

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

THE

WATER

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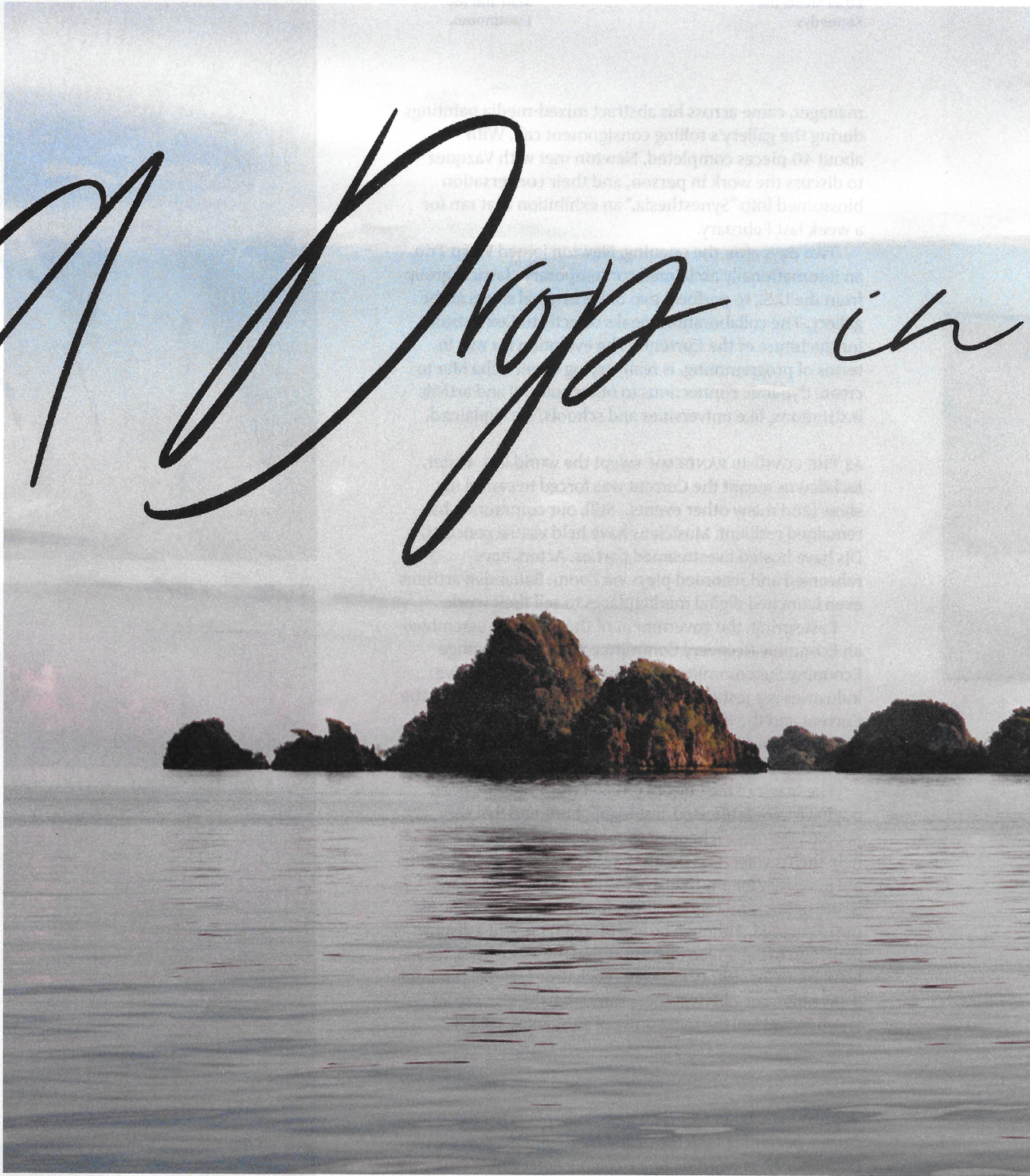
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*AKNAFO*



SAILING THE ISLANDS OF EASTERN INDONESIA, **SAKI KNAFO** FINDS NATURE AT ITS MOST



# The Ocean

PRISTINE—AND A SURPRISING HISTORY THAT TODAY RESONATES MORE THAN EVER.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROL SACHS

**Y**OU PROBABLY haven't heard of them. You almost certainly wouldn't be able to find them on a map. But there's a case to be made that eastern Indonesia's tiny Banda Islands—or the Spice Islands, as they were once known in the West—have done more to shape the last 500 years of human history than any other place on earth. I'll come right out and say it: the Banda Islands are the birthplace of modern capitalism. Whatever you think of the economic system that rules the world and likely your life, you may find it intriguing to learn that it could have originated about 600 miles north of Australia, on a cluster of palm-fringed volcanic formations smack in the middle of an azure sea—a place that could hardly feel more distant from our overcrowded, hyperconnected centers of commerce.

