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PLUS: THE WORLD'S GREATEST NATURAL WONDERS – AND HOW TO SPOT THEM FROM YOUR YACHT





THE GREATEST SHOWS ON EARTH

From red seas to underwater waterfalls, the natural world is capable of amazing displays – with many best viewed from on board. *Olivia Michel* picks the greatest, with charters to get the adventure started

Boats have historically had a front-row seat to witnessing natural phenomena. Christopher Columbus was one of the first to document glowing fireworms in the sea aboard the *Santa Maria* in 1492. Captain Cook's crew first reported of a "phenomenon in the heavens", the southern lights, from HMS *Endeavour* in 1770. St Elmo's fire, an electrostatic discharge caused by certain weather conditions, has long been associated with sailors. Astronomical events, spectacular geographies, inexplicable animal behaviour and wild weather have throughout time presented themselves in full splendour to those at sea.

Today's new explorer-capable superyachts, and the mobility, flexibility and state-of-the-art technology that comes with them, offer the best views of these natural wonders. And it's a trend that's catching on, with an increasing number of owners investing in superyachts that can take them to the far-flung destinations where such phenomena occur – BOATPro data shows there are currently 56 expedition-classed superyachts scheduled for delivery in 2023.

Jimmy Carroll, co-founder of luxury adventure company Pelorus, believes the last few years have made people want to explore further afield. "I think, after lockdown, people realised that the natural world itself is just an incredible, beautiful place."



REACH FOR THE STARS

Awe-inspiring events occur in nature all the time, but astronomic occurrences are among the most spectacular. "Today, I would say we are in the golden era of astronomy," says Gerhard Hüdepohl, an astro-photographer and former engineer at one of the world's largest telescopes at the European Southern Observatory in Chile. He credits the publication of advanced imagery by the Hubble and James Webb Space Telescopes, as well as the recent first image of a black hole, for encouraging greater interest in night sky observation.

Being aboard a private superyacht not only offers greater access to dark sky territories – areas on the planet untainted by light pollution – but also unobstructed views of the horizon. And when considering the best spot to do this, Hüdepohl notes that "the southern sky is more exciting".

"In the southern hemisphere, you are looking towards the centre of our Milky Way, so the density of stars is much greater. You can also see the Magellanic Clouds (the two dwarf galaxies orbiting the Milky Way) with your naked eye, which cannot be observed in the northern hemisphere," he explains.



Tasmania:
Mes Amis
44m
Guests 10

cecillwright.com



Above: a double display of the Southern Lights on the horizon and bioluminescence in the water

The aurora australis is another reason why the southern skies spark interest. Just like the Northern Lights, this phenomenon occurs when electrically charged solar particles collide with oxygen and nitrogen atoms in the earth's atmosphere. "The Southern Lights are not that well known," says Jasper Sigon, co-founder of Voyages & Journeys. He notes that while the colours produced can be even more vibrant, they are "much more elusive than their northern hemisphere counterpart".

The best places to witness them, he says, are around Hobart and Bruny Island in Tasmania between May and August or during the September equinox (when the northern and southern hemispheres experience roughly the same amount of daytime) – and even as far as the Antarctic continent at 70 degrees south where there is significantly less land mass. "This is why we love to carry out this experience by yacht," explains Sigon, adding that his choice of charter yacht for clients is 39-metre *The Beast*, which he describes as "the ultimate yacht to chase the lights."



Dark sky territories, best for night sky observation, are easily accessible by yacht

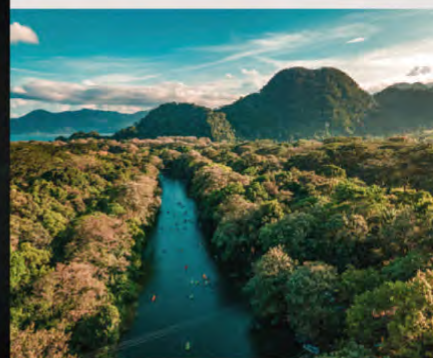


ONCE IN A BLUE MOON

Lunar eclipses are also high up on any wannabe astronomer's to-see list. "One of the great things about being on a yacht is that you're mobile; we can position ourselves to best take advantage of the atmosphere and the conditions," says EYOS Expeditions' guide Mike Moore. "You can also watch the effect on the water, the reflections in the atmosphere and you've got a much broader expanse of what you can see."

