

# BATTLE OF THE SCHOONERS

SEVEN SCHOONERS RACED OFF PALMA IN JUNE, THE LARGEST NUMBER EVER TO SAIL TOGETHER. IT IS A COMPLEX BUSINESS, AS ELAINE BUNTING REPORTS

**S**eldom has there been a more magnificent sight in sailing than on the opening day of the Superyacht Cup in June. Seven classic and replica schooners gathered for a friendly match in Palma Bay, bringing together probably the greatest number of schooners to race at one time. With topsails set and pressing eight sails upwind apiece, it was a superlative

exhibition of ageless might and elegance.

Such a grand collection of large schooners is unprecedented. For one thing, these yachts were built and raced in different eras; some are replicas. A few rarely compete or have never raced before. *Germania Nova*, a replica of the 1908 classic *Germania* and launched in 2011, had never been on a racecourse before.

But in June she lined up alongside the 138ft Herreshoff schooner *Mariette of 1915*, her

**Main picture:** *Mariette of 1915* charges through to windward of *Naema*, a 137ft schooner inspired by the 1937 Alfred Mylne design *Panda*





**GERMANIA NOVA**  
 Built 2011  
 Size 181ft  
 Designed by Max Oertz/Detlev Loell

**MARIETTE OF 1915**  
 Built 1915  
 Size 138ft  
 Designed by Nathanael Herreshoff

**KELPIE OF FALMOUTH**  
 Built 1928  
 Size 79ft  
 Designed by Francis Sweisguth

**ELEONORA**  
 Built 2000  
 Size 160ft  
 Designed by Nathanael Herreshoff

**ELENA**  
 Built 2009  
 Size 180ft  
 Designed by Nathanael Herreshoff

**NAEMA**  
 Built 2013  
 Size 137ft  
 Engineered by Hodgdon Yachts

**SHENANDOAH**  
 Built 1902/2009  
 Size 178ft  
 Designed by Theodore Ferris

**“THIS WAS A SUPERLATIVE EXHIBITION OF AGELESS MIGHT”**



Claire Malches



Andrew Wright



Claire Malches

Jésus Renedo

**Left:** the afterguard and guests on board the giant schooner *Germania Nova*, a near-replica of the great German yacht of the early 1900s

smaller ‘sistership’, the Francis Sweisguth-designed *Kelpie of Falmouth*, *Naema*, a 137-footer launched in 2013 and inspired by an Alfred Mylne design, *Shenandoah*, the 178ft three-masted schooner, the huge 180ft *Elena*, a replica Herreshoff design, and *Eleonora*, the 162ft replica of the 1910 Herreshoff design *Westward*, built in 2002.

The odd one out was *Moonbeam*. Although an eligible member of what was in its heyday known as the ‘Big Class’ this 115ft William Fife gaff cutter from 1914 had come along to a special spectacle to preface the 20th anniversary of the Superyacht Cup.

The idea of a Big Class exhibition race came about through a conversation last year between Kate Branagh, organiser of the Superyacht Cup, and Charlie Wroe, captain of *Mariette*. There had been interest in taking part from the captain of *Elena*, too, and Wroe thought it would be great, “unique”, to get all those schooners active in the Mediterranean together.

“I thought there were so many classic boats in port that I might get a few others to come out and play, so I spent the winter trying to persuade as many others as possible,” says Wroe. The idea gained ground and the Superyacht

Cup, says Branagh, provided “the infrastructure, the photographers – and the date.”

Justin Holvik is as seasoned a captain as they come. He went to sea at 19, when he joined the Norwegian Navy. He is a master mariner, has sailed round Cape Horn on a 1904 gaff cutter and now, at 41, is in command of the enormous 181ft *Germania Nova*.

**All sails flying**

*Germania Nova* feels as much like a ship as a yacht. She was launched in 2011 and is aesthetically as close as possible to *Germania*, the 1908 schooner built for a scion of the Krupp family. The original yacht won Cowes Week in her first year and regularly raced against Kaiser Wilhelm’s *Meteor IV*, reputedly yielding to her diplomatically, but her winning streak and that era came to an end owing to the outbreak of World War I. *Germania* was seized as a prize of war, sold and resold until, in 1930 she sank in a storm off Key Biscayne.

