

“MY GOD, MY GOD. THEY KILLED MY daughters. Shlomi, I wanted to save them, but they are dead. They were hit in the head. They died on the spot. Allah, what have we done to them? Oh God.”

These were the words of Palestinian doctor Izzeldin Abuelaish as he spoke to Israeli television journalist Shlomi Eldar from the ruins of his home in the Gaza Strip on January 16, 2009. More than words really, an animal cry from the depths of a father's heart.

The Israeli attack on Gaza, code-named Operation Cast Lead and launched in response to Palestinian militants' firing of rockets into Israel, had entered its 20th day when Abuelaish used what was left of his fading mobile phone battery to make his call. No reporter, Israeli or otherwise, had been allowed into the heavily populated Palestinian territory since the beginning of the war, and for many journalists this doctor's eyewitness account had become crucial to their understanding of what was happening.

Abuelaish was trusted and well respected, not just by members of the Israeli media, but by the country's medical fraternity as well. He'd been the first Palestinian obstetrician and gynaecologist to have been given a residency inside an Israeli hospital. He'd helped scores of infertile Israeli couples realise the joys of childbirth. He'd travelled from Gaza to Israel most working days – passing through numerous Israeli checkpoints – to help save Jewish and non-Jewish lives. He'd hosted Israelis in his home, a generous shelter amid the squalor of his teeming refugee city.

He'd proved himself repeatedly a man of peace, someone prepared to condemn his own side's suicide bombings, in private as well as in a public letter to the *Jerusalem Post* newspaper. “Israelis are our friends,” he would often tell his daughters, “and we should love them as we love one another.”

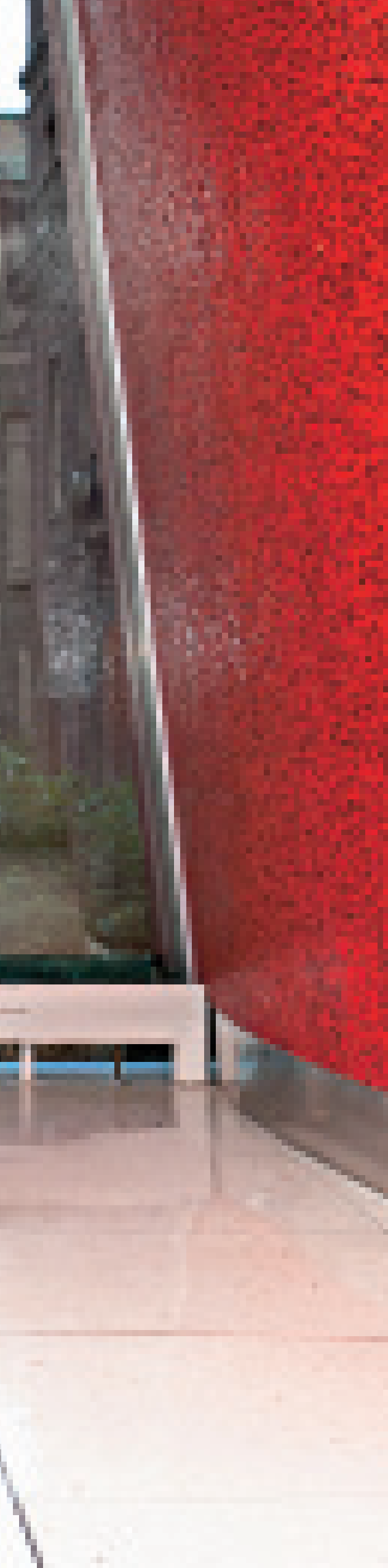
And here he was now, wild with grief, dialling his friend Shlomi Eldar, a reporter with Israel's Channel Ten, as Eldar was going live to air on national TV, about to begin an interview with the country's then foreign minister, Tzipi Livini.

When Eldar saw the first of Abuelaish's two calls flash on his screen, he ignored it. On blind impulse,

TWO YEARS AGO, IZZELDIN ABUELAISH LOST THREE BELOVED DAUGHTERS IN AN ISRAELI TANK ATTACK, YET THE FAMED PALESTINIAN DOCTOR REFUSES TO LET HATE FILL HIS SOUL. HE EXPLAINS WHY TO DAVID LESER.



HEALING HEART



he took the second. “I told the viewing audience that we had something very important coming in and pushed the telephone speaker button and held the mobile phone up so the viewers could see it,” Eldar would say later. “I think my director wondered what on earth I was doing taking a phone call in the middle of a live news broadcast.”

