

Francesco Galli Zugaro, owner of cruise company Aqua Expeditions, above. Dine al fresco aboard the Aqua Blu yacht, left.

TRAVEL INDONESIA

Marine dream

Swimming with whale sharks is one of many highlights while cruising on the chic Aqua Blu, writes **Tess Bennett**.

Getting dropped into a feeding frenzy of whale sharks might not exactly scream "luxury", nor might spending a week aboard a decommissioned British navy vessel. But throw in a cruise director who was once a Royal Marine and an owner with a passion for hard-to-reach destinations, and you've got Aqua Blu – an adrenalin-fuelled take on high-end cruising.

I'm among just 15 guests on one of the ship's first outings since it was acquired by the small ship operator Aqua Expeditions, on a seven-night voyage from Bali through the remote marine paradise of the eastern Indonesian archipelago to Komodo National Park.

My biggest concern before boarding was I'd packed only one book, a hasty decision made on my way out the door to ensure my luggage wasn't overweight. It turns out I needn't have worried. The excursions briefing from the cruise director, and the waiver I am asked to sign, make it clear I won't be spending the week lounging on deck, a pina colada in one hand and a book in the other.

The action starts early on our first morning. Overnight, the 15-suite Aqua Blu has arrived at our first stop near Moyo Island and the guests are split into Team Dive and Team Snorkel to explore the shallow reefs. We drift with the current for over an hour, over bright-blue starfish and colourful coral. I'm reluctant to get out of the water, but there are many more marine adventures ahead.

Aqua Expeditions has carved out a niche in the cruise market offering "soft adventures" for small groups of guests in bucket-list locations, as owner Francesco Galli Zugaro tells me. "Our guests are well-travelled, but they like to stay active. They are not the kind to just sit and sunbathe for a week."

By the sixth consecutive day of snorkelling, getting back into the water starts to feel like an endurance test – but not one I'm ready to opt out of. Each outing has revealed schools of colourful fish, sharks, turtles and manta rays.

And even the sweatiest of our excursions come with a touch of luxury. On a late-afternoon visit to Padar Island in the Komodo archipelago, we head up a steep hill for a panoramic view of three crescent-

shaped beaches with white, pink and black sand – to be greeted at the summit by a smiling Aqua Blu guide with a cooler bag full of cool, wet washcloths.

At full capacity, Aqua Blu's crew-to-guest ratio is 1:1 and the attentive staff cater to all kinds of requests. Want to sleep under the stars? No problem. Want to jump from the third level of the yacht? Knock yourself out. Want to listen to The Beatles? The ukulele-playing bartenders take requests.

The strictest onboard rule we have to adhere to is the yacht's no-shoes policy, meaning we go barefoot for a week.

Days on the ship follow a similar pattern. There's the early-morning gym set-up for those who don't like their exercise routines interrupted by travel, followed by breakfast and a morning activity such as diving or snorkelling.

Then it's back to the yacht for lunch – gazpacho followed by barramundi, say, with a mandarin sorbet for dessert. The menus are designed by Australian chef and restaurateur Benjamin Cross. We eat around communal dining tables, while Aqua Blu lifts anchor and sails to the next destination.

Most days there's time after lunch for a siesta in the comfortable air-conditioned cabins or an on-board massage, and then in the afternoon we pile back into the ship's Alson Flash speedboats to dive, snorkel, kayak or visit a hidden waterfall.

But one item on the agenda has created the most buzz among my fellow passengers: the whale sharks.

The day starts with a 5am wake-up call, and we're in the speedboats headed to Salah



From top: In the water with a whale shark; the crescent-shaped beaches of Padar Island; a Komodo dragon.

The staff cater to all manner of requests. Want to sleep under the stars? No problem.

Bay before sunrise. Spotting the whale sharks can be hit or miss, our guides tell us. The whole operation relies on local fishermen, who radio in their GPS coordinates should the giant animals arrive while they're raising their nets.

