

ISSUE THREE
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The Superyacht

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OLD INTO THE NEW

– WORDS BY ELLIE BRADE

There are many paths into ownership and although building or buying a yacht is the norm, some owners looking for a unique project are attracted to the prospect of the conversion of a commercial vessel into a luxury yacht. This was the route taken by the owners of the 51m superyacht *Northern Sun*: the yacht is an ex fisheries research vessel built in 1976, that they bought in 2005 and converted into a long-range expedition yacht. Since the completion of the project they have enjoyed many happy years of cruising out of the yacht's base in Asia.

Whilst the thought of a conversion project might be overwhelming to some, taking on a conversion project was a logical step for the owners of *Northern Sun*. Undertaking a variety of types of refit projects in the last 20 years had afforded them ample experience in the complexities of refit and conversion. Their first major boating project was the conversion of a Dutch river barge, *Regatta*, originally built from riveted steel in Belgium in 1908. "Our passion for yachting began with *Regatta*, which we lived aboard for seven years," said the owner. "Before that we were not particularly 'yachty'... *Regatta* was our first heavy displacement vessel." Following her refit the couple was able to enjoy their work first hand and lived aboard her in London between 1993 and 2000. Ready for a fresh challenge, and with their new love of yachting, the couple decided to enter the superyacht market by converting a commercial vessel into a yacht. "The idea of a new build never entered our minds, we



A high-angle photograph of a white and blue motorboat moving across a deep blue sea. The boat is leaving a white wake. On the deck, a diver in full gear is visible. The background features a rugged, rocky coastline with lush green vegetation under a clear sky.

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HOUSES TO BRING UP-TO-DATE; WE
LOVE TO DO THAT WITH VESSELS.”**
– OWNERS OF *NORTHERN SUN*



like the 'old-into-new' feeling of a treasure-hunt that we get from bringing these older vessels back to life," said the owners by way of explanation. "Some people like to find old houses to bring up-to-date; we love to do that with vessels."

In fact their entire route into ownership steered away from convention, and forgoing the usual research-through-experience process, they did not undertake any charters in order to better understand what they wanted from their finished yacht, before buying *Northern Sun*. "We did not charter, since our passion is refit and conversion. Instead, we look for good hulls and nice lines." That said, they are complementary of charter as a way for owners to understand the market and what there is on offer. "Chartering is probably a good way to get great ideas for future ownership. We always say 'yes' when invited to view other yachts."

With the decision made to begin the new project, they set about finding a suitable vessel for conversion. They bought *Northern Sun*, then an ex-fisheries vessel called *Hokko Maru*, in 2005 after seeing an advert for her in a boats-for-sale magazine. Having been decommissioned, little had been done to her since. "You had to squint hard and dream long to imagine what she was capable of becoming," said the owners. She was taken from where she was lying to the Philippines where work was undertaken at two yards. With the basic structural work done in 2007, the yacht left the shipyard and the couple continued with the refit work whilst using the yacht. From beginning to end the project took around five

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years, although the owners had full use of the vessel for much of this time. "Detailed finishing work should not stop a good cruise!" they said. Their use of the boat during the refit had the added bonus of meaning that as they travelled, "We had the benefit of moving from port to port to take advantage of the best each area had to offer," said the owners who gave examples of the teak in Thailand and the electronics in Hong Kong as the types of wares on offer. "We chose to do the work in Asia because of a combination of skilled craftspeople and



Previous page: The rejuvenated *Northern Sun* after her refit.

Opposite page: Enjoying the waters off Thailand; The luxurious deck.

This page: The original Japanese fishing vessel, *Hokko Maru*, purchased in 2005; Halfway through her refit; The finished *Northern Sun* today.



This page: Idyllic bays off the coast of Asia;
Freshly caught lobster lunch.

Opposite page: The local wildlife in
Borneo; *Northern Sun* allows her owners
to explore and adventure.

affordability. Trying elsewhere in the world to come up with the same result as the one we achieved with *Northern Sun* would have been crushingly expensive and we might well have been disappointed with the result," they said.

Unlike a new build, with a refit or conversion you can never be entirely sure what might crop up as the project progresses, and *Northern Sun's* owners' advice to anyone considering this type of project is to "work with a captain and crew you respect through the refit period. Since there are thousands of details to attend to with any refit, it is important to have good people on the project capable of making timely decisions."

At the end of the five-year project, *Northern Sun* emerged as an ideal yacht for long-range ventures and destinations off the beaten track, but with all the interior comfort of a luxury yacht. Her sturdy hull and deep five metre draft means that she is extremely stable at sea, and an ice strength steel hull together with a 10,000nm cruising range means that few destinations are off limits to her. "We are very pleased with the results on *Northern Sun*; we have all the advantages of upgrades and all the advantages of engines made with a quality of durability rarely found anymore," said the owners.

During their time in Asia they also undertook the refit of *Java*, a 17m teak motor launch, originally built in 1935 for the Hong Kong Marine Department, which they still own and have moored up next to their house.


"*Java* is a part of Hong Kong history," they said.

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“Our favorite use of her now is to take her out pink-dolphin hunting off Lantau in Hong Kong.” In all their projects it is clear that they take great pleasure in taking a piece of history and restoring and preserving it for future generations.

With their work complete, the owners have taken great advantage of owning *Northern Sun* and have travelled extensively on board. “Perhaps the worst part of owning a superyacht is knowing that the boat is someplace quite special but we are not aboard,” they said. Wanting to avoid the Caribbean and Mediterranean milk runs, the owners based *Northern Sun* out of Asia, which they never left once the conversion, was complete. Being in Asia means that the yacht has wealth of unspoilt cruising grounds at its disposal. “We currently manage to cruise aboard her in Southeast Asia about every six weeks, using the wonderful practice of sending the vessel ahead to waters we want to cruise,” said the owner. For their visual beauty both above water and below the waters around Phuket are a favourite spot. “*Northern Sun* suits us beautifully,” they said. “We’ve appreciated having a ‘home-away-from-home’ while on business trips to 



Singapore; we've loved the gentle cruising in Phang Nga Bay, Thailand; we've loved her strength in the swells off Sai Kung, Hong Kong. Borneo was an adventure-and-a-half, given that we were cruising in areas last charted with lead lines in the 19th century, yet we were aboard a modern vessel with modern navigational equipment (interestingly, the old charts were quite accurate). We've never dreamed of a trip she couldn't do."

Although *Northern Sun* is currently listed for sale, it is a reluctant sale and not prompted by dissatisfaction with the market. "We are really focusing on our charitable activities now and so have made the tough decision to sell," they said. "*Northern Sun* has been a large part of our lives for years and has been well loved by all who cruise on her." One suspects, however, that this isn't the end of refit projects for the couple. "We will need a rest after two significant refits, but never say never!" they said. Watch this space. □

Photos: Courtesy of the crew of *Northern Sun*.



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