Shlomi Eldar and his viewers were thunderstruck by what they heard. “I can’t tell you how extraordinary this was,” Eldar said. “It’s not something a news anchor ever does – to take a call in the middle of the show. I was all the time wondering if this was the wrong thing to do, at the same time as I was listening in abject horror to what he was saying. Then I heard my editor’s voice in my earpiece saying, ‘Move the telephone closer to the microphone.’”

“The conversation that followed was heart-breaking. He kept crying ... His surviving children were screaming in the background [as] I asked Izzeldin where he lived. He was sobbing. ‘No one can get to us. Oh Shlomi, oh *God*, oh *Allah*, my daughters are dead.’”

DOCTOR OF PEACE

Abuelaish was born in the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza in 1955, the eldest of six brothers and three sisters. He was 12 years old when he saw his first Israeli soldier. In the space of six breathtaking days in 1967, the Israelis swept all before them as they captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria and the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt.

Israeli tanks rolled through Abuelaish’s street as they sought to secure the territory from Egyptian rule. There was chaos everywhere – houses destroyed; children separated from parents, his own parents screaming in horror; people digging holes in the ground to hide; his family fleeing to an orchard for three days to sleep on the ground and live off apricots and apples.

Three years later, at the age of nearly 15, Abuelaish experienced another side of the Israeli character when he went to work on a Jewish farm near Ashqelon, an Israeli town just north of the Gaza border. For three months he lodged with an Israeli family and, despite his loneliness, found the warmth and hospitality of his hosts life-changing.

“That summer left a powerful impression on me in many ways,” he has said. “That an Israeli family would hire me, treat me fairly and show so much kindness toward me was completely unexpected.”

One week after his return to Gaza, the streets of the territory were widened so that Israeli tanks could negotiate their way more easily. Hundreds of houses, including Abuelaish’s family home, were bulldozed to the ground.

It was this divergence between the kindness of his Jewish hosts and the conduct of Israeli soldiers that triggered something deep inside the Palestinian teenager’s heart. He wanted to build a bridge of peace, not just between Palestinians and Israelis, but between the two divides of the Israeli character. He wanted medicine to be his tool of trade, his instrument of change. And not just medicine, but obstetrics and gynaecology in particular. He was thrilled by the miracle of newborn life.

After graduating as a doctor from the University of Cairo in 1983, Abuelaish obtained a diploma in obstetrics and gynaecology from the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia, in conjunction with the University of London. He then studied foetal medicine and genetics in Milan and Brussels, before enrolling in a master’s program in public health at Harvard.

“

THERE WAS A MONSTROUS EXPLOSION THAT SEEMED TO BE ALL AROUND US. I REMEMBER THE SOUND. I REMEMBER THE BLINDING FLASH ... AS THE DUST BEGAN TO SETTLE, I REALISED THE EXPLOSION HAD COME FROM MY DAUGHTERS’ BEDROOM.

”

BUILDING BRIDGES: Izzeldin Abuelaish (opposite, in Toronto in 2009) remains committed to finding a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli divide, despite the suffering of his family.

In the early 1990s he returned to Gaza to set up a private evening clinic for the poor, many of whom he treated free. At the same time, he applied to become a volunteer at the Soroka hospital in the Israeli city of Beersheba. He wanted to learn from Israeli doctors, and they soon decided they wanted to learn from him.

“Izzeldin was a special person, with a balanced point of view about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” Dr Shlomo Usef, the director of Soroka hospital, observed. “He saw it as a conflict with two sides, and himself as the person to bridge the two.”

In 1997 Abuelaish took up residency at the hospital, the first Palestinian doctor to be accorded this position. He began studying Hebrew under a leading rabbi. He was anxious for his patients to know he could understand their symptoms.

He became friends with his Israeli colleagues, hosting groups in his home once a month, taking the opportunity to show them the conditions in which his people lived.

“These get-togethers brought home to me how similar we are,” said Abuelaish.

ONE TERRIBLE DAY

On the afternoon of January 16, 2009, Abuelaish was at home with seven of his eight children, exactly four months to the day after his wife, Nadia, the mother of their children, had died in an Israeli hospital from leukaemia.

Theirs had been an arranged marriage between two close families 22 years earlier – Nadia, a 24-year-old dental technician working in the West Bank town of Ramallah; Abuelaish, a 32-year-old doctor on the rise. The two families rejoiced over their union and the husband found himself enchanted by his wife’s intelligence and devotion.

