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The Superyacht

TRUTH • OPINION KNOWLEDGE • IDEAS & SUPERYACHT OWNER INSIGHT



OWNER

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François Fiat on the adventure, science and education at the heart of his new yacht.

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A latter day TINTIN

M/V *Yersin* is a custom yacht project like no other. Commissioned by French businessman and former racing driver François Fiat, she is designed to fulfil three core objectives: adventure, science and education. Justin Ratcliffe travelled to the Piriou shipyard in Concarneau, Brittany, just prior to her launch in January.

— WORDS BY JUSTIN RATCLIFFE

“To understand how *Yersin* came about we have to go back to my childhood,” says Fiat. “I grew up in Marseilles and often went down to the port to watch the ships coming and going. I was a big fan of *The Adventures of Tintin*, Jacques Cousteau and the early single-handed sailors such as Alain Gerbault. For me, there’s no adventure without a boat and that was the starting point for M/V *Yersin*. She’s more than a yacht project; she’s an ongoing quest.”

Yersin is a highly innovative 76.6m vessel designed to operate safely and comfortably in ambient temperatures of between -20°C and $+50^{\circ}\text{C}$, which is a first for a private yacht. A diesel-electric drive train is coupled to Schottel twin-propeller pods for full DP capability, augmented by a powerful pump jet instead of a bow thruster. The relatively shallow draft hull for navigating shoal waters is reinforced to Ice 1C criteria. Passenger Ship-certified with two laboratories, a media room, an infirmary, landing craft and an array of other winterised tenders, the result is a multi-purpose vessel that combines the comfort of a superyacht with the go-anywhere vocation of an explorer and the scientific facilities of a research ship.

During a press conference at the 2014 Monaco Yacht Show, Fiat described *Yersin* as a ‘*navire de voyage*’, which loosely translates as a ship for voyaging. In fact, he prefers to avoid the term ‘superyacht’ altogether and the M/V notation stands simply for ‘motor vessel’. Fiat’s discreetly cultured manner reflects his dislike of ostentation, which is why he wanted his yacht to blend in to her surroundings wherever she goes.

“Just as I wouldn’t wear a T-shirt and shorts to visit Notre Dame cathedral, nor do I want my yacht to have a visual or environmental impact on the places we want to visit, many of which are in

developing or ecologically sensitive regions of the world,” says Fiat.

Respect for the marine environment was at the top of his priorities as the first ambassador of La Belle Classe Superyachts, established by the Yacht Club de Monaco with the support of the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation to preserve our maritime heritage, respect naval etiquette and protect the marine ecology. All of these tenets had a direct influence on the design of *Yersin*.

The Clean Ship concept was coined at the 5th North Sea Conference in 2002 and aims to eliminate harmful operational discharges and emissions by designing and building vessels that are energy and resource efficient in their daily operation. The *Yersin* project has taken this message on board literally and uses a resin compound from Bolidt instead of teak on the exterior decks and minimal wood veneers inside the yacht (a safety measure already prescribed by SOLAS), while much of the engine room and technical spaces are dedicated to Clean Ship technologies. The vessel is able to stay offshore for 50 days in endurance mode and for 10 days with zero waste discharge with up to 40 people on board.

“We don’t drop a teaspoon of dirty waste water into the sea,” insists Captain Jean Dumarais, who compiled the spec list with his chief engineer during the two-year design phase before construction began. Instead, grey and black water is biologically treated and stored in holding tanks, where it is continuously zapped with UV to produce perfectly clean ‘technical’ water with zero bacteria content which can then be used as ballast water or for washing down the boat. Instead of biocide antifouling, the hull is treated with a non-toxic and self-cleaning silicone coating. A dry stack exhaust also means there is no soot and or oily slick in the water



associated with wet exhausts, and even the emergency generator has its own soot sinker.

Dumarais also captained Fiat's previous yacht, the 52m Benetti *Latinou* (now *Latitude*), a very different kind of vessel when you consider that as much as 70 per cent of the available space aboard *Yersin* is devoted to technical spaces and equipment.

"*Latinou* was not the boat I wanted to build," explains Fiat, whose taste for adventure has blossomed since he retired from a parallel career as a racing driver on the professional GT circuit. "She was a way of getting to know the industry and understanding how a large yacht is operated from a crew perspective. Beyond that, you usually have to do something twice to make sure it's halfway decent!"

As its first yacht project, the choice of the commercial Piriou shipyard represented a calculated risk. Several well known superyacht yards were approached, but most were unnerved by the vessel's sophisticated propulsion system and complex operational parameters. Fiat was keen to build in France and was impressed by Piriou's track record for building ocean-going tuna purse seiners and other SOLAS-certified working vessels, often with diesel-electric propulsion, capable of remaining at sea for weeks at a time. Possibly a

more romantic motive was the fact that the disassembled remains of Cousteau's famous *Calypso* can still be found at the Piriou shipyard after a restoration project stalled due to lack of funds.

