

THE 100FT SWEET SPOT

ELAINE BUNTING JOINS SOUTHERN WIND'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY REGATTA IN CAPRI AND FINDS OUT WHY THIS ITALIAN/AFRICAN COMPANY IS ON A ROLL

A small fishing float ahead as we make a tack back inshore is the only clue that we are fast approaching the entrance to the Grotta Azzura. The navigator points it out, the tiny opening to the famous Blue Grotto cavern that was once decorated with statues of Roman sea gods, where the Emperor Tiberius used to swim and may (or may not) have scandalously bespotted himself with young acolytes.

It is race one of the Rolex Capri International Regatta. Aboard Southern Wind 78 *Whisper*, we have been tacking to clear the north-eastern point of the island by threading through ephemeral bands of north-easterly breeze. The conditions for racing are so-so, at best. The wind vanishes in void patches only

to reappear and head us by 30° or more. A crewman is winched aloft to seek the breeze.

Once a staple of the racing calendar, the regatta at Capri used to attract large fleets. But crews began to congregate elsewhere, notably Porto Cervo in Sardinia, where the winds are more reliable, and Capri fell out of favour. This is a shame, because the island, with its hills and high limestone cliffs, dotted with villas perched precariously at the edge, offers some of the most imposing coastal scenery in the Mediterranean.

But in May the event was rejuvenated by a fleet of Southern Wind yachts. The Italian company, which builds yachts of 82ft to 115ft in Cape Town, chose this race series as the time and place to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

The connection between the two is Willy Persico, the Italian engineer and businessman >

Main picture: SW100 *Illusion of the Isles*, one of 13 boats at this size Southern Wind has sold

“THIS IS A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY. I GREW UP SAILING IN THESE WATERS AND WE HAD THE FIRST SOUTHERN WIND TROPHY HERE”

who founded Southern Wind and is still its CEO. Persico grew up in Naples and holidayed in Capri as a boy, and for him this is a special place. “This is a sentimental journey,” he admits. “I grew up sailing in these waters and we held the first Southern Wind Trophy here in 1998.”

In the years since the Capri regatta was a big thing, something has happened that the collection of yachts in the harbour this year made startlingly clear: the growth of the performance big boat and, in particular, the seemingly unstoppable rise of the 100-footer.

While cruiser-racers of 50ft and below have stagnated since the financial crisis of 2007/8, this highly specialised area has experienced unprecedented growth. The 100ft mark is where many new big boat/superyachts are being built, yachts designed for comfortable cruising, but shaped by a sharpening seriousness about competing in offshore and superyacht regattas.

Southern Wind’s success, however, is something else again. Most builders of yachts at this size are creating one-offs, successful new yachts such as the bright green Briand design *Inoüi*, or the newly launched Frers design *Unfurled*. Bespoke is, after all, a watchword in this realm.

But Southern Wind has not, until very recently, been a custom builder; it is a manufacturer of small production semi-custom series. Yet its most successful series has been the SW100. Since 2006, the company has built no fewer than 13 of these 100-footers, making them the most successful producer of series yachts right on the threshold of the superyacht.

Besides those, it has built five SW105s, production expanded to a 110-footer and continues to develop with two newly announced performance Farr designs, the SW96 and SW105 (see New Yachts, page 66), while at the top of the range, the SW115 is the flagship of the brand.

To succeed with series production of semi-custom superyachts is remarkable. But Southern Wind has other unique claims: the only builder of luxury yachts in Africa; one of the few shipyards in the world to do everything in-house: engineering design, build, fit-out. And it is one of the few yards to have remained in stable and continuous ownership and management for a quarter of a century.

A clear vision

At the helm of SW78 *Whisper* is Michael, the former owner. *Whisper* is for sale. Michael now has a larger yacht, an SW94. Like many Southern Wind repeat customers, he has traded up. But with her 3Di sails and race gear, this 15-year-old Reichel/Pugh design is still competitive. When I ask why he stayed with the same brand, he says he likes dealing with the company, cites the customer service and remarks: “I looked at a Swan, but you pay a lot more for the Swan name.”

You could argue that success at this size of yacht is a



Carlo Baroncini Photography



Carlo Baroncini Photography

case of the global rich getting richer. And while that is true, there has been a sliding scale uncoupling of great wealth from ordinary affluence, to understand the phenomenon of Southern Wind, you have to meet Willy Persico, the man who started it and still directs it.

Persico has a clear idea that the company is there to make quality bluewater cruisers, comfortable for sailing round the world, but with the capacity for decent performance. He insists that, before being a boatbuilder, he is a boat owner. At the age of 78, Persico is still in charge of every aspect of the business.

“I go to the office in Genoa every day. I go to South Africa four or five times a year for a couple of weeks and we talk on the phone every day. We share many decisions. Of course I should reduce my involvement, but I like to be involved in all the details, particularly the interior.”