In the months after Nadia’s death, Bessan, at 21 their eldest daughter and a student of business at the Islamic University of Gaza, assumed the running of the household, insisting that her father continue to work in Israel. Always the young adviser, she felt her father would cope better if he was busy.

By January 16, there was talk of a ceasefire in the three-week-old conflict. Abuelaish kept reassuring his children the war would soon be over, that they would all make a new life in Canada, where he’d just been offered a prestigious position at the University of Toronto’s school of public health. The children were encouraged and excited. “I want to fly, Daddy,” his second-youngest daughter, 14-year-old Aya, said. She was hoping to be a journalist one day.

But at 4.45pm an Israeli tank shell hit Abuelaish’s home, obliterating his daughters’ upstairs bedroom. “We had left the girls’ room and were in the middle of the dining room when it happened,” Abuelaish recounted later in his international best seller, *I Shall Not Hate*. “There was a monstrous explosion that seemed to be all around us. I remember the sound. I remember the blinding flash.

“Abdullah [at six, the youngest child] was still on my shoulders, Raffah [at 10, the youngest daughter] came running, screaming from the kitchen, Mohammed [the eldest son, aged 13] stood frozen at the front door.

“As the dust began to settle, I realised the explosion had come from my daughters’ bedroom. I put Abdullah down and Bessan ran ahead of me from the kitchen; we wound up at the bedroom door at the same time. The sight in front of me was something I hope no other person ever has to witness.

“Bedroom furniture, school books, dolls, running shoes and pieces of wood were splintered in

a heap, along with the body parts. Shatha [at 17, the third-eldest daughter] was the only one standing. Her eye was on her cheek, her body covered in bloody puncture wounds, her finger hanging by a thread of skin.

"I found Mayar's body on the ground. [Fifteen-year-old Mayar was the fourth-eldest daughter and had wanted to be a doctor like her father.] She'd been decapitated. There was brain matter on the ceiling, girls' hands and feet on the floor. Blood spattered the entire room, and arms in familiar sweaters and legs in pants that belonged to these beloved children leaned at crazed angles where they had been blown off the torsos.

"I ran to the front door for help but realised I couldn't go outside because there were soldiers on the street. A second rocket smashed into the room while I was at the door. To this day I'm not absolutely certain about who was killed when. My brother Nasser had raced down the stairs after the shell hit, and he got to the door at the same time as my brother Atta and his daughter Ghaida. They were caught [and injured] by the second explosion.

"I couldn't find Bessan, and kept calling her name: 'Bessan, Bessan, where are you? Tell me where you are so I can help you.' But she was now dead, along with Mayar. So was Aya and so was [my 17-year-old niece] Noor."

A GENEROUS SPIRIT

Abuelaish is sitting in a white hotel bathrobe talking to me via Skype from the US city of Spokane in Washington state. There are tears rolling down his cheeks and for a few seconds he has to walk away from the computer screen to collect himself.

Our online meeting is less than ideal, hardly

the forum to explore the fraught and tender subjects of love, loss and forgiveness. But this is our only way to secure a last-minute interview, given the gruelling nature of Abuelaish's work schedule and his imminent arrival in Australia.

Now based in Toronto with his five remaining children, Abuelaish was last year nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize following the publication of his book *I Shall Not Hate*. Following his daughters' deaths in 2009 he founded Daughters for Life, an organisation dedicated to changing the status and role of women in the Middle East. Often a keynote speaker at peace conferences, he is in Spokane to talk at the Second International Conference on Hate Studies, a multidisciplinary forum seeking to combat extremism in all its guises: racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism ...

"I think the world is drowning in hate," he tells me, "and hate is destructive. It is a toxin that affects all aspects of life. It doesn't just affect the individual who carries it, it affects the community. If I hate, who is going to suffer? Myself. My children. My relatives. My community. I will be disconnected from the world."

How is it, though, that he does not hate those who took his three daughters from him? "Are we going to hate everyone who did something wrong to us?" he replies in his Arabic-inflected English.

But what of the Israeli soldier who fired those tank shells? "I don't think any bad thing about him because I don't blame the soldier. I don't want to blame ... but if we want to blame, blame the system and start to correct the system.

"I am sure [the soldier] knows what he did. He knew the impact of the two shells. He knows that there are innocent girls, wonderful girls, three daughters, one niece, and others who were killed

“ I THINK THE WORLD IS DROWNING IN HATE, AND HATE IS DESTRUCTIVE. IT IS A TOXIN THAT AFFECTS ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE. ”

and severely wounded. And one day this soldier will marry and have children, and when he realises the consequences of what he did ... God bless him.