▶ *A dinghy flanks the Aqua Blu, off Raja Ampat, in eastern Indonesia. Opposite: Francesco and Birgit Galli Zugaro, owners of Aqua Expeditions.*





My trip to see them began, as all my trips do, in the throbbing heart of capitalism itself. In late 2019—mere months before the pandemic stopped the world—I flew from New York to Hong Kong, and from Hong Kong to Bali, and then from Bali to a town called Maumere, on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores. There I availed myself of one of the world's extravagant pleasures—a luxury cruise.

As I stepped onto the long-range explorer yacht with the other passengers, a handsome man in sunglasses, his silvery hair swept back, politely invited us to join him in taking off our shoes. From his faint accent it sounded like he might be from Italy. I later found out he had lived not only in Rome but also in Zurich, Bonn, Cyprus, Boston, London, Ecuador, Peru, Singapore, and possibly a few other places that I'm forgetting. He introduced himself as Francesco Galli Zugaro, the adventurer-entrepreneur behind Aqua Expeditions, the cruise line that owns and operates the vessel. His company has been a leader when it comes to small-scale river cruises, with itineraries along the Mekong in Southeast Asia. His *Aqua Nera* was launched last year and sails the Peruvian

Amazon. He said he would be accompanying us on the voyage with his wife, Birgit, the company's guest experiences director.

The debut of the boat, *Aqua Blu*, is Galli Zugaro's first foray into ocean cruising. It has made visiting this remote part of Asia possible without the challenges of organizing a private charter (though you can do that, too—the *Aqua Blu* can accommodate parties of up to 30 people, perfect for those who want privacy). Built as a survey vessel for the British Royal Navy, it has since been appointed with four teak decks, 15 plush carpeted suites, and a bar with an Italian parquet floor.

On the first evening of the voyage, in a salon decorated with mementos from the Galli Zugaros' travels in Southeast Asia and Oceania—a golden seated Buddha from Thailand, a feathered headdress from New Guinea—Galli Zugaro reminded us that this was the *Aqua Blu*'s inaugural cruise, as well as the first time any vessel of its kind would test its strength against the notoriously powerful currents of eastern Indonesia's wide-open waters. Most tourists who had previously sailed these seas had either chartered their own yachts or secured berths in a *palari*, the traditional wooden schooner. "You've obviously chosen this departure," Galli Zugaro said, "because the spirit of adventure lives within you."

The adventure would span a 600-mile stretch of a nation composed of 17,508 islands—an itinerary possible only by cruise. We'd begin by heading east along the remote Southeast Moluccas, sometimes called the Forgotten Islands. We would then cut across one of the world's deepest seas before turning north toward Raja Ampat, the heart of the Coral Triangle, where there are more marine species than anywhere else on earth. Along the way, we would stop in the Banda Islands. From the 15th to mid-17th centuries, in the Age of Exploration, they were renowned among Europe's mariners as the source of nutmeg and mace, spices that commanded obscenely high prices, in part because they grew only here.



◀  
Clockwise from top left: A soup course on the Aqua Blu; local architecture on Banda Neira; swimming off Banda Neira; a bushel of nutmeg; a flame tree on Alor Island.

We would have it a little easier than the men who risked dysentery and starvation to load their ships with those delectable treasures centuries ago. In our bathrooms, the towels were anointed with a sweet and woody fragrance that Birgit and the ship's exacting decorator had spent a day concocting with a perfumer in Bali. There would be no hardships in the dining room, either. The meals were served on custom-made plates adorned with

paintings of Wallace's flying frogs, a creature named for Alfred Russel Wallace, the British naturalist who, independently of Darwin, conceived of the theory of evolution in eastern Indonesia's species-rich forests. The menu evoked the wide-ranging cuisines of the old spice route, which once stretched from the port cities of the Mediterranean to the rural islands we'd soon be exploring: Balinese-style suckling pig with a minty salad of sweet corn and palm hearts, succulent lamb shoulder with a vibrant tabbouleh, and translucent sashimi—an improvised addition, which appeared on our plates a few hours after fishermen pulled up alongside the yacht to offer their catch of tuna.