Voyages & Journeys is planning a trip around the upcoming total lunar eclipse (or blood moon) on 14 March 2025, suggesting the 77-metre explorer yacht *La Datcha* as the perfect vessel to travel to the eclipse's prime viewing point: the Gulf of Alaska.

Not willing to wait until 2025? There will be a few eclipses this year, including an annular eclipse on 14 October. For this, Pelorus will be using superyachts to access remote islands in



Clockwise from
top right: Glacier
Bay, Alaska;
Honduras; Raja
Ampat; Papua
New Guinea;
the 33m Phinisi
Leyla; an
annular eclipse

Honduras, Guatemala, Panama and Belize for photography masterclasses with assistance from Hüdopohl.

Eclipse-themed charters are also a high priority on Black Tomato's agenda, most recently to Raja Ampat – a destination which Carolyn Addison, Black Tomato's head of product, describes as "a treasure trove of natural wonders". The Indonesian Archipelago is home to the world's most biodiverse marine ecosystem and eclipses are best seen from aboard a traditional Phinisi boat in this remote locale.

Out of all the different types of eclipses – including total, annular (where the moon covers the sun's centre) and partial – Hüdopohl attests that a total solar eclipse is the most spectacular thing he's seen, especially when watching the animals near the coastlines. "The birds will stop singing and cows in fields will lie down because they think it is night time," he explains.



**Honduras/
Guatemala/
Panama:**

Madsummer

95m **Guests 12**
moranyachts.com



**Rajat Ampat:
Samata**

42m
Guests 10
fraseryachts.com



The perfectly round Great Blue Hole in Belize is just over 300 metres in diameter. Below: yacht Teleost



MIGHTY MIGRATIONS

Eclipses are not the only time when marine life might display weird and wondrous reactions. Spring full moons are also known to affect the behaviour of the giants of the sea, whale sharks, which congregate close to the underwater wonder of the Belize Great Blue Hole in Central America. The 125-metre-deep sinkhole 70 kilometres from the mainland formed in the Ice Age when rising seawaters flooded a cave system. "Whale sharks are typically deep dwellers, but they come [to the surface] to feed when mutton and dog snapper fish are spawning in the area," says Pelorus's head of yachting Elise Ciappara. "We encountered them when I was on board 49-metre Teleost."

Using snorkelling and scuba kit from a superyacht toybox, descending in a submersible or jumping into the blue hole from



Tonga:
Driftwood
55m
Guests 12
y.co



The world's largest fish is surprisingly docile around divers

a low-flying helicopter are unique ways to witness them. "They were fairly inquisitive and we were able to snorkel with several," says Ciappara. "You can feel slightly intimidated when you realise the size of the whale sharks, but with the right team it's easy."

Humpback whales also display impressive migratory behaviours, with the Pacific islands of Tonga remaining one of the best places to see them, according to the captain of 37-metre charter yacht *Dardanella*. It is estimated that about 700 whales journey to various parts of the kingdom in June each year, returning to Antarctic waters around November.

"The Tongan islands are insane, truly incredible for that, because every year the females come up there to raise their young," says the captain. "If you're sailing through there at the right time, you might see between five or 20 whales. They're very calm; they come there for safety so they're easily approachable."

