

Whatever floats your boat...

It's not enough for boutique hotels to have spas and Michelin-star restaurants. They need a yacht too. Welcome to the new floating hideaways. By Lisa Grainger



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Barbinis' sleek 74ft catamaran, Blue Deer
PAMU

Like the Thottrups, the owners of *Blue Deer*, Stefano and Giorgia Barbini, didn't intend to be hoteliers either — or to have a boat. Fed up with the fashion world, after decades at Escada, they started to take paying guests in their Dolomites home. Two years ago, having made the San Lorenzo Mountain Lodge into one of the most luxurious hosted mountain villas in Italy, they felt it would be wonderful to expand to somewhere by the sea. There was a hitch, though. They thought beach holidays were boring. "I don't want to go to the sea and look at it," says Stefano, as he drives me from Rome airport to the sea. "I want to be out exploring it."

When Stefano's father-in-law — who runs the fashion company Brioni — asked Stefano to accompany him to a shipyard where he was having a catamaran built, the penny dropped. "I phoned Giorgia and said, 'We have our new hotel. It's a boat.'"

Today, *Blue Deer* is one of only seven 74ft catamarans in the world, and the only one of its class to be run as a private floating hotel. Like *Satori* it is available for charter by groups of up to eight guests. But while *Satori* is a classic yacht, *Blue Deer* is the Armani of the boat world, with its sleek white lines and sails, contemporary, clean-lined white cabins and acres of space. Like the couple's Mountain Lodge, the decor is stylish and sympathetic to its environment. The kitchen is adorned with pots of living herbs, an integral part of the traditional meals made by the Puglian chef Paolo (which may include sea urchin spaghetti and dark chocolate fondant). At night the tables are laid with elegant white Italian crockery and glassware, and silver lanterns are lit on the wooden deck. There are even concealed televisions in the bedrooms.



Scuba diving from *Blue Deer*
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Of course, what makes *Blue Deer* special is that it can go pretty much anywhere guests want from its moorings in the pretty town of Gaeta, on the coast between Naples and Rome. At present the Barbinis have routes in three suggested areas — the volcanic Aeolian islands, the north coast of Sardinia (away from the crowded south) and the Pontine islands (north of Capri). Each of them, Stefano says, is not just charming, but also — discounting August — incredibly quiet. “You can see Italy as it used to be,” he says. “You can find fishermen who still talk in a dialect hardly anyone understands, learn to pick capers, taste wine from vineyards that don’t sell anywhere else and, of course, eat the best mozzarella in the world.”

In two days, sailing with him and his crew to the islands of Ponza and Palmarola, we see a little-visited region of Italy in almost total privacy. At night we moor in quiet bays walled by dramatic volcanic cliffs, dine under the moon on seafood pasta and fine south Italian wine and fall asleep to the lap of the waves. By day we use the boat's dinghy to get to tiny pastel-painted villages where water is still caught in Roman cisterns, to explore massive stone arches and caves, and to swim in clear blue waters with not another person in sight.

“There is nothing as wonderful as sailing,” Stefano says. “How else can you enjoy the world in almost total silence — and privacy — and go where you want, when you want? Hotels are great. But boats are even better.”

Blue Deer costs from
€36,500 a week, plus an additional 20 per cent for food, fuel and VAT
(sanlorenzolodges.com)