



**EYE TO EYE WITH
A LEVIATHAN**
An elite encounter
in Dominica.

FORTUNE • THE BRIEF

23

PASSIONS
**EXPLORING
LUXURY'S WILD SIDE**
BY ADAM ERACE

▶ **GABRIEL ARMOUR** stands on the aft of the sleek teak-and-leather tender and gets right to the point: “I’m big, I’m bad, and I’m ready for action!”

The bachelor sperm whales visiting the Caribbean island of Dominica don’t speak—at least not in the way humans understand speech. But Armour, who grew up swimming alongside these creatures and works for local

outfitter Diving With Giants, is doing his best translation of their cetacean courting calls. The crew unties our smaller transport boat from the \$100 million superyacht, *Solace*, and Armour pops on his sunglasses: “Who’s

ready for daddy?”

On the small craft zip-ping across the choppy sea, I imagine what’s happening under the waves. The deep waters close to shore create a safe calving ground for pregnant mother whales, with an

abundant buffet of giant squid the size of Mini Coopers. I ask Armour the depth. “Fifteen hundred meters,” he replies: nearly 5,000 feet. I’m ready neither for daddy, nor to swim in that.

Adrenaline doesn’t care what you’re ready for. “Let’s go! Let’s go!” someone shouts from the front of the tender. “Group two in the water—*now!*” I mash my feet into fins, strap on a mask, and plop into the two-foot swells behind Armour.

Science-based ecotourism has traditionally been a more rugged affair, often involving backpacks, hammocks, and sturdy hiking boots. Lately, the sector has attracted a different kind of well-to-do do-gooder: As the pandemic and climate crisis have turbocharged a don’t-delay mentality among eco-curious travelers, high-end adventure companies have found themselves busy.

If you drew a Venn diagram with circles for absurd luxury, rarefied access, scientific enlightenment, and philanthropic conservation, EYOS Expeditions, charterer of the 187-foot *Solace*, would occupy the intersection. “People that travel with us are inherently curious about the world,” CEO Ben Lyons told me over dinner the night before our Dominica expedition. (The experience and yacht are offered at \$395,000 per week, but Lyons was hosting me as a journalist.) “Given the incredibly fortunate positions



our clients find themselves in, they want to do something to give back.”

The kind of experience these companies curate manages to be sumptuously luxe and transformatively meaningful—and offers plenty of swashbuckling tales to tell. But it is not the kind of vainglorious folly that sends celebrities into space or ends up with a submersible imploding on the seafloor. Instead, it could be a naturalist-led meet-and-greet with resident giant tortoises at the Waldorf Astoria Platte Island in the Seychelles, or a research expedition with polar scientists aboard Ponant’s luxe icebreaker.

At Islas Secas, a Panamanian private-island resort that hosts speakers from National Geographic and the National Audubon Society, I met Henry Cookson of Cookson Adventures, an OG operator in this space that plans trips

starting at \$150,000. In 2022, he told me, he sent a group of clients to participate in the translocation of 14 rhinos with the Kenya Wildlife Service. “You’re in the thick of it: the dust, the smell, the urgency,” he said. “Everyone has a role, from being in the helicopter with the sharpshooter to pouring water over the rhino’s head to keep it cool.” It’s a far cry from passively observing wildlife from a safari Jeep, he said: “The ultimate bragging right is putting a thermometer up a rhino’s ass.”

It would be naive to ignore the tension between conservation and conspicuous consumption, and companies have tried to reckon with that thorny issue. Cookson calculates carbon offset into its pricing, and London outfitter Journeys With Purpose (JWP), which is taking a group to Norway in July in partnership

with Polar Bears International, includes a mandatory, percentage-based donation to conservation efforts. Many clients on JWP’s trips—which start at \$17,000 per person—donate more.

The idea behind this kind of tourism is that it can help fund conservation, while inspiring wealthy and powerful people to deepen their engagement in environmental activism. “We want to open the doors for people who have a sense of advocacy, people that are going to pull big levers,” JWP’s managing director Venetia Martin explained. “It’s not until we emotionally engage with a place that we become motivated to protect it.”

EYOS is also part of Yachts for Science, a nonprofit Lyons described as “playing Tinder between scientists and yachts”—allowing researchers to use the boats when clients



aren't on board. Later this year, *Solace* will host cetologists monitoring the humpback population in the Dominican Republic.

What these companies offer are high-access, singular experiences that would be hard to replicate. A close encounter with a sperm whale, for example, could never be offered in mass-market tourism. Dominica has designated 300 square miles of marine reserve as off-limits to humans, and leaves open the slimmest keyhole for tourists to swim with the mammals. A tightly regulated permit costs 16,000 Eastern Caribbean dollars (currently \$5,900) for a maximum of three swimmers, with a guide. A fisheries department official tells me, "We aim to limit the permits to three per day." Sperm whale permits in Dominica generate around \$6.5 million a year to fund marine conserva-

▲ **GILDED VOYAGE**
Guide Gabriel Armour and the EYOS-chartered superyacht *Solace*.

tion programs.

Dominica's legislation was inspired by Rwanda's gorilla trekking permits, which are capped at 96 per day. The revenues from the \$1,500 permits have been a boon for Rwanda, but have also pushed travelers into less expensive, more permissive markets such as Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

When it comes to sperm whales, there is no discount Dominica. The island, which is composed of nine jungle-clad volcanoes, has the world's only year-round population of sperm whales, owing to its unusual seafloor topography. "It's like a mirror of the island, upside down," Armour said on the tender, rotating his hand 180 degrees.

On the surface of that aquatic upside-down, we're swimming toward two juvenile sperm whales that are drifting about 40 yards off the tender's starboard bow. By law, the boat cannot chase or follow the animals; swimming with whales in Dominica means swimming *to* whales. No life jackets, no lead lines, just your guide and open water, of which I take a mouthful. (As a former lifeguard—in *New Jersey*—I had pooh-pooed a snorkel. How nature humbles us.)

Armour hooks my arm, and the panic abates. I dip my head below the surface to find a 45-foot-long sperm whale 10 yards away. He's a slate-gray submarine in a field of saturated blue. I catch his eye. The look lasts maybe a second, but it's enough.

For all the planning, permits, and polished teak, it's ultimately the whale who sets the terms of the experience—which turns out to be the most expensive way imaginable to feel very, very small. ■

ITINERARY

THE GUIDES TURNING CONSERVATION INTO LUXURY ADVENTURE

EYOS EXPEDITIONS

Beyond Dominica, EYOS brings its richly detailed and educational expedition programming to the Arctic, Madagascar, and more on ultra-luxurious yachts.

JOURNEYS WITH PURPOSE

Under the "Seven Worlds, One Planet" banner, small groups visit a different biome on each continent, from India's Himalayas to the "European Yellowstone" of Romania.

KENSINGTON TOURS

The expedition arm of this legacy London outfit recently negotiated access to Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park through a chiropterologist (bat scientist) and hired an Italian naval master to bring a submarine into a Sicilian marine preserve.

COOKSON ADVENTURES

Geotag giant tortoises while swimming in the Galápagos, discover shipwrecks while seafloor mapping, glamp on Yemen's otherworldly Socotra island, and more.

