

Italy | Yachts are increasingly being chartered not just to be floating cocktail lounges, but to take part in no-holds-barred racing. By Claire Wrathall

Off the leash

Morning, mid-September, bright sunshine but sufficient wind to make my eyes smart, and I am having breakfast on the deck of the sailing yacht Elena, a replica of the schooner that in 1928 won the King's Cup transatlantic race, breaking a record that had stood for 23 years. The chief stewardess, Laura Pearson, comes over. "We need to get you fitted for your uniform," she says. I suspect I look appalled. I haven't worn uniform since I was at school, nor shorts for that matter. "You don't have to," she reassures, "but most guests want to."

This is no ordinary sailing holiday, then. Rather, I am in Italy to race in the four-day Vele d'Epoca di Imperia, the fifth stage of the Panerai Classic Yachts Challenge, which is, at least according to its sponsor, "one of the most important events of its kind in the Mediterranean". Though Elena can be hired for a week's conventional cruising - sailing yachts account for about a third of the super-yacht charter market - she is also being marketed for "regatta charters" for the first time. This increasingly popular type of sailing holiday is now offered by the main brokerages (Y.CO, Edmiston, Camper & Nicholsons) and enables families or groups of friends with no sailing skills to experience racing in celebrated events such as Les Voiles de St-Tropez, the Cannes Régates Royales, the Mount Gay Round Barbados Race and Antigua Sailing Week.

The Porto Maurizio at Imperia, 26km along the coast from San Remo in northern Italy, is packed with more than 70 classic sailing boats. On our port side lies Moonbeam IV, a 33-metre gaff cutter launched in 1914. To our starboard side is Eleonora, Elena's big rival. But where Eleonora's deck is comfortably furnished with steamer chairs and a dining table, and shaded by "biminis" (ship-speak for awnings), ours has been cleared of everything, bar furling sails and coils of rope. The only place to sit is on the central deck lockers. Then again Eleonora isn't racing today. "We've beaten her 19 times," Elena's captain Steve McLaren tells me. "Last time we smoked them every day. It was very rewarding."

To some extent, this is history repeating itself, for Eleonora is a replica of the



schooner Westward, built in 1910 and designed by naval architect Nathanael Herreshoff to be the fastest in the world. Which indeed she was until the then commodore of the New York Yacht Club, Morton Plant, challenged Herreshoff to build him a boat that would beat her. The result was Elena: 55 metres from the tip of her bowsprit to the end of her boom, with a steel hull, a main mast rising 42 metres above the waterline and a sail area of up to 2,000 sq metres.

She passed through a succession of distinguished owners - among them Cornelius Vanderbilt - but in 1942, then based in Europe, she was donated to the war effort. Her keel was stripped of lead; her hull was turned into a floating quarantine ward. In 1954, she was scrapped.

It was McLaren's idea to rebuild her, "out of vengeance", he says, not quite joking. A former captain of Eleonora, he parted company with its owner on terms one might hesitate to call cordial. Then again, McLaren is not your average skipper. His career started as an apprentice shipwright in Scotland, after which he found work in boatyards in Germany and the Netherlands. By his early twenties, he had a sailing boat of his own and, while working on its restoration, he was approached by the owner of a larger yacht who offered him a job. If most captains start as deckhands, McLaren, as he tells it, "was an owner first".

Elena was launched in 2009 so it's no surprise to learn that her construction was a challenge to finance but, through force of ambition, a walletful of maxed-out credit cards and a number of stake-



holders, some of whom stayed the course, others who didn't, he had her built to Herreshoff's original plans at the Factoria Naval de Marín in Galicia, northern Spain. And eventually she was sold to its current owner, a British entrepreneur protective of his anonymity, who retains McLaren as its captain.

Certainly there is no doubt that she's a trophy asset, such is the quality of her construction. Her interiors are built from Brazilian mahogany that McLaren found in a timber yard in Vigo: "They clearly had no idea what it was worth," he tells me. And much of the brassware, the lamps and light fittings, he sourced from old ships that were being broken up. Although the deck, at least on race days, may be short on comfort, its interiors are commodious.

There are five well-configured, air-conditioned cabins, three with double, two with twin beds, all made up with monogrammed linens and each with a well-equipped bathroom. The saloon, meanwhile, contains a large dining table and two sofas in buttoned red leather. Bar an array of old photos of Herreshoff yachts, the only ornaments are pieces of Chinese porcelain fixed to the shelves with adhesive pads.

