



# set sail

EDITED BY ARTA GHANBARI

Embrace the magic of being on the open water and visiting destinations that are accessible only by boat. Here is our guide to thrilling sailing journeys and expedition cruises worldwide

ANDREW URMW

# Fantastic beasts

MARY LUSSIANA takes a luxury superyacht cruise to the Galápagos, the Pacific Ocean archipelago known for extraordinary wildlife that is found nowhere else on earth

FEATURE  
Galápagos

I walked along a reddish-sand beach this morning, the fine grains caused by the erosion of the iron-rich lava cliffs that backed it. I avoided a few slumbering sea lions and the occasional black marine iguana, sneezing to expel excess salt from their bodies after a morning swim, and I came across a family of oystercatchers – two parents at the sea's edge with their two chicks. I stopped to watch the adult birds bringing food in their long, postbox-red beaks to the week-old chicks, when suddenly, with a loud alarm call, they took off into the sky, the chicks obediently sinking into the beach and remaining immobile.

I looked skywards and saw the threat. A Galápagos hawk was just above us, soaring with intent. Thankfully, the oystercatchers managed to scare him away and I walked on to a neighbouring saline lagoon where flamingos were nesting. A fluffy white chick, visible until her mother sat on her, was the first young flamingo the naturalists I was with had seen, such is their rarity. But, for me, the Galápagos Islands bring a first every day. Yesterday, from our panga (tender), I saw two Galápagos penguins fighting over a fish. The day before, I had snorkelled with Pacific green turtles and watched from underwater as a flightless cormorant dived down to catch its breakfast. I saw a stingray camouflaged under the sand and a hieroglyphic hawkfish, its dark blue-grey skin etched with irregular green markings outlined in blue, as beautiful as the stained-glass windows of a cathedral.

And in among the firsts is the gleaming *Aqua Mare*, the 50-metre superyacht making its debut in these waters. I have been to the Galápagos before. I have also been on each of the other four small-ship voyages that Aqua Expeditions specialises in – on the Mekong, on the Amazon and in Indonesia. The combination of the extraordinary comfort of *Aqua Mare* – designed and built by the internationally-renowned Italian CRN yard – and the bespoke nature of a ringside seat on the natural world is a winning duo.

There are just seven cabins on *Aqua Mare*. The Owner's Suite, at 80 square metres, is the largest on this archipelago

and certainly impressive. Of the remaining six, which range in size from 16 to 28 square metres, one is equipped with a whirlpool bath and sauna. There are three dining areas, in which delicious food – from scorpionfish ceviche to shrimp encocado – reflects the creativity of consulting chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, who already works on Aqua's Amazon cruises. A wealth of information on the islands can be found on the bookshelves encased in gleaming Italian veneer in the elegant panoramic lounge.

The interiors are by designer François Zuretti and over these, Birgit Galli Zugaro, wife of Aqua Expeditions' owner Francesco, has sprinkled a sense of place. There are 17th-century prints of endemic Galápagos wildlife, and plates designed and custom-made by Balinese ceramicists Gaya, featuring flowers that Darwin sketched in his notebook.

The more practical side of luxury, no doubt thought up by Francesco, whose career started here 15 years ago, can be enjoyed when snorkelling. No other boat offers wetsuits, socks and hoods that are washed between each dip and dried using a specially placed ventilator. And having one naturalist to every eight guests on expeditions, as opposed to the usual 1:16 ratio, means that nobody misses a thing.

The yacht runs seven- and 14-night itineraries, departing weekly all year round and covering alternately the west and the east of the 13 major Galápagos Islands. Wildlife varies – Española, in the east, is the only island where the waved albatross breeds, while the western route (which I took), delivers Galápagos penguins on Isabela and Fernandina islands, plus the opportunity to see extraordinary frigate birds at their breeding ground on North Seymour Island. Two or three expeditions are led every day, on land or by water, ensuring the greatest chance to see wildlife in action.

Those privileged, David Attenborough-esque moments – like seeing the courtship dance of the blue-footed booby in which it waves its colourful feet in the air to entice a mate, or the baby marine iguana that hatched beside us – can be enjoyed, and then stored away in our memories, as carefully as the islands themselves are being preserved.

TOP ROW FROM LEFT Iguanas on the shore with *Aqua Mare* on the horizon. Exploring caves on a tender. Male marine iguanas change colour during mating season. MIDDLE ROW A sea lion. Kayaking expeditions are led by naturalists. The brown pelican is a common resident of the islands. BOTTOM ROW Sierra Negra volcano on Isabela island. A Sally Lightfoot crab. One of the Galápagos' famous giant tortoises

## WAYS AND MEANS

Scott Dunn (020 8682 5030; [scottdunn.com](http://scottdunn.com)) offers a seven-night trip to the Galápagos on *Aqua Mare* from £11,770 per person, including all flights, National Park fees and two nights in the Hotel del Parque in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

