

by Sergio Cutolo

THE EVOLUTION OF THE EXPLORER YACHTS

Boats and sailing have always been linked to freedom. Without wanting to disturb Baudelaire, boats and consequently the seven seas have permitted men to search, explore the world and to discover lands unknown, to encounter new cultures, all of which often led to a better understanding of their own limits. It's fair to say that yachting, ever since its inception has transferred in to the "private" sector that same strong desire for research, adventure and sense of freedom which early explorers experienced just like more recent ones have done by starting from a brief crossing over to the islands in search of a pretty, hidden, inaccessible, and safe bay in which to spend a day or two perhaps. Whatever the size of a yacht or type, sail or engine, it remains a derivative of merchant ships which as time went by became more and more functional and stylish to the point where quoting from writer/ yachtman Stefano Carletti "the noblest of ships is the one built exclusively for the pleasure of sailing". Evolving markets led to move away from "trading" criteria or purely naval ones also because the ensuing evolution developed from the bottom up, from small boats to large ones. Important ship builders, those adopting naval standards in term of size and type would have seldom gone in the opposite direction that's to say getting involved in the construction of large recreational units or yachts which were totally different from the current production of the time and which was anyway principally made up of large "motor boats" built in GRP, or in wood/marine ply, and were equipped with huge engines. They were designed and built exclusively for recreational purposes. These few yachts were often based on displacing steel hulls with aluminium alloy superstructures, and generically speaking were referred to as "Navette" meaning small ships which probably deserve a few lines to describe the way they evolved. The international yachting scene back in the 70's was simply made up of boats, even ships decked out to cruise along the coasts by day, with limited range and little comfort judging by today's standards and generally unwelcoming external spots from which to sunbathe perhaps. Of course there were a few exceptions, and I wish to recall most of all, the boats an Italian project designer Fabio Peterlin who used to call them "Trawler" or "Passage maker". They were built at the Craglietto di Trieste yard shipyard or at the Castracani di Ancona one. It is no coincidence that both these two shipyards also built fishing vessels, trawlers and small tankers, and every other type of small merchant vessels. I've recently seen "Petrarca" advertised in a brokerage web site which was built by Castracani on a Peterlin project.

They were steel built ships driven by relatively low powered engines, with generous ranges which could stand up to anything. Towards



Explorer 57 m-

the end of the 70's and the beginning of the 80's, the average yacht size for the big ones was around 20 metres and a 35 metre was considered as a Megayacht. It was during that decade that several yachtsmen were already filing away as passé, the then current traditional hulls and wanted something else, this desire led to a long new route figuratively speaking but also in terms of miles. I think the first yacht which was expressly built to explore the world with the owner on board is for me Itasca. The original name was Thames III built by J. & K. Smits Scheepswerven in Holland in 1961. We're talking about a lovely 50 metre hull, built like an open sea rescue tug. It was transformed into a yacht in 1979 and since then it has sailed around the world three times and was the first yacht to take the North West passage separating the US from the USSR.

But what are the special features which have gone into making Itasca the legend she has become? Well firstly the yacht possesses a remarkable range of 13,000 nautical miles, as well as two engines which are coupled to a single drive shaft, a huge hangar space in which to store a great number of tenders, and toys in addition to a helicopter landing pad. The substantial range Itasca offers is of course useful in ensuring comfortable long hauls but it also offered the possibility of bunkering where fuel was cheap. Twin engines coupled to a single drive means alternating between the two and having a propeller with a large diameter which works off low revving engines with great efficiency. During long crossings at econ speed both engines are exploited but alternatively. The considerable space dedicated to tenders and the helicopter pad make Itasca even more attractive even if its size isn't so far off the "bench mark" by today's standards and even if the project design is more than half a century old. A number of years ago I seized the opportunity to go visit Itasca, and I was impressed by the spaces and fascinated by the appeal the external areas had on me, with those metal railings, and the shape of the decks, for the size of the technical areas as well as the enormous engine room. Soon enough refits and conversion work began to be carried out like Itasca's on other vessels with some degree of commercial success, and this paved the way which further led owners to possess something different, something which could lead to greater knowledge rather than pure divertimento as an end to itself, and to an adventurous enterprise perhaps rather than a holiday.

