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WINTER 2010

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his latest venture

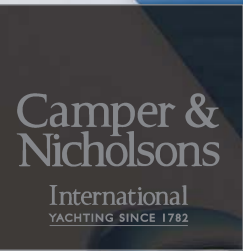
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richard branson

VIRGIN TERRITORIES

He famously crossed the Atlantic and Pacific in a hot-air balloon, but with his latest venture entrepreneur **Sir Richard Branson** is getting closer to the ocean with the launch of his new catamaran Necker Belle

By Kate Rigby

Having been in the international travel market for 25 years, Sir Richard Branson of Virgin fame continues to take a hands-on role in the choice of properties he offers clients. His exclusive Virgin Limited Edition portfolio currently extends from his original Necker Island retreat in the British Virgin Islands, to Kasbah Tamadot in Morocco, Ulusaba in South Africa, The Lodge in Verbier, Switzerland, Sa Terra Rotja near Palma, Mallorca, and (for dining and events) The Roof Gardens in London, UK.

Perhaps with the intention of providing his original Caribbean property with a little sister, Branson recently purchased and refitted a 32m (105') catamaran, Necker Belle, which is available to charter from February 2010. Here, the British entrepreneur talks about his ventures – including his new launch.

Travel experts tend to specialise in one type of holiday – what is your inspiration behind offering seven very distinct/individual properties?

I think it all ties in with the way I approach any of my businesses. Distinction, soul and character are three very important qualities that define our retreats. We have been fortunate in finding hidden gems, with each having a fun story behind the inspiration. Take Kasbah Tamadot, for instance... I have my mum to thank for spotting this divine fortress from the side of the road while I was attempting a world record in a hot-air balloon. Necker Island... well, that was a ploy to win over Joan, now my loving wife. We aspire to inspire our guests and strive to keep our collection eclectic and a tempting alternative to cookie-cutter hotels. Necker Belle is a fine example of how we do not confine ourselves to land. →

Clockwise from top: Necker Island; Kasbah Tamadot in Morocco; the recently refitted charter yacht Necker Belle



Above: Necker Belle's saloon converts into a double cabin with a privacy screen
Opposite page, from top: Ulusaba in South Africa; cabin luxury on board Necker Belle; Sa Terra Rotja in Mallorca; The Lodge, Verbier

Each of your properties seem to be very personal to you – places where you love to spend time. Do you tend to buy with your own taste in mind, or for your future customers?

The founding property in the Virgin Limited Edition collection was Necker Island, my very own home, so yes, my taste has consequently come into play. Each retreat is very personal to me and my family. However, many factors enter the picture; the location of the property is very important, as is being able to successfully blend local and indigenous style/culture with luxury and comfort. Our aim is to provide amazing experiences for our guests. Hopefully the allure of the land, locals and the native culture mixed with a bit of my taste will continue to drive our guests to our retreats.

As far as Necker Belle was concerned, I first encountered her as her former self, Lady Barbaretta, when I spent a week chartering her in 2005. I fell in love and so began a three-year complete rebuild and refit. She's now the latest addition to our collection. Free to explore all ends of the globe, she has a unique quality to adapt to wherever she sails.

What things are important when you choose a new property?

We attract guests who value excellent service and tailored experiences; therefore, when we're choosing a property we need to be sure that the location is just right and that we are bringing forth an experience that is unique to the marketplace.

What would be your ultimate property/travel experience to offer clients?

We're always looking to expand the collection where we can, whether it be a new property or a management contract. We hope to expand our international brand presence and are actively pursuing leads. Ideally, we'd like our collection to include retreats in Europe, South America, and perhaps explore more Caribbean and African ventures. We don't operate with any restriction as we believe we have sufficient brand identity and experience to operate globally.

What inspired Necker Belle? Have you previously owned or chartered yachts?

Perhaps I wanted Necker Island to have a floating sister! Seriously, I was brought up in the countryside and absolutely love being in touch with nature. I lived and worked on a house boat for many years in my twenties, and although I've owned boats before they've never been anything on this scale, and I've certainly not chartered any yachts as a business before. I think it's so wonderful to be able to explore the beautiful, undamaged parts of the world and to enjoy the magnificent oceans.

Tell us about Necker Belle and her charter plans.

Necker Belle is an indoor/outdoor sailing yacht with spacious common areas and four beautifully appointed main cabins, all with en suites, so she's perfectly designed for fun and relaxation. She can accommodate up to 12 guests by converting the saloon into a double cabin with a privacy screen, and two lucky adventurous souls can sleep under the stars. The portside deck is set up for game fishing and enthusiasts will be fighting for the game chair. Water babies will be able to dive off the yacht from the 1.8m (6') diving board on the top of the aft deck straight into the clear turquoise waters. I'm really excited about one gadget in particular – a three-man submarine that can be used by people who don't have their scuba licence.

Where in the Caribbean will she charter? Can clients combine a charter with a stay at Necker Island?

There are no planned routes; all will be tailor-made to each request. And yes, guests can combine a charter with a stay on Necker Island. We plan to operate on a weekly charter basis, however, should the yacht be available for days in between, we will invite guests from Necker Island to consider her for day charters or drink/dinner receptions when at anchor.

Normally Necker Island is hired for exclusive use by an individual or group, but during Celebration Weeks, held on selected weeks throughout the year, couples or singles can

book one of 14 rooms individually and share the island with others. We have a family fun week which will be held on the 23 October 2010 for three, four or seven nights, which would be ideal for those who want to combine the two.

Today's superyachts are compared to the finest six-star hotels; the charter market is thus extremely competitive. How do you anticipate making an impact and creating a unique experience in such a market?

Necker Belle is not your average catamaran. In fact, she is one of the largest all-carbon multi-hull yachts of her kind, reaching speeds of over 20 knots. In addition to her speed, the interior is luxuriously spacious — 14m (46') wide — so you feel like you're in your own private beach house. And her indoor areas are light and airy and offer undisturbed views as she cruises. I think her little submersible gadget will also make an impact, particularly with the boys – it could be described as being a bit like an underwater fighter plane.

What things about the luxury yacht charter market do you think need to change/improve/adapt?

As we are new to the scene, I don't feel it is right for us to start making pointers. Instead, we look forward to bringing our wealth of luxury travel experience to this industry. We will let you know how we go!

How will you optimise the Virgin brand's innovation and business ethic in the superyacht charter market?

Just as we do with our other retreats, we will continue to make our guests the number one priority and strive to offer an experience that is unique to the marketplace, bringing the small but all-important extra touches to the forefront. Necker Belle will partake in setting goals with our charitable foundation, Virgin Unite, just like the other retreats. As I said, she's a fast cat with a soon-to-be submersible in the mix... I think it says it all! ■

Necker Belle is based in the Caribbean during the winter and will be available for weekly charters. It is planned she will spend the summer in the Mediterranean.



| NECKER BELLE | |
|------------------|---------------|
| LENGTH..... | 32m (105') |
| BEAM..... | 14m (45') |
| BUILDER..... | CMN Cherbourg |
| YEAR..... | 2003/2009 |
| STATEROOMS | 4 |
| GUESTS..... | 12 |
| CREW..... | 7 |