

## **Caribbean Boatbuilders Taking Unique Designs Worldwide**

**Modern boatbuilding companies have taken over in the Caribbean and are producing distinctive boats that can compete worldwide.**

*By Carol Bareuther*

### **CARIBBEAN**

It used to take a year and a half to construct traditional wooden trading schooners on the island of Carraicou, a practice dating back nearly two centuries, but modern boatbuilding companies have taken over in the Caribbean and are producing unique boats that can compete worldwide.

However, remote locations, difficult shipping options and inexperienced work forces may limit future growth potential.

These difficulties are not preventing companies from being on the cutting edge of design and technology, which in turn is leading to success in certain niche markets.

Beginning with a focus on small trimarans, St. Croix's Gold Coast Yachts has progressively built bigger, more luxurious, day-charter catamarans, and holds the US patent for the power multihulls known as wave piercers.

A wave piercer is a member of the displacement non-planing catamaran family. These boats are fuel efficient, especially in the 10- to 25-knot range, because of long, slim extended hulls, which avoid generating surface waves and greatly reduce the slamming experienced in conventional craft.

This design came about because of the need for relatively fast inter-island craft that could handle the Caribbean's rough sea conditions without burning a lot of fuel, which is expensive.

Not incidentally, the passengers aboard these craft are often vacationers who wouldn't put up with an uncomfortable ride.

A number of Gold Coast wave piercers have been built as yachts, and some are used as commercial ferries for resorts in areas with rough sea conditions, like those found in the Virgin Islands. Ferries are operating at the Hyatt Hotels in Grand Cayman and Aruba; the El Conquistador in Puerto Rico; the Atlantis Resort in the Bahamas; Little Dix Bay in Virgin Gorda; and a Hilton in Hawaii.

## **Finding a niche**

"We've taken the basic concept of a catamaran and moved it to the next level," says Rich Difede, president of Gold Coast.

More traditional catamaran builders like UK company Prout Catamarans Ltd., which was recently purchased by Quest Marine based in Florida, say they aren't worried by niche companies like Gold Coast.

Prout, which has built more than 4,500 catamarans, is a production builder not interested in the one-off market, says Rupert Knox-Johnston, Prout sales and marketing.

Gold Coast boats are considered to be excellent for the day sail charter trade, says Bob Carson with British Virgin Islands company Southern Trades Yacht Sales. The fact that the boats are US-built makes them ideal for clients wishing to charter in the United States, and the few boats that hit the used market sell quickly at high prices.

With gross profits of US\$2.2 million in 1999, the 35-employee Gold Coast Yachts recently completed its 56th vessel.

Fast, lightweight performance sailboats utilizing a patented rudder design are the niche for Soca Sailboats, Ltd., a five-year-old shipyard in Port of Spain, Trinidad.

Soca has produced 30 of its Henderson 30s, a one-off 10.7-metre design and the company is looking at doing an 11-metre racer/cruiser, according to owner and builder Paul Amon.

Key among the Henderson's design features is a 26-pound variable-aspect rudder assembly (VARA) made of carbon fiber that improves speed and handling. Henderson and Amon jointly own the patent for the VARA.

In 1998, Amon opened Soca Spars, dedicated to building carbon fiber masts and booms for the Hendersons. Revenues for the 14-employee company have averaged between US\$1 million to US\$2 million annually, Amon says.

## **Labor and marketing issues can be difficult**

Duty-free export to the United States, Canada and Europe is one advantage for Caribbean boatbuilders, says Amon, but shipping issues can be difficult.

The great distance from the Caribbean to mainstream markets in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand can add a lot to the cost of a boat, not to mention the vagaries of duties, customs fees and the costs of meeting import regulations like the Conformité Européenne (CE) certification required on boats to be sold in Europe.

Even within the Caribbean there can be problems. Norma Prudhon of Nicholson Yacht Sales in Antigua says her company had to pay high importation costs when it ordered some "Pirogue" boats from Soca several years ago.

Labor issues are a mixed bag. Trinidad has a labor force capable of being trained, and the labor rate is favorable, Amon explains, but investing time and money in professional education for staff can be challenging.

Amon says this effort is necessary to keep turnover low and staff dedicated to producing a quality product.

The distance between the building facilities and potential customers is usually large, "and that discourages the tire-kickers," Difiede notes. The distance also makes warranties more formidable to honor.

The brisk winds and battering seas that are a constant feature of the Caribbean provide the perfect testing grounds, Difiede says.

The success of Caribbean boatyards has not gone unnoticed, and order books appear to be more than full with customers worldwide.

Continued evolution in production and design technology are on the drawing board for both Gold Coast and Soca, and like many boatbuilding companies, both are going for ever-bigger designs with higher performance than in the past.

Difiede says Gold Coast is capable of five different projects a year. In the works are custom 19.8-metre and 20.1-metre foam and glass catamarans for private use, a 25.2-metre wave piercer, and a 23.8-metre motorsailor with carbon fiber mast and twin 420-horsepower engines.

Though Gold Coast historically has used composite wood epoxy exclusively, it is now branching out into a hybrid of wood/epoxy and vacuum-bagged wood, foam and glass, or all foam and glass.

Customers, who have ranged from as far away as Europe, Africa and New Zealand, are concerned with "maximum weight savings with minimal cost increases," Difiede says.

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