Most days, we would board the tenders in the morning and again in the afternoon to snorkel or dive around the nearby reefs. Floating face-down in the shallows, I could watch butterfly fish and parrotfish, fish named for angels and trumpets and clowns, flickering through the coppery cities of coral beneath my nose. Kicking out beyond the reef's sheer edge, I'd feel the churning of my thoughts subside as I gazed down into the vortex of blue, waiting for a big turtle or a school of barracuda to come gliding up from the depths.

Every two or three days, we'd deviate from this hypnotic routine to visit one of the villages along the route. One morning, we awoke to find ourselves anchored about a hundred yards off the shore of an island consisting of a pair of lush green peaks. From the taller peak rose a ribbon of smoke. We were looking at Mount Serua, one of the most active volcanoes in the region, on perhaps the most isolated of all the Forgotten Islands. According to Galli Zugaro, few if any other cruise vessels in eastern Indonesia would have spared the time to stop alongside it.

For the most part, the trip had been so smooth that I almost forgot I was on a boat, but I'd felt the rise and fall of the swells the night before. We'd been crossing the abyss of the Banda Sea—four miles at its deepest point. The 12-hour voyage was the longest crossing of the trip. Now the water was calm again, and a small skiff was puttering across the span of indigo between the island and our vessel. Two men and a boy pulled up to the stern, and some of the Indonesian crew members went down to ask if they would let us take a look at their village. After a brief exchange, a box was filled with goods from the *Aqua Blu* kitchen: instant ramen, several bags of sugar and coffee and rice, a loaf of bread, and a jar of jam.



►  
*Clockwise from top:  
Kayaking through a  
cave on the coast of  
Raja Ampat; stingless  
jellyfish in a saltwater  
lake on Raja Ampat;  
cocktail hour for Aqua  
Blu passengers on a  
beach on Banda Neira.*

Climbing out of the tenders onto the rocky beach, we were greeted by a lanky man in a Nike cap. “This is the chief of the village,” said one of our scuba guides, Kaz Kazzuaeni, doing double duty as an interpreter. “He said it must be that God has guided us to come here.” The man turned to face the slope of the volcano and moved his lips in silence for a minute or two—“a prayer to ancestors to get permission for visitors.” Then he led us up a path through the vine-wrapped trees toward the village. According to Kazzuaeni, the man said we were the first passersby ever to come ashore.

The village of Waru is perched about 1,300 feet above the sea. Our host said the 60 families who live there grow nutmeg and cloves much as their grandparents did before them. Their ancestors had established the village more than two centuries ago. Before that, he said, they lived in caves. The houses are small, with rusty tin roofs, but the Christian church is an airy building of bone-white stucco with turquoise trim and a pale blue steeple. Inside, a white tin rooster sat atop the feathery branches of a Christmas tree. I wandered back outside into the glare of the sun and stood at the edge of a soaring overlook. The sparkling sea stretched to the horizon. Swifts turned and swooped in the air, and unseen birds filled the jungle behind me with their calls.

This was one of a number of moments when Galli Zugaro delivered what he called “the wow factor.” Another came a couple of days later, when we spotted a dolphin as we were taking the tenders out to a reef for a dive. Slowly we realized we were approaching not one or a few but hundreds of them, their shiny dark bodies

