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VOYAGING

Explorer Yachts

By [Alyssa Haak](#)



Photo courtesy of Aquos Yachts

Expedition yachts are built from the keel up to go anywhere.

the standard mega- yacht run between the Med and the Caribbean. These itineraries require detailed planning, specially chosen crew, and most important, yachts that are up to the challenge.

How Did I Get Here?

Recent boat shows have presented an influx of explorer-style yacht designs and launches. Builders as disparate as Moonen, Mondo Marine, McMullen & Wing, and Kingship have designs ready to build, just waiting for the right person to sign the contracts that will begin construction. But owners looking for vessels to carry them to destinations that are off the chart must know what they need.

Dutch yacht designer Rene van der Velden, who has an explorer design in build at Alloy Yachts in New Zealand, draws a distinction in these designs, "Today there are a lot of 'fashion explorers' for people who like the bold look that come with the type," van der Velden says. "But the use of the vessel is not different than an ordinary yacht."

As with any trend, pretenders come along, capturing the look but not the capabilities. "There are two kinds of explorer yachts," Fraser Yachts broker David Legrand concurs. "The second kind is vessels that look the part and are an explorer in spirit. And then there are the expedition yachts."

Ends of the Earth

Specialized yachts seek adventure when the usual ports aren't enough.

In less enlightened times, unexplored areas of the map were marked with the simple phrase, "Here Be Dragons." Nowadays as paper charts have been fleshed out, unexplored areas are often simply marked with pins, changing them into a personalized destination wish list.

But turning those far-flung daydreams into reality is far more involved than planning

Megayacht owner Richard Beatty knows what a real explorer yacht needs. He designed and tested his 45-meter (147-foot) Big Fish and then logged more than 45,000 NM aboard her. “The equation is always one of balancing design and performance—which in exploration yachts means long range as well as excellent seakeeping—with construction excellence,” says Beatty. “To achieve the latter, it is absolutely essential to find a yard that has had significant experience building yachts that operate safely and reliably, and are easy to repair and maintain when far away from port facilities. We selected McMullen & Wing because of their reputation for operational reliability.”

This New Zealand yard focuses on not only expedition but also high-speed yachts, both of which require increased engineering. On Big Fish, that included an ice-strengthened hull, extra-robust and -reliable systems, and increased refrigerated stowage. And while keeping food fresh is obviously important, so is keeping garbage from smelling until the vessel reaches a port with the capabilities to accept it.

Legrand is also managing a new explorer project by the Italian shipbuilder Mariotti, a yard that until now had focused on building luxury cruise ships. In designing the 55-meter (180-foot) Geo, it is adhering to the same demanding timetables and engineering practices that are common in the cruise-ship industry.

Geo (the project name) features key aspects that are common on expedition yachts. Her increased outdoor space includes a 220-square-meter sundeck that’s protected from the weather by heavy glass and aft doors. There are three decks dedicated to guests, whose main-deck cabins have the maximum light and the best views, while the 13-member crew has its own dedicated deck. A small transom door simplifies boarding from a tender in heavy seas and replaces the aft swim platform for areas where unwelcome visitors could be a problem.

Another concern for these yachts is their external finish. Allan Jouning, co-director of the megayacht agency 37 South, was captain of Itasca, the first private yacht to transit the Northwest Passage from west to east in a single season. “Exploring arctic and antarctic areas can be hard on hull paint so expedition yachts normally go for a more high-quality commercial finish,” he says.

And while range is important for long-distance cruising, it doesn’t always tell the whole story. “A real expedition yacht would have fuel to take it halfway around the world without fueling,” Jouning continues. “But most of these yachts will have one or two generators running 24 hours a day so the actual range gets altered with this requirement.”

While safety and efficiency are concerns on any yacht, they’re especially important on an expedition yacht. And the differences aren’t always obvious based on the exterior styling. “Actually the design brief is not so different from what it should be for a ‘normal’ yacht,” van der Velden says. “Some well-designed yachts will be better explorers than some of the fashion explorers today. The main thing is that for a serious explorer, safety and practicality should always prevail over style.”

But it’s not just the yacht itself that owners need to consider. Capt. Paul Deeth, who has helmed both the 194-foot Senses and the 115-foot Surprise, points out that even the tenders have special requirements. “They need to be able to launch in big seas and cruise two days to a reef.” For example, Big Fish’s tender, the 28-foot custom Triple Ripple, has a 315-hp Yanmar with a 200-mile range at 17 knots as well as a jet drive for cruising in shallow waters.

