

THE METRE WARS

Azzam, at just over 180m, currently the largest yacht in the world, owned by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the President of the UAE and Emir of Abu Dhabi. *Opposite*: Winston Churchill on board Aristotle Onassis's *Christina O*, 1961; an aerial view of the same yacht today

SOME GIRLS ARE BIGGER THAN OTHERS

The humble yacht is so over. First came the superyacht. Next, she went mega. Then—just when you thought this show couldn't get any bigger, badder or more billionaire-fabulous—along came the gigayacht. By ALAN HARPER

THE

he *Iron Pasha*, one thousand five hundred tons, two hundred and fifty feet long, steel-built by Feadship of Holland in 1987 to the specifications of her present owner..." Thus John le Carré introduces readers of *The Night Manager* to his novel's real heroine: a sleek superyacht belonging to Richard Roper—Englishman, arms dealer, and "the worst man in the world".

EVEN ROMAN ABRAMOVICH'S *ECLIPSE*, AT A HUGE 533FT, IS NO LONGER TOP OF THE LIST

The book came out 10 years before Feadship launched anything that big, but le Carré is nothing if not prescient. In acknowledging the symbolism of the superyacht as a tool for the discreet deployment of power and wealth, he was simply looking ahead to a time when none of us would be able to hear the words "yacht", "oligarch" and "politician" in the same sentence without assuming something fishy was going on.

We are living in a boom time for the superyacht constructors. For their *über*-minted clientele, a financial crash or an economic recession is not so much a setback as an opportunity. In a perfect echo of Parkinson's Law, as the rich have got richer, yachts have expanded to absorb the money available for their acquisition. The numbers involved are eye-watering.

"I remember that the 315ft (96m) yacht *Vava II*, built at Devonport, had a budget of €1.8million just for the exterior lighting design," says London superyacht consultant Tim Thomas. "Which just goes to show how much money can be spent if you really want to."

According to Thomas, the best way to calculate the likely cost of a yacht is to look at its interior volume—gross tonnage—rather than its length or weight. "A lot depends on where it's built and the level of interior finish. Ballpark, I'd say a good 260ft (80m) yacht from a

top yard could easily cost €120million," he says. "At the Dutch yard Amels, for example, the typical build cost is €60,000 per gross ton. At Benetti in Italy it's €44,000, and at Sunrise Yachts in Turkey, it's €29,000." So a Limited Edition 188 from Amels, which is 58m long and 970 gross tons, would come out at about €58million. The Limited Edition 272, however, at 83m and 2,827 gross tons, could cost you a mind-altering €169million.

It's no wonder these queens of the seas are not called superyachts any more. Super doesn't begin to cover it. Clients for whom an 80m megayacht is merely a rung on the ladder of stratospheric ambition require linguistic hyperbole to match the extravagance of their expectations. Welcome to the era of the gigayacht.

"When the term 'megayacht' was coined back in the 1980s by George Nicholson, 80- to 100-footers (24m-30m) were considered big yachts," explains Diane Byrne of *Mega Yacht News*. "When I began covering them in 1993, yachts of about 100ft to 120ft (30m-36m) caught attention. Sure, there were larger yachts, but they were mostly anomalies."

The gigayachts of their day, these anomalies were actually some of the most alluring yachts afloat, and in many cases they still are. But not all of them started out that way. Constructed on the Thames at Poplar back in 1865, the Egyptian presidential yacht *El Mahrousa* was built as a royal paddle steamer for the Khedive. She officiated at the opening of the Suez Canal, and at 478ft (146m) remained the world's largest yacht for more than a century.

She doesn't get out much now, but if you're a summer regular on the Côte d'Azur you will certainly have encountered *Christina O*, a head-turning 325ft (99m) long and a yacht of such demure elegance that all the stories about her simply must be true, from

KLAUS JORDAN (AZZAM); TED RUSSELL/THE LIFE IMAGES COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES (CHURCHILL); CHRISTINA O (CHRISTINA O, AVAILABLE TO CHARTER—SEE CAMPERANDNICHOLSON.COM)



her illustrious guest list—Maria Callas, Greta Garbo and Elizabeth Taylor; Churchill, Sinatra and JFK—to those famous bar stools upholstered with whale foreskin. She was actually built as a frigate during the Second World War, after which the shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis bought her for peanuts and had her converted into the most luxurious vessel afloat, at a reported cost of \$4million.

