



# Sailing to success

How Dutch sailing yacht builder Claassen's recent acquisition by Vitters will make them stronger, savvier and even more successful

Charl van Rooy

Based in the quaint town of Zaandam in the Netherlands, Claassen Shipyards is one of the most highly respected sailing yacht builders in the world. Celebrating 30 years in business last year, the past three decades have seen the company go from strength to strength. From gaining fame on the race circuit with their almost-unbeatable flat bottomed yachts in the early 90s, to producing some of the world's most beautiful classic yachts following the J-Class revival several years ago, Claassen quality and reputation have seemingly never faltered.

One of the biggest changes to come in recent times, however, appeared earlier this year in January, with the announcement that the shipyard has been jointly acquired by Vitters and the Claassen Management. A purely strategic move, both yards will retain their brand identities whilst at a management level, Claassen and Vitters will make and assess decisions collaboratively. There will be close ties in project management, with the two yards working with the same suppliers and contractors in the Netherlands.

Here we talk to Claassen's CEO, Joachim Kieft, who sheds a little more light on their new, fruitful relationship with Vitters, the importance of the regatta scene, and how the sailing yacht market can be made more attractive to prospective owners.

Can you tell us about the changes that have been happening at Claassen this year regarding your relationship with Vitters?

After the announcement during the Düsseldorf show we have received a lot of positive feedback from Claassen owner's as well as prospective clients. Claassen and Vitters will keep their own brand name and identity where Claassen will focus on the classic designs and Vitters will continue the more modern designs. For our clients, Claassen will remain Claassen and Vitters will remain Vitters. Both shipyards have their own unique qualities and we will share knowledge and manpower so both Vitters and Claassen gain from the new relationship. The facilities

will remain the same, but if the demand gets bigger, size-wise, then we would increase capacity.

How will Vitters benefit from this venture?

Together we can offer a wider range of super-yachts - from 20 up to 90 metres. At Claassen a client can still build a custom built 20 metres for a competitive price, but when a repeat client would like to build a yacht which is too big for the capacity of Claassen, this client would have the yacht built at Vitters. Claassen has a small overhead with short communication lines and a hands on management which our clients like but we also realise that there are limits to our company set-up.

With our new set-up there are also possibilities that Green Marine would build the hull, Vitters would do the engineering and Claassen the carpentry work. So we can offer a larger range of services, custom designed for our clients.

Do you think something needs to change in the industry to make the sailing yacht market more attractive to owners?

Yes, and there are a lot of things that could be done. The importance of a good service network is absolutely underestimated. I see a lot of shipyards who try to look after their clients, but not to the level where owners expect their service to be. They all have very exclusive cars and in the automotive industry service is a much bigger part of the whole business model. The super-yacht industry can definitely increase that quality of level of service. The automotive industry is a good model for that, but not everything is transferrable.

Do you have any plans in motion to change that aspect of the industry at Claassen?

We will definitely increase our service network. We have a base in Palma, we are currently looking into the best location for remain Vitters. Both shipyards have their own unique qualities and we will share knowledge and manpower so both Vitters and Claassen gain from the new relationship. The facilities



“ When a client is happy with our product, he is the best part of my sales team ”



be close to zero, so you have to make sure you don't build the yachts too complicatedly, but if there is an issue, you should be able to have technical guys from the shore fixing an issue, or parts that are available worldwide. No matter where you are in the world. Time is the only thing you can't buy with money, and most of our owners have very little to spare.

Is the regatta scene important to you?

Yes, it's the fun bit. Our clients like to participate, to combine their competitive DNA with the fun of sailing with their friends and family and the ambience at the event. It's also a social event where you have the chance to talk to other owners and combine a bit of business with pleasure. For shipyards it's great to have your yachts racing together, and owners feel as though they are part of the Claassen family. A few years ago we had five Claassen super-yachts in the SuperYacht Cup and we received a lot of very positive feedback. That's also very important in regards to service. When a client is happy with our product, he is the best part of my sales team.

The majority of the people you employ already have a sailing background. Do you feel this is an important aspect of Claassen?

The project managers all must know how to sail. How can you build a sailing yacht if you don't know how to sail? Would you ever buy a car from somebody without a driver's license?

It also gives a lot of trust to the owners, as well as the skippers. We bring this kind of philosophy into every part of the build. I told a client that I couldn't meet because I needed to do sea trials and he asked, 'You do it yourself?' I said, 'Yes, why not?' We stand behind the product and how it is built. The client said to me: 'Now I know I'm at the right shipyard.' I hadn't really thought about it, because it just makes sense to me.

