



SHOW BOAT From top: The Amazon River at dusk and *The Aqua* on the move. Opposite page: *The Aqua*'s glass-walled dining room.

A New Way To Cruise

Mystic River

Walk the glam-plank! All-inclusive Amazon cruising has never been this swank. **By Laurie Kahle**



It's dark by the time we reach Nauta, Peru. Our guides hustle us through the bustling marketplace to the river landing. Nervously applying bug repellent and feeling conspicuously pale, we sit waiting in a wooden skiff next to a towering ferryboat stuffed with locals, who lean over the rails and stare at us. Tourism has arrived in this remote region near Iquitos, the world's largest inland port. We shuttle around the bend to where *The Aqua* awaits, aglow with lights, condensation from the air conditioning streaking the vessel's windows.

A double-ringed moon foretells good weather as we engage the wide Amazon River, leaving cell signals and the Internet in our wake. *The Aqua* (rates from \$2,100; 866.603.3687, aquaexpeditions.com) is bound for the vast, flooded forests of the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, an area spanning more than 5 million acres (twice the size of Yellowstone Park) at the headwaters of the Amazon basin. The nearly

two dozen guests onboard are among only 2,500 visitors who explore the reserve each year, so encounters with tourists are even rarer than pink dolphin sightings.

The odd-looking, 130-foot-long vessel resembles a top-heavy, modernist tugboat as it cruises through the moonlit water, which peels away from the hull like mercury. Before turning in, I visit the prow to breathe in the balmy air and contemplate the star-filled sky. Suddenly, the heady scent of nectar overcomes me as I realize we are passing through a bed of water lilies, their fragrance pervading the air and firmly imprinting a sensory memory on the night. I feel freed, cut off from the endless stream of needy communications. My world can spin without me for four nights while I explore a world that relatively few others will ever see.

Aqua Expeditions CEO Francesco Galli Zugaro, a handsome and charismatic Rome

AMAZON RIVER PHOTO BY GETTY IMAGES; AQUA PHOTO BY WALTER WUST

LUXURY FOR LESS:

...continued

or dinner—every day of your stay! ... Through June, Ritz-Carlton Kapalua (ritzcarlton.com/kapalua) in Maui is offering the fifth night free, plus \$500 resort credit for dining,



native, launched this custom-built cruiser last year. Peruvian interior designer Jordi Puig used local slates and Amazon woods to create the understated, contemporary design. Expansive windows provide an ever-changing backdrop as the scenery glides by. The 12 air-conditioned suites feature king-size beds, rain-head showers and your own wide-screen, high-def view of the Amazon. Chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, a culinary star in Lima, conceives the menus centered on light, unfussy Peruvian cuisine with an array of local fish, grilled meats and delightful salads—all complemented with a list of South America's most sought-after wines.

The pace of an Aqua cruise is similar to that of an African safari. Early each morning or late in the afternoon, you embark on skiffs to explore pristine tributaries and lakes populated with countless species of exotic birds and animals. Squawking, vibrantly colored macaws fly overhead with tails streaming; weird, masked-looking three-toed sloths listlessly hang from branches; and the elusive pink Amazon River dolphins swiftly surface and submerge around you. "Each excursion involves a component of luck," says Galli Zugaro. "You can go up and down the same river, and have a different experience every time." Visits to local villages offer a memorable cultural exchange—Galli Zugaro is currently developing programs to enrich these communities with basic medical services and supplies. Between excursions, the long, leisurely afternoons are free for rejuvenating siestas and relaxed lunches in the glass-walled dining room.

Abundant downtime and the ship's intimacy give guests and staff plenty of storytelling opportunities. Daniel Vásquez, our passionate guide, speaks fluent howler monkey and can spot a koala bear-like kinkajou high in a tree at nightfall. "I picked up most of my knowledge from my 95-year-old grandmother," he says. "My job is like a therapy. When you're watching wildlife, you think of God."

All-Inclusive, All the Time Wild Adventures, No Surprises

Kangaroo Court

With its cliff-top perch above Hanson Bay, the **Southern Ocean Lodge** (rates from \$625 per person, per night; 011.61.2.9918.4355, southernoceanlodge.com) offers panoramic views of South Australia's picturesque Kangaroo Island. And just out the back door, you'll find the namesake kangaroos aplenty—plus wallabies, koalas, sea lions, seals and even platypuses. The four-course dinners are exquisite.

The Lion Kings

The unfortunately named **&Beyond** (formerly known as CC Africa) recently opened **Xudum** and **Xaranna** (rates

from \$550 per person, per night; 888.882.3742, andbeyond.com), two luxurious safari lodges that share 62,000 acres in Botswana's vast Okavango Delta, home to the Big Five. Luxurious lodges and tented suites offer private plunge pools and al fresco dining.

Kiwi Polish

In 1895, when Sir Heaton Rhodes constructed the Queen Anne-style **Otahuna Lodge** near Christchurch, it was the largest residence in New Zealand. Today, it's an impeccably renovated Relais & Chateaux lodge (rates from \$282 per person, per night; 011.64.3.329.6333, otahuna.co.nz), where chef Jimmy McIntyre draws on a bounty of organic gardens and orchards to construct artful five-course menus paired with local wines.

Pole Dance

Travel to the North Pole aboard a nuclear-powered icebreaker with Quark Expeditions (rates from \$4,790 per person; 800.356.5699, quarkexpeditions.com). Take flight on the ship's helicopter for unparalleled sightings of polar bears and penguins.