The replica *Germania Nova* charters with a permanent crew of 13: a mate, bosun, chief engineer, deck engineer, chef, sous chef, stewardesses and deck hands. To race takes

**Above:** bow crew at work on consecutive days of racing on the same yacht, the Herreshoff schooner *Mariette of 1915*





**Main picture:**  
crew work aloft on  
the foremast of  
*Mariette of 1915*

**“THE JACKYARD WEIGHS 300KG. SETTING IT IN PLACE 42M ABOVE DECK TAKES CAREFUL WORK”**



Andrew Wright



EB/WPIX

**Above:** bowman on the comparatively diminutive 79ft *Kelpie of Falmouth*.  
**Left:** Justin Holvik at the wheel of the 181ft schooner *Germania Nova*

the set, which is called by the mate. Harder still is lowering the yard; the mate is aloft for this and the captain calling it.

The process of hoisting and setting all these sails takes nearly an hour, even with the help of modern hydraulic winches. Yet compared with bygone days, this is slow. “You could do this quicker by hand, but there’d be five people pulling a sail up, not one. You’d need 20 more guys then and it would knacker them,” says Holvik.

“Looking at the records, they could set sail in 20 minutes,” says Detlev Loell, *Germania Nova*’s designer and build supervisor. “But *Germania* had more than 30 [permanent] crew. Nobody could afford that now.”

With all sails flying on the first day of regatta racing, *Germania Nova* leaned into the breeze and marched out across the Bay of Palma at a stately, but surprising speed. We made towards the layline for the first mark at the head of the fleet, or assumed so until we saw *Mariette* heading out across the other side of the bay.

It took several minutes to discover that the course had been changed just before the start. The course change had been announced on the radio, but the call had been missed in the preparations. *Germania Nova* was put about and we chased after the other schooners. The large lead on which we had been prematurely congratulating ourselves on the schooner’s first ever windward leg became, at a stroke, a sizeable stern chase.

nearly three times as many – there were 32 on board for the Superyacht Cup.

Holvik began planning for the regatta a month beforehand. Extra crew had to be recruited and race sails prepared. The jackyard topsail had not been hoisted in two years and the jackyard topmast had been stored in an industrial estate. Permissions needed to be obtained to bring the yard, at 19.5m the longest in the fleet, to a shipyard in a long loading truck.

A large group of schooners sailing together is a toweringly impressive sight. *Germania Nova* set a jib top, jib, staysail, fore, fore topsail, main topsail staysail, main and jackyard topsail.

The jackyard weighs 300kg and setting it in its place 42m above the deck requires careful co-ordination on peak and throat halyards. A deck hand is always aloft for





Andrew Wright

**Above:** the skills of the true 'schooner boy' in action – head for heights is essential. **Below:** Elaine on *Germania Nova's* enormous bowsprit

There were no other glitches in a well-sailed race, but there was no hope of more than 3rd place, finishing behind *Naema*. "It would have been nice to win, but we want to sail well and look spectacular," Holvik commented. "We finished the course, everyone is safe, there is not a single rope burn. If we did more racing, I'd have a more established crew, we'd have different sails and people more familiar with certain jobs," he added.

### A breed apart

Although technically of superyacht size, schooners are a breed apart. To anyone used to a modern yacht, the plethora of white ropes seems confusing. "There is a system within it, where halyards and topping lifts are and where downhauls are, on the opposite side. It's the same system as the old days, which depended on who rigged the yacht. The are different dimensions of lines, the halyards are a different size to the topping lifts and downhauls, and you know them visually and by feel."

It takes a level of familiarity to sail these yachts. "The most complicated manoeuvres are settling the jackyard topsail, spinnaker gybes and sheet leads."

As on many classic yachts, schooner crews need an arsenal of traditional skills. Most fall under the heading of seamanship, that simple-sounding, but

all-encompassing mixture of seasoned experience, common sense and sixth sense. "The most complicated things are to do with leads, stoppers and transferring halyards from manual winches onto belaying pins," says Holvik. "Sheet leads when on deck and in the air can look completely different."

"We have got three of the deck crew in harnesses while we are racing ready go aloft to change a lead. Because of the leads in the rig we can only have a sail set on one side and we have to relead a sheet or a halyard or a tack line, such as fore topsail. The fisherman we have to drop, transfer and rehoist."