I can remember few other ships which share the same characteristics, but more especially to two which contributed in enhancing the "Explorer" type yacht concept. One of them was certainly the Giant and the other Simson S. Rene Herzog, back in the seventies was a "gentleman driver" and a Yacht enthusiast, but he founded Alucraft. Renè was a natural innovator and soon struck up a working relationship with architect and designer Alberto Mercati. From there on several "unforgettables" made their appearance: Texas first then Galaxy, Both were built chez Proteksan in Turkey. These were followed by Adler and Baroness, built by Baglietto on Alucraft Mercati project design work in the mid eighties. These yachts boasted innovative designs, they were sporty looking, aggressive, and innovative in terms of interior layouts as well. Finally in 1992 Giant appeared in its new mode. This ship was originally built for Russian owners in 1974 by IHC in Holland. It was built to rescue ships in high seas, an all weather ice breaking tug in the literal sense of the word. When René Herzog future owner discovers it in Mexico Giant had been left to itself for a number of years. Converting it took considerable time the



Darwin 96 Stella di mare

The evolution of the explorer yachts

task was completed in 2001 in Italy. Giant too had plenty of room for tenders and toys and enormous volumes below decks with all of its 70 metres as well as a helicopter pad towering above its red hull. Giant is currently undergoing a further refit under a new name : Legend, which will be lengthened by seven metres thereby reaching 77 metres. Simson S, has become Lone Ranger. It used to be a rescue tug with an LOA of more than 80 metres. It was converted into a yacht by Jack Setton who's contributed in developing yachting in no mean way.

Jack Setton's past as a yachtsman was miles away from the Explorer concept which comprises researching high performance levels and futuristic design work as well. In spite of this he played a key role in developing the Explorer concept with René Herzog. Simson S, like Giant and Itasca were converted into Explorer Yachts while maintaining the aesthetic features proper to a working boat. Here too there's plenty of room for all kinds of tenders and water toys. Thanks to Jack Setton's determination that another very important step was taken in the evolving saga of Explorer models.

While Simson S was being converted and refitted, Jack Setton was already working at a completely new concept for an innovative Explorer model. He and Martin Francis set out to develop Senses which was perhaps the first to be built around the types and number of tenders it had been destined

to carry and more especially the owner's faithful Nelson 42'. German yard Schweers specialised in merchant ship building handed the completed yacht over to the owner in 1999. Senses features all the qualities to sail every ocean with a Megayacht's style and elegance.

However as an example which mustn't be forgotten, Gianni Agnelli preferred to chose a "new" build rather than converting and refitting an existing commercial vessel and asked CRN yards to build him an atypical 33 metre yacht designed by Gerhard Gilgenast which was delivered to him in 1983. Certainly a choice which was ahead of its time in that period but today it is still in the norm.

Luciano Benetton too took the same decision when he asked

Mondo Marine to build him a new one based on Luca Dini's project design work to his very own requirements. Mondo Marine launched Tribù in 2007. Smaller vessels also are converted from fishing trawlers and tugs into yachts. Often though the final results are not convincing enough and don't quite make the grade for them to be realistic Explorer vessels. The limits in converting smaller vessels into Explorers are more apparent and stand out more when compared to new builds. Converting a commercial vessel into an Explorer became a more complex affair as time went by, specially in terms of costs and generally speaking would be owners of Explorer models began to prefer a new ship to a converted and refitted one with the requested features. A good example of that trend is what happened to Stefano Carletti in 2003. Stefano Carletti a writer, archaeologist, diver, yachtsman, sail maker, seaman, was at the time looking for another boat which could substitute Yoshimi of which he was very fond. Yoshimi was an attractive little ship of about 20 metres designed by Vripack which possessed all the features he wanted in terms of range, sea-keeping qualities, reliability, and with relatively low running costs, but it had become a little small for his expanding family.

Stefano is well introduced in yachting and naval circles and he had already looked at some of the market's offers to find something which could match his new requirements and went on to tell me when we met, he was looking for a boat which was less than 24 metres long, with a single very trustworthy

engine which could propel the boat to 9 / 10 knots at cruising speed, and one which could take on tons of fuel and which was easy on the pocket to run. Following a series of meetings which were nearly all accompanied by good food excellent wines, stories related to the sea and philosophical disquisitions on various topics led to the Naumachos 82' model. Once the project was off the drawing board we needed to find the right shipyard. We found it one morning, it was December 27th 2003 and we were talking to Ennio Cecchini who was then the owner of the Cantiere Navale di Pesaro. Why you might ask did you decide to go for a new construction? In reality the possibility of exploiting the hull of an existing commercial work boat had been carefully analysed. Realistically speaking the final choice was dictated by two separate reasons. The first one had to do with project design work meaning: small ships (tugs, fishing boats, supply vessels and so on) that are built for a precise reason, to satisfy specific needs, which often ill adapt to leisure cruising requirements. Up until then we had found ships whose engine rooms took up two thirds of the hull, with insufficient headroom below deck, and with the sheer lines and camber which would run along inside of the low superstructures. The second reason was a purely financial one: gutting out an existing hull, building back, substituting existing machinery for new or fully reconditioned one we soon realised the only saving and partial at that, would have been in the naval carpentry.