Can the super-yacht industry learn more from the automotive industry?

It's a good model, but not everything is transferrable. Every car on the market has been tested over and over before the first car would be sold, and then of course with the production line model generating vast quantities of the product, it's a completely different ball game.

With yachts at Claassen, of course we meticulously test the systems and take time to do extensive tests during sea trials on each individual vessel, but as 95% of the yacht is hand-made, you can imagine that small mistakes can be made. Our clients understand that, but it's important how you deal with it and that you don't walk away from it. Either way, I prefer the beauty of simplicity when it comes to our yachts, which minimises the potential for technical error.

What are you working on right now?

We are now at construction number 152, so we've delivered around 60 vessels to date. Under construction we have a 90' wooden classic, we just delivered a 127' Atlantide, which won the World SuperYacht Awards in the 30 to 40 metre Sailing Yacht category. We have a lot of projects on the drawing board, ranging from 24 to 65 metres.

## R&R with Astilleros de Mallorca

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The strategically located island of Mallorca has become known for its capabilities in the refit and repair of super-yachts cruising throughout the Mediterranean. Be it a quick summer pit stop or extended winter period, a long list of high profile super-yachts call Mallorca home for a large part of each year's summer and winter seasons. One of the oldest facilities of its kind on the island is the shipyard known as Astilleros de Mallorca. Company Commercial Manager Stefan Enders showed us around the shipyard and told us everything there is to know about the refit business in this super-yacht hub.

The shipyard has been around since 1942. Has the company always specialised in the repair of vessels?

The shipyard originally focussed on the construction of a great variety of vessels. In the early 90s however we adapted to the requirements of the up and coming market of luxury yachts. The conversion to a full service shipyard, specialising in refit and repair, was therefore a natural step for us.

Do you have any competition here on the island?

We are unique, but so are other companies on the island. Our wider vision is to make Mallorca the place to be for a super-yacht. This island has a very high level of professionals, specialists and many of the top companies in the yachting industry have a branch office in



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Palma. Competition makes us keep our standards high and prices fair, ensuring that Mallorca goes on developing as a refit and repair reference centre for the entire Mediterranean region.

You recently expanded into the STP shipyard. How are the two companies connected?

Initially it seemed a contradiction, but it is well known how inspiring, challenging and innovative healthy competition can be. Back in 2008, Astilleros de Mallorca opened a small office within STP with a team dedicated full time to the production of boats. From this point on it has continued to boom, annually increasing its offices and workshop space. Last year alone, the Astilleros team in STP successfully carried out projects on over 110 yachts.

What was the reason for the expansion?

For Astilleros de Mallorca, the STP area represents the ideal opportunity to expand our business premises, increasing our haul-out and working capacities. Eight years have gone by and nowadays all the efforts, investments and hard work that we have put in, have resulted in a unique all round service centre with mechanical, metal, piping and electrical workshops.

Would you say most of your business is coming from repeat clients, or new ones visiting for the first time?

We are honoured with a long list of loyal clients. We believe that the healthy balance between pleasure and work is very important to our clients. The island offers all the comfort and facilities a captain would want. It doesn't feel like an industrial area; it feels more like a home.

Palma is a big sailing yacht hub in the

Med. What makes this area so attractive to sailing yachts?

Just take a look at the Palma SuperYacht Show and you will get to see the most beautiful sailing yachts in the world. The Balearics offer spectacular sailing grounds that are easy to navigate with no major challenges and generally smooth weather making it a joy for both sailing and stunning motor yachts.

Do you have access to enough skilled workers based on a small island such as Mallorca?

This island has a very high level of professionals, specialists and the best companies in the yachting industry have a branch office in Palma. The steady flow of super-yacht traffic coming through Palma throughout the year has led to many industry professionals and skilled contractors establishing themselves here.

Does the refit business on the island get affected by the two cruising seasons?

Mallorca is the focal point for super-yachts running both Caribbean and Mediterranean seasons. In the past years we have noticed a change in the cruising habits of super-yacht owners, with some avoiding the crowded months of July and August in the Med, which has a direct affect on the yachts' yard period planning. Also some refits are being planned in phases to match with the client wishes.

What are your future plans? Any more expansions?

Our future plans are linked to the restructuring project of Palma's harbour. Our hopes are placed in a reallocation that would allow us to invest heavily in the installation of a Syncrolift to service all those larger super-yachts that today cannot be attended to in the Balearic Islands.

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