The 262ft (80m) Norwegian royal yacht *Norge*, conversely, was built as a yacht but requisitioned to serve in the Royal Navy during the war, while her then owner, English industrialist Thomas Sopwith, got on with making fighters for the Royal Air Force. She was built by Camper & Nicholson, who had constructed the yachts *Endeavour I* and *II*, with which Sopwith had entered the America's Cup challenge in 1934 and 1937 respectively. *Philante*, as *Norge* was first named, was a family yacht with a crew of 42. She had a busy life until the war curtailed such idle pursuits, cruising to the Galápagos Islands twice and bringing back iguanas and penguins at the request

signed to be just a tiny bit longer than the previous longest."

If there is a limiting factor in the gigayacht era it is not money, or ambition, but capacity. There are few shipyards capable of building a yacht the size of *Azzam*. But customers who can't wait their turn for a bigger yacht might be persuaded to buy a second one—or even a third. "It's definitely the case that more owners are investing in a second yacht, although their reasons differ," Thomas says. "Sometimes it has been rivalry. Paul Allen and Roman Abramovich were classic cases of owners who wanted multiple large yachts. But if you looked at their mini fleets, they contained a range of vessels from go-anywhere explorers, such as Allen's *Octopus*, to high-performance specials such as Abramovich's gas turbine-boosted *Ecstasy*."

According to Thomas, there is a growing market for more specialized yachts for owners who might want one yacht to travel the world in and charter, and a second to keep close to home. Or they might invest in a support vessel to carry extra tenders, toys and equipment.

IF THERE IS A LIMITING FACTOR, IT IS NOT MONEY OR AMBITION—BUT SHIPYARD CAPACITY

of London Zoo. She also, no doubt, entertained plenty of politicians eager to place orders for aeroplanes.

Perhaps the most famous megayacht from the pre-megayacht era was another royal yacht, *Britannia*, built at the legendary John Brown shipyard on the Clyde, with an interior by Sir Hugh Casson and, in the true spirit of post-war austerity, designed to be converted into a hospital ship if necessary. Or that's what we were told. Strangely enough, it never was necessary. Today she is on display at Leith.

Britannia is a substantial ship, and at 412ft (125m) would still be among the largest yachts in the world—although not in today's top 10, because things have lately gone a bit crazy. "Back in the late 1990s I asked a designer what the next big step was, and he believed that soon, 150-footers (45m) were going to turn heads," remembers Byrne. "Then 200-footers (60m) became more prevalent. Fast-forward to today, and some shipyards focus primarily on super-size gigayachts, about 230ft (70m) and up."

And up. In the gigayacht era, the list of the world's biggest yachts is dominated by vessels of such gargantuan proportions that the Queen's old yacht could easily fit inside. In fact, *Britannia* would rank about 14th on the list, and even Roman Abramovich's *Eclipse*, at 533ft (162m), is no longer top. The latest masterpiece of marine engineering to ascend to this apex of opulence is the \$600million *Azzam*, built for the ruler of the UAE at Lürssen in Germany, and launched in 2013. She has six decks, measures 592ft (180m) from bow to beach club, and with a warship-style propulsion system of diesel engines and gas turbines is capable, reportedly—all details being shrouded in secrecy—of an impressive 30 knots.

Not only has the gigayacht industry lately shown itself more than equal to the task of finding owners with inexhaustible amounts of money, it has also proved adept at keeping them. One way, according to Tim Thomas, is to appeal to their competitive streak: "For some, there is an element of look-at-me, or one-upmanship," he says. "That's why we see sailing yacht projects with masts that are just two metres higher than the previous highest, and yachts de-

Propelled by the enthusiasm of these ultra-wealthy owners, the yacht industry has entered a new phase. Bigger yachts are more seaworthy, and more self-sufficient. They can go further and stay at sea for longer, while advances in communications technology mean that owners are more prepared to spend time on board. "This has had an impact on how owners use their yachts, facilitating longer periods on board and allowing owners to venture to more remote destinations," says Alev Karagulle, at yacht charter and brokerage firm Burgess. "The level of sophistication means that yachts can remain at sea with all manner of creature comforts provided for."