But if sailing a schooner looks and is more complex in many ways, the task of running a large classic yacht is correspondingly simpler in others. "We can fix a lot ourselves whereas on more complicated yachts work has to be contracted out because it's all so high-tech and complicated. On modern [superyachts] they're flying in people at €1,000 a day while I have a lot of junior crew I'm training up at fraction of that and they are learning shipwright skills, carpentry, sail repair, varnishing, rope skills, canvas, leatherwork," says Holvik.

"My mate, Ben, is a shipwright. We make our own palms and ditty bags. It's good, basic seamanship. We are very self-sufficient. I think that's why in the J Class now you have a high percentage of classic sailors who have picked up these skills and taken them on there."

*Mariette of 1915*, the 140ft Herreshoff-designed schooner, is one of the best sailed and most competitively



EB/ywpx

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Jésus Remedo

**Above:** aerial view of *Germania Nova*.  
**Below:** the same yacht's winch-mounted breech-loading 10-gauge Herreshoff saluting cannon – when fired it scared the living daylights out of the neighbouring crew of *Unfurled*



raced classic yachts, and one of the best known of the big schooners. Her captain, Charlie Wroe, agrees, also pointing to the differences between schooner crews and those on modern yachts, things that contribute to a special culture shared among these boats.

“If you look at modern yachts you can have 110- and 120-footers crewed by three or four people. There is a trend towards reduced crew and everyone has to be completely expert. I’d say that on a schooner you tend to get a bigger spread of experience and so it’s more family like,” says Wroe.

The term ‘schooner boy’ is one still in use. It sums up a variety of skills and attributes: quickness and agility, a head for heights, a nearly prehensile ability to cling on atop, a facility to work with rope and sails, to get on agreeably with fellow crew.

“Sailing a schooner, at least the way we run *Mariette*, makes this a younger person’s game,” says Wroe. “You are able to take on younger crew, irrespective of whether they have sailing experience or not, because they are surrounded by a core of experienced sailors. So I can bring people up through the ranks. That is not so much the case on modern boats.

“Because these boats are complicated, we need consistent crew that keep coming back year after year. Essentially, we are looking at two kite hoists at the windward mark and two kite drops at the leeward mark.



EB/ywpix

“The second reason is we fly eight sails upwind and there are a lot of lines between the mast, and the opportunities for a bad lead are high. The most difficult part is getting the crew work to a situation where everyone is working in harmony. That takes time and it’s a question of putting in enough practice,” Wroe continues.

“For example, take trimming a sail. It’s easy for someone to trim incorrectly because they are not aware of how their sail interacts with all the other sails and that can only be understood with experience. It’s incredibly difficult with 30 people on board to give everyone the opportunity to properly learn their own job.”

### A romantic appeal

Some jobs can only be done aloft. On *Mariette*, hoisting, setting and putting away the main topmast staysail, or MTS, requires someone to be at the top of the foremast as does helping the sail through the gap when racing. “That’s generally not a problem, but when you get to a certain wind strength and sea state you can get caught out,” says Wroe. “When you have more than 16 or 18 knots of breeze things become correspondingly different.”

These complexities are perhaps one reason so few get together to compete. But Wroe wants to change that. He thinks that a regular schooner regatta could be a spectacle on a par with the J Class regattas, albeit in a much more Corinthian vein.

He thinks that the display of racing in Palma could be replicated, indeed should become a regular part of the classics calendar. So he is trying to organise another to attract “eight or nine” of the dozen or so big schooners actively sailing.

“I think there is an appetite among the owners and captains to have a big classic yacht regatta and in future I see Big Class yachts doing their own thing,” he says. “It doesn’t have to be separate [from existing regattas], but like any successful type such as the TP52 or J Class you have to make your own association for really good racing and race somewhere there are good conditions.”

Wroe’s idea already has a name, and a plan. He is calling it Schoonerfest, and it will happen in “Porto Cervo, Bay of Palma or Mahon” next summer. “More and more of these boats are being rebuilt or restored,” says Wroe. “This would be a great showcase and a spectacle. The J Class is magnificent, but just imagine a fleet of eight-sail schooners crossing tacks with each other.”