"I feel deeply for how he lives, and if he came to me and said, 'Izzeldin, I apologise for what I did' ... believe me how generous I would be. [I would] hug him and show him that I am ready to help him. But the system, till now, did not take any steps to help the soldier, or to help themselves.

"No one [from the Israeli political or military establishment] has met with me, or asked me what happened. *No one. No one.* And no one came to ask me, 'How is your daughter [Shatha, who lost her eye] or niece or brother?' and to say, 'Izzeldin, we apologise.' No one said that."

Although at the time there was a public outpouring of horror and sympathy within Israel for him and his family, there were also Israelis, like Levana Stern, a mother of three soldiers, who screamed at Abuelaish during a press conference, accusing him of harbouring militants and hiding weapons in his home. Abuelaish was doubly mortified. "All that was ever fired out of our house," he responded later, "was love, hugs and acts of peace."

Indeed, three of his daughters – Bessan, who died when the second rocket exploded in her bedroom, Dalal [the second eldest] and Shatha – had, at their father's urging, attended a peace camp in New Mexico for Israelis and Palestinians a few years earlier.

Throughout their young lives they had heard their father talking of peace and co-existence; they had imbibed his stubborn refusal to stereotype Jews in general and Israelis in particular. Four years before her death, Bessan had signed up for a road trip across the United States with a small group of Palestinian and Israeli women. The trip

Italian love affair.
Cult leather corner sofa with motion from \$4,495 or 20% off Cult range for 20 days only

Cult leather corner sofa starting from **\$3,995** instead of \$5,180

NATUZZI BENVENUTI A CASA*

*Prices in call to action, as shown, exclude VAT. Model shown refers to Cult version 1005 & 201. Minimum 12 months, not to be combined with other offers.

resulted in a documentary aimed at promoting dialogue between enemies. "I wanted my daughters to meet Israeli girls and to spend time with them in a neutral setting in order to discover the ties that may bind and heal our mutual wounds," Abuelaish would write later of these endeavours.

At the mention now of Bessan and her two dead sisters, Mayar and Aya, Abuelaish begins to weep. "Once you mention them I see them," he says, his voice washed through with anguish. "I see them eye to eye now, talking to me. I say to them, 'You are living with me. I will never forget you. Your blood and your souls are not wasted, and I am not going to relax till I meet you one day ... and to tell you your souls made a difference in others' lives.'

"Each girl in this world is a special girl. Girls are the life and the love ... and I miss them. I miss every beautiful thing from them. Their smiles. Bessan's advice. Their talks. Their hugs. Mayar's wisdom. Believe me, everyone misses them. It is a loss for everyone. They were girls who ... had the potential to make a difference in this world."

DREAMING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Abuelaish grew up with one foot inside his own people's camp, and another inside the enemy camp of the Israelis. It was never an easy thing to arrive at this profoundly decent position.

His family's land – located in what is today the northern Negev Desert of Israel – was lost during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. (The land is today owned by the now-comatose former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and his family.)

Most of Abuelaish's early life was spent in a refugee camp, first under Egyptian rule, then Israeli. Until recently, he was to know only occupation and everything that came with it: lack of fresh food



and water, unchecked sewage, overcrowding, sanctions and blockades, the enduring frustration and indignity of security checkpoints. And all of this before the loss of his wife and daughters.

Despite these trials, Abuelaish has clung to the belief that things can only improve. As a small boy he treated his school books as treasured possessions, sensing that a good education would lead him to a better life. As an adult he kept his mind tuned to the task of healing – healing the sick and trying to heal the conflict between two peoples locked in their eternal struggle.

In the semi-fog of our cyber meeting, this much seems clear. Izzeldin Abuelaish is a man devoted to peace. He feels the pain of the Palestinians, the pain of the Jews, his own unfathomable pain, but remains determined to look for the best in people. "Thank God I am not a victim any more," he says. "I am moving everywhere because I feel the obligation to send my daughters,

A FATHER'S GRIEF:

Izzeldin Abuelaish addresses the media in Tel Aviv in January 2009 – the day after an Israeli tank shell killed three of his daughters in their Gaza Strip home.

ters, on a daily basis, gifts that I am doing good things, to make a difference in other people's lives ... to tell people hate is not right, to tell them that weapons are useless, that weapons are the weakest and we must change the system."