Gossip abhors a vacuum, and the absence of hard information about many of these floating palaces is no deterrent to the flocks of fanciful stories they attract, which often involve guns and rockets and other defensive equipment. "The rumours are exactly that: rumours," insists Byrne. "No yacht owner would ever give up the amount of space necessary to handle missiles or their firing system." Then what about anti-paparazzi lasers? "Fiction," she says. "Even if such a system existed, it would blind the photographer—just imagine the lawsuits." Sonic guns? These sound even more fanciful, but apparently they do exist—they're known as "long-range acoustic devices." "There are some quite large yachts owned by heads of state that employ safety and security technology developed for the military, so it stands to reason that other owners concerned about security would want similar protection," says Byrne.

When it comes to the tenders, toys and other fun features available aboard big yachts, the gossips are on firmer ground. Many of these vessels are on the charter market, where such playthings as Sea-Doos and slides are at least as important as a decent wine cellar. "*Rising Sun*'s basketball court was added at the request of her then owner, Larry Ellison," says Tim Thomas. "Since then, technology and the increasing size of the yachts have led to even wackier elements." So the 2015 Feadship *Savannah* has an underwater viewing lounge, while the 440ft (134m) *Serene* has a copper-clad "Nemo room" with a glass portal in the bottom of the hull, and a compart-

TIM GRAHAM: PHOTO LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES (BRITANNIA); REX/SHUTTERSTOCK (SUBMARINE); GETTY IMAGES NEWS (TENDER TO CHRISTINA O); COURTESY OF STARCKNETWORK (TENDERS TO A); MICHAL BAGINSKI (IMAGINE); MARK GREENBERG PHOTOGRAPHY (SPIRAL STAIRCASE); GUILAUME PUISSON (A)



WAKE UP

Clockwise from top left: the Royal Yacht *Britannia*; the yellow submarine on Paul Allen's *Octopus*; *Christina O*, with one of its tenders in the foreground; two Philippe Starck-designed tenders of his yacht *A*; a glass-sided pool on board *Imagine*, one of the craft designed by British studio Winch Design; the vertiginous spiral staircase on board *Christina O*; Starck's *A*—the ultimate Marmite yacht

ment next to the sauna where it actually snows. “Oceanco’s 90m *Moonstone* will have 300 backlit triangular panels so the entire hull can be set to shimmer to create a jaw-dropping interplay with the water,” he adds. “These things are limited only by an owner’s imagination, and willingness to invest in the design and technology required.”

Azzam carries a private submarine, and is by no means the only gigayacht to have one. Most examples of this latest must-have accessory are the mini subs for one or two people that you see displayed at the Monaco Yacht Show, but some are more substantial. Microsoft billionaire and conservationist Paul Allen has a 65ft sub—it’s yellow, naturally—in which he indulges his passion for the undersea world. Among many other toys, his 414ft (126m) yacht *Octopus* also has a remote-controlled deep-water submersible, which last year descended into the darkness of the North Atlantic to recover a ship’s bell belonging to the British battlecruiser HMS *Hood*, sunk in 1941. Now restored, the bell is on show at the National Museum of the Royal Navy in Portsmouth.

Unfortunately, Allen’s nautical expeditions have not always run so smoothly. His other megayacht, the 303ft (92m) *Tatoosh*, was

involved last January in a high-profile incident off the Cayman Islands that saw her accused of laying waste to a coral reef. Allen denied this, but funded the restoration anyway. While this shows that accidents can happen even to the best-intentioned billionaires, they are seldom as catastrophic as the sinking of the 204ft Turkish-built megayacht *Yögi* in the Mediterranean a few years ago, in circumstances which—according to an investigation by *Power & Motoryacht* journalist Bill Pike—remain inadequately explained. The seas were rough, there were no guests on board, the yacht took five hours to sink and fortunately all the crew were rescued by the Greek navy. Nevertheless, wrote Pike, the report by the French authorities—the yacht was French-flagged—served only to “roil the waters, pass on a few innocuous recommendations. . . and put an end to continued inquiry”.

Even a mystery of this magnitude pales beside the mystery of why some gigayachts look the way they do. Take *A*, for example—that’s what she’s called, just *A*—which, depending on your personal sense of aesthetic seamliness, is either the coolest yacht ever built, or the illegitimate offspring of the Millennium Falcon and a Type XXI U-boat. Either way, the 390ft (119m) craft, built in Hamburg by

Blohm & Voss, is quite unlike anything else afloat.