This region also has a much higher occurrence of the natural phenomenon of bioluminescence, says *Dardanella's* captain, who has travelled extensively throughout the South Pacific - although EYOS co-founder Tim Soper has witnessed "the natural firework display" south of Portugal as well. This sparkly blue glow comes from an accumulation of marine organisms or algae that emit light when disturbed by a wave or a ship's wake. At times, dense toxic blooms of a certain organism can occur, turning the ocean red in the daytime. This is often known as a red tide.



BEAR NECESSITIES

Another animal behaviour best observed from on board is the springtime emergence of polar bear cubs from their dens in the Arctic Circle. Each May, the youngsters follow their mothers out toward the coastal sea ice, where she can teach them to hunt seals. Known to actively hunt humans, these ferocious creatures are a thrill to watch. Andy Marsh, co-founder of Secret Atlas, recommends witnessing them in Svalbard, a rugged, remote Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic – and staying there for at least 10 days to ensure greater success of sightings.

The last time Marsh saw a cub on its first walkabout was in May 2022 aboard 46.5-metre *Explorer*, approximately four hours out from the port of Longyearbyen. “We saw a mother and cub on the edge of the fjord ice, and then a male bear started to challenge them. It felt like a scene from a nature film. We were there for ages watching this unfold.”

Marsh employs expedition vessels and superyachts for such excursions. To get even closer, Marsh recommends deploying a Zodiac Milpro MK 5 inflatable boat – but remembering to stay at least 200 metres away and turn off engines for minimal disturbance. “Zodiacs allow us to travel to a wildlife sighting at a fast speed, explore shallow waters and switch off the engine in a split second,” explains Marsh. “On land, if you see a polar bear, you have to evacuate immediately.” In a Zodiac, however, “You’re safer. And bears don’t tend to attack in the water.”

In the Great Bear Rainforest of Canadian British Columbia, superyachts have also become a key component for tracking down the spirit bear, one of the rarest mammals in the world. These mutated black bears are born with white fur and are



The best way to observe polar bears is from the water – on land they can run at 40km/h



Secret Atlas favours the smaller Svalbard over Greenland for spotting polar bears. Below right: a spirit bear



Arctic Circle:
Nansen Explorer
72m
Guests 12
eyos.com



British Columbia:
Komokwa
41.1m
Guests 12
fraseryachts.com

sacred to the indigenous people living in the area – as legend goes the Raven (creator of the world) turned every 10th bear white to remind people of when glaciers covered the land. Their equally shy neighbours, the Vancouver coastal sea wolves, are also revered and every autumn both animals are lured outside of the forest to the rivers to feast on sockeye salmon, which spawn there.

Operating helicopters is a challenge in this region. “A boat allows us to venture deep into the maze of waterways, dramatically increasing our chances of experiencing memorable encounters with the bears,” says William Siddeley, senior concept designer at Cookson Adventures.

For this fjordic expedition, Cookson sails the 34.6-metre classic *Pacific Yellowfin* south along the coast from Kitimat to Bella Bella. Siddeley recommends at least five nights on board to ensure a sighting, noting that “guests are very likely to encounter bears over one to two days of the trip”. He adds that “the wolves are harder to track and more mobile, but at least one sighting of a pack”, can be expected during this period. Even if you don’t get lucky, this region is not short of incredible wildlife. “From orcas and sea lions to giant eagles, guests are surrounded by a thriving and biodiverse ecosystem,” assures Siddeley.



BEST BY BOAT

Some illusions and natural phenomena can occur all around the world – and sailors typically enjoy the best views of these

Fata Morgana The mirage caused by light rays bending as they pass through different temperature air layers appears as a distant floating city or ship, hovering upright or inverted above the horizon. Historically seen in the Strait of Messina, this optical illusion is named after the Arthurian sorceress Morgan Le Fay.



The green flash When the air is stable and clear during sunrise or sunset, the earth’s atmosphere can cause sunlight to refract into different frequencies. This creates a green light at the horizon, momentarily colouring the surrounding waters emerald. This mirage can be viewed from any body of water in the world.