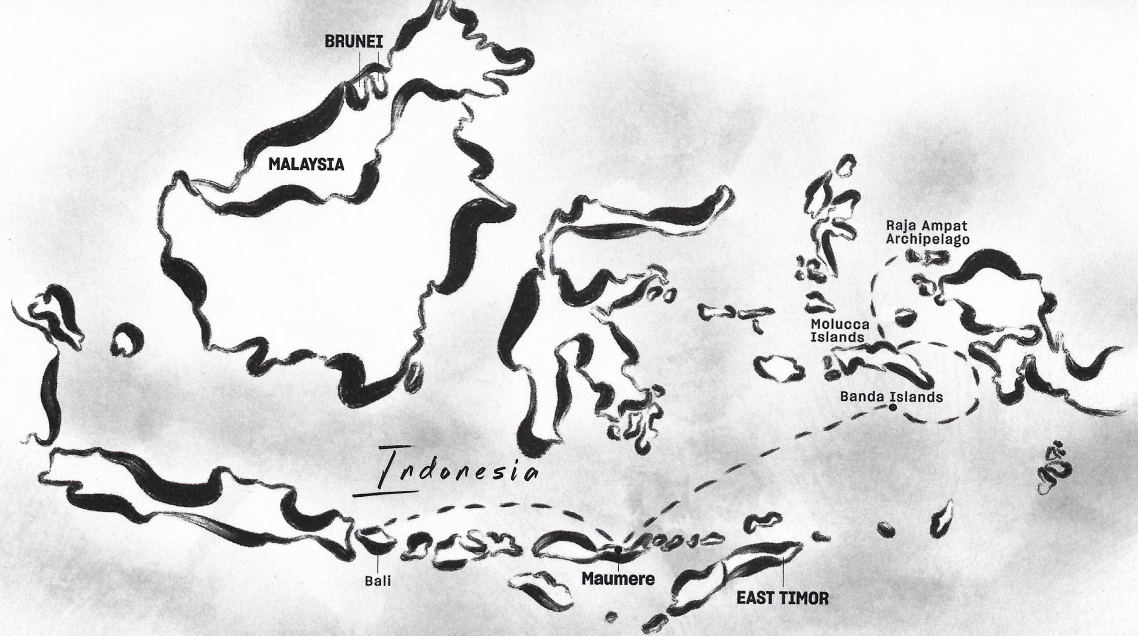
cresting and dipping in perfectly synchronized rows of three and four. Soon they were flinging themselves into the air all around the boat, and then they were racing beneath us, shooting from the port side to the starboard just beneath the bow. Our driver cut the engine, and we slipped over the gunwales and into the water, but the dolphins weren’t interested in sticking around to find out what we would do next. Listening under the surface of the water, I could hear them chattering and clicking as they sped out of sight.

In the days to come, we’d sail through the sun-dazzled channels of Raja Ampat, a jumble



ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY





of jungle-clad limestone islands that had been sculpted into fantastical shapes by the tides. We'd see a sperm whale breaching just off the boat, and we'd swim in a salt lake teeming with a rare kind of jellyfish, their stingless bodies bouncing off our skin. But the climax of the journey came on the day we first caught sight of the Banda Islands, once among the most sought-after on the planet.

When Columbus set out from Spain in 1492, he was hoping to find not just the East Indies generally, but those nine specific specks of land. And Ferdinand Magellan reportedly had the same goal in mind in

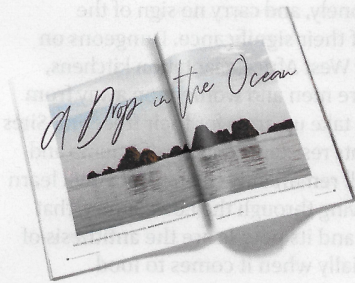
(Continued on page 102)

## Sailing the Spice Islands

**Aqua Expeditions** offers 12-day sailings on the *Aqua Blu* between the Banda (Spice) Islands in March, October, and November. Exact routes vary, but the closest itinerary to the one taken by the author leaves in March, both this year and in 2022. For a totally personalized experience and itinerary, the *Aqua Blu* can be chartered independently to sail around the region. [aquaexpeditions.com](http://aquaexpeditions.com); itineraries from \$12,800 per person, all-inclusive; yacht charter from \$290,000 for seven days, all-inclusive.

In Indonesia, Aqua Expeditions can arrange regional flights that will take you from Bali or Jakarta to Flores or Ambon, where you'll board the yacht.

The company recently launched a partnership with **Nihi Sumba**, a resort known for its private-island vibe and world-class surfing. Included is a four-night charter (for up to 30 people) on the *Aqua Blu*, with stops for hiking, mountain biking, and diving, followed by three nights at Nihi Sumba. From \$281,000, all-inclusive.



(Indonesia, continued from page 89)

1519, when he launched his ill-fated expedition to circumnavigate the globe (one out of the five ships made it, but not before Magellan was killed in the Philippines by warriors who refused to convert to Christianity). For two centuries, the Netherlands, Portugal, and England fought over the islands, with the Dutch acquiring one of them from the English in exchange for a small backwater by the name of Manhattan. Now, as the yacht slipped into the harbor, I could make out the archways and terra-cotta roofs of Banda Neira, formerly the hub of the global trade in nutmeg.

Following a guide through the old colonial town, we passed a grand hotel that had fallen into disrepair, its custard-yellow paint cracking and peeling. Farther down the road, spiders the size of mice crouched on strands of cobweb suspended from the balconies, and a pair of 17th-century cannons lay neglected on the side of the street. It is the sort of town that visitors might idealize as “faded,” though I doubt most people who live there think of it that way. The market was busy, with rows of gleaming skipjack and grouper and bins filled with pandan leaves and chiles. The homes had been painted in arresting shades of lime and lemon, indigo and salmon.