Her owner, Andrey Melnichenko, is soon to take delivery of an even weirder sailing yacht of the same name. Both were designed for him by Philippe Starck, a designer who, though he has a track record in boats, is mainly known for such diverse products as a three-legged citrus squeezer for Alessi and the Ghost plastic armchair. Alev Karagulle is a fan: “These trailblazing yachts are an expression of the highest form of individuality, and this is the main driver for their owners. It’s important that there are owners prepared to push the envelope, as this feeds creativity and has a trickle-down effect on what’s happening in yacht design. What seems radical today may seem less so in the future,” she adds, citing London’s Gherkin office block, the glass pyramid at the Louvre and Sydney Opera House. After *A*, Starck went on to design *Venus* for Steve Jobs.

Ever more outlandish projects are bound to see the light of day, because gigayacht owners are getting younger. As a new report

elements are the same,” says Jim Dixon at Winch. “A lot of the details are the same, and a good proportion of the general arrangement plan is the same, which helps reduce the time frame and make the project more efficient to engineer.” According to Dixon, these benefits can translate into a saving of six months on an Amels LE 212.

“It’s quicker, it’s a proven platform, and all have been delivered on time and on budget,” claims Caminada. Amels has so far delivered 20 LE 180s, and completed over 30 of these semi-custom yachts—a build rate for yachts of this size that was unheard of a few years ago.

It is not without risk for the shipyard. “It does mean putting several million euros upfront,” Caminada admits. Pressure to find a buyer increases as the build proceeds—as another Dutch shipyard recently found out. Heesen Yachts exhibited its latest project, a striking 153ft (47m) superyacht called *Elena*, on the glittering catwalk of

A WELL-RUN YACHT IS LIKE THE BEST HOTEL YOU CAN IMAGINE, WITH AN EVER-CHANGING VIEW

by Camper & Nicholson and the Wealth-X consultancy puts it: “A younger generation of wealthy individuals is now transforming the broader luxury landscape.” Because not only are “more than 20 percent of the world’s billionaires aged between 45 and 54, but there is a new wave of inter-generational wealth transfer happening from baby boomers to their heirs—a fact which is having a big impact on the state of luxury and yachting.”

Demand for gigayachts from people with plenty of money but little leisure time has led to the phenomenon of the off-the-peg superyacht, an idea pioneered in the 1990s by Benetti Yachts in Italy with its Classic series. Starting with a standard fibreglass hull and machinery package, there was enough variety of interior designs on offer to ensure that a Classic owner would never find himself moored alongside another one exactly the same. The first yachts measured only 115ft long, but such was the shipyard’s success with this series-production or “semi-custom” concept that Benetti’s 145ft Vision range is built to the same streamlined production principles.

Full custom shipyards, the traditional constructors of bespoke, one-off yachts in steel and aluminium, soon caught on. In Holland, Amels’s Limited Edition series starts at 180ft (55m) and proceeds upwards through six separate models. “We started in 2005 with a 52m, now known as the 180,” says the shipyard’s Victor Caminada. “It was a real game-changer.” Each model is designed on a standard platform, with no customer input required, so that the shipyard can start the build “on spec”. Where a big yacht such as Amels’s 242 (73m) would traditionally take four to five years from conception to launch, a Limited Edition owner can now take delivery in half that time—and, says Caminada, pay up to 30 percent less than they would for a similar yacht from a full custom yard.

The British studio Winch Design has been commissioned to work on interiors for three 212ft (65m) Limited Editions so far. Working on a series of gigayachts of the same size and shape can significantly speed up the design process, even with a fully bespoke interior created in full consultation with the client. “Some design

the Quai des Etats-Unis during the Monaco Yacht Show. She was the 10th of her type to be completed, with a bespoke interior and the same hull design, power plant and layout as her sister yachts. Just as at Amels, the build had begun long before a customer had signed the first cheque. But as work continued and still no buyer hove into view, the shipyard had little choice but to carry on, digging itself into an ever-deeper financial hole. It wasn’t until a few weeks before her scheduled launch that *Elena* was eventually sold, to a customer delighted to buy a brand new superyacht without having to wait for it. Everyone at the shipyard breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Superyachting, evidently, is not all plain sailing. When stories began to emerge in 2008 of discreet meetings off Corfu aboard the 238ft (72m) *Queen K*, they had all the irresistible ingredients of a tale by John le Carré: a Russian oligarch, an English billionaire, a whiff of political scandal, and power play between high-ranking members of the UK government. One senior British dignitary caught up in the fallout confessed that he only went along because he wanted to see what it was like on board. And who can blame him? A well-run superyacht is like the best hotel you can imagine, and with an ever-changing view through the window.

