

# Aqua Mare

## AQUA EXPEDITIONS

Aqua Expeditions enhances its fleet with an intimate, seven-cabin superyacht that sails the Galápagos.

Words: Lauren Ho • Photography: © Stevie Mann

In Academy Bay, the waterways are teeming with life. Bordering Puerto Ayora, the largest and most populated town in the Galápagos, on the southern edge of Santa Cruz Island, the radiant turquoise waters see yachts, fishing trawlers and sailboats bobbing gently up and down on the waves. Amid this jumble and a raft of frolicking sea lions, Aqua Mare stands out from the crowd.

The first true superyacht in the Galápagos, the vessel is the latest to join the Aqua Expeditions fleet, which comprises four other ships that sail the Amazon and Mekong rivers, as well as the pristine East Indonesian Archipelago. The company was founded by Francesco Galli Zugaro, who has made it his mission to connect guests to the destinations they sail, whether that be through the interior design, the dining or the off-the-beaten-track excursions that form part of the multi-day itineraries. Having launched the small-ship expeditions company with the 16-suite Aria Amazon in 2011, expansion has been moderate, with Galli Zugaro and his wife Birgit actively involved in every aspect of the design and development. Aqua Blu launched in 2019 followed by Aqua Nera in 2021, and like her sisters, Aqua Mare is a beauty to look at, her sleek exterior hinting at the understated luxury that awaits inside.

Previously privately owned, the yacht was the simple answer to the lengthy waiting times of delivering a newbuild. "Francesco and Birgit had been thinking, dreaming and working towards a yacht in the Galápagos for a long time," explains the group's interior design consultant, David Cole. "We did have a full set of plans and designs ready for a newbuild, however the decision was made to try and speed









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up the process and purchase an existing ship if a suitable yacht could be found."

Indeed, sourced by Francesco and Birgit's son, Massimo, the 50-metre yacht perfectly fits Aqua Expeditions' luxuriously low-key, intimate ethos, with space for just 16 guests and 16 crew, including two naturalist guides. Built by Ancona-based shipyard CRN in 1998, she has 30% more indoor space than most yachts her size and unfolds to include seven spacious cabins – one being the 80m<sup>2</sup> Owner's Suite – a beach club, three indoor and outdoor dining areas, including a barbecue area that is used as a workout space in the early mornings, and a sundeck with a shaded six-person whirlpool.

While acquiring a ready-made ship was ideal, it still came with the challenge of transforming her from a private yacht to a passenger one, without losing the glamour and luxury that Aqua Expeditions guests have come to expect. Of course, with the yacht already in superb condition, and with naturally great bone structure, little was needed by way of

renovations, bar a few tweaks such as converting a former living space into a dining room. "The spaces on Aqua Mare work so well," says Cole. "Even with a full complement of guests, she never feels overcrowded; the public spaces span indoors and out, while in the private quarters, bathrooms are very large for a ship and there's plenty of storage." Even the crew spaces get an upgrade from the norm. "I love the galley with its large windows, it keeps morale up – it's always good to keep the chefs happy!" he quips.

The original interiors are the work of prolific superyacht designer François Zuretti and his team, whose extravagant aesthetic is revealed through rich details, from silk curtains and tie backs to an excess of heavy furniture. This, as Cole says, is a change in pace from the modern, simpler look of Aqua Expeditions' other vessels, and so some revisions were required. "The interior vision for Aqua Mare comes very much from Birgit," he continues. "As Director of Aqua Expeditions, and my co-designer, she has a very defined vision of what she wants for the Aqua







Expeditions persona, so together we approached the design by paring back and simplifying the existing decoration."

The result makes use of the yacht's original polished walnut veneer panelling, contrasting with natural fabrics in a palette inspired by the colours and textures of the Galápagos. Interiors are dressed with stone tables, luxurious Jim Thompson fabrics for the wallcoverings and soft furnishings, and artwork from the 1700s obtained from antiquarian shops in New York, which give a feel for Darwin's era. There's bespoke lacquer tissue boxes, a collection of books relevant to the destination, and as with other Aqua Expedition ships, tableware from Indonesian ceramic brand Gaya, designed with the destination in mind and featuring details like gold and platinum lava flows, or the number 1835 in reference to the year Darwin visited the islands.

"For me, as in all design, it must function," says Cole. "What we do when designing, is to make a luxurious interior comfortable and

inviting, not intimidating, but intimate and cosy. We want guests to feel they are boarding a private yacht without having to pay for the entire boat. You will be hard-pressed to find any superyacht in the world that you can book by the cabin or charter."

As for Cole's favourite space? "My favourite cabin is number 301, which is the yacht's smallest and located on the bridge of the deck. The window here is huge, taking up most of the wall, so you can lie in bed looking at the ocean. It's magical."

This, alongside two custom-made black military-grade zodiacs with low-emission engines, and a collection of toys from kayaks and stand-up paddle boards to scuba gear, makes Aqua Mare the perfect base from which to enjoy the wonders the Galápagos Islands has to offer. "I enjoy working with a small group of people with the same goal and a desire to create something wonderful," Cole concludes. "It's so gratifying to see everyone's work come together into a cohesive and beautiful product."



#### ON DECK

Route: Galapagos Islands  
Owner / Operator: Aqua Expeditions  
Interior Design: David Cole,  
Birgit Galli Zugaro  
[www.aquaexpeditions.com](http://www.aquaexpeditions.com)