We arrive as the sun is starting to rise and get into the water with our snorkels and masks. The whale sharks appear almost immediately, swimming beneath us. We've dropped in on eight adolescents and young adults eating their breakfast.

It's an exhilarating way to spend the Monday morning peak hour. Soon the sun is up, the jellyfish have come out, and it is time to head back for breakfast with a true sense of achievement – we've won the day before 7am.

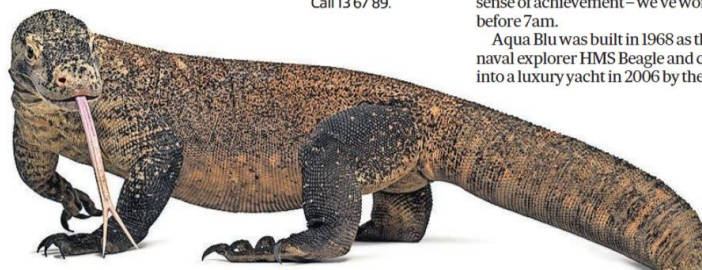
Aqua Blu was built in 1968 as the British naval explorer HMS Beagle and converted into a luxury yacht in 2006 by the billionaire



Need to know

Aqua Blu Seven-night Bali to Komodo National Park (and vice versa) from May to September 2023, \$8717 per person. Charter rates: seven nights from \$US298,000.

Virgin Australia operates multiple flights to Bali. Call 13 67 89.



Garavaglia family, owners of the Campari Group. Aqua Expeditions acquired the yacht in 2019, sailing it from the Mediterranean to Singapore, where it spent six months being refitted.

The result is a five-deck, 15-suite long-range explorer yacht that looks like a warship from the bow and a luxury yacht from the stern.

A tour of the lower levels reveals not much has been updated below deck. The four original Lister block engines still power Aqua Blu's voyages to three destinations in East Indonesia – Komodo National Park, the Spice Islands and Raja Ampat, depending on the season.

Aqua Blu can be chartered for groups of up to 30 guests, but most trips are booked by cabin.

"A ship like this is perfect for a family buy-out. We get a lot of those and I would love to have more," Galli Zugaro says. "But the majority of our business is people booking a cabin."

Our week concludes with a chance to spot Komodo dragons, and we're hoping our luck with the whale sharks will be repeated. Aboard Aqua Blu's tenders, we scan the rocky beaches of Horseshoe Bay, and our eagle-eyed guides point out several of the giant reptiles sunning themselves on the shore.

Our itinerary also includes a visit to a popular tourist spot, the Loh Liang ranger station in the Komodo National Park – where guides brandishing large forked sticks lead visitors along the paths. We're given a strict warning not to wander – lest we end up like that tourist in the '70s who disappeared, with only his camera and sunnies left behind.

We encounter several dragons and stand what feels to me far too close to take photos. Towards the end of the hike we stop to watch a large male finish off a wild boar, and move out of the direct path of another dragon striding through the tourist-trinket stalls.

On the final morning, we leave our week of living barefoot behind us, lacing our shoes to return to shore. As we wait to depart, the discussion turns to the logistics of booking an Aqua Blu sailing to Indonesia's Raja Ampat or Spice Island, proving it's a hard life to leave behind.

Before I fly home, I sit down with Galli Zugaro at the Ayana Resort in Labuan Bajo, about an hour's flight from Denpasar. (It's the first time I've interviewed someone while suffering from land sickness, which takes me a few days to shake.)

Galli Zugaro is preparing to board Aqua Blu with friends, family and other guests, to take the same voyage in the opposite direction. He and his wife, fellow company director Brigit, plan to spend more time on board Aqua Expeditions' five yachts now all three of their children have left home. Their personal touch is apparent in details such as the selection of books in Aqua Blu's library and the custom porcelain tea sets handpainted with gold.

He promises there will be more ships added to the fleet in the coming years to keep his guests – his "affluent explorers" – coming back. **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Aqua Expeditions.