

International Magazine Features St. Croix Boatbuilders

By Susan Ellis

Gold Coast Yachts is featured in the spring edition of *Professional Boatbuilder*, an international publication that recognized the St. Croix-based boatbuilders for their high-quality engineering and craftsmanship, sleek recognizable silhouette and successful business operation.

Gold Coast Yachts was incorporated in 1985 and founded by Roger Hatfield and Richard Difede who had been partners since 1980. In 2008, they had 60 employees and currently there are 44 who are launching the 94th Gold Coast vessel this weekend. The “Soul Rebel” will sail to Jamaica to become the fifth in the Sandals and Beaches Resort’s fleet of Gold Coast yachts.

Hatfield said “Soul Rebel” is one of the less expensive day charter models at a price of \$600,000. In the past, the boats have ranged from \$450,000 to \$2 million for some of the private yachts and range in length from 50-80 feet.

The signature look of a Gold Coat yacht is the cabin line, side profile and the underwater profile, Difede said. Hatfield said function and simplicity are more important than style and feels the simple lines create the beauty of a GC vessel.

“Style adds weight, cost and nothing important. I think there’s elegance in simplicity,” Hatfield said.

Sailors and charter companies seem to agree. The other 93 St. Croix-manufactured catamarans can be found throughout the Caribbean, Hawaii, Florida, Texas, Maryland, Martha’s Vineyard, Costa Rica and Rifle Colo. The partners estimate that a quarter of a million people sail on Gold Coast yachts every year.

It takes four months to build a GC yacht. The first month and a half, the parts are crafted at a 44,000 square foot warehouse at the Roebuck Industrial Park and moved to the Salt River operation for assembly, which takes another six weeks. Then the vessel spends a month at the dock being commissioned. During the last month, the boat is fitted with rigging, electricity, plumbing, etc. and tested. Difede said they try to have three boats under construction at the same time. One in the warehouse, one at Salt River and one at dock.

Hatfield, who is the company’s design engineer, said he thinks the company was chosen for the spotlight in *Professional Boatbuilder* because the publishers recognize their expertise. Hatfield grew up sailing with a naval architect father and was trained in engineering. He said he learned good building and design

skills by building and maintaining a trimaran he and his wife sailed for two years before settling on St. Croix.

“I was sailing in my mother’s womb,” Hatfield said.

Professional Boatbuilder magazine has hosted the International Boatbuilders Exhibition and Conference (IBEX) for the last decade or so and both Difede and Hatfield have been presenters at the symposium. Hatfield spoke at three conferences on boat design and Difede has talked about business practices, management and employees at four or five workshops, he said. Difede described the IBEX as a small version of Miami Boat Show, for builders, with more than 100 vendors and 50 workshops over a three-day period.

“We fit into what they’re trying to write about and I think we deserved to be written about,” Hatfield said.

Being adaptable and willing to build whatever style of boat a buyer demands is one reason Difede thinks the magazine chose to feature Gold Coast. The company specializes in building day sail catamarans, cruising yachts, power cats, ferries, wave piercers, snorkel and dive boats and excursion vessels. After developing a new model, they just submitted a bid to build the St. Thomas-St. John ambulance boat.

Local boats include Teroro II and Renegade on St. Croix, three cats on St. John and seven on St. Thomas including three water taxis. Under construction is an 80-foot private yacht for a sailor who lives in London.

“The company can shift on a moment’s notice. Our designs are consistent and adaptable but we’re not stamping out Hershey bars. We’re not on the forefront but we’re close to the cutting edge,” Difede. “For decades they’ve (*Professional Boatbuilder*) been writing about how to screw this into that. Now the human component is the focus.”

As the chairman of the federally-funded VI Workforce Investment Board, Difede has more human resources experience and knowledge than most boatbuilders. Not only does Gold Coast offer a two and a half year on-the-job training program, but Difede is working with the VI Department of Labor to re-introduce a nationally-approved mariner’s curriculum into the St. Croix high schools. There is a marine technical program at Ivanna Eudora Kean High School on St. Thomas but the program on St. Croix closed when the teacher left the island, Difede said.

The VI Workforce Investment Board, formed in 1998, acts as an advisory team to the governor on workforce issues in the territory and was “created to consolidate, coordinate and improve employment, training, literacy and vocational

rehabilitation programs,” according to the board’s Web site. Difede said Gov. John de Jongh Jr. and personnel at the DOL are aware that boat building and repair is one of the top 10 jobs in the Virgin Islands in high demand and with some of the highest wages.

The *Professional Boatbuilder* is available online and by subscription. Difede said marine-related companies can qualify for a free subscription and the magazine is sold on the newsstand.

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