

A new concept in cruising offers inquisitive travellers a more environmentally sensitive means of exploring out-of-the-way destinations with the minimum of effort. Sophy Roberts accesses all areas. Illustration by Richard Rockwood.

I first heard the term “microcruising” when sailing with a group of 20 friends around the Flores Sea. We were guests of a private boat owner whose small cruise ship operated out of Bali – fully staffed, with Zodiacs for making landfall wherever it took our fancy. For a week we explored the tiny, outlying islands of Indonesia’s eastern archipelago, from Komodo’s pink beach over which wild pigs scrambled, squeaking and shrieking, to Sumba and Sumbawa where we shopped for ikats, a traditional dyed Indonesian cloth (the best ones eminently collectable). We browsed local markets selling fish, meat and spices, met chieftains and artisans and visited a local orphanage. We ate delicious local foods – I remember one lunchtime picnic of baby goat roasted on a spit beside the beach – and snorkelled and dived in some of the world’s most pristine waters.

A few of the islands were mountainous, covered in green jungle; others were dusty, with thatch-roofed houses,



lonely palms and empty curls of shell-strewn sands. Aside from Komodo, where there’s a brisk trade in dragon-spotting, I don’t recall coming across another tourist – for there were few hotels, shops or spruced-up restaurants. It was privacy perfected: we would drop anchor in out-of-the-way bays, swim off the boat and commandeer great swathes of beach for entire, languorous afternoons.

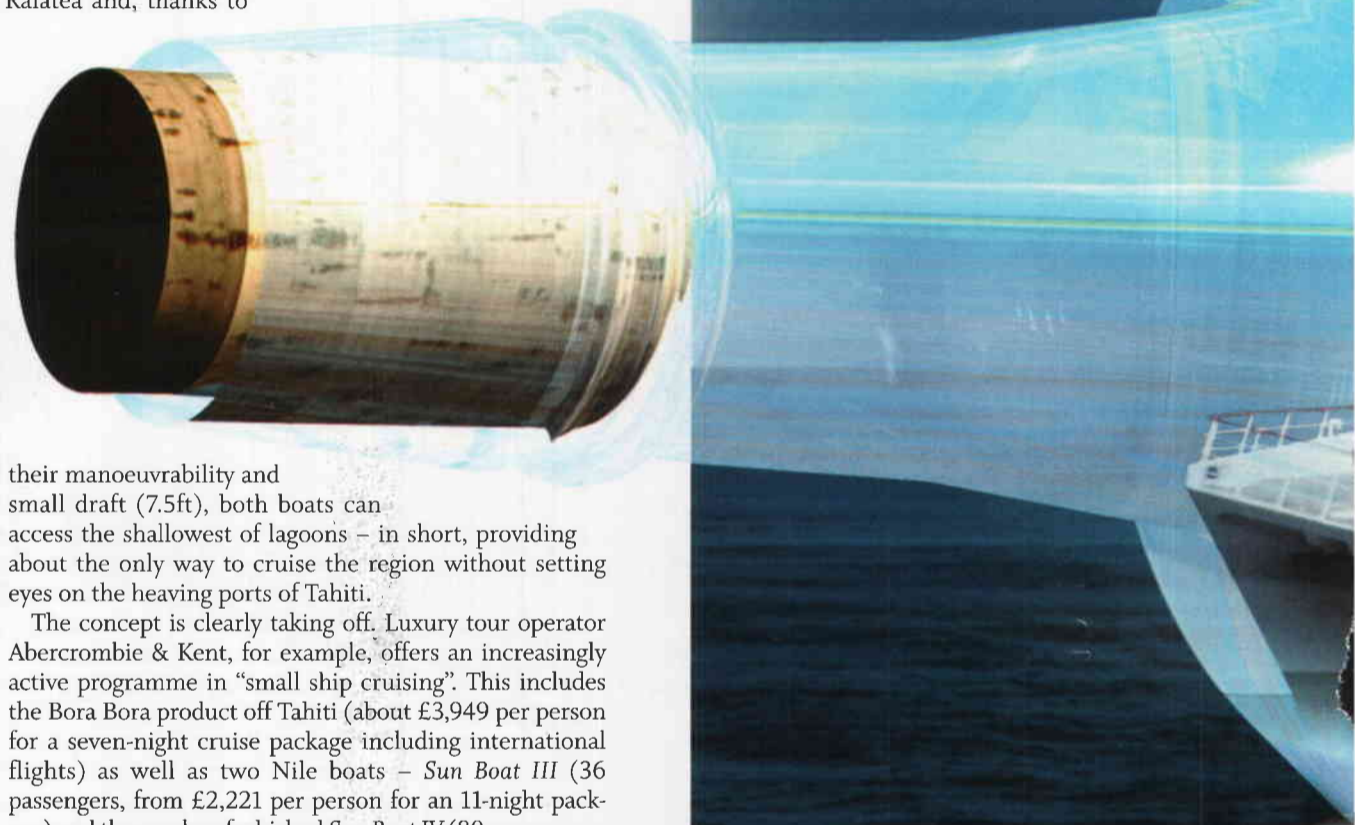
The general appeal of cruising is simple enough: boats reach parts others can’t get to. They allow you to cover significant distances while you’re tucked up and sleeping – and in far greater comfort than on a 747. For the inquisitive traveller who likes to keep on moving, you can do a new thing each day without the agonies of thinking how to go about it. The view, by definition, is constantly changing. However, how to do it without compromising either your budget (the superyacht syndrome) or personal style? For some of us, there’s also an innate fear of a big ship’s sense of social claustrophobia.