In the museum, while my fellow passengers were examining the coins

and weaponry of the archipelago’s colonizers, I noticed one of the cruise’s snorkeling guides, an Indonesian from Sulawesi named Refli, studying a gruesome painting. It showed a band of Japanese mercenaries butchering dozens of native people while a Dutch commander looked on approvingly. “It’s very sad,” Refli said, “but good to know the history.”

THE STORY OF the Banda Islands’ colonization is about as dark as histories get. In 1621, a fleet of ships belonging to the Dutch East India Company arrived. Within two months, the islands were under Dutch control and as many as 14,000 of the 15,000 original inhabitants had been deported, enslaved, or killed. A statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the officer of the Dutch East India Company who presided over the slaughter, still stands in his birthplace of Hoorn in the Netherlands. But in the abandoned mansion he built in Banda Neira, the only remnant of his tenure is a suicide note scratched into a windowpane by the homesick Frenchman who cooked his meals. No other evidence of habitation remains. After the Indonesians won independence from the Dutch, in 1949, they threw every last stick of furniture away.

In an orchard on the outskirts of town, we finally laid our eyes on the literal seed of all the greed and terror of that era. At one of the islands’ few surviving nutmeg plantations, we watched a guide use a special basket at the end of a long handle to pick a golden fruit. He sliced the flesh with the tip of his machete to reveal a shriveled brown nut wrapped in crimson threads of mace. Because of its ability to keep meat from going bad and its purported power to ward off the plague, the spice

derived from that nut once fetched higher prices in Europe than gold. Once the Dutch East India Company took control of the Banda Islands and started importing nutmeg, the sudden infusion of all that profit into the cities of the West would change the course of history. As Charles Corn wrote in *Scents of Eden: A Narrative of the Spice Trade*, it “spawned a new age of revolutionary economics based on credit, the rise of a rudimentary banking system, and ultimately free enterprise.” In other words, the blood-soaked soil of the Banda Islands, a place so little-known in the West today that some cartographers don’t even bother to include it in their atlases, was where modern capitalism took root.

Around five o’clock that evening, as the heat began to loosen its grip, we climbed a candlelit staircase to the top of a massive pentagonal fortress built by the Dutch. The young Balinese men who had been serving our drinks on the cruise had set up a bar on the ramparts just for us. I ordered a gin and tonic, walked over to the crenellated parapet, and watched the gold-fringed clouds floating over the harbor. About four hundred years ago, a succession of Dutchmen had presumably stood where I was standing, aiming their muskets through the notch where I was resting my cocktail. I had to figure I was there at least in part because of them. If they hadn’t seized this land and shipped its bounty overseas, giving rise to a whole new economic system that would enrich the nations of the West, the currents of history might have never aligned to allow a lucky bunch of Europeans and Americans to tour this beautiful part of the world on a yacht. I finished my drink, had another, and then we all went back to the *Aqua Blu* to watch the sunset. The roof of clouds was stained purple and so was the sea, and far away, on the wide horizon, the sun glowed like the golden fruit that changed the world. ✦

Content in this issue was produced with assistance from Aqua Expeditions; Belmond Afloat in France; Destination Great Barrier Island; and Tourism New Zealand.



*Aqua Expeditions' Aqua Blu off the coast of Serua Island, Indonesia.*

# If the Oceans Are Calling...

After a lost year, cruise lines are pulling out all the stops. **BY FRAN GOLDEN**

WE'RE ALL ANXIOUS to get back to sea. The proof? When Royal Caribbean put out a Facebook call for volunteers to help test out the line's stringent new COVID-19 protocols, more than 100,000 cooped-up explorers raised their digital hands. So even as cruise companies continue to cancel trips as they try to navigate the pandemic, consumers, it seems, can't wait to go.

"Travelers are picking up their dreams and trying to make them reality as fast as possible," says Barbara Muckermann, chief marketing officer of Silversea Cruises.

Much remains uncertain for cruising in the coming months, but the industry has used last year's unprecedented pause to prepare for a grand return. Here are four promising developments to watch.

## **NEW SHIPS FINALLY ARRIVE**

The pandemic slowed both the delivery and the debuts of new vessels. But this April, at the very start of European yachting season, the first ship from the Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection, the 298-passenger *Evrima*, is scheduled to make its long-awaited first trip. Regent's *Seven Seas Splendor* will also sail the Mediterranean this year.

