



## The ABCs of an *Aqua Blu* Cruise

Steve Leland wanders the world in style. Now, he's cruising Raja Ampat, Indonesia.

by Steve Leland

As we pried the lid off our post-pandemic bucket of travel dreams, the off-the-radar destination of Raja Ampat rose to the top. When we mentioned the region to our friends as our next adventure, puzzled looks gave way to, “Where and what is that?”

Part of Indonesia's Southwest Papua province, this exotic archipelago of over 1,500 small islands, shoals, and cays straddles the equator just off the northwest tip of the big island of Papua and New Guinea. Containing the richest marine biodiversity on Earth and ranked as one of the world's top-10 dive sites, it's no wonder that this isolated aquatic wonderland beckons to those with a penchant for Mother Nature's beauty, above and below the surface.

Sailing through the mosaic of islands you'll never share the seas with the large cruise ships found in the Caribbean. Nor will you find mega-resorts brimming with tourists. Niche cruise operator Aqua Expeditions glides through this unspoiled sanctuary with their 30-passenger yacht *Aqua Blu*. The cruise is a weeklong expedition into paradise, with curated excursion experiences and creative cuisine.

### Ready, Jetset, Go

Reaching the embarkation port requires planning a flight through Jakarta, Indonesia, with a connecting flight to Sorong in the east, but the effort is mitigated by the incredible experience on board. The smiling face of cruise guide Kaz meeting us at the airport launched the feeling of personalized pampering from the crew.

After our jet lag-induced 4:00 a.m. wake-up, a soothing soak in the Jacuzzi with cappuccino in hand served as a front-row seat to a cinematic sunrise. Anticipation ran high and a roster brimming with diverse daily activities went well above expectations.

With *Aqua Blu* anchored just off Mioskon Island, snorkelers and divers were able to experience some of the best underwater exploration in the world at two different dive sites. Weighing anchor in the late morning, the yacht sailed to Wallace Passage and guide Jamar delivered a presentation on the fascinating marine life of the region. In the afternoon, kayaks were deployed; we took on the role of intrepid explorers paddling through lush mangrove islands, eyes peeled for cockatoos and the Papuan hornbill.

Mornings in these equatorial regions possessed a certain charm and indelible memories were made as we snorkeled and scuba dove at Cape Kri, a site that holds the record for the most species of fish (374) encountered on a single dive.

As daylight faded each evening, the Sundowner cocktail-and-canapé event on deck became a staple activity, but it was extra special as we departed aboard the yacht's twin RIB boats for an afternoon cruise through an idyllic lagoon. Fully stocked with wine, beer, and snacks, they were lashed together to drift effortlessly for the spectacle of a blazing sunset.

Day Three found us visiting an authentic pearl farm to learn the process of raising the oysters that create this treasure. Snorkeling and diving was over the reef of Edie's Black Forest and the day culminated on a deserted beach for swimming, paddleboarding, or simply enjoying paradise with cocktails and snacks.

## Hide and Seek

If you were to google Raja Ampat, odds are that the iconic image of the Wayag Islands would appear. Towering mounds of

karst formations flush with green vegetation and surrounded by a labyrinth of lagoons — these are unquestionably a sight that will remain etched in your mind forever. Kayaking through the turquoise waterways created photographic magic ... an Instagram post of a lifetime.

Encouraged by a presentation on manta rays by the ever-smiling guide Refly, we headed out on Day Six to observe the activity of an underwater manta-cleaning station. These magnificent creatures with wingspans of 8-10 feet travel long distances to come to this specific site to be cleaned of parasites by ever-willing fish.

The cruise would not have been complete without peering into the culture of the local population. A visit to the island community of Arborek provided an intriguing glimpse into the everyday lives of the indigenous people. Small tribal colonies like this are surrounded by the sea and locals rely on fishing as the primary occupation.

Our final day on board was a fitting grand finale. A predawn trek took us up a mountain trail to a camouflaged hideout where we waited for daybreak to witness the elaborate dance of red birds of paradise, the flashy males flaunting their bright red-and-yellow plumage.

