



SUPERYACHT REVIEW

NECKER *B*



Belle Stupenda

STORY PETER SCOTT PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREA FRANCOLINI

It's a beautiful November day. The sun is almost above the yard arm and the brilliant sunshine dances across the ripples on Sydney Harbour as we approach. There's not much activity aboard – the crew are assembled on the foredeck for a debriefing. The big cat has just anchored after a trial run through the Heads with her new rig.

Shortly, I'll be aboard Sir Richard Branson's completely refitted superyacht, Necker Belle.

As the tender draws closer, the enormity of this spectacular catamaran becomes

apparent. She's 105 feet long and has a beam of almost 46 feet. Her 125 foot mast towers above the deck and as we circle to draw the crew's attention, the sheer height and waterline of the catamaran are imposing.

The starboard transom deck, finished in freshly stained teak, is lowered and I am greeted by Necker Belle's Captain Jono Tobin, an Australian Master Mariner. Jono and his crew of six are still in shake down mode. The massive catamaran is just two days out of a two and a half year refit at Azzura Marine in Newcastle and in less than a week, Necker Belle sails across the Pacific

enroute to her home base, Sir Richard Branson's private Caribbean retreat, Necker Island.

The history of the Necker Belle is as interesting as her forthcoming voyage. Built in 2003 at a French yard, she was designed and commissioned as a light weight, fast, day charter boat servicing the lucrative Mediterranean cruising ports. The hulls were moulded entirely of carbon fibre giving exceptional strength and weight reduction.

When finally commissioned after the original owner sold her unfinished hull, she was placed into charter in the Mediterranean. With no generators aboard, she was not equipped for extended cruising but easily accommodated day charters because of her speed (more than 20 knots under sail and 14 knots under power).

As luck would have it, she was chartered by Sir Richard Branson and his family in 2005. While the original fitout is a far cry from the refitted Necker Belle, Branson enjoyed the overall spaciousness of the boat and her light interiors.

Branson had been looking for a yacht to sail around the world. He wasn't particularly disposed towards motor yachts and was impressed by the Necker Belle (then known as the Lady Barbaretta) - the problem was that she wasn't equipped for extended cruising. The rig wasn't suited for extended passage making and the absence of generators was a major problem for hydraulic drives and refrigeration.

Despite her shortcomings, Branson purchased the catamaran in December 2005 and renamed her, the Necker Belle. Tender documents were drawn up for a complete refit. Tenders were received from ship yards in Europe, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. Branson had the catamaran sail to Australia in late 2006 and he and his family spent a full month aboard the Necker Belle - much of it on Sydney Harbour.

He had enjoyed his time aboard so much that he decided to proceed with the refit and accepted an Australian tender. The giant catamaran's refit (which as Jono Tobin says virtually became a rebuild) commenced on Australia Day 2007.

Over the next two and a half years, the Necker Belle was completely stripped back to bare hull. Structural work was done to strengthen the hulls and mindful of her original lightweight design, the refit team selected light weight MultiPanel as an

alternative to timber. MultiPanel is 70% lighter than timber and is 100% waterproof. MultiPanel was cut into strips, then joined to make a ladder frame and adhered to the carbon fibre hulls. The framework supports the bulkheads throughout the vessel and assisted with weight reduction and will last the lifetime of the catamaran.

The French designed and built rotating rig was replaced by a more robust rig, larger mast, hydraulic boom and Reichmann furling systems. The new rig was designed and installed by Southern Spars and the catamaran equipped with a suite of North Sails including a brilliant red gennaker.

To accommodate a larger mast, the post base was strengthened and the compression posts supporting the mast were doubled in size. A winch powered stainless steel crows nest was also incorporated in the new rig design. Extensive internal modifications were carried out including the provision of redesigned crew quarters, storage areas, galley and a complete cabin and living area refurbishment. A laundry, equipped with commercial grade Miele appliances was also installed in the forward section of the starboard hull.

In addition, the helm stations were moved from the flying bridge and positioned on the extended aft deck hardtop. The flying bridge cockpit was reconfigured with tiered seating and enhanced.

Prior to the refit, the entire vessel was surveyed and found to be structurally sound. The refit was designed to transform the once poorly equipped catamaran, into a self sufficient long range cruising vessel. To achieve that goal, power generation would be needed so the engine rooms were extended to allow for the installation of twin 40 kilowatt Cummins Onan generators, inverters, two Sea Recovery desalinators and greater volume fuel tanks. The original six cylinder turbo diesels were retained and rebuilt and the fire retardant systems were overhauled. The extended engine rooms also allowed the crew internal access to the back-up steerage system without having to exit to the weather decks. Watertight bulkheads and hatches were installed as well as additional soundproofing to the engine room.

Holding tanks were replaced and a Head Hunter sewage treatment plant was installed.