The yacht that John le Carré probably had in mind when he sketched his pen portrait of Richard Roper’s belonged to a real-life arms dealer. Adnan Khashoggi’s *Nabila* was launched in 1980 by Benetti in Viareggio, and at 282ft (86m) was the largest privately owned yacht in the world. Today, after several changes of name and ownership—she passed to the Sultan of Brunei, and was known as *Trump Princess* for a short, inglorious season—she isn’t even the largest yacht in Antibes. But with the understated elegance of her Jon Bannenberg design, she still exudes the effortless authority of old. She might cruise the globe, host glamorous parties and bring friends and families together, but with barely a glance she also reminds us of her original purpose: the discreet deployment of power and wealth.

The tales she could tell. □

The World’s Ten Largest GIGAYACHTS

AZZAM

592ft 6in (180.60m), Lürssen Yachts, 2013
Powered by gas turbine engines and with a top speed of 30 knots, she’s an engineering marvel with purposeful looks that echo its builder’s warship heritage.



ECLIPSE

533ft 1in (162.50m), Blohm & Voss, 2010
With three subs, two swimming pools and space for three helicopters, the flagship of Roman Abramovich’s fleet has 18 guest cabins and a crew of 70.



DUBAI

531ft 5in (162m), Platinum Yachts, 2006
Begun in Germany for young Prince Jefri of Brunei, *Dubai* had a troubled gestation until taken over and completed by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum.



DILBAR

511ft 9in (156m), Lürssen Yachts, 2016
Secrecy surrounds Alisher Usmanov’s latest monster megayacht, which left the Bremen

shipyard in May en route for delivery to her owner in Tangier.



AL SAID

508ft 6in (155m), Lürssen Yachts, 2008
Owned by Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman, *Al Said* has a top speed of 25 knots, while 154 crew ensure that her 70 guests are well looked after.



‘PROJECT 131’

491ft 1in (150m), Mariotti Yachts, 2016
Better known for cruise ships and commercial vessels, this Genoa shipyard is dipping its toe into the megayacht market in a very big way. At the time of going to press, this yacht was still shrouded in secrecy. . . Watch this space.



TOPAZ

483ft 1in (147.25m), Lürssen Yachts, 2012
Details remain closely guarded, but *Topaz* was built for Manchester City owner Sheikh Mansour at a reported cost of €400million.



PRINCE ABDULAZIZ

482ft 3in (147m), Helsingør Værf, 1984
Flagship of the Saudi fleet, she was the largest yacht in the world in her day, and is naturally rumoured to be equipped with fearsome defensive armament.



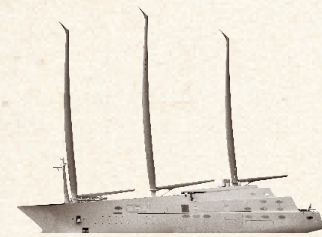
EL MAHROUSA

478ft 1in (145.72m), Samuda Bros, 1865
Built on the Thames as a paddle steamer, designed by Sir Oliver Lang and powered by coal, the Egyptian state yacht is a throwback to another world.



SAILING YACHT A

468ft 6in (142.80m), Nobiskrug, 2015
Known by various codenames during her build in Germany, she’s an oddity even by designer Philippe Starck’s standards.



GIOVANNI ROMERO (AZZAM); ANDALOU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES (ECLIPSE); ROSS LAND/GETTY IMAGES (DUBAI); GIOVANNI ROMERO/ THE YACHT PHOTO.COM (DILBAR); KLAUS JORDAN (AL SAID); PETER SEYFERTH/THEYACHTPHOTO.COM (TOPAZ); VARIO IMAGES GMBH & CO. KG/ ALAMY (PRINCE ABDULAZIZ); DAVID DEGENER/GETTY IMAGES (EL HORRIYA); EPA EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY BV/ALAMY (SAILING YACHT A)