

From Backyard to Big Time - Gold Coast Yachts

By Chris Goodier

In the 1970's, Roger Hatfield built a 31-foot trimaran in his Tacoma Park, Maryland back yard, his wife learned celestial navigation, and they sailed off to the Caribbean for a few years.

"I had a passion and chased after it," says Hatfield.

Around the same time, Richard Difede left New Jersey to winter in Mexico, sought a place where "people were half sane and spoke English," and came to St. Croix owning nothing but his surfboard, backpack and dog.

After Hatfield and Difede met through a mutual friend, they began building a personal cruising boat, basing themselves at the Salt River Marina in exchange for cleaning up and managing the place. Then fate stepped in, in the form of Captain Heinz Punzenberger, who needed a new boat to take tourists on day excursions to Buck Island. He asked Hatfield and Difede to design and build *Teroro II*, still a familiar sight in St. Croix waters 21 years later.

"It's sailing every bit as well as ever," says Hatfield of the 42' trimaran which has never needed structural work despite being flipped upside down by Hurricane Hugo in 1989 and hit by lightning after a power surge at Green Cay Marina in 2002.

"It's been such a good relationship," says Mary Punzenberger. "We had no signed contract—my father was alive at the time and he thought we were crazy. It's a very good boat."

One good boat led to another, Gold Coast Yachts was incorporated, and this year Difede and Hatfield began work on boat number 80. Satisfied repeat clients are the norm—Red Sail Sports, a charter company operating catamarans in Aruba, Grand Cayman, and Hawaii, has taken delivery on seven so far. What's the Gold Coast secret of success?

"A lot of boats in the day charter business are racing boats or cruiser boats which don't have passenger spaces," says Difede. Hatfield's catamaran designs incorporate safety features, like sails and rigging placed away from passenger areas, and comfort features like sun roofs and steps to the sea. Speed is a consideration, too—Gold Coast's 54' motor sailers operate at around 25 knots under power or sail.

Hatfield's ideas, now widely copied by competitors, came from listening to customers and employees and taking into account each client's budget and requirements.

"Roger's job has been to synthesize all of that," says Difede, who handles the business end. "That's why people come to us." As in a good marriage, each partner credits the other with the success of the business.

“He’s the backbone of the whole thing,” says Hatfield about Difede. “He deals with the numbers with dollar signs. He’s more creative than I am in many ways.”

Realizing early on that they could not rely on itinerant sailors for skilled help, the two gradually trained their own work force of 27 people. With this team they will build six boats in the next 12 months while holding deposits from four or five clients on a waitlist. Besides commercial sailing catamarans, Gold Coast builds Wave Piercers used for water taxi and ferry services around the Caribbean.

Although they’ve earned their way into the big time, Difede and Hatfield still run a lean operation, working out of a trailer, sheds, and shipping containers. Three boats are in progress at any one time, and the average price per boat approaches \$1 million as costs for time and materials increase.

Space constraints prevent Difede and Hatfield from building more boats per year and they think about moving. First, though, they will wait to see if the government of the U.S. Virgin Islands changes Economic Development Commission laws to allow more than 20 years of benefits—if not, their tax incentives will end this year along with the ability to run a profitable business.

Until they get word, they’ll keep messing around with boats on the banks of a river where Columbus sailed in 1493 and where they created a work world that they say has been a blessing. Rich Difede likes the maturity the work brought to his former tropical backpacking life.

“It has been a great place to force you to grow up,” he says.

And Roger Hatfield, who chased after his passion? He’s still finding it in a St. Croix boatyard.

“Anything we want to learn in life, we can learn it here,” he says.

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