Guests will get to enjoy Virgin Voyages' new 2,770-passenger, adults-only *Scarlet Lady*—and its sister ship, *Valiant Lady*, due later this year. Silversea has three ships slated to make their inaugural trips in 2021.

The new expedition line Atlas Ocean Voyages plans to launch its first ship, the 196-passenger *World Navigator*, with all-inclusive fares that cover even emergency

*Aboard the  
Aqua Blu, near  
the port city of  
Sorong, Indonesia.*



medical-evacuation insurance. Celebrity Cruises will unveil the 2,918-passenger *Celebrity Apex*—a sister to the well-regarded *Celebrity Edge*—along with new all-inclusive pricing across the fleet. And Carnival Cruise Lines will make a splash with its 5,282-passenger *Mardi Gras*, complete with an onboard roller coaster, a first for the industry. The *Mardi Gras* will also be Carnival Corporation's fourth ship to run on cleaner-burning liquefied natural gas.

#### ALASKA BOUNCES BACK

Around 1.3 million cruisers had to cancel their plans to visit the state in 2020. For those who want to try again this year, there are new options: Lindblad Expeditions plans to send five ships to Alaska in 2021. Itineraries will include September sailings that will spend four days in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest, the habitat of the elusive white spirit bear.

#### THE ARCTIC STAYS COOL

Expedition cruises were surging in popularity before the pandemic and will continue to be big for years to come, says Robin West, who heads expeditions for the luxury line Seabourn. The company's newest vessel, the polar-class, 264-passenger *Seabourn Venture*, will set off on 12- and 14-day itineraries along the coast of Norway this December. West says he can "practically guarantee" sightings of the northern lights—though guests may have to suffer a late-night wake-up call in order to admire the spectacle, he jokes.

#### LUXURY TRIPS GO OVER THE TOP

Some gung-ho travelers are making up for lost time by making ambitious bookings for the future. When Regent Seven Seas Cruises opened reservations on a 143-day, six-continent journey aboard the 700-passenger *Seven Seas Mariner*, all 60 of the luxury suites were gone within hours—at prices starting at \$107,499 per person. Meanwhile, Oceania Cruises says its 2022 European season is already the best in company history, with one in three guests booking a first-ever cruise for next summer.

Other lines are offering tons of privacy. In the Galápagos, Ecoventura has two 20-passenger ships available for full buyouts for \$169,000 a week. And AmaWaterways has put its entire 25-vessel fleet up for charter, at rates from \$365,000 for 12 nights on the *Zambezi*—the ultimate onboard bubble. ✦

► The view from a cabin on the *Aqua Blu*.



## Short but Sweet

Condensed cruises can still pack a punch with stops at some of the world's most exciting ports—even on itineraries of just a few days. **BY PAUL BRADY**

Cruise lines are planning a comeback this year, after rethinking safety protocols and collaborating with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention on ways to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 on board. Masks and social distancing will be standard practice, and the companies are working toward onboard bubbles. Guests will only be allowed to go on ship-sponsored shore excursions and will have to submit to frequent testing.

Helping the cause is a shift toward shorter sailings, with many 2021 trips slated to last a week or less. But these new micro-itineraries don't skimp on the cultural sites or unforgettable ports of call.

**Ponant** (*en.ponant.com*), for example, will offer a four-night trip in August, sailing from Valletta, Malta, to Venice, with stops in Kotor, Montenegro, and Dubrovnik, Croatia. Thanks to a new partnership with the Louvre, curators from the museum will be aboard a July 13–20 sail through Greece's Cycladic islands, offering expert talks.

**Azamara** (*azamara.com*) is also focusing

on Greece, with six- and seven-night round trips out of Piraeus, the cruise port for Athens. These itineraries pack in islands including Mykonos, Patmos, and Santorini, as well as a stop at Ephesus, in Turkey.

After canceling its Alaska cruises for 2020, **Holland America** (*hollandamerica.com*) is preparing for a big return. This year, the line will add seven-day trips between Vancouver and Whittier, on Prince William Sound, that include visits to Juneau and Ketchikan.

The newest **Silversea** (*silversea.com*) ship, the *Silver Moon*, is set to make its debut in the Mediterranean this year. A series of six-night trips between Barcelona and Lisbon, scheduled for May and August, will focus on Iberian food and wine, with excursions dedicated to cava, tapas, and sherry.

**Windstar** (*windstar.com*) will also call at ports in Spain, with an October sailing aboard the *Wind Star* from Rome to Barcelona that visits both Mallorca and Menorca, as well as Corsica and Elba—all in just six days.