

THE ART OF CONVERSION

WORDS RYAN SWIFT

Taking a navy or fishing boat and turning it into a long-range exploration yacht offers owners some huge advantages — particularly if built in Asia. Tom Perkins, famed builder of the Maltese Falcon is a fan, and some of the best work seems to be coming out of the Philippines





Dr. No on tour in Indonesia.



*Top: The wheel house on Dr. No.
Above: The HYS-Yachts, yard in Subic Bay, Philippines.*



The forward deck area on Blue Hunter, before being fitted for submersibles.

► **BUYING A SUPERYACHT CAN INVOLVE PLENTY OF TIME AS WELL AS MONEY.** There's consulting with designers, yards and service providers. A fully customised yacht can take years to go from concept to creation. However, for owners willing to rough it a little bit, there's a handsome trade in converted yachts going on, with some active players in Asia.

No less a client than US billionaire Tom Perkins, who famously built the 88-metre *Maltese Falcon*, is a convert himself. He most recent yacht purchase (he has his own fleet), is *Dr. No*, a 115-footer that was the ninth conversion project for Harbour Yacht Services, now known as HYS Yachts. Based in the Philippines, they have a 10,000 square metre facility in Subic Bay.

"I am very pleased with the *Dr. No* project," said Perkins enthusiastically, adding that "It was on time and on schedule." This is not faint praise, for Perkins is well known in the yachting world for being demanding on projects.

Perkins was searching for a vessel that would be based in the Pacific and would serve as an expedition yacht, with plenty of stowage space and capacity for long-range ventures. Perkins has also been a driving force behind the development of the Deep Flight range of submersibles, tiny submarines that look like jet fighters and actually "fly" underwater. These were first deployed on *Maltese Falcon*. *Dr. No* has an extra crane added to the bow storage area specifically for launching these cool toys.

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Perkins is a serial yacht owner, and *Dr. No* is pretty mission specific. It's all about Scuba diving or flying about underwater in the far-flung and beautiful places of the Pacific. He keeps another yacht - his "Med yacht" - in the Mediterranean for entertaining guests more used to the top end of luxury. "I go cruising with my older friends on that one," says the 80-year old Perkins.

Dr. No was launched in July, 2011, and will be based out of Cairns, Australia. Already, he has had some fun onboard. Perkins loves Palau - a place he has been to frequently, and the Raja Ampat, where huge varieties of coral and fish are matched with near-stone age villages ashore. And what of cruising aboard *Dr. No*? "It's terrific so far. It's not an opulent boat, but it really is a proper exploration boat." With a range of over 4000 nautical miles (pretty good for a 115-foot yacht) at cruising speed of ten knots, *Dr. No* is the perfect vessel for the demands of cruising the Asia-Pacific's vast distances.

"For the next while, we'll be doing exploration trips to Papua New Guinea and then on to Tonga." Sadly, *Dr. No* is not available for charter - Perkins likens the money that comes from the charter business as a heroin addiction. But that doesn't preclude a similar project for another buyer looking to do some long-range exploration.

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Mark Prangnell is the founder and co-owner of HYS Yachts. Prangnell leads a small, core crew of four, with Prangnell himself, a mechanical engineer by trade and former first officer aboard several cruising yachts, acting as project manager. HYS Yachts will find boats, many of which are retired Japanese research boats - perfect for hulls designed for long-range travel in potentially tough conditions - and begin a stripping down process that can reduce the boat to as little as the bare hull. Rebuilding a yacht in this way is more than a new coat of paint or a teak deck - HYS Yachts can add tender garages, new electrical systems, bow thrusters, helipads, adjustable swim pads and more.

Dr. No (ex *Blue Hunter*) was a Japanese fishing boat that HYS bought and converted to be a company yacht. Mark and his team did an initial 12-month refit on *Blue Hunter* before putting this newly-converted yacht up for sale. That caught the attention of Perkins, who initiated discussions on the yacht and the project through a Canadian broker.

A second period of refit was required, this time for four months, while the extra crane was installed and a few Perkins-specific requirements were dealt with. "Tom is a very tall person - he's actually six foot four (1.93 metres)," reports Prangnell. This required HYS Yachts to rebuild what was to become the master cabin. "The deck-to-deck height of Japanese boats didn't really take that into account."

In all, the first refit period cost HYS Yachts about US\$3.2 million, while the second cost about US\$1 million. Crew accommodations also had to be seriously upgraded, as these tend to get short shrift on commercial vessels. The main engine was completely rebuilt, though not

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The main salon on *Dr. No*.