The best medicine for treating hate, he insists, is success. His five remaining children are living testament to this. "What they suffered in one year, no one can tolerate. At the start of the school year they lost their mother and four months later they lost three lovely, beloved sisters and one [cousin].

"They went back to school [in Toronto] and they succeeded as if nothing had happened to them. My daughter, Shatha, who was severely wounded – she lost the sight in one eye, she has four malformed fingers – she was in her high school and I didn't expect much from her. But she came to Canada and they announced the result [in her school] and she succeeded. She succeeded with 96 per cent and now she is studying computer engineering at the University of Toronto.

"That's what I mean when I say the antidote of hate and revenge is success, to move forward, to not collapse, to not be destroyed but to stand steadfast.

"No one is born violent. The violence is environmental. The violence is the symptom of a disease. Change the environment and there will never be violence. No one is born to hate."

Might peace be possible then, I ask him finally, between his people and the Israelis? "It is important to keep our hope," he answers. "I don't believe in any impossible thing in life. The only impossible thing is to return my daughters back." **GW**

Izzeldin Abuelaish will be appearing at the Sydney Writers' Festival (May 16-22) and at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne on May 23.

OPENING PAGES: UMAR SHAHZAD. THIS PAGE: AFP

UNIWORLD'S INCREDIBLE 50% OFF EUROPEAN CRUISES

With Uniworld's all inclusive, value packed programs you'll have nothing to worry about except enjoying award-winning hospitality, world class cuisine, captivating excursions and the finest river ships in the industry. And for a limited time only, Uniworld is offering 50% off selected 2011 European itineraries.

EUROPEAN JEWELS



AMSTERDAM TO BUDAPEST
15 DAYS FROM \$2854*PP

SAVE UP TO \$2587[#] PER PERSON

Includes: 14-night cruise in a riverview stateroom on the *River Queen* or *River Baroness*, all meals onboard, complimentary European wines during dinner, 12 shore excursions, exclusive Epicurean Adventurer Program, transfers on arrival and departure days.[†]

Departs: 6 Nov 2011

LEGENDARY RHINE & MOSELLE



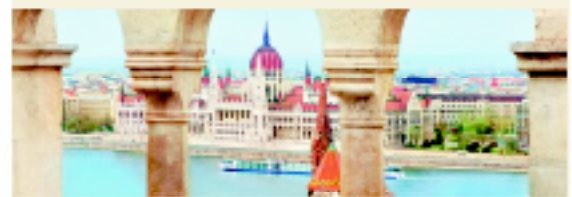
AMSTERDAM TO BASEL
13 DAYS FROM \$2591*PP

SAVE UP TO \$2362[#] PER PERSON

Includes: 12-night cruise in a riverview stateroom on the *River Queen*, all meals onboard, complimentary European wines during dinner, 12 shore excursions, exclusive Epicurean Adventurer Program, transfers on arrival and departure days.[†]

Departs: 23 Oct 2011

GRAND EUROPEAN RIVER VOYAGE



ISTANBUL TO AMSTERDAM
27 DAYS FROM \$5500*PP

SAVE UP TO \$5062[#] PER PERSON

Includes: 23-night cruise in a riverview stateroom on the *River Duchess*, 3-nights in deluxe Istanbul hotel, all meals onboard, complimentary European wines during dinner, 20 shore excursions, exclusive Epicurean Adventurer Program, air travel between Istanbul and Bucharest, transfers on arrival and departure days.[†]

Departs: 10 Oct 2011



2012 UNIWORLD PREVIEW BROCHURE

Travel at 2011 prices + early bird savings of up to \$3,800* per couple

TO BOOK, CONTACT YOUR LOCAL TRAVEL AGENT
To order your Uniworld 2012 Preview Brochure or for more information
visit uniworldcruises.com.au

UNIWORLD
BOUTIQUE RIVER CRUISE COLLECTION

*Conditions Apply: Prices are per person twin share cruise only. Advertised prices are inclusive of all savings and are based on specified departure dates including port charges. Offers subject to availability at the time of booking. Seasonal surcharges and upgrade charges will apply. #50% saving is based on twin share Category 5 (max), excluding port charges. If upgrade available, full upgrade price is applicable. Discount is not applicable for singles. Discount is not combinable with any other offers, and can withdrawn at any time without prior notice. Valid for new bookings only. Valid for sale. Until sold out. Prices and taxes are correct at time of printing and are subject to change without notice. †Further conditions apply. Please contact Uniworld for more details. TRAB40/GN06/YPC