

matt jones

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Some like it yacht

*Legendary yachts such as Aristotle Onassis' Christina helped establish 'floating mansions' as the ultimate celebrity get-away. Today, thanks to a new generation of high-tech floating palaces, another 'golden age' has dawned. **Matt Jones** reports.*

“It’s exquisite, like a floating mansion!” says Marilyn Monroe as she steps into the salon of the millionaire’s yacht *New Caledonia* with Tony Curtis – a moment preserved forever in the celebrated 1959 movie *Some Like It Hot*.

In real life, the screen icon could well have said the same of Aristotle Onassis’ yacht *Christina*, on which she and a host of other famous names were guests in the 1950s and ’60s – a golden age for luxury yachting. Prince Rainier of Monaco and Grace Kelly, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, Frank Sinatra, opera diva Maria Callas, JFK and Winston Churchill – all were guests on the Greek tycoon’s 99 metre floating mansion, the reputation of which helped to establish private yachts as the ultimate glamorous get-away for movie stars and men of power and influence.

Half a century later, interest in luxury yachts is as strong as ever. The burst of construction activity in German and Dutch shipyards since 2000 has heralded a new golden age, one that’s being ushered in by ambitious owners from the Middle East, the United States, Russia and Germany. Of the world’s 50 largest yachts, 22 were built in the first six years of the ‘Noughties’ – more than in any decade of the 20th century. Of the top 20, eight have been built since 2000.

“Generally, so-called ‘golden ages’ in yachting have followed bullish trends in global financial markets,” explains Dubai yacht broker Nick Earles. “Significant liquidity in the market often leads to the acquisition of toys that complement newly acquired wealth. Examples of previous golden ages are the post-Depression boom in the 1920s; the re-emergence of economies and those driving them post-World War II; and the emergence of icons in the entertainment industry and sport, with the unparalleled amounts of money they earn. More recently, we’ve seen the IT bubble in the US and the general increase in the price of oil and its related industries.”

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Given the historical trend, it's not surprising that the names of Russian oil tycoon Roman Abramovich, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and Oracle's Larry Ellison appear as current owners of some of the world's largest and most sophisticated yachts. What might raise eyebrows, however, is that Abramovich and Allen own not one, but two yachts each in the top 20. According to *Hello!* magazine, it's not unknown for the Russian to take more than one yacht on vacation just "to widen his dining options".

Today, Marilyn's mansions have been joined by floating palaces. You wonder what she would say about modern, high-tech "mega-yachts" such as Abramovich's Dhs400 million plus *Pelorus*, built by the German Lürssen shipyard in 2001. At 115 metres, *Pelorus* is 12 metres longer than the football pitch at Stamford Bridge, the home of the Russian's beloved Chelsea, and 16 metres longer than the legendary *Christina*.

If Marilyn was around to take a 'Roman holiday', she would arrive by helicopter instead of a sea-going launch (*Pelorus* has two landing pads), and would find on board the sort of gadgets and security personnel that in Onassis' day were associated only with James Bond stories and countries with sizable defence budgets. As a guest of Allen, Marilyn could go for an underwater excursion in the 10-man submarine that operates from his 127 metre, Dhs735 million yacht *Octopus*, safely protected from the paparazzi by the ex-Navy SEALs employed in Allen's crew.

As large and impressive as *Pelorus* and *Octopus* are, however, they are eclipsed in size by a new yacht begun in Germany by Blohm & Voss and Lürssen, and completed in Jebel Ali Port, here in the United Arab Emirates: *Dubai*, formerly known as *Platinum*, the new yacht owned by HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai.

At 160 metres plus, *Dubai* is easily the longest yacht in the world, a title previously held by the 147 metre *Prince Abdul Aziz*, the Saudi royal yacht, which was built in 1984. By way of comparison, the recently decommissioned British royal yacht, *Britannia*, is 125 metres long.

Dubai is so long that if it were stood on its stern on Sheikh Zayed Road, it would be taller than the Dusit and Fairmont hotels (both of which are 153 metres) and the 149 metre World Trade Centre Tower, which at one time was the tallest building in the Middle East. Yes, it's that big. It looks stunning, too. "For sheer beauty it's up there with classic, iconic motor yachts like *Christina*, and is setting the trend for mega-yacht class vessels," says Earles.

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Another yacht with Dubai connections, hailed by *The Superyachts* journal as “A design masterpiece” and “A classic of its time”, is fashion designer Giorgio Armani’s *Mariu*. Armani, who is to open a flagship Armani Hotel in Emaar Properties’ Burj Dubai – the tallest building in the world – in 2008, named the 49 metre mega-yacht after his mother. “*Mariu* is my very first boat and also my last – you only do one in a lifetime,” he says.

According to Earles, “To own or not to own is an eternal question and one too complex and individual to generalise.” Modern divas who don’t get invites to holiday on yachts such as *Pelorus* or *Octopus* opt not to own, but to rent. Mariah Carey’s choice is the 52 metre *Big Eagle*, built in Japan in 1980 and refitted three times since, most recently in 2004. For Dhs459,375 it’s hers – or yours – for a week.

In Armani’s case, it was his desire for a yacht that reflected his good taste that prompted him to switch from renting to owning. “I had chartered boats for years, but there was always something I didn’t like. Dreadful carpet everywhere or furnishings I hated. So I decided to buy one and take care of the design myself,” he says. Predictably, *Mariu*’s gorgeous interiors are furnished with items from the Armani Casa range.

And therein lies the appeal of owning a motor yacht. “It’s what I call ‘the luxury snail syndrome’,” says Earles. “The ability to travel surrounded by a constant reflection of one’s personal success, coupled with an instinctive desire to demonstrate – to those that care – an acknowledged level of achievement. Movies and TV only offer fleeting glimpses of the lifestyle. Only magazines offer the opportunity to linger, absorb – and dream.”

For those who dream of living like Armani, *Mariu* – like *Big Eagle* – is available for charter when the Italian designer isn’t using it. Up to 12 guests can be accommodated in six cabins for cruises in the Mediterranean or Caribbean. Available for Dhs734,081 per week through Inter Yacht Charter (www.interyachtcharter.com), the price includes a professional and experienced crew – but not Signor Armani.

Alternatively, if you fancy following in the footsteps of Marilyn, why not charter *Christina* itself? After Onassis died in 1975, the yacht – which was originally built in Canada in 1943 as a World War II convoy escort – was donated to the Greek government. In 1998, Onassis family friend John Paul Papanicolaou, who had sailed on *Christina* as a youth, bought it and began a three-year, Dhs184 million restoration, which involved meticulous research, engineering and craftsmanship.

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Renamed *Christina O*, in 2001 the fabled yacht was reintroduced in her original splendour. Today, she's available to charter through EastMed Yachting Partners (www.eastmedyachting.com) for between Dhs211,539 and Dhs305,551 per week, plus expenses, depending on the number of guests, up to a maximum of 36.

According to Earles, "Few modern yachts truly reflect the character of the owner in the same way as the classic 'ladies' did." In the best-selling novel *Churchill's Triumph*, which opens and closes on board *Christina*, British author Michael Dobbs writes that because of Onassis' opulent taste and renowned hospitality his yacht, "was almost as much of a legend" as Churchill himself.

Perhaps the most famous spot on board remains Ari's Bar, where in 1957 the British war leader first met JFK, who was still four years away from the White House. As in the Lapis Lounge, the main dining room and the onboard cinema, Onassis' touches have been retained in the bar, including the stools that he famously covered with whales' foreskins. We can only guess what Marilyn said about those.

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