Sea Worthy

The cruise industry is in the midst of its biggest fare war ever. **Crystal Cruises** (crystalcruises.com) is giving away shipboard credits of up to \$2,000, to be used for spa treatments, shore adventures or even gratuities for your butler. And **The Yachts of Seabourn** (seabourn.com), which launches its newest vessel, *Odyssey*, next month, is offering discounts of up to 65 percent on Mediterranean and Northern European voyages.

If Only for a Night... Got an ungodly-early flight or awkwardly long layover? Looking to save a few bucks on a one-night stay? Cube hotels are teensy-weensy, but fun.

The Cube ▼	What To Expect ▼	"It" Factor ▼	Could We Do It? ▼
citizenM AMSTERDAM Rates from \$90; citizenm.com	Wall-to-wall windows, cylindrical sinks, futuristic shower capsules. Room key card doubles as a luggage tag and remains active for your next stay.	Electronic mood pads control everything from music to window shades and will wake you "gently" or "wildly."	Yes, if we needed to be at the airport extremely early.
Luxe & Luxe XL BANGKOK Rates from \$95; staywithluxe.com	Luxury micro hotels in bustling Bangkok 'hoods. Refined, Zen-like design with wood-paneled rooms. Sublime beds.	Stunning designer interiors. Cool and cozy circular wooden bathtubs.	Absolutely, but not in the smallest rooms.
Qbic Hotels AMSTERDAM, ANTWERP AND MAASTRICHT Rates from \$90; qbichotels.com	Design-forward, city-center hotels with white-on-white rooms and colorful mood lighting. Beds are fun white cubes. Bathroom fixtures by Philippe Starck.	Self-service check-in and check-out at the automated kiosk.	Yes, if only for a night.
Yotel LONDON AND AMSTERDAM Rates from \$51; yotel.com	Intended only for airport layovers. Chrome-on-white interiors by Conran & Partners. The sofa becomes a bed with the touch of a button. Concierge service.	In the terminals. For a nap between flights, it beats any airline lounge.	Yes, if we had a long layover and needed a nap.
easyHotel LONDON, ZURICH, BASEL, BUDAPEST Rates from \$36; easyhotel.com	From the creator of budget airline easyJet. Extremely basic. Small pads in palatable shades of orange and baby blue.	Great locations in vibrant city centers.	It really wouldn't be good for our image.

—Dominique Fong

Simply Inn-credible

Go high style in Italy, Switzerland, Mexico, Germany... (for \$250 or less!) at these new über-deluxe, design-driven hotels. **By Laurie Kahle**



▲ The George

>>> HAMBURG, GERMANY

The Buzz: The George's "New British" style references classic English social clubs with a modern design code conceived by Sibylle von Heyden of SynergyHamburg. The 125-room hotel features a dark, cozy library; a smoking lounge; a popular bar; a Mediterranean restaurant; a rooftop spa; and two decadent penthouses.

The Ultimate Room: Take in beautiful views of the river Alster from the 625-square-foot George Suite, which includes two balconies. *Rates from \$217; 800.377.4685, designhotels.com/the_george.*



▲ Nhow

>>> MILAN, ITALY

The Buzz: Designers Daniele Beretta and Matteo Thun restored and repurposed an old General Electric factory in Milan's art district of Zona Tortona with flexible, fluid, loft-like spaces. The 249-room hotel also serves as an exhibition space for various art galleries.

The Ultimate Room: The Nhow Suite is a loft space that tops 3,000 square feet on two levels with a barrel vault that spans more than 78 feet. On the upper level, a glass-floored bath radiates theatrical light into the downstairs space. *Rates from \$213; 011.39.02.489.8861, nhow-hotels.com.*



▲ The Omnia

>>> ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND

The Buzz: Arriving guests pass through a tunnel and rise in an elevator to the Omnia's lobby located 5,250 feet above sea level. The design presents a modern interpretation of an alpine chalet with stunning mountain views.

The Ultimate Room: The legendary Matterhorn is the backdrop for a two-room suite with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the village of Zermatt and surrounding alpine peaks. *Rates from \$250; 800.377.4685, designhotels.com/omnia.*

The Fitzwilliam Hotel

>>> BELFAST, IRELAND

The Buzz: Ideally located on Great Victoria Street next to the Grand Opera House, The Fitzwilliam immerses guests in a relaxed, contemporary environment in the center of the city.

The Ultimate Room: Round-the-clock butler and limousine service are part of the package when you stay in Northern Ireland's largest penthouse suite. *Rates from \$181; 800.323.7500, preferredhotels.com/fitzwilliam.*



▲ Roomers

>>> FRANKFURT, GERMANY

The Buzz: A five-story, downtown office building supplied a blank canvas for Romanian designer Oana Rosen and architecture firm Grübel to create this sleek and imposing 117-room hotel. The building is crowned with an illuminated glass dome, under which you can de-stress and find balance in the hotel's Biorhythm fitness and wellness center.

The Ultimate Room: Indulgence and minimalism are not at odds in the junior suites appointed with black parquet floors, custom furnishings, integrated Nintendo Wii stations and skyline views. *Rates from \$232; 800.377.4685, designhotels.com/roomers.*

Rosas & Xocolate

>>> MÉRIDA, MEXICO

The Buzz: Architect Salvador Reyes Rios restored and redesigned two colonial mansions to create the romantic Rosas & Xocolate. Rooms feature views of the interior courtyard with palm trees, wooden trellis walkways, the swimming pool, ponds and patios.

The Ultimate Room: The Master Suite fuses contemporary and classical design influences with custom furniture, fabrics and handmade floor tiles. You can bathe under the stars in a tub for two that has been positioned under a glass ceiling. *Rates from \$255; 800.377.4685, designhotels.com/rosas_and_xocolate.*