But why did we go for CNP? (Cantiere navale di Pesaro) Aside from Ennio's great passion for what he does and friendliness, the choice was dictated by spotting on the premises a Mega 80 metre yacht which was being refitted, a 45 metre tug, named Prometj which was being converted into a yacht, several fishing boats being built as well as small transportation vessels destined to work in lagoons and two over 100 metre ships in which to transport gas. We had struck on a shipyard which was capable of handling any sort of construction. The first Naumachos 82' named Bodry II was built in a very short time and taken to the International Boat show in Genoa in 2004. Bodry II

was easily noticeable, there was no compromising in terms of exterior lines, it was "brutally" inspired by work boats' lines and beamy too in relationship to the overall length (a 7.2 m maximum beam) with an imposing superstructure and last but not least a red hull. Today Bodry II is called Akula. This yacht was the first "pocket explorer" to have been built in Italy, and up until then no one that I can recall had seen anything like it anywhere exactly like Stefano Carletti's unfruitful quest had grandly demonstrated. The building of Bodry II in a shipyard specialised in building work boats among which at least in terms of size were fishing vessels, we realised that as we proceeded with the installation of the plants and gradually the interior decor; that for "ad hoc" designed boats a lot more care had to be taken in comparison to a mere work boat where a lot of details were not of importance. Meanwhile the engine room with a single engine installed in the middle was situated well back in the stern area and was clearly a compact one which gave lot's of extra space between the bow end bulkhead of the engine room and the crash box's bulkhead so as to install four ample guest cabins in the area. The standing headroom, being comparable to much larger vessels added a greater sense of comfort below deck.

The positioning of crew quarters instead were derived from what's normally found on smaller fishing trawlers or small supply vessels, where the cabins are situated on a half deck forward of the wheel



Explorer 40 m Mondomarine



Naumachos 82 Bodry

The evolution of the explorer yachts



Naumachos 82 Indian

house and of the technical rooms in the bow area. In this way the crew area was well separated from the rest of the boat.

More or less the same concepts were adopted and applied but harmonised and better optimised for the case in point by the shipyard which drew some inspiration from the Darwin series which in a moment of great recession allowed a new shipyard to take the lion's share in the market thanks to the high quality standards it was generating and to the simplicity of the solutions installed and to reduced running costs of its boats which clearly corresponded to what the market had been looking out for.

Today Explorer models are a globally recognised category which has been widely appreciated, nevertheless a number of salient aspects still need to be underscored.

We've witnessed how Explorer models have developed over time and how they have evolved from conversions and refits of existing commercial vessels to new builds.

And as mentioned earlier the hulls and superstructures of commercial vessels or work boats have a series of limitations which derive from the fact that they were originally designed to carry out different tasks, and very often we find ourselves with insufficient headroom between decks, a freeboard which is too low, an engine room which is too large, crew quarters which are much too small, and superfluous plants. When we consider that often these hulls need to be gutted completely, restored, refitted and transformed into something else and when you add these factors to some of the structural problems involved, we can come to the conclusion that it would be more convenient in terms of costs, time taken, reliability and efficiency to start from scratch and to draw up a project design for a new Explorer Yacht.

Of course we must also distinguish between an Explorer yacht model for its contents and substance and an explorer yacht which is termed as such for its aesthetics.

I often cite a parallel situation from the automotive industry: we can be often attracted by vehicles which were termed as off road vehicles and which today offer an incredible range of small differences. A Land Rover "Defender" or a "Wrangler" Jeep are two "off road" vehicles since inception. Originally even deployed in war zones and later adapted to civilian street use. On the other side to remain in the same frame of things we have a "Range" or a "Grand Cherokee" which while maintaining when not bettering the existing, off road qualities, they offer great on the road comfort while travelling, also thanks to sophisticated technical solutions.

In the middle of all this there's a whole range of crossover models which do without four wheel drives but maintain the looks of real "off road" vehicles.

Much the same thing is happening in the production of current Explorers: An Explorer possesses several essential features such as long range (and not merely a large fuel tank capacity, you also need space enough for ship stores, refrigerators, cold storage cellars, comfortable crew quarters in which to spend long periods at sea, the possibility of embarking large tenders and a good selection of water toys.

The success Explorer models have met with has been confirmed by the fact that internationally renowned shipyards have also lined up a certain number of Explorer models next to traditional yachts.

As far as I'm concerned, and because of a sailing yacht background, I find myself observing that in this short period of time the sailing yacht world is close to that of the Explorers in the same way as Jack Setton after having spent much of his time racing cars, he joined the sailing yacht world, obviously in an unconventional way. We've met Gianni Agnelli, and Luciano Benetton both great enthusiasts, Stefano Carletti, Martin Francis, and we can safely and gladly admit that Explorer models are the link which bring together the worlds of motor and sailing yachts and which in both cases represent a discerning and aristocratic way of going to sea while respecting nature and the surrounding environment.

We are currently experimenting something new: we're busy drawing up a project for a second Explorer for the same owner and this to us is a source of limitless information and stimulus.

We'll be back to tell you more about this in a couple of years.