"I thought it would be easier for a commercial yard to adapt to this type of vessel than a superyacht builder," says Fiat, a keen yachtsman who has raced in the Fastnet and other regattas. "They had the knowledge and the expertise and they were prepared to listen, whereas most shipyards want to do things their own way."

The shipyard's CEO, Pascal Piriou, adds: "In the fishing industry we deal a lot with owner-skippers who put their whole life into a project. As an experienced sailor, François was also knowledgeable and passionate. In the end we convinced each other that it would be a good idea to work together."

Fiat went to Piriou without middlemen in the form of brokers, naval architects or project managers. Instead, he chose to rely on the experience of his own captain and chief engineer along with the shipyard's in-house team of naval architects and technicians (designer Pierre Jacques Kubis was later brought in to incorporate the owner's vision into a set of comprehensive drawings). This provided a clear and direct line of communication undiluted by intermediaries, which in turn ensured that

Opening page: François Fiat, owner of M/V *Yersin*.

Above: Launching of M/V *Yersin*.

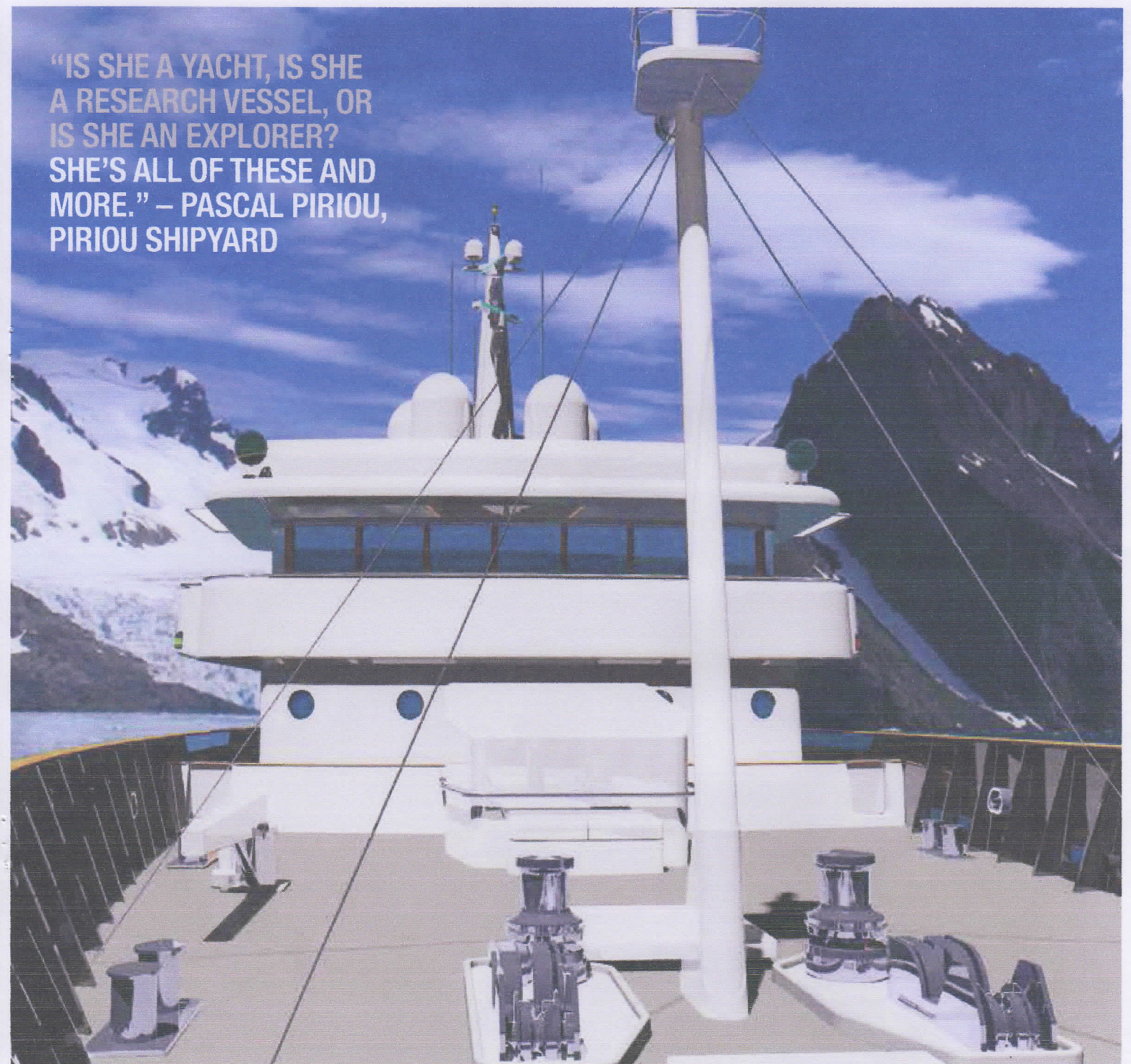
"JUST AS I WOULDN'T WEAR A T-SHIRT AND SHORTS TO VISIT NOTRE DAME CATHEDRAL, NOR DO I WANT MY YACHT TO HAVE A VISUAL OR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ON THE PLACES WE WANT TO VISIT, MANY OF WHICH ARE IN DEVELOPING OR ECOLOGICALLY SENSITIVE REGIONS OF THE WORLD."
— FRANÇOIS FIAT, OWNER OF M/V *YERSIN*



