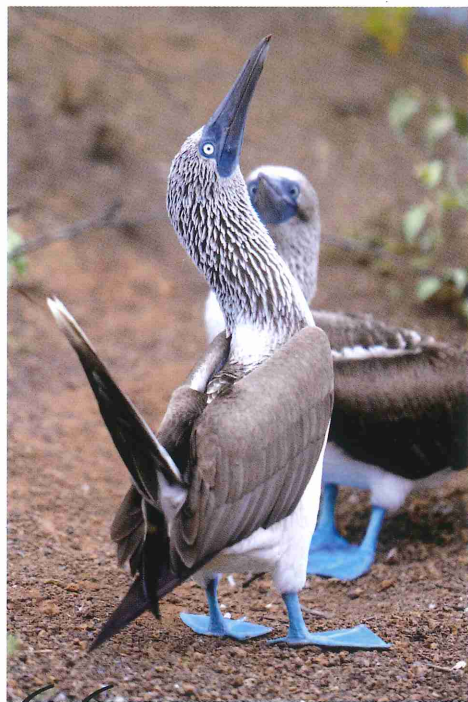
In addition to operating a charter business, Aqua Expeditions commissioned river boats and yachts to be built and refurbished during Covid. As a result of the pandemic, it saw a surge in the appeal of remote, off-the-beaten path destinations, especially those in which

travellers can connect with nature and the outdoors. Vietnam and Cambodia for the company’s *Aqua Mekong* river cruise and Indonesia for its *Aqua Blu* coastal yacht cruise are now restriction free, making travel there accessible again. “Because of these factors, we are thankful that everything appears to be returning to normal,” says Zugaro. “*Aqua Blu* relaunched in May with great success and *Aqua Mekong* will return to the Mekong River in September.”

Challenges to fleet expansion faced during the pandemic mainly centred around reaching destinations. “We were trying to buy *Aqua Mare* in Istanbul, and restrictions and lockdowns made it difficult to navigate,” says Zugaro. This extended to the rest of their vessels. “We needed to get out to the Amazon and Indonesia to make sure that our crew were well looked after and to keep morale up during that difficult time.”

“Covid has shown me that more than ever I am committed to the niche tour industry – small ship cruising to remote destinations that are renowned for their spectacular wildlife and natural beauty. This is aligned with the travel behaviour we have seen post-Covid – a desire to explore the outdoors in bucket list destinations, in small groups.”

With five vessels in the Aqua Expeditions fleet now, the company plans to keep a balance between its coastal



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yachts and river ships. Independent from the vessels, its focus is on establishing the Aqua brand in these key locales, and in Zugaro's words, "bringing luxurious, contemporary design and tailor-made service to these remote destinations and to provide guests with an Aqua experience full of unforgettable memories."

For the company's second superyacht, *Aqua Mare*, the plan was for a custom build but due to Covid and ensuing disruption to supply lines, it was not possible to ensure delivery times and



From left: Aqua Expeditions gives travellers access to remote destinations, including the Galapagos Islands, home to Blue-footed boobies (left) and Galápagos sea lions



control cost. So Zugaro decided not to embark on that path, which could have extended to at least 36 months. It was vital for the company that it would be ready to return to business as soon as lockdowns eased and confidence in international travel returned. With this in mind, the company bought an existing yacht to refit for its purpose – to explore the Galapagos. "A custom-built yacht, had we decided to go down that route, would have been very similar to *Aqua Mare* in terms of the size of the ship and spaciousness of the cabins," Zugaro explains. "So, we were lucky to find an existing vessel that ticked all our boxes."

Zugaro says that while Aqua Expeditions has further expansion plans, the focus now is to get all vessels in the fleet back into seamless operation post-Covid: "We are always

brainstorming, considering, and exploring new remote locations to explore. For now, we plan to focus on the resumption of all five of Aqua's ships in Indonesia, the Galapagos, Vietnam and Cambodia as well as the Peruvian Amazon. Some of our guests have had to postpone their trips for a few years now and we want to ensure them the experience of a lifetime and give our staff and crew some stability."

However, the expedition company founder still taps into his own wanderlust, sense of shared experience and positive impact. "My desire is to ensure that all growth will be accompanied by an even stronger impact in remote regions, working on community projects that are self-sustainable, and engaging in valuable partnerships with some of the world's leading conservation programmes."

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