For a long time, the options have felt like a cruel pair of pincers, for the two boom boating trends are private yacht charters – with fully staffed yachts in the Med costing from £25,000 to £500,000 a week, according to **Jamie Edmiston**, director of **Edmiston & Co** yacht brokers – and the less-than-fashionable but eminently more affordable traditional megacruise (in 2006, the number of UK cruise passengers grew by about 17 per cent, says The Passenger Shipping Association). They are polarised in style, affordability and content, which is where the microcruise steps in. These small, luxury boats sit somewhere between the private yacht and cruising’s super giants and take upwards of 10 to 12 passengers, but are not so large as to lose the “boutique” sensibility.

To get a handle on the concept, luxury microcruisers ply specific waters with a full staff, usually have set departures

and can be booked berth by berth. Microcruising also tends towards a more exploratory attitude, avoiding the well-plied waters of the Caribbean and heading instead for out-of-the-way, more adventurous destinations. I think of the best microcruise I ever took, on a 96-berth ship to Antarctica. The boat was only half full. Any larger, and I fear the experience – of getting close to nature that didn’t think of humans as predators, of hearing the awesome silence that defines this great southern wilderness – would have been compromised beyond recognition.

A good example of luxury microcruising exists among one of the trend’s early starters. Launched in 2003, *Tu Moana* and *Ti’a Moana* are two 226ft, 50-berth luxury yachts operating in French Polynesia under Bora Bora Cruises, replete with flatscreen TVs, Philippe Starck-fitted bathrooms and a full-service onboard spa. They sail from Bora Bora to Huahine passing by Taha’a and Raiatea and, thanks to



their manoeuvrability and small draft (7.5ft), both boats can access the shallowest of lagoons – in short, providing about the only way to cruise the region without setting eyes on the heaving ports of Tahiti.

The concept is clearly taking off. Luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent, for example, offers an increasingly active programme in “small ship cruising”. This includes the Bora Bora product off Tahiti (about £3,949 per person for a seven-night cruise package including international flights) as well as two Nile boats – *Sun Boat III* (36 passengers, from £2,221 per person for an 11-night package) and the newly refurbished *Sun Boat IV* (80 passengers, from £1,813 per person for an eight-night package) – as well as *Eclipse*, a 48-berth, 210ft motoryacht that sails the Galápagos with an onboard swimming pool (seven nights from £2,095 per person).

Christopher Wilmot-Sitwell, director of tour operator Cazenove + Loyd, uses the same Galápagos ship (a seven-night cruise costs about £1,800 per person sharing a double cabin): “The concept means you can take advantage of a set departure, and those relatively attractive price implications; you don’t have to get together 10 friends to hire a boat or, if you’re just a couple, pay for an entire charter. Plus a small ship is an awful lot more pleasant and environmentally sensitive; generally, vessels with fewer than 50 cabins don’t make an impact. You just have to see a place like Buzios in Brazil: when a cruise ship comes in, the whole place is swamped. Which is another reason why microcruising tends to work in parts of the world where there’s no real infrastructure, offering unique access to hard-to-reach wildernesses. Getting

PALACE IN WAN

Main picture: *Four Seasons Explorer* at Kuda Huraa in the Maldives. Left: seal-watching off the *Orion* in Antarctica.



DER LAND

away from it all is what people want, which is why I think you'll see the trend keep growing."