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Our afternoon was no less stimulating; we boarded river canoes for an upriver journey and a short hike through the jungle to the Blue River. We jumped in and floated effortlessly down the brilliant, sky-blue waterway, all of us surrounded by a virtual garden of Eden for a session of spirited joy.

## Red Rover, Send Us On Over

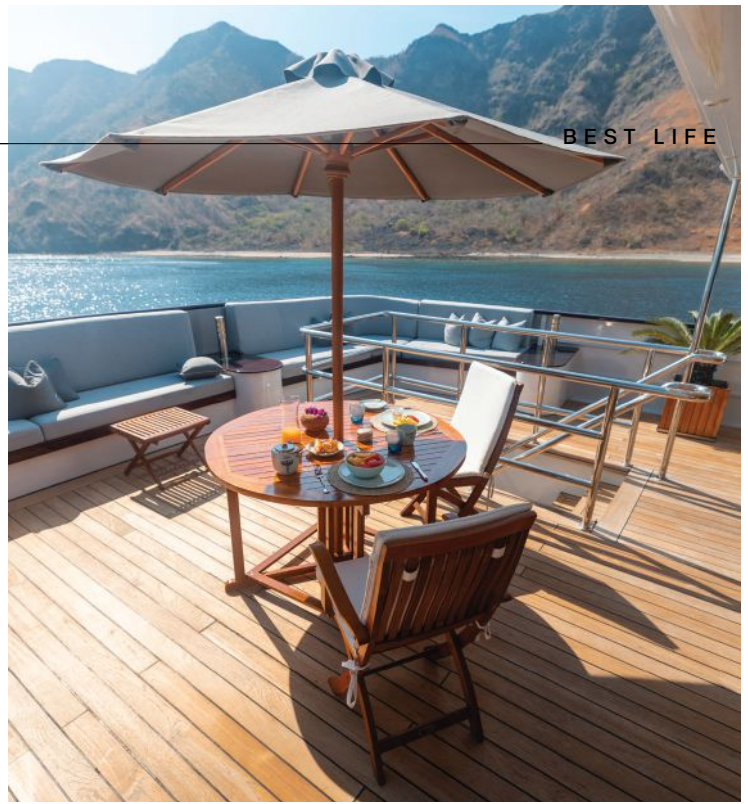
*Aqua Blu* features 15 individually designed staterooms elegantly furnished with contemporary luxury in mind. A soft palette of ivory, gray, and gold trimmed with light-grained wood and gleaming chrome adorns the yacht's interiors and outdoor social space, with a roominess that contributes to the feeling of a jet-set lifestyle.

There's no need to be a yacht aficionado to appreciate a sun deck that sets the stage for food and drink under the stars. Reflect on the day while relaxing in wrap-around sofas, comfortable lounge beds, or the warmth of the Jacuzzi. An outdoor workout space encourages active pursuits while a spa, TV room, and library pleases more sedate personalities.





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Meals can be served alfresco or in the vessel's main dining room with menus that reflect the area's abundant seafood, fresh fruit, and other produce. Exquisite dishes representing the cuisines of the region have been orchestrated by Chef Benjamin Cross.

Although breakfast and lunch are served buffet-style in the Sky Lounge, it's the evening meals that showcase the brand's culinary skills. Dishes are served family-style around a gigantic round table, allowing guests to sample each of the items on the menu. A typical dinner might start with a fresh tuna ceviche, followed by regional salad and capped off with grilled Indonesian prawns, a short-rib beef rendang, or steamed grouper.

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Owner and founder Francesco Galli Zugaro had a vision to develop intimate expedition cruising, and that vision comes to fruition throughout the entire Aqua Expeditions fleet. The recently launched yacht *Aqua Mare* hosts expeditions through the Galápagos Islands. River expeditions aboard *Aqua Mekong* sail the Mekong River in Vietnam and Cambodia, while *Aqua Nera* and *Amazon Aria* explore the wilds of the Amazon. *Aqua Blu* repositions to Bali in May and sails weeklong cruises to the Komodo Islands throughout the summer months. ●

