

LOCAL BOATBUILDING

sets sail

From multi-hulled luxury yachts to cutting-edge catamarans, the South African boatbuilding industry is fast becoming an international force to be reckoned with. *By Louis-Marc Germishuys*

What might once have been considered a whimsical hobby of the rich and famous now constitutes a significant business opportunity, and South Africa's boatbuilders are buoyant. Their masterpieces are increasingly in demand world-wide, with the result that the local boatbuilding industry is showing no signs of slowing down.

The sector has enjoyed a marked increase in exports of late, spurred jointly by worldwide word-of-mouth, accolades gained at international boat shows and additional initiatives back home.

Boatbuilding in South Africa comprises an obscure yet dynamic business sector of the local economy. The industry generates an annual turnover of over R1-billion, which translates into an increase of 150% since 1994. Despite such phenomenal growth, the industry is still growing, with exports constituting 85% of the sector's overall turnover.

In response the industry has formalised itself and the South African Boatbuilders Business Council (SABBC) vigorously promotes and facilitates investment opportunities.

One such opportunity is the signing of an export contract between Cape Town's premier boatbuilder, Robertson and Caine, with a leading UK-based global charter company, First Choice Marine. The contract honours the ten year relationship between the two parties, and was spurred by Robertson and Caine's catamarans winning five international awards. Says Robertson and Caine Marketing Director, Ellian Perch: "These five highly prestigious awards signal recognition by the international marine industry of the high standards of design, innovation and build-quality produced by the company."

The R200-million order comprises the export of Robertson and Caine sailing catamarans, to be delivered in 2007, mooring this boatbuilder's position as South Africa's leading exporter of luxury yachts.

Says Perch: "This design will raise the bar for everybody in the international marine industry and the orders will promote job creation."



On the status of the industry at present, Perch says: "There are some hurdles we have to overcome. One is transport, since we are a long way away from our markets. At the moment we hope to do all our expansion in South Africa and to keep the jobs here in the Western Cape, something we believe is possible with help from the government."

The boatbuilding industry has also fostered considerable growth in related fields such as sail-making and mast-building, with leading mast-builder Sparcraft recently announcing a deal with New Zealand's Southern Spars and a massive drive in capital expenditure.

Also on the rise is the beautiful area of Knysna, which has always been associated with ships and shipbuilding. It too has re-entered the industry with the recent opening of the Knysna Yacht Company. Marketing Director Dries van Rooyen is especially up-beat about the future, noting that his company has invested heavily in moulds, marketing and infrastructure to be able to build as many as eight catamarans and motor yachts a year.

South African boatbuilders blew opposition out the water in the Strictly Sail section of the Miami International Boat Show in Florida in February of this year, winning a number of awards and millions of dollars in orders.

A luxurious 23 metre Silhouette 760 catamaran built by Matrix Yachts of Killarney Gardens, Cape Town, was named "star of the show" and sold for \$US3.95-million (about R26.5-million).

Another South African prize-winner was Woodstock-based Robertson and Caine, which won an innovation award for its 4 000 class catamarans.

For the first time South Africa had its own pavilion at the prestigious Miami show, which won the Best of Show Award for the outstanding quality of its design and products exhibited. While hundreds of potential customers and investors browsed the local exhibitions, 12 South African exhibitors displayed their wares, including eight boatbuilders displaying