



Europe. This new vessel, along with its sibling ship, *Emerald Azzurra*, which debuted in 2021, are meant to bridge the gap between a six-figure superyacht experience and a more traditional oceangoing cruise. Being sleek and small is fundamental to the concept: throughout the eight days we spent on board, traveling from San Juan to Antigua, my wife and I felt like the ultimate insiders. “Our” yacht ducked into coveted ports such as Jost Van Dyke, in the BVI, and St. Bart’s, where we anchored just a few hundred feet away from *Whisper*, the yacht owned by Eric Schmidt, the former executive chairman of Alphabet. (A few days later, off St. Kitts, we spotted *Rising Sun*, which is owned by music mogul and film producer David Geffen.)

As we island-hopped from San Juan, we quickly got to know our fellow passengers—many of whom told us they were wary of big-ship cruising but delighted by the *Sakara*. The enthusiastic crew seemed just as interested as we were in hiking, snorkeling, and paddling around places like St. John, in the USVI, or Vieques, off the coast of Puerto Rico.

The sense of discovery continued in St. John, where my wife and I joined a group of about a dozen passengers for a hike along the craggy coast of the island, much of which is part of Virgin Islands National Park. After about half an hour on a dusty trail, we spilled out of a scrubby forest onto a beach worthy of a Corona commercial; aside from one guy napping in the shade of a palm, we were the only people there. After slipping on some goggles, we dove into the dead-flat sea, chasing after colorful fish.

Our stop in St. Bart’s was another highlight. Emerald had arranged a small-group tour with Ernest Magras, the sort of effortlessly chic guide you always dream of meeting, but rarely do. As he drove six of us around the island, stopping for photos every so often, he’d sprinkle in memories of his family, who first arrived on these shores in 1725, and would tell stories of how this small French protectorate became a global byword for beachy glitz.

Before bidding us farewell, Magras took us to the Domaine Félicité, in Gustavia, the capital. It’s one of those house museums you might walk right past if you didn’t know what treasures lay within. It’s filled with archival photos of the island, including one memorable snapshot of Eden Rock—St. Barths, back when the resort was just a tiny hideaway. On another wall, Magras pointed to a detailed family tree that went back centuries. There, he indicated, was his own name, slipped just so between the generations. It was another moment that felt like the perfect fit, when our small group was let in on something special.

*Eight-day Caribbean trips with Emerald Cruises from \$3,795 per person.*



*The riverfront of Mompox, Colombia.*

## BEYOND CARTAGENA

Innovative operators are opening up river-ship itineraries in the alluring heart of Colombia. **By Nora Walsh**

THE NOBEL PRIZE-winning novelist Gabriel García Márquez once described the Magdalena River, which runs from the Andes Mountains to the Caribbean Sea, as the “River of Life.” For centuries, it was one of Colombia’s main transportation arteries, connecting Spanish colonial towns such as Calamar, Mompox, and San Basilio de Palenque to the port of Barranquilla and the wider world.

“But when the railways and roads were built, these towns lost significance and were somewhat forgotten,” says Boris Seckovic, the cofounder of Amakuna Travel and a Colombia specialist on T+L’s A-List.

That’s about to change, as the cruise line **AmaWaterways** prepares to launch two luxury vessels on the river in 2025 (*seven-night trips from \$3,839 per person*).

“We are pioneering an entirely new frontier,” says Rudi Schreiner, the company’s cofounder and president. To make that possible, he says, AmaWaterways is building new docks and training local guides.

The forthcoming ships, the 32-cabin *AmaMelodia* and the 30-cabin *AmaMagdalena*,

will operate from Barranquilla to Cartagena, or the reverse. Like the brand’s popular European ships, these vessels will take inspiration from their surroundings, with handmade textiles, locally sourced coffee, and menus that lean on native ingredients such as chocolate and tropical fruits.

One of the most intriguing ports, Seckovic says, will be the town of San Basilio de Palenque. “It was the first village in the Americas to be founded by Africans who escaped Spanish rule,” he explains. Also of note is Mompox, said to be the inspiration for much of Márquez’s fiction. Once a hub for Spanish gold merchants, it remains a center for jewelry artisans who specialize in filigree work.

And while AmaWaterways is leading the return to the river, it isn’t the only brand making inroads. **Metropolitan Touring**, an operator that specializes in South America, plans to launch a 25-cabin Magdalena River ship by mid 2025 (*seven-night trips from \$3,499 per person*). It’s further proof that this storied waterway is back on the map.

