

# MAN AT THE TOP CPT. SIMON JOHNSON

INTERVIEW BY  
COLIN SQUIRE



**BELOW RIGHT:**  
SIMON'S FAMILY  
CIRCA 1969

**BOTTOM RIGHT:**  
SIMON WITH SISTER  
TESSA IN 1970

**RIGHT:**  
SIMON WITH HIS  
TWO SISTERS IN CAPE  
TOWN – 1971

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**  
THE FAMILY HOME  
– 1974

**HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF SITTING WITH CAPTAIN**

Simon Johnson on the bridge of the 63.5 m Lioness IV in Antigua at the end of the ACYM show. I have known Simon for many years and like many in the industry consider him to be a true friend. It is certainly an honour to be able to talk to him and be able to share his life's many wonderful experiences with you.

*Simon where were you born?*

I was born in Mangula, Rhodesia, now the Republic of Zimbabwe, on 18th January 1965. Mangula is a mining village with a population now of around 10,000 people (then it was around 1000 people) which grew up around a major copper deposit. From what I have read the mining ceased in the late 1990's and the place has now become a bit of a ghost town. I lived with my family in a house without electricity and running water, it was raw and open to the Bushveld. I remember it as an invigorating part of central Rhodesia with one road in and one road out – an amazing place that sits always on the edge of my memory, it was beautiful and it was my childhood home.



*What was the population of Zimbabwe at that time?*

There were about 220,000 white people then and about six million black people in a country about the size of France, it was a sparse country with lots of open spaces that were full of animals and wildlife. There were only 9 or 10 large towns dotted around the country. As you can imagine it was a big country.

*How did your parents end up there?*

My mother came from quite a few generations of Rhodesians; her great grandfather came out with Cecil John Rhodes and formed the country in those times. My father came out in his early 20s and joined the police force, met my mum and then fell in love, they met over rowing. My mother is deaf, she had been deaf since birth and it took quite an ambitious person to take her on as a spouse, I have always had tremendous respect for my father due to this. It was a tough life living in Africa and if you have a crying child because he or she has been bitten by a snake and you were deaf, you just wouldn't hear it. It was challenging for her, we always had dogs around us that would be her ears and these were trained to run to her if there were any problems.

*What was your mother's name?*

Janet Tobilcock, one of the last Tobilcocks in the world, her name was a corruption of Trebelcock which is a Cornish derivative and it was probably a spelling mistake at some point that created the Tobilcock name. I did consider name changing, I felt Tobilcock was a memorable name, but stayed with my father's name in the end.

*And your Dad?*

He was born Henry Howard Vaughan Johnson.

*You mentioned to me in an earlier conversation that your father was involved in a court case involving Mugabe?*

Yes, he was part of the prosecution when Mugabe was charged for murdering his own brother. Mugabe was convicted and put into jail from where he escaped and then subsequently ended up running the country and by this time my father was in



Government, we had to get out fast, there was no question about it, the writing was on the wall. I will never forget how one day in late 1978 my father came back home and announced that we had to go, we could not take anything, we had two suitcases each and just £640 between the whole family.

*Tell me more about your life in Rhodesia, it must have been primitive?*

Towards the end, when my father was in parliament, we went to Salisbury, which was the capital later to be renamed Harare. I went to a fantastic school there, St Georges College, where most of us were aiming to become Rhodes Scholars. It was a very good educational system run by Jesuits, a very good, sound, strict and ethical background, which I enjoyed. It was a delightful town because when you bumped into someone in the street you would say 'I am so terribly sorry', it was a very polite society. I guess it was like living in England during the 1950's. I was brought up with a sense of politeness, please and thank you were very much part of our culture and, to this day, I have found everything falls beautifully into place if you use those words, it is a culture that I still insist upon on the boat today.

*You were a long way from the sea, Zimbabwe is a landlocked country, I am still trying to get my head around what led you into having such an illustrious career in professional yachting?*

An interesting thought, most of the time that I spent in the Bushveld I was surrounded by rocks and stones and I enjoyed that,

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but when I was 13 I read Swallows and Amazons, a book that was totally inspirational for me. It captured my imagination and after reading it all I wanted to do was to get on a boat and set off on an adventure. My life, of course, had been an adventure up to that time, but here in this book was the prospect of another adventure that I hadn't even contemplated, I was totally wrapped up in the story and I think that this fired the embryonic change that was to dominate my life, but at that time I had no idea that I was going to leave my country of birth.