The main cabin aboard *Dr. No*.

enhanced. The slow revving engine delivers better range and fuel economy.

Dr. No was HYS Yachts' ninth such conversion project. Currently, HYS is converting a 33-metre Australian fishing boat into a luxury long-range cruiser for an Australian hotelier. The new yacht, named *Mutual Enterprise*, is being stripped to the shell, with a new superstructure being built for her.

The publicity of a positive review from Tom Perkins is certainly good news for HYS Yachts. According to Prangnell, the company is planning to add a new boat shed (over water) that will accommodate yachts up to 50 metres. This will be used to improve the quality of their paint jobs. Eventually, Prangnell wants to add a table lift to the shed to more easily get big boats in and out of the water.

HYS Yachts began life over ten years ago, when a Philippine businessman approached Prangnell about buying a superyacht. The buyer had been looking at a Feadship, but Prangnell advised doing a conversion project, using an old Japanese research boat. His argument that it would save money but also give the owner – a first time buyer – a relatively inexpensive way to see what he liked in a yacht and what he didn't. This proved persuasive, and HYS Yachts began. The Philippine buyer was pleased



Above: *Dr. No's* crane deploys Tom Perking's *Deep Flight Sub*.
Below: Tom Perkins goes underwater exploring in the *Raja Ampat*.



enough with the outcome that he became a silent partner of sorts for HYS Yachts – a partnership that Prangnell says has been very helpful.

That first yacht, named *Tiara II*, would eventually be sold on to another owner and renamed *Galapagos*. That very same yacht would then be purchased by a gentleman who had cruised aboard *Galapagos* as a guest, and it came back to HYS Yachts for another refit. The newly re-christened *Ark Angel* was then fitted out with two helipads – one for permanently storing the owner's Agusta 109 private helicopter, and the other to be used for touch-and-go passenger service. The hull lines were kept, but the refit to *Ark Angel* involved a substantial rebuild to the superstructure, which lost the look of a commercial boat completely, and now features the unbroken deck lines that are popular on modern superyachts.

THE HONG KONG CONNECTION

HYS Yachts is also responsible for two superyachts that are part of the Hong Kong scene – *Northern Sun* and *Western Isles*. The 50-metre *Northern Sun*, originally a Japanese research boat, was purchased by HYS Yachts for less than US\$1 million, with a further US\$6 million going into the conversion and rebuild. Prangnell notes that

the yacht is for sale with a price of US\$15 million. A brand new superyacht of 50 metres, with a steel, ice-classed hull, could easily cost US\$65 million or more. Naturally, owning a brand new superyacht is a different proposition from buying a conversion project. But if a buyer is happy to sacrifice on luxury aboard in the name of sturdy construction and a very competitive price, there is something to it. *Northern Sun* frequently cruises from Hong Kong through the Philippines.

The other major conversion that graces Hong Kong waters is *Western Isles*. Originally a Japanese weather research ship, the boat was transformed in ten months into an elegant cruiser that recalls the luxury yachts of the 1960s. There is even a canoe-stern with a huge aft deck suitable for large tenders. The project was purchased by a Hong Kong Chinese businessman, Francis Choi, who still uses it to this day. The boat is for sale through Seanergy for US\$12 million.

Though Harbour Yacht Services is the leader in these types of conversion projects, they are not the only company in Asia that can do such work. In Thailand, there is Yacht Solutions, owned by brothers Gareth and Simon Twist. Most recently, they were working on a complete yacht conversion project known as *Fox*.

The project has been set back from its original launch date in early 2011. But the project, owned by a Hong Kong businessman, is still ongoing. A new launch date has not been supplied, but when complete, the 60-metre yacht will be largest such project conducted in Asia. Originally a Royal Navy Hydrographic research boat, the conversion is such that the boat is virtually unrecognisable from its former self.

Yacht Solutions, which provides the project management for refits and conversion projects, works closely with a selected shipyard in Bangkok, and the firm now has three major refit projects underway – a 48-metre yacht and two 36 metre boats.

As for Tom Perkins, he is now looking forward to new expeditions aboard *Dr. No*. "For the next while, we'll be doing exploration trips to Papua New Guinea and then on to Tonga." In a twist of irony, Perkins' own investigations into marine life are taking place aboard a boat that used to be in the service of the Japanese Fishing Industry. Who says that owning a superyacht isn't environmentally friendly? ■■■

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