There are eight permanent crew from almost as many countries, among them a female first mate, Tzara Bierowiec; an outstanding chef, Benedicte Cochard, whose last job on land was at Joël Robuchon in Monte Carlo, which gives you a clue to the exalted cooking quality onboard; and a delightful stewardess, Aliz Laky, from Hungary. Most guests' principal contact, however, is with

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Laura Pearson, a former maritime lawyer in England, who quit corporate life to join Elena's crew five years ago.

True to her word, several pairs of shorts and polo shirts in various sizes had been laid out on the bed by the time I returned to my cabin, along with a baseball cap with an attachment to fix it to your collar lest it blow off, all embla-

zoned with the yacht's sail number: A9. There was nothing for it but to change.

If superyacht charters tend to be languorous cruises between secluded island bays and glamorous marinas during which you have a vicarious sense that the boat is yours, regatta charters are a different experience entirely, not least because in addition to the permanent crew, there are a further 20 or so race crew who come aboard each day. Some are professional sailors, others are volunteers. Again, the variety of nationalities was vast, as was the age range, which seemed to stretch from 20 or so to 70-plus. Each had a critical role to play.

As guests, our role was just to watch and get out of the way when told to. But what a spectacle. I loved the daring I witnessed: the shimmying up the mast and on to the end of the bowsprit. I hung on the tactician's regular updates on wind speed and our own rate of knots.

I loved the archaic jargon - "When I say go to the lug, just lug it!" - and the bellicose commands: "We're setting up for an attack!" It was exciting, and a joy to see other boats under sail, even if, in the end, we were not the overall winner.

Once all is shipshape and restored to order after the day's racing there are drinks aboard. "Rum, red and rosé: the three Rs of sail racing," said a deckhand as he passed me a glass. Indeed Elena has her own wine, Château de Berne, hence the image of the boat on its label.

It is a thrill to watch a race from the deck. For even though I'd had no role, I felt somehow part of it, so much so that as I had my parting cappuccino on deck the morning I disembarked, I felt not just regretful to be missing the last day's Grande Parata, when all the boats in the competition process out to sea, but out of place to be back in my own clothes. For the first time in my adult life, I'd spent my days, barefoot, in a liveried shirt and shorts, and loved it. I felt like a different person. It was another world, a real adventure, and the most terrific fun.

Drones, jetpacks and submarines: the latest superyacht toys

It's almost a century since Russian inventor Aleksandr Andreyev patented the idea of the jetpack, a concept that quickly became a science-fiction staple. But at last month's Monaco Yacht Show, a real-life version was attracting much attention and seems destined to be a key superyacht accessory next summer.

The top-of-the range Jetlev-Flyer JF-260 (€91,000 from superyachtendersandtoys.com) is a backpack connected to a hose that sucks up seawater, and a separate floating power unit. It emits a jet of water that lifts the wearer up to 15 metres above the waves, and propels them forward at up to 22mph.

Alternatively, consider a Flyboard (from about £4,200) which attaches



The Dragon submarine

to a jet ski and works on a similar principle, lifting the user on what resembles a flying wakeboard. A "stabilisation thrust nozzle" is attached to each forearm and used a little like ski poles to help balance. "With practice," says Rory Trahair, head of marketing at yacht brokerage group Edmiston, "you can hover 10 metres up in the air as well as performing precision flying

and aerobatics like backflips, spins and twists."

Of course, you'll also want to be able to photograph yourself aloft, to which end you'll need a drone such as the DJI Phantom Aerial UAV Drone Quadcopter (dji.com, from about €559), the camera accessory of choice on yachts in the Mediterranean last summer.

Also on show at Monaco was the latest in DeepFlight's (deepflight.com) range of "personal submarines", the two-seater Dragon (from \$1.5m), an electrically powered submersible capable of running for up to six hours and descending to 120 metres, the so-called edge of darkness. It's not yet in production, but pre-orders are being taken.

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DETAILS

Claire Wrathall was a guest of Y.CO, which charters sailing yachts from €32,000 per week. A seven-night charter of Elena costs from €80,000

In an old university building in the Danish city of Aarhus, I'm led down into what looks like a bomb shelter. A heavy door opens into a darkened storeroom, with rows of exhibits stacked on shelves. Finally, at the end of one aisle is a case the size of a coffee table, covered in



eventually have other uses, such as seating for up to 10,000 concertgoers.

"For now, we want people to come and sit on it like any other hill," says museum administrator, Henrik Hatt.

"We don't mind if they bring a sleeping bag and rest under the stars, or just picnic. The

expected to be soldiers from China's Terracotta Army. Other exhibits due to go on show include Viking items, which ironically are on loan from a museum in the British city of York.

Grauballe Man will take pride of place, resting in a two-tier mock-up of a nest box. Visitors can peer down