JUSTIN RATCLIFFE

This page: (above) Pascal Piriou, Captain Jean Dumarais and François Fiat, (below) a render of M/V Yersin.
Next page: (left) Yersin, under construction in the yard, (top right) Fiat named the yacht after physician, explorer and naturalist, Alexandre Yersin, (bottom right) Alexandre Emile Jean Yersin.

“IS SHE A YACHT, IS SHE A RESEARCH VESSEL, OR IS SHE AN EXPLORER? SHE’S ALL OF THESE AND MORE.” – PASCAL PIRIOU, PIRIOU SHIPYARD



Fiat retained control of both the design and the budget.

"I was looking for a fair deal," says Fiat. "I didn't want to kill the yard, but I also had a good idea of what the cost should be. We started with Piriou's already high commercial standards and then upgraded the specs. Do that with a superyacht shipyard and the pricing goes through the roof."

"The big question was whether we would be able to build such a multi-purpose vessel," admits Pascal Piriou. "Is she a yacht, is she a research vessel or is she an explorer? She's all of these and more."

Part of the challenge was to determine where the research vessel stops and the superyacht starts. In reality, the two concepts are so closely interlinked as to

be indistinguishable. *Yersin* has a cinema, gym, spa and two dining rooms, but she also has 'wet' and 'dry' laboratories and guests are expected to eat with the crew in a self-service canteen on a daily basis.

"Science is not the ultimate goal, but it can be a by-product," says Fiat. "She is a very comfortable research and explorer vessel, if you like. But the whole idea was that I didn't want to be limited to a category, which meant building outside the box."

Beyond her specifications and amenities, *Yersin's* exterior styling perfectly captures her multi-purpose personality. The functional lines and round portholes resemble the kind of small but seaworthy cargo ships that once plied the oceans, perhaps with a few paying passengers on board. Two

fictional vessels borrowed from Hergé's *Tintin* also provided inspiration. The *Aurora*, aboard which the comic-book hero travelled to the Arctic with a group of scientists, recalls the yacht's expedition vocation (the *Aurora* had its own seaplane and *Yersin* is also equipped to carry such a plane on the upper aft deck), while the retro-styled funnel resembles the luxury liner *Scheherazade* that appears in the story *The Red Sea Sharks*.

M/V *Yersin* is not a vessel suited to all, or even the majority, of tastes. Few owners, for example, have the time or inclination to spend up to a week each month on site during a three-year construction period, as Fiat has done. Indeed, when *The Superyacht Owner* visited the build, Fiat was to be found





deep in the bowels of the ship with his wife, Geneviève, choosing fabrics for the crew quarters. But there is no doubt that he has thoroughly enjoyed the build process and Pascal Piriou sums up the experience with an elegant turn of phrase: “*Le chemin fait partie de la messe*”, meaning “The journey to church is part of the spiritual process”.

M/V *Yersin* is on schedule for delivery to her owner in May. Her cruise itinerary has yet to be decided, but far-flung destinations on the wish list include St Petersburg, Alaska, the Amazon, the Great Barrier Reef, the fiords of New Zealand, the St Lawrence River and the Great Lakes.

“I’m very proud that *Yersin* has been built in France,” concludes Fiat. “All our friends and relatives didn’t think we had the skills, but we found them all in Piriou. Would I do it all over again? Let’s just say that building a yacht is like having a child: you never know, you might want another one.” □



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WHAT'S IN A NAME?



Alexandre Emile Jean Yersin (1863-1943) was a Swiss and naturalised French bacteriologist and student of Louis Pasteur who discovered the bacillus responsible for the bubonic plague (*Yersinia pestis*). Yersin left Europe in 1890 to serve as a physician aboard steamships operating off the coast of Indochina and later spent four years exploring inland. He was a pioneer in the cultivation of rubber in south-east Asia and also introduced quinine trees for treating malaria. He died in Vietnam (where, incidentally, Piriou also has a shipyard) and is still remembered to this day. Streets were named after him, and his former home in the coastal city of Nha Trang is now a museum. François Fiat felt the achievements of the physician, explorer and naturalist best captured the core values of adventure, science and education and led to his naming the yacht in Yersin’s honour.

