

STATE OF GRACE

Some of the world's finest small cruises echo the personalities of their owners. A wedding gift from Aristotle Onassis to Princess Grace of Monaco, the *Grace* stands to be the most elegant ship to cruise the Galapagos Islands

WORDS BY MICHELLE V. AYUYAO

THE IDEA OF traveling on a cruise has always intimidated me. For one, there's that Titanic story. Then there's the fact that these liners resemble Lego block buildings skimming the ocean surface (along with that, thoughts of it losing its center of gravity and toppling over). I like my hotels planted on cold, hard ground, thanks. "Small cruises then," travel specialist Steph Wetherell tells me, as we dive into a discussion of traveling the Galapagos Islands. I'm not out to plan my lack of millions on a trip of a lifetime, but she has me intrigued. Wetherell is part of A2A Safaris (Lapanday Center, 2263 Pasong Tamo Ext., Makati, 952-7414; a2asafaris.com), the



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BEYOND THE SEA
Top: Prince Rainier and Princess Grace aboard their yacht, a wedding gift from Greek tycoon Ari Onassis, in April 1963. The couple honeymooned aboard the boat—which they christened Deo Juventa II—along the coasts of Corsica and Sardinia. Above: The sundeck has a bar and plenty of space to be in the open air. Opposite: Guests can also relax in the front of the boat where the jacuzzi and sun chairs are located.

group responsible for introducing African safaris to Asia—this year, A2A lists Latin America and Antarctica in their travel arsenal. Close to 200 years since Charles Darwin went into detail about natural selection, the Galapagos Islands seem to be *the place to be*, and exploring it via small liners is just the way to do it. An A2A favorite for exploring the wildlife of the islands is the *M/Y Grace*, named after its original owner,

PHOTO BY BATES LITTLEHALES/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES

Cross Continental

Following the success of their African safaris, A2A introduces bespoke journeys through Latin America and Antarctica. Travel specialist Steph Wetherell brings us up to speed



Which regions are your areas of expertise?
We are specialists and have deep expertise in six destinations within Latin America: Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands, as well as Antarctica. They are all great destinations, but if I had to pick one to highlight, I would choose Ecuador and the Galapagos.

If there was just one thing you recommend, what would that activity be?
That is a hard one—there is so much diversity in Ecuador! The Galapagos Islands are spectacular though and a seven-night cruise aboard the *Grace* is an unforgettable experience. For Antarctica, I'd recommend you give yourself a little more time. This is the ultimate once in a lifetime experience, a completely uninhabited continent where you will see spectacular scenery all around as well as some amazing wildlife, including penguins, seals, Mike and Humpback Whales, and even Orcas.

Why did A2A take on Latin America?
Many of our clients in Asia have told us they wanted to continue to go to new exotic destinations with us, and that has very much encouraged us to diversify. Much like Africa, we feel that Latin America is a destination which requires specialist and expert knowledge to ensure the highest quality journey and experience. Travel distance, language barriers, and the sheer size of the continent might put people off as they don't know where to start, but with our deep knowledge of the region we can plan trips to suit people's interest, timeframe, and budget.

Being a travel specialist, you've had your share of unforgettable experiences. Can you share a few that you've encountered?
Access to the famous ruins at Chichen Itza, Mexico before they were open to the public, private candlelit dinners at the foot of a Mayan temple, surprise picnics set up by the guides in Torres del Paine National Park in Chile, meeting one of the surviving members of the original Buena Vista Social Club in Cuba. But it is often the small touches which make a place unforgettable to me—like a guide noticing I like Diet Coke and dutifully carrying one four hours up a mountain for me because he knew I would probably want one when we got to the top!

Visit A2A Safaris (952-7414; a2asafaris.com/journeys) at Unit 10B, Lapanday Center, 2263 Pasong Tamo Ext., Makati.