Persico, an oil company executive, created Southern Wind in 1991 by happenstance. The Cape Town yard that

Above: a light winds finish to the race on day two off the Faraglioni, the famous rock stacks on the SE corner of the island of Capri.
Above left: another keenly sailed SW100, *L'Ondine*



This picture: the successful campaigner SW82 *Grande Orazio*

Photos: Carlo Borlenghi



Main picture: Reichel Pugh-designed *Whisper*, which is now 15 years old and is still competitive, well raced and upgraded with the 3Di sails and race winch package

“AT LEAST TEN PER CENT OF OUR YACHTS HAVE SAILED ROUND THE WORLD AND MANY HAVE DONE IT TWICE”



Above: aboard *Whisper* with the afterguard on the downwind leg south of the island. **Left:** spinnaker peel on the 100-footer *Blues*



Over the intervening 25 years, the building methods have changed and the yard has expanded enormously. In 1991, they were doing wet lay-up, with a male mould for the hull and a female mould for the deck. A team of 30 people was employed at the yard, in a shed not far from Cape Town airport. Things began to change. Owners wanted lighter, faster, stiffer, bigger yachts.

By 2000, Southern Wind was working with designers Reichel/Pugh and interior specialists Nauta on the more modern SW78, and carbon fibre was being used for the first time. Five years later an infusion method of building was introduced and the yard continued to expand.

In 2006, Southern Wind launched its first SW100 and realised it had hit a sweet spot. A yacht design that crossed the threshold into superyacht territory, designed to be built in series, met demand that possibly exceeded even the company's projections.

Persico maintains that the rise and rise of the 100-footers is far from accidental. But surprisingly, he does not refer to the regatta and superyacht racing that is fuelling such an interest in carbon composite designs of this size, but quite different ambitions. “My opinion is that the 100-footer is the perfect boat for sailing round the world,” Persico declares.

The SW100 propelled the company to another stage of expansion. By the time the first SW100 was launched, the Southern Wind yard employed over 200 people and had been redeveloped and expanded. Today, more than

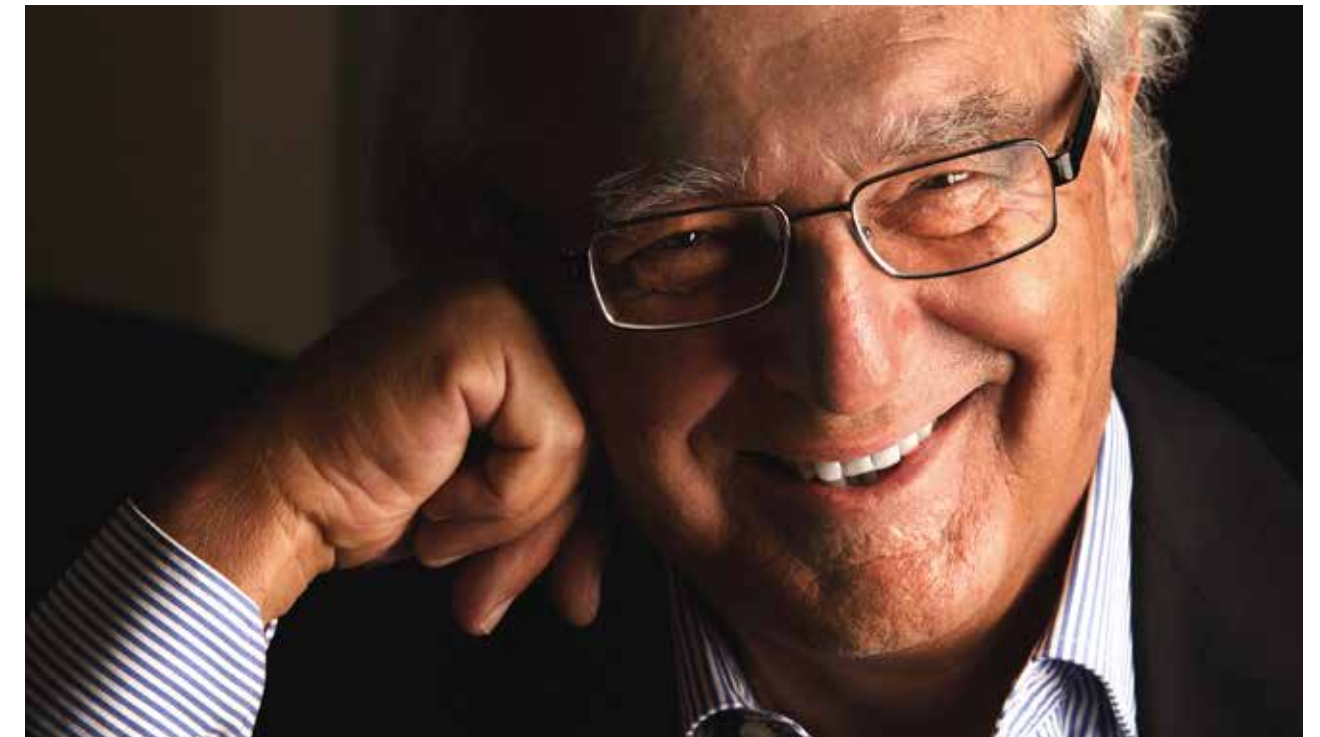
was building his Ron Holland-designed 72-footer went bust and Persico stepped in. “It was a crazy decision to set up a shipyard in Africa in 1991, when Mandela was just out of prison and there was a white government to be replaced quickly by a black government. But I took the chance and we are the only shipyard in Africa building luxurious cruising yachts,” he says.