Tourist and conservation authorities in the Galápagos have long fostered the microcruise concept because the archipelago of 13 volcanic islands scattered over 23,000 square miles of Pacific Ocean is largely accessible by boat only (hotels are limited to the islands of Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, Floreana and Isabela; only a few land-based tours are available). This is to protect the fauna, for more than 80 per cent of the animals are unique to the islands. Visitors who don't have their own yacht are therefore obliged to take either a private charter or a berth in a small boat with a set departure (due to the fragile eco-systems, big ships are inherently controversial). Because of conservational concerns, itineraries are also more or less prescribed. A seven-night cruise would likely include Floreana, famous for its flamingos; South Plaza, for its yellow land iguanas; and Santa Cruz, where you can see giant tortoises grazing wild in the highlands like sheep in the English countryside. Another hotspot is Española; in April, the world's entire population of waved albatross arrive on the island, leaving again by early December.

I sailed on a boat called *Angelique* – not one at the top end of the market, but a beautiful 210ft brigantine built in Rotterdam in 1895 and renovated several times, the most recent being in 2005. It has riveted hull plates and old wooden decking and sleeps 16 passengers in double bunk-bed cabins with private bathrooms (about £950 per person for eight days including domestic flights, bookable via the Edinburgh-based specialist tour operator Andean Trails). I liked it because I've learned that, personally, I prefer being under sail. The pace is easy, laid-back.

With *Angelique*, I appreciated the essence of a good microcruise: limited guest numbers meant we could take long lunches and snorkel off her sides more or less whenever we wanted (on larger boats, you have to cooperate more fully with the agreed itinerary). I remember the afternoon we dropped anchor off Rábida, one of the smaller Galápagos islands distinguished by its rim of burnt red beaches. Angelfish and sergeant majors slipped

Using the boat as a base, guests can commandeer a Bell 407 helicopter, jet boats, guides and naturalists and go hiking, whale-watching and fishing.

through the water beneath me, flashing yellow, taking sudden flight at a sealion's approach. Hammerheads drew slow circles on the ocean floor, nosing around, and there were manta rays, 16ft across with a soft white underbelly, gliding just beneath the surface of the water.

To experience this without having to be a diver was a modest sort of epiphany: microcruising suited me. It made me realise that you don't have to subscribe to some hardcore liveaboard to enjoy a boating wilderness, nor a giant cruise ship, which I still approach with shameful bigotry at the blue-rinse brigade (a reputation the industry is trying to shake off but, for all these efforts, the idea still fills me with a mild sense of horror).

I think I'm not alone in this pursuit of the relatively affordable, small ship experience. The recent flood in new upscale operations is, indeed, conspicuous, among them Chile's Nomads of the Seas. The mother ship, *Atmosphere*, caters for 28 passengers in high-end cabins, all with private bathrooms and exterior views. There's an onboard spa for massages and thalassotherapy (specialised sea water treatments) and a Swedish sauna. The contemporary Chilean menus have been masterminded by Guillermo Rodriguez, one of the country's better-known chefs, and the wine list displays New World vintages at their grandest. But you can pretty much forget all this as a reason for booking. The crux is the concept, add-ons and the destination. *Atmosphere* cruises southern Chile's Patagonian fjords, inlets, channels, estuaries, islands and islets – vistas incorporate the glaciers and volcanos of the southern Andes – covering over 405 nautical miles from the bay of Puerto Montt to the Taitao Peninsula. Using the boat as a base, guests can commandeer the Bell 407 helicopter, six jet boats, five Zodiacs, guides



Above: bottle-nose dolphins swim near Safari Quest in Mexico's Sea of Cortés. Below: preparing to dive off The Seven Seas in Komodo National Park.

and naturalists, and go hiking, whale-watching and fishing for trout and salmon (one week from about £5,100 per person).

In Europe's more way-out reaches, the Toronto-based luxury tour operator Butterfield & Robinson is launching a new microcruise up the Black Sea Coast. The programme – incorporating Istanbul, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Romania and finishing in the Crimean Peninsula – will start in August 2008 using a 30-passenger yacht, *Callisto* (prices from about £4,300 per person for a nine-day cruise). This same boat – which features 15 air-conditioned state rooms with TVs and DVD players, a teak-furnished sundeck, 16 crew, kayaks and bikes for daily excursions – will also be used by Butterfield for 13 fixed departures in 2007. Destinations include the Dalmatian Coast (about £4,240) and Tunis to Tripoli (about £5,240; all prices per person). "What makes our trips different is the active component – biking or hiking each day in places that are hard to get to," says Graham Lewis, director of Butterfield's yacht programmes. "*Callisto* is small enough to enable this. And unlike big-ship cruising, our guests don't feel herded. We expect it to become a really strong growth area. It answers



a desire for meaningful, out-of-the-ordinary experiences that are difficult to organise on a bespoke basis."