All wiring and looms were removed and replaced and in addition to the hardtop, two





large garages were added topside and a forward starboard cabin and day head were also incorporated in the interior redesign. The decking was replaced with teak and bamboo and internally, dark stained wengie flooring has also been used in the bathrooms.

An impressive suite of electronics was added including Furuno 120 nautical mile radar and GPS, Tracvision for satellite communication, a camera system monitoring the aft cockpit and engine rooms and a completely new anchoring system was installed. Powered by Muir winches, both 200kg Kedge anchors are fitted with 100 metres of chain.

The result of the multi-million dollar refit is simply brilliant. This is one of the finest, yet totally understated long distance cruising yachts I have had the pleasure to be aboard. Clearly Branson and his dedicated crew have achieved their goal to create a unique, safe, stable and comfortable cruising yacht.

The refitted Necker Belle is also a credit to Australia's ship building prowess. The refit, which was managed by Azzura Marine, is world class. All of the interiors were manufactured at the Azzura factory at Coomera on the Gold Coast and shipped to Newcastle for installation.

So, allow me to guide you through this magnificent vessel. Around the decks, there is enormous space. The side decks provide easy passage to the bow of the boat. A massive trampoline net connects each hull and is supported by a teak centre board upon which is anchored the gennaker and genoa. Twin main mast stays are anchored to the superstructure and the side decks outside the safety rails so the weather decks are completely unimpeded.

Access to the flying bridge is either by way of the internal staircase or ladders from the side decks. From the flying bridge, all round vision is superb. The twin helm stations are positioned well aft and equipped with stainless steel cruising wheels and an impressive array of controls, gauges and electronics. Each helm has a Cassons & Plath compass, 20 inch GPS screens, VDO gauges including rudder indicator and electronic engine controls. Four massive winches, two of which are mounted aft on the hardtop, power the rig.

The mainsail traveller is mounted forward of the twin helms and the gennaker traveller forward of the main mast. For guest comfort,





the expansive cockpit lounge with its tiered seating and a removable table for dining is simply unsurpassed.

For the adventurous, a diving board has been installed on the hardtop between the twin helms and plans are in train to fit a game fish chair on the port aft deck. The teak aft deck makes maximum use of the 46 foot beam and is fully protected by the hardtop. Two large garages are located on either side of the deck and are concealed by large sunbeds. The Necker Belle has a full suite of water sport toys including dive gear for six and compressor.

An alfresco dining area occupies the aft deck and can easily seat 30 guests. On either side of the companionway leading to the saloon are tables surrounded by comfortable lounges and while the Necker Belle has a comprehensive wine cellar below decks, two wine fridges are also located in the aft cockpit.



The apartment style saloon is inviting and is connected to the cockpit by four sliding glass doors. A bar is set to port while to starboard, the lounge has a massive 52" flat screen television affixed to the aft bulkhead. In a piece of clever design work, the lounge can be converted to a fifth cabin by using a privacy curtain which is held in place by a magnetic track system. The day head, set forward of the bar, is exceedingly spacious and has a shower, toilet and vanity.

A large buffet table which houses crockery and cutlery for as many as 30 guests, is set forward of the saloon behind the internal staircase. Companionways either side service the four main cabins and lead to the wheelhouse.



The cabins are all located on the main deck well above the waterline. The cabins are designed to meet a multiplicity of accommodation requirements. All have separate ensuites, massive amounts of storage including a collection of drawers and hanging wardrobes and all cabins give unsurpassed views of the surrounding anchorage through large portlights protected by adjustable louvres for privacy.

The aft port cabin has twin single beds that can be converted to a double if required. The forward port cabin has a walk around island double bed while the starboard forward cabin has a double bed set against the starboard bulkhead. The master cabin is located to starboard and is a spacious retreat offering everything from a comprehensive in-room entertainment system, large desk,