Who Are You?

Seeing a speck on a map and turning it into a destination requires certain personality traits of an explorer-yacht owner, crew, and guests. A few characteristics tend to repeat. Legrand says the typical explorer owner is experienced and values the lower operating costs an efficient yacht can provide.

Plus, expedition owners tend to be active; they’re into diving and fishing, and their yachts usually have the toys to match. “All of our owners are passionate about watersports, but those who own explorers are even more so,” says Dorien Bilterijst, communication manager of Moonen Shipyards, which is currently building its second explorer yacht.

Owners who invest in such a yacht, says Liz Howard, a Fraser charter broker, can’t rely on chartering. “[Expedition yachts are] a hard sell,” she says. “People still want the big white boat in the south of France.”

When charter clients do seek out an adventure charter they often share certain characteristics with expedition yacht owners—they may even be owners themselves, or were in the past. “[An owner’s] boat may not be suitable or he may not want to move it around the world,” Jouning explains.

Having sailed far afield, Deeth knows the expectations of owner and crew need to align. “The owner has to want to be adventurous and find a crew to match,” Deeth explains. “The captain is key as the job is a bit more demanding, with long hours and overnights.”

Though the typical owner spends only a few weeks aboard every year, the crew are there for the duration. “The crew tend to be comprised of thrill seekers,” Howard says. “If they’re going to be in the South Pacific for two years, they have to love adventure sports.”

But as the distance increases between the yacht and “yachtie” towns such as Fort Lauderdale, Florida, or Antibes, France, so does the difficulty in replacing crew. Deeth no longer uses crew agencies, and instead depends on word of mouth from other captains. “You look for people who are keen to join,” he says. “Not everyone wants an adventure.”

The definition of adventure isn’t just spontaneity, however, so those thrill-seekers also need to be adept in practical things like planning and provisioning. Supplying an expedition yacht doesn’t just refer to the chef’s keeping the pantry full and the meals tasty and interesting, Howard points out, but also to the engineers stocking detailed spare parts. “There are so many logistics,” she says. “It’s better to have an experienced crew who know the requirements.”

An experienced crew also knows how to put together alternatives when there are no conventional means available, whether that be the owner’s private plane or a more creative solution. “We were cruising from Fiji to the Marshall Islands and we weren’t sure there would be fuel,” Deeth recounts. “So we hired a guy with a donkey cart to bring enough fuel down.”

Beatty praises Capt. Winston Joyce-Clarke for choosing a crew that has contributed to Big Fish’s success in terms of travel itinerary, safety, and in attracting repeat charter clients. “Even though it’s far more difficult on crew to be constantly with guests in remote areas, I believe you actually can attract a higher caliber of crew when your boat is going to exciting places,” Beatty says. “What young person—who is also a committed seafarer—wants to be stuck on a boring yacht doing the same thing in the same old watering hole as every other yacht on the planet?”

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

An explorer yacht that is well crafted, staffed with a willing crew, and provisioned to the hilt will be limited only by the owner’s imagination (and possibly the restrictions of a few inhospitable governments). In just 18 months, Big Fish has been to the Galpagos, Antarctica, South Georgia Island, and the Amazon. “It was always my plan to take my yacht—excuse me for borrowing the phrase for my own purposes—to go where no yacht has gone before,” Beatty says.

However some destinations do have their drawbacks. The May-to-October South Pacific season coincides with hurricane season, but relocating north or south escapes the storms’ common path. Jouning suggests moving north toward the equator or south of New Zealand in the sub-Antarctic Auckland Islands.

Once the chosen destination is reached, it is Deeth’s experience that most owners want to live off the land or sea. “Fishing or catching lobsters are part of the adventure,” he says. “In the Solomon Islands, the [former] owner of Surprise went for a drive and returned with a wild boar.”

But at the end of the day, the typical expedition trip is about the adventure, but not necessarily isolation. “I built Big Fish because I enjoy cruising remote areas where you can meet native, non-Western people, enjoy waters that have not been overfished or environmentally degraded, and see wildlife in abundance,” Beatty says. “You can literally be where no private yacht has ever been before and still conduct critical business and be in touch with your family. What’s incredible to me is that given the technology we now have, how few yachtsmen are enjoying the ability to enjoy the world at its very, very best.”

Editor’s note: For a detailed checklist of explorer-yacht components visit www.pmymag.com/explorer.

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