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SUPERYACHT REFITS WITH A FRENCH TOUCH

Behind the glamour of owning a superyacht lies the constant maintenance work required to keep it shipshape and looking spectacular. Atlantic Refit Centre in La Rochelle on France's west coast, offers superyacht owners and captains a truly boutique maintenance experience for their yachts. Thanks to this, the company has attracted some of the most famous yachts in the world. Owner and CEO Stéphane Marcelli spoke to Richard Hagan about the company's ethos, achievements, and vision.

The superyacht industry is experiencing a massive boom period that shows no sign of stopping. The global market for superyachts was estimated to be worth \$64.1 billion in 2020 and is expected to reach \$84.7 billion by 2027. Yachts are being sold at a tempo never seen before, with some changing hands within weeks of being placed on the brokerage market.

The world has a massive appetite for superyachts and even in spite of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as a range of other factors, it's one that is not likely to end anytime soon.

But despite the industry's glitzy facade, superyachts are just like any other machine. They require constant maintenance, including servicing, new parts, paint jobs and occasionally complete refits of the interior or exterior. And when it's time for your superyacht to head back to a yard for any of those kinds of projects, Atlantic Refit Centre is ready to carry out that work.

Early stages

Stéphane Marcelli and his business partner founded Atlantic Refit Centre in 2006. With Mr Marcelli's background in new yacht build

management and with his partner's 20-plus year career in yacht painting, the superyacht space was an obvious target for their ambitions to create their own business.

The process of starting the company was organic, as Mr Marcelli explained: "The business began very simply. Both of us wanted to set up our own company and we felt that there was an opportunity in the yacht refit market. The port of La Rochelle wasn't being used much at the time, which created the possibility for us to develop a great facility there."

The company successfully negotiated for the use of the two drydocks. The bigger dock is 176m long and 22m wide, allowing the company to welcome yachts up to 140m in length.

Its first project was a 30m sailing yacht and it's a story that the team remembers well.

"The owner brought the yacht in only for a mast replacement," Mr Marcelli recalled. "It came out of our shipyard eight months later. We had done a full repaint, plus a full interior modification, and we'd changed the engines!" he added with a chuckle.

Since those early days in 2006 and that first hallmark project, Atlantic Refit Centre has enjoyed double-digit growth of between 10-15% every year, with the only exception being the global recession in 2008. With the rate of growth of the global superyacht fleet and the fact that superyachts are generally very well maintained, the company expects that it will easily maintain that level of growth going forward.

Project highlights

"We've had some great projects," smiled Mr Marcelli. "One of the most iconic was M/Y Skat when she came in for a paint job. Then in 2011, we undertook the biggest project to date for our company. We converted a 72m military frigate into an explorer superyacht. This was a huge project that took two and a half years to complete. The owner was very happy."

"Once this project was finished, we received a Boat International magazine award for 'Best Refit Project'. This was an important milestone that also cemented our reputation in the industry for this kind of project involving converting military ships."



into explorer yachts. It's an industry trend that is still important."

In 2017, Atlantic Refit Centre welcomed an especially iconic yacht to its yard – the explorer superyacht M/Y Andromeda (then named M/Y Ulysses).

"This is the biggest yacht we've worked on so far. We did a full fair and paint of her hull in a record time of three and a half months."

Another high-profile yacht client was the explorer yacht M/Y Enigma XK. This yacht – also a conversion from a military vessel – is based in Cape Town, South Africa where it takes guests to some of the far-flung corners of the world. "Since working on that yacht, we've had several requests for similar projects on similar vessels," noted Mr Marcelli.

All of its work on large conversion projects has lent Atlantic Refit Centre particular expertise for this market and it's one that the company will be focusing on in the future, confirmed Mr Marcelli.

"We know what the right decisions and strategies are in a conversion project; it includes having the skill to select the proper vessel to convert," he said. "Even when the client comes to us, we are able to make a critical analysis right at the beginning as to whether this is a project that we can deliver on time and to specification."

Boutique, tailored service

Atlantic Refit Centre's business strategy differs somewhat to the larger European yards who may work on up to a dozen yachts simultaneously.

"Our approach to refits and the way that we work with the client is really customised to each project," detailed Mr Marcelli. "It's not just a standard procedure process that you'd find in the biggest shipyards. We can't do more than two or three projects at a time and we don't actually want to hold many projects simultaneously. I want to stay small and take very good care of our clients."

"Our approach is to offer a very tailored level of service to our clients and to work in very close collaboration with them. For this reason, for the projects that we do choose to take on, we want to take very good care of the client."

But what does that level of service actually mean? Mr Marcelli was happy to elaborate.

"It starts from the beginning," he said. "Before we sign the contract, even when we are dealing with a refit, we try to establish a very close relationship with the client in order to get all the technical information we



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need. This allows us to develop a detailed quote and planning programme ensuring that when we present our offer, the client can visualise how the project will run before the contract is even signed.

"Our clients know that when they request a quote from us, we go into a lot of detail with it."

The company then sets up a comprehensive project management team to oversee every contract, with a team composition that directly reflects the desires of each client.

"We set up a custom project management team that reflects the client's own organisation," said Mr Marcelli, explaining that this approach ensures that the yacht's every need is correctly accounted for in every project.

"We want the chief engineer of the boat to speak with a chief engineer on our team.

We want the chief stewardess to speak to a steward on our team, the captain to our captain, and so on," outlined the CEO. "As a result, projects run very fluidly because it shortens the communication time between the role players. This is also the way I would like to be treated as a client; if the crew is happy then the owner is happy and we save time. It's much more efficient."

Sustainability and innovation

According to Mr Marcelli, sustainability and innovation are two of the biggest challenges facing the company and indeed the industry today.

"Sustainability is a growing demand from the client and it's a trend that we need to jump on," he asserted. "It's more of a challenge for newbuild yards and designers but

it's something we need to constantly be aware of too.

"Innovation is also key. In our business, that means being aware of new products and new technical solutions, and generally being up to date. We attend technical forums such as the Global Superyacht Forum every year in Amsterdam as well as some more specific forums on subjects like painting and so on. We pay attention to these events because we need to know what's going on and what products exist so that we can answer the client's needs and enquiries."

With the ongoing boom in the superyacht industry, added to Atlantic Refit Centre's unique geographical position and its focus on delivering top-notch customer-focused service, the future of the yard looks brighter than ever. ■