

LEX RAAS

AN UNASSUMING VISIONARY

If you're still dreaming about your last multihull vacation, then that's partly down to this man. Despite the fact that he has never been front page news in the sailing world, he has played a vital rôle in the huge growth in the number of multihulls that now sail in the world's most beautiful waters. From South Africa to France and from the States to Asia, he has worked alongside some of the sailing world's most influential people. Here is a modest look back at the unusual career path of a man whose outlook has always been firmly turned towards the future.

Text and photo : François Tréguët



He arrives a few minutes late to the lobby of the Miami Beach Holiday Inn, having already called to apologise. A tireless worker, despite the fact that it is only 8.30am, this is already Lex Raas's second interview of the

day. It's the middle of the Yacht and Brokerage Show, yet he still manages to spend over two hours with us looking back over his incredible career. This Johannesburger's sleek physique hides a steely resolve to take on anything.

When international anti-Apartheid sanctions against South Africa started to bite in 1984/85, he saw his burgeoning business as official Bénéteau importer nosedive from 40 boats to zero. It was then that he made a huge decision: he sold up, and with his wife and children, moved to Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie in France. He was counting on a promise made by Bénéteau boss François Chalain to take him on at the company's headquarters. First stop was the Netherlands where he picked up his Dutch passport, the nationality of his parents, and the only way that a subject of a country that quite rightly had pariah status could work legally in Europe. François Chalain was as good as his word, and it's from here that Lex would experience the ground-breaking advances made with the Océanis range: the stairs in the transom breaking with the closed back boards of the First range of boats, fixed cockpit tables which, despite the horrified reaction of the traditional yachting set, he managed to push through, and which are now standard on all boats as a key element of onboard com-

fort.

It was Lex Raas who was sent to the States in the late 1980s in the wake of the Osmosis crisis, to ensure a comprehensive after-sales service. It was there that Lex encountered American-style "customer service," in other words: everything revolves around the client. Although catamarans at that time were only a tiny percentage of the charter fleets, Lex was convinced that they were the future of yachting, but that they weren't properly adapted for their intended use. Now at Moorings, he hired a cat, and effectively metaphysically deconstructed it in an effort to understand how an everyday sailor would use it. The mainsail track in the cockpit? Too dangerous. It should be moved further back onto an arch, well out of the children's way. What about those tiny engines advocated by the hardcore sailors? They were replaced by much more powerful models, capable of taking you where you want, when you want, even when the wind isn't blowing in the right direction. Why should the boat renter spend his time going from transom to bridge to cockpit? Lex decided that for

leisure clients there shouldn't be more than two steps between the sea where they are swimming and a cold beer! He suggested a walk around with direct access to the cockpit. The perpetual sceptics were convinced that it wasn't possible. Lex proved the contrary by using a reinforced rear beam. Next up, instead of leaving the galley down in the hull, he brought it up into the main deck of the salon area. And when he wasn't reinventing the wheel, Lex could still find the time to look for inspiration in the work of others, with a view to taking their concepts to another level. For example, the roof steps inspired by Kronos de Wauquiez: on the Moorings

comes to second-guessing what sailors want before they even know it themselves! In the same way that our brains take decisions 5 seconds before we are aware of them, Lex Raas is 5 years ahead of all of us holiday skippers when it comes to knowing what we will be asking for further down the line....

In 2010 after 10 years running Moorings and Sunsail, he left the group, taking a year's sabbatical to travel around the world with his family looking for inspiration. Being on holiday is no reason for our gray matter to take a break, and Lex's brain would appear to be constantly at work. The result of his deliberations, was

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boats they doubled up as a sun-shade as well as seats. The Christopher White designed front cockpit was also adapted for charter use. These are all elements that are typical of today's Leopard range, yet most of them were already to be found on the first Moorings 4500 in 1997. This was a four cabin/four bathroom boat that made people sit up, with American Cruising World magazine immediately crowning it "Charter Boat Of The Year!" It wasn't that long ago, but it constituted a mini-revolution which influenced, and is still influencing the design of many multihulls. It merely proved that the charter market deserved its own dedicated boat.

Lex Raas can boast numerous qualities that are crucial in business: intuition; good judgement and an ability to adapt product design "on the hoof." He also has no problem with getting personally involved. When the Moorings board initially refused his catamaran idea, he turned up the next day and suggested that he resign. He left that meeting with an agreement to build 17 boats! As there was no "traditional" shipyard that was prepared to back him, he turned to his old South African mates, John Robertson and Jerry Caine and their eponymous yard, and their loyal associate Ellie Perch. Admittedly, they had never built a catamaran, nor did they have a suitable shipyard, but that wasn't going to stop them, and compared to the monumental tasks being taken on by others in the young Rainbow Nation, the scale of their challenge must have seemed laughable. Time proved that they were right. Today they are the world's number two shipyard, and Lex Raas played his part, even though he doesn't work for the company any more. It's down to the fact that he has no equal when it

that motor-powered catamarans were where the next big advances would be made. Once again faced with scepticism from the market leaders, he didn't give up and endeavoured to get the best people on board. That meant J&J in Europe for the design, Sino Eagle Group in Asia for the production, and for distribution in the States, the biggest market, Marine Max. And so, the Aquila range was born. Today, after only two years, two models are already available, and there's a fabulous factory, built from scratch, capable of producing 75' catamarans.

Despite being serious when talking boats, intense when putting things into perspective, and precise when relating important dates and names from his career and private life, his face lights up as soon as his family is mentioned. There's no hiding his pride in his 4 children and 9 grandchildren who he feels lucky to have close to him in Florida. Just like Lex, who took part in his first regata aged just 4 (!), and sailed anything he could get his hands on, especially if it had at least two hulls, they are all water sports fans. But when he opens his own photo album, rather than show you pictures of them, it's his other passion that he wants you to see. His secret garden. What makes him tick. Outside of his professional sphere yet tantalisingly close: Polynesian pirogues. His enviable physical condition must be partly down to the club he runs and sails with here in Florida. But you can't keep a good man down! Just like his new 45' pirogue for 6 rowers.. Made from sculpted carbon, it will weigh less than 60 kilos. And of course, it will sport his company's logo, because you are what you are, and here in the States, even at the weekend you keep your corporate hat on!

It's a rare combination of South African determination, American business acumen and a European sailing culture which helps Lex Raas to develop his great ideas. Focus groups and surveys can tell you what your clients want now, but none of them can tell you how this will have evolved in five years. Like Steve Jobs, Lex Raas has that rare gift of being able to anticipate developments rather than follow them. Thankfully Lex Raas's ego doesn't get the better of him, and he is at pains to assert the good fortune that has allowed him to work alongside people for whom he has the greatest respect: Annette Roux; François Chalain, Christian Estovici; the Xiong family... Not only are they great bosses but also wonderful associates that he has managed to work with and to whom he is eternally grateful. Having revolutionised the charter sector, and therefore simultaneously changed the accepted framework of the yachting market with sailing catamarans, is Lex going to pull it off again with motorised catamarans? It would seem from the most recent indiscretions from the market leader and other actors in the business that their analyses are finally catching up with his instinct. Lex Raas is still ahead of the game. He may not wish to look into his multihull crystal ball for us, but he just lets slip, with a hint of mischief, that he is currently working on new projects which are very different to anything that's currently being made. For Lex, the future is now, and we are all eager to see what it brings! |

I AM HONORED TO BE PART
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THE FUTURE IS EXCITING AT AQUILA.