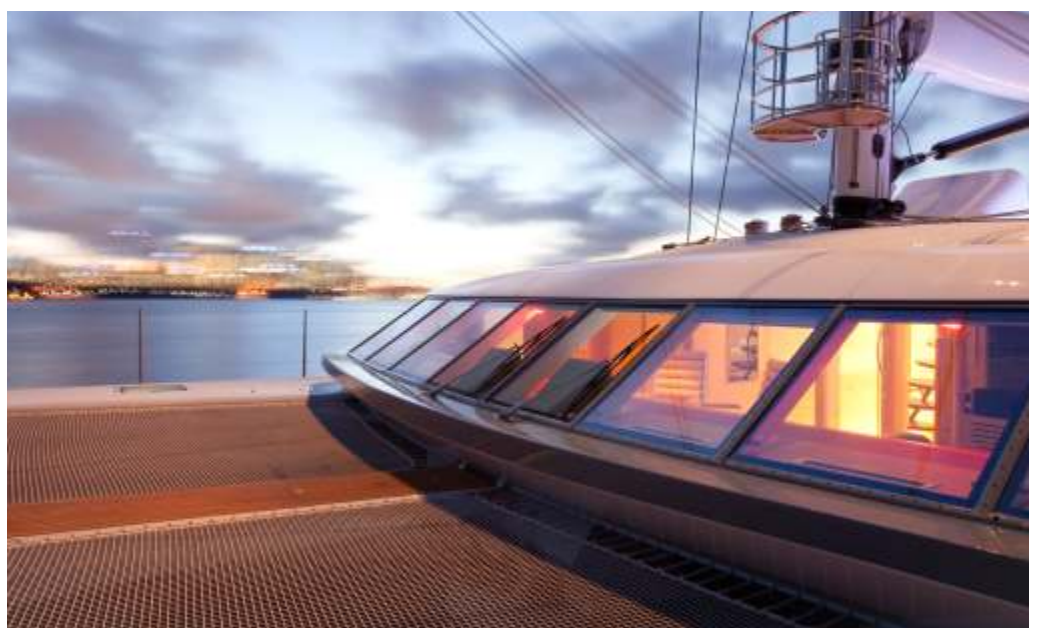


and an island king size bed. In fact, all cabins have in-room entertainment systems featuring large flat screen plasmas and sound systems.

All ensuites feature superb amenities including frosted aqua vanity bowls, separate toilets and shower cubicles. The master cabin ensuite has twin vanity bowls mounted on stainless steel supports.

A collection of limited edition prints of Necker Island, the catamaran's home port decorate the cabin walls, saloon and companionways reminding those aboard of her Caribbean island home. The entire interior is finished in satin stained American Rock Maple and bamboo flooring features throughout.

The wheelhouse occupies the entire forward section of the vessel, eight large screens provide a complete forward vista. There is enormous desk space for charts and a navigator's station with an impressive array of electronics and a communication system connecting the outside world including fax, radios and satellite phone, is set to port and aft of the companionway connecting the wing decks as well as providing access to the lower decks. A skite plate is mounted on the bulkhead above the navigator's station. It reads: 'Necker Belle - Launched by Azzura Marine, Newcastle Australia, 6/9/2009. Refit by Azzura Marine on behalf of Sir Richard Branson!'





The main helm features two unique armchairs for skipper and navigator. A comprehensive electronics package has been installed including V-com systems monitoring, autopilot, digital engine readouts, extensive analogue gauges, compass and rudder angle indicator as well as wind direction, speed and depth instruments. There are twin overhead hatches as well as escape hatches under the dash.

The vessel can accommodate between eight and 12 guests in the four main cabins and converted saloon lounge. The Necker Belle has a crew compliment of seven including Captain, First Mate, Engineer, Mate, Chief Steward, Steward and Chef. Crew quarters are located in the hulls of the vessel are the workshop and galley.

To provide an unsurpassed culinary experience, a full commercial grade galley was also installed during the refit. Located in the port hull, the galley features extensive stainless steel bench space, stainless steel refrigeration and under bench freezers, dry storage, separate appliance storage nook and even a crew dining area. There is a separate cooking area which accommodates two Miele ovens, microwave and a Miele four ring induction cooktop allowing the chef to literally cook up a storm. Chef's mango souffles are simply divine.

While every conceivable luxury has been included in the refit, The Necker Belle not



only offers outstanding onboard living, she also has very good sea keeping characteristics. According to Engineer Goce (George) Jovanoski, a Newcastle boy who has been with the boat for three years, she handles well in all sea conditions including a following sea. George describes her as a super fast catamaran designed to reach speeds of 30 knots under sail.

Carrying some 7500 litres of diesel fuel, the big cat has a cruising range under power of some 1800 nautical miles cruising at 12 knots. She is equipped with an extensive suite of North sails and her props are a SPW four blade feathering design. All drives are hydraulically powered and a 600 amp hour house battery system and twin 40 kilowatt gensets provide substantial energy redundancy. The catamaran is extremely manoeuvrable and while she is equipped with tailing winches for docking, she does not have thrusters which says a great deal about her close quarter handling.

The catamaran has an unique livery - white hull with olive green panels on the superstructure. She is serviced by a 12 person RHB which is housed on the flying bridge and launched and retrieved using the main boom.

The Necker Belle is now enroute to Necker Island, a journey which will take some two and a half months with the longest single passage being 40 days. She will trek east towards New Zealand, then to Tahiti and the





Galapagos Islands before reaching the Caribbean in February. She will immediately be available for charter during the Caribbean Winter season of 2010.

Charter rates start at US\$88,000 for seven nights aboard. Bookings are handled through Virgin Limited Edition's Sales and Reservations Office in the United Kingdom - Phone 0800 716 919 (toll-free) or +44 (0) 208 600 0430 or by email to enquiries@virginlimitededition.com

Time aboard this classy Caribbean lady - clearly the Belle of Necker Island with an accommodating charm and enticing manner is relaxation personafied. She is simply Belle stupenda.