Of course there were lakes around that I could go to and then one day we went to Cape Town via a four day steam train

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ride. The steam train itself was such an adventure, I was allowed up in the loco to chat to the drivers and they allowed me to help shovel coal in and in fact drive the train, it did not take much. I can still remember stopping in the middle of Botswana and seeing the streams of locals who brought the water needed to fill the loco on their heads and then going to Kimberley to pick up more coal, that train was an adventure before the holiday began. We went into Cape Town and the steam train locos were changed over and I loved the shunting that went on and the noise as guys were tapping the wheels to make sure all was ok...it was just so exciting. My whole formative life was an adventure. Going to Cape Town, which is an invigorating place and seeing Table Mountain and where the South Indian and South Atlantic oceans collide left an indelible memory. It was an adventurous place, it was clean and beautiful. There were the Dutch Cape Houses, the sea was beautiful and then travelling on to Mozambique was just as amazing, it was run by the Portuguese at the time, the streets were lined in marble, there were fountains – it was just like Lisbon, Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) was such an exciting place. We also went to Inhaca Island and Madagascar which were simply stunning places to experience.

*As a kid you were certainly having an exciting life?*

The sense of adventure was with me every day in Africa, I had great fun around where I lived and the car and train trips were real eye openers.

*How did you manage to get on board a boat?*

Every single Rhodesian, white or black, were pioneers, the objective was to be self-sufficient. 1965, was the year of UDI, the Declaration of Independence from Britain, which was a big bold move, but I can remember there being nothing on the shelves in the shops. Apart from flour, salt and for some reason Smarties, all the shelves were bare, if we wanted food we had to grow it. We grew all our own food and amongst other things we had mulberries, strawberries and asparagus. I tended to them and we ate from the land, we wanted for nothing. Rhodesia at the time became the bread basket of South Africa. I am not sure why I mention this but grapefruit is very difficult to grow, it needs lots of water, but we were able at one point to grow them and lot's more. Dams were built as a part of the big plan and I was aware that my father was a part of all of this. From the dams it was possible to irrigate the great plains of Rhodesian Africa where the farmers grew the most amazing fruit and vegetables that were exported all over the place. The lakes that the dams created then provided the sailing ground that I was desperate to get on. I managed to get a little boat and I loved it. I think the combination of Swallows and Amazons and the lakes inspired my sea going career, all I wanted to do was carry on with the adventure.

*You have a twin sister?*

I have two sisters, my twin, Tessa, is obviously my closest and best friend ever and three in Africa is good because if you have one injured child with a snake bite, one can stay with the injured one and the other can go and get help, so three is the secret number for African children. My other sister is Colette. We always played together and we would look after each other, a culture I have brought with me to the yachts – we have to look after each other, every person is important and it is about being self-sufficient.

*Did you ever get bitten?*

Oh yes, it was always dangerous, I wasn't frightened, I remember waking up one morning and a snake was lying alongside me. It had wanted the warmth of my body and I had to get out of my bed very carefully, if you weren't frightened of them they would not bother with you. There were lots of spiders around and I was fine with them until one day I ran into a web that was just full of them and I was completely covered in what seemed like enormous creatures, my skin crawls now just at the thought. We had black widow and tree spiders that could jump on you, I became good at spotting them, you also had to look where you put your feet to make sure you didn't stand on a snake, or a scorpion, everywhere there was danger. There were even little ants with a powerful venom, spitting cobras, we always had to be very responsible and always wear long socks, boots etc. if we were going out in the bush. The sun was there and we were conditioned to never go out in it without being covered as best we could be, people couldn't understand how white I was when I arrived in the UK, but we just never went out in the sun, it's dangerous stuff, today of course everybody is warned of its dangers, back then it was simple common sense.

*How about big cats, did you ever tangle with them?*

Hyenas were the worst, they are clever things, they are pack animals and they are bold when it comes to food, they have the ability to put a humans head in their mouth and crush it, that's how powerful their jaws are and they are very clever. Lions are a little lazy, they will sit and wait, but the hyenas will go out and hunt. In a fight between a pack of hyenas and a lion it would be interesting to see who would win. You could hear the wild animals and growing up with the noises of the animals all around was exciting, it is strange that we took everything for granted in such a wild place. Could you imagine a lion or whatever running loose in Europe or America, all hell would be let loose.

I absolutely loved the wild birds that were around, I could distinguish all the birds, I could identify them by the noise they made or their tracks. As a youngster I had so much to discover, I did not wait for the world to come to me, I went out and discovered it, we did not have the internet, we had to learn as

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people had for thousands of years. Once we discovered some new creature we would get our books out and look it up, we also learnt how to identify animal tracks by scratches, paw prints and even dung from which we could work out how many hours or days away they were. I was bought up as a boy scout and the ways of Baden-Powell with his sense of getting out into the world and learning about it rather than waiting for it to