But it did bring together some of Persico's long-held interests. “My father was manager of a shipyard in Naples after the war, and I grew up as a kid looking at the ships,” he explains. Later, he went on to work for an oil company and became involved in shipbuilding. “The company for which I was working purchased a shipyard producing hydrofoils in Sicily and I was president of that company for five years. So I had experience of managing a shipyard and when I took over [Southern Wind] I liked the idea.”





“I BELIEVE THAT SAILING WILL CONTINUE TO ATTRACT PEOPLE WHO WANT TO HAVE SOMETHING THAT IS DISTINCTIVE”



Above: regatta winner *Seawave*, a deck saloon version SW102 launched last year, which went on to win overall, chasing SW100 *Farewell* in a pursuit race format

300 people work at the yard, some families on the second generation, Persico is pleased to add, and the facilities in Cape Town have been developed and modernised, with 14,000m² of the 18,000m² being under cover.

“We can easily handle three builds a year up to 100ft,” Persico comments.

Racing and cruising ambitions

On our race round Capri we pick up some wind along the western side of the island and the larger Southern Wind yachts begin to close up. SW100 *Cape Arrow* foots by, overhauling us slowly. As at superyacht regattas, the racing is run under the ORCsy handicap rule. For safety’s sake there are separate starts for each yacht, with times staggered by two minutes, in an order that sees gradual (and at times slightly confusing) reshuffling.

The race crews on most yachts are a mix of permanent crew, guests, friends and a few professional sailors. On

Whisper, communication is in a mix of English and Italian – often not complete sentences in either language – and there is a lot of it. Yet it all works amazingly efficiently. The hoist at the windward mark, the gybes down the back of the island, close in by the huge limestone cliffs, all go smoothly aided by this ad hoc Esperanto.

Racing is only part of the menu for these large yachts, but it is becoming more earnest. Pro crews are filtering in. The newly launched SW102RS *Seawave* has former Volvo Ocean Race skipper Matt Humphries on board, and goes on to win the regatta overall; there are some top sailors too on board the competitively raced SW82 *Grande Orazio*.

Most family owners do both. The owner of one SW100 was racing, but planning a second circumnavigation with his wife and teenage children next year.

For most, cruising is still the driving force. SW100 *Illusion of the Isles* was sailing along with a handful of people aft and no one visible on the front 70ft of deck.

“I came here with six friends to celebrate Willy Persico and his achievement,” says the owner, who has had the boat since her launch a decade ago. “We’re all sleeping aboard and champagne is our most important fuel.”

The next sweet spot?

There is no ignoring the move towards performance sailing, though, which is why Southern Wind is building a fully custom Reichel/Pugh 90-footer for a specific client and has commissioned two new designs, the SW96 and SW105 from Farr and Nauta. These projects branch out into a high-performance, lighter-displacement cruiser, beamier and lightly chined, capable of being built in pre-preg carbon/Nomex and featuring lifting keels and more sophisticated hydraulics for quicker sail handling.

Willy Persico observes that 115ft is potentially the next sweet spot, and he is not alone in believing this. The performance cruisers Baltic 115 *Nikata* was launched last

Top: Willy Persico, CEO of Southern Wind, is still in charge of everyday business at 78.

Above: the yard’s newest design, a custom RP90 in carbon composite, emerging from a shed at the facility in Cape Town

year, and two Swan 115s have recently been launched in Finland, and two more are under construction.

“We see that the trend is for performance. In recent years we see many clients interested in dual use, private use by the owner for cruising and racing, and charter to cut the expenses of the management of the yachts. We think that around 115ft is the next step.”

Persico has a clear vision of where his company should go, and that includes beyond his eventual retirement. “I do not want to sell the company and I do not want to leave the company to my family because nobody has the capacity and it’s easier to find this in my team. So in future my team will become the shareholders in the company to continue my way to build boats. Or,” he adds quickly, “maybe their way to build boats.”

The move towards higher performance may seem inevitable, but as a boatowner Persico maintains that sailing will never be predominantly about speed and that the market for superyachts, though it has declined, is not under any threat from power. “As an object a yacht should have a charm, an appeal that even the best powerboat hasn’t. I believe that sailing will continue to attract people who want to have something that is distinctive.”

His yard manager, Marco Alberti, who has worked with him for over 20 years, agrees. “We will always be building bluewater yachts that can go round the world, feel safe and be reliable. Our yachts have gone to the Arctic, Antarctic, done the Sydney-Hobart Race, to Japan, to Alaska. At least ten per cent of our yachts have sailed round the world and many have done it twice.”