The demand is clearly global. Seattle-based American Safari Cruises continues to expand its offering; for 2007, it will operate three high-end yachts (*Safari Quest* is pictured above), carrying from 12 to 21 guests, in Alaska's Inside Passage (seven to 14 nights from about £2,755), Mexico's Sea of Cortés (nine nights, about £2,950), the Pacific Northwest's Columbia and Snake Rivers (eight nights, about £2,100), and the islands and fjords off the coast of Washington and British Columbia (seven nights, about £1,700; all prices per person).

And Antarctica is booming. Of the small ship specialists sailing this region, among the most luxurious is *Orion* (pictured on opening page). It launched in 2003 and features 31 suites, 22 state rooms and 75 staff – with a maximum of 106 passengers. From December to February, *Orion* cruises the Southern Ocean from Hobart or New Zealand (18 nights cost from about

£7,000 per person based on double occupancy).

Scotland is also on the up. The old favourite, and chartered by Queen Elizabeth for her 80th birthday, is the 49-guest *Hebridean Princess* (about £4,000 per person for a seven-night cruise on the west coast). Launching this May is the new *Fyne Spirit*, a 112ft boat for 12 guests (in single or double beds) that's small enough to get through the Caledonian Canal and into Loch Ness (about £2,150 per person for a one-week classic tour). Certainly, cold-weather cruising is not to be sniffed at. In Iceland, Borea Adventures has launched regular departures aboard the new

12-berth, 60ft *Aurora* (about £1,025 for a five-night cruise). Itineraries explore Iceland's little-inhabited West Fjords, incorporating sailing, sea kayaking, snorkelling, mountain biking, wildlife watching and glacier walking. Many of the areas visited are only accessible by boat or on foot. The wildlife includes Arctic foxes, sea eagles and whales, as well as millions of seabirds viewable at two of the biggest bird cliffs in the North Atlantic.

Meanwhile, back in eastern Indonesia, Mark Heighes (Heighes was the onboard tour director who took me around Sumba and Sumbawa), has started a new company, The Seven Seas, which recently launched a new eponymous liveaboard: a 108ft long schooner (pictured below left), suitable for up to 16 passengers in eight luxury cabins with air conditioning, a covered rear cruising deck and 14 crew (about £150 per person per night, discounts available for groups and full charters). Sure, most of the people who take *The Seven Seas* are going to be divers – the boat is kitted out with state-of-the-art gear – but then diving is also one of microcruising's main inspirations. For the ultimate example, look at the Four Seasons Explorer in the Maldives (pictured on previous page, about £900 for a three-night cruise) – a high-luxe, 128ft, 22-guest, three-deck catamaran with modern dive equipment as well as super-chic, contemporary cabins by Kathryn Kng, a rising star in Asia's interior design world.

So the trend is here, even if it's just the beginning. Will Jones, managing director of Africa specialist Journeys by Design, is keen to pursue it on the East African coast. "I can already see the concept being toyed with but, right now, the reconverted dhows with regular departures simply aren't quite up to it. If they can get the luxury aspect right, it would be the perfect add-on to the safari experience. Travelling under sail you could get the old Arab trade wind feeling. You could anchor offshore at some of the region's exceptional private islands – Mnemba, say, or Vamizi off Mozambique – and cruise around Zanzibar, Lamu and the Kiwayu archipelago. The potential is just massive."

But for now, if it's East Africa you're after, you'll have to "make do" with chartering Richard Leakey's private catamaran with its state-of-the-art Bose music system – available through Journeys by Design for £11,500 a week for four. ♦

THEY GET AROUND

Abercrombie & Kent, 0845-0700 600; www.abercrombiekent.co.uk. **American Safari Cruises**, 001888-862 8881; www.amsafari.com. **Andean Trails**, 0131-467 7086; www.andeantrails.co.uk. **Cazenove & Loyd**, 020-7384 2332; www.cazloyd.com. **Bora Bora Cruises**, 00336-8888 4055; www.boraboracruises.com. **Borea Adventures**, 00354-869 7557; www.boreaadventures.com. **Butterfield & Robinson**, 001416-864 1354; www.butterfield.com. **Four Seasons Explorer Maldives**, 0096-0664 4888; www.fourseasons.com/maldives. **Fyne Cruises**, 07962-261 911; www.fyne-cruises.com. **Hebridean Cruises**, 01756-704 704; www.hebridean.co.uk. **Journeys by Design**, 01273-623 790; www.journeysbydesign.co.uk. **Nomads of the Seas**, 00562-414 4600; www.nomadsoftheseas.com. **Orion Expedition Cruises**, 00612-9033 8700; www.orioncruises.com.au. **The Seven Seas**, 0062361-750 129; www.thesevenseas.net.