Waterspouts This tornado-like column of fast-moving wind that spins over bodies of water descends from cumulus clouds when the air above is much warmer than the water below. It is common in tropical climates and is rarely as dangerous as a tornado, but captains are advised to head away at a 90-degree angle.



Ice eggs In rare occurrences, ice eggs can accumulate on beaches during freezing weather. They are caused by the wind and currents rolling over small pieces of sea ice in open water, turning each one into an almost perfect sphere of between 10cm and one metre across.





Left: ice calving in Svalbard. The dramatic show of nature comes with an equally powerful sound. Right: the underwater waterfall of Mauritius



SPECTACULAR SCENERY

Experts like Siddeley and Secret Atlas' Marsh encourage travelling to places where the natural phenomena extend to the geography, in order to mitigate disappointment for guests when other aspects of nature won't play ball.

"Go to Svalbard because it's an amazing location, not just because of the polar bears," Marsh advises. Summertime in the Arctic is characterised by the spectacular midnight sun, as well as ice calving – the breaking off of icebergs from retreating glaciers. The booming cracks and thunder as the ice slams into the sea, Marsh says, is "a really dramatic thing to witness".

They can also create powerful waves. Glaciologist Julian Dowdeswell says that major calving events might cause "a mini tsunami", but "if you're in a ship in the middle of a fjord, you don't tend to feel that very much." For safety, official guidelines by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators specify yachts stay 200 to 300 metres away from the glaciers.

Dowdeswell says the most frequent ice calving happens in Antarctica, Alaska, the Arctic and Chile during their summer months, pinpointing the Monacobreen, Hansbreen and Lilliehöökreen glaciers in Svalbard and Pia glacier in Chile as key areas. "If you're around for a week, the chances of you seeing something is quite reasonable there. But they're still not completely commonplace. If you're by a tidewater glacier, you could sit there for days and not see anything. And then all of sudden you'll hear a rumble and then you'll see a very spectacular collapse of the ice wall."



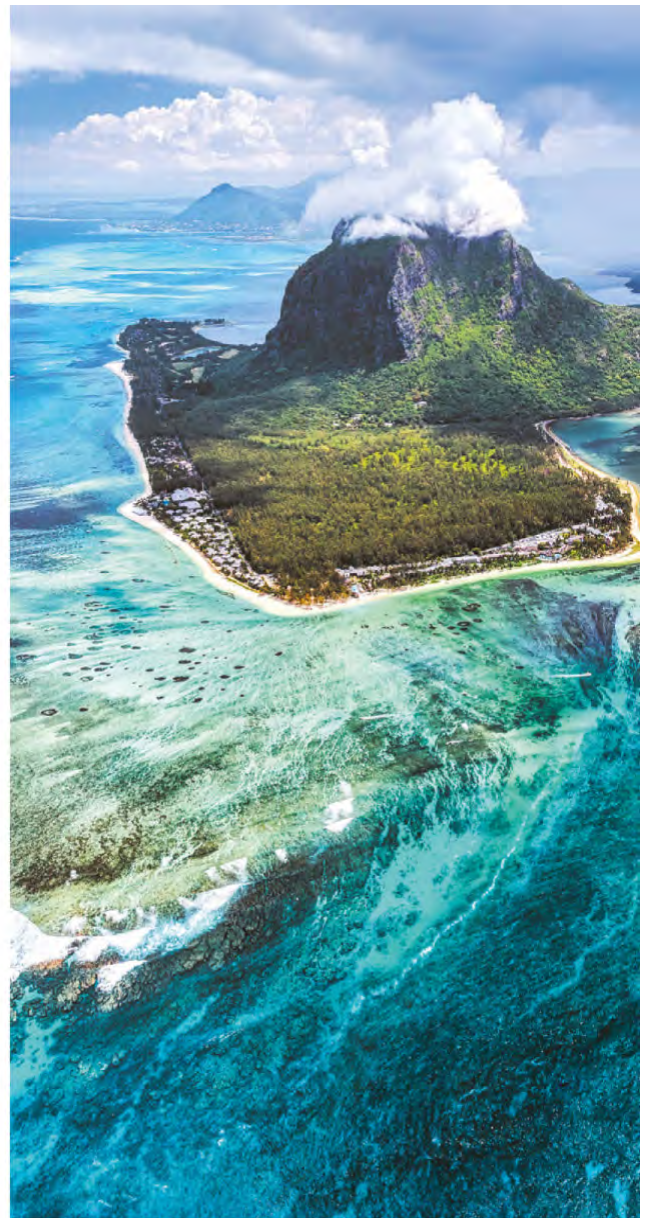
Chile:

Tranquility

91.5m

Guests 22

camperand
nicholson.com



WATERY ILLUSIONS

Geographic phenomena are, of course, not relegated to the polar extremes. Off the coast of Le Morne Brabant in southern Mauritius lies an underwater waterfall. Created by perpetual shifting sands off the edge of a submarine plateau into an abyssal drop of 4,000 metres, the crystal-clear waters create an optical illusion that emulates a crescent-shaped waterfall under the surface. Black Tomato has orchestrated boat and dive tours to the site, but "it is through the aerial perspective that you can best appreciate the illusion with maximum impact", says Addison, recommending a flight from your superyacht helipad to best enjoy this view.

From an underwater waterfall to the magnificent horizontal waterfalls of the Kimberley region in Western Australia.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MIKE MOORE/EYOS EXPEDITIONS; GERHARD HÜDEPÖHL; FIDEVPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES; CAMPER AND NICHOLSON; NICOLAS CLARIS; MAPS: FREEFORMAPS.COM


Mauritius:
Guillemot

43m

Guests 10

 camperand
nicholsons.com

Kimberley, WA:
Princess Iluka

34.5m

Guests 10

iyc.com



This daily spectacle is caused by fast-moving tides pouring through the narrow gorges of the McLarty Range in Talbot Bay, creating the illusion that the water is actually falling horizontally.

EYOS's Moore suggests the best way to view this is to anchor off the bay and take a Zodiac towards the falls for closer observation. "When you time it right, you can take Zodiacs through, and you can be going full speed and the water is just piling up against you. It's really incredible," he says. "Seeing it from the air, you'll just see a bit of white water. But if you're actually faced with the tidal bore, seeing the power of the water gushing through these narrow constrictions, there's no comparison." He adds that the waves become "more dramatic" depending on the phase of the moon each month.

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Above: Mount Yasur in Vanuatu is an easily accessible active volcano

Tanna Island, Vanuatu



NATURE'S FIREWORKS

In Oceania, volcanic activity is also prevalent. Moore attests that the best volcanoes are east of northern Australia, "particularly Mount Yasur on Tanna Island is amazing".

The volcano here has been erupting continuously for hundreds of years, and boats are able to get the best views by approaching close to the rim. Though there is an airport on the island to get visitors onto the volcano, Moore explains that "Like being at the base of a skyscraper, if you are standing too close on the coast, one cannot see the top. The views are better from the perspective at sea, and the red glow from the volcano often reflects on the clouds above it, creating an amazing sight."

But while travel experts can employ their expertise and the advice of scientists to plan meticulously for spectacular shows of nature, each attests that managing clients' and owners' expectations is vital for a positive experience. Cookson's Siddeley stresses that "patience is key" for observances of natural phenomena, but notes that quiet moments spent waiting and listening in expectation can still be "a deeply relaxing and immersive experience".

Sometimes, nature's whims will simply not play to the crowd, but, according to Moore, this risk is part of what makes the experience so exciting. "The ephemeral nature of natural phenomena is what makes it so special – it's like gambling," he says. "You can plan exhaustively, but all of the conditions have to conspire with you, and that's when you have these moments of pure magic." ▢



Left and above left: the Kimberley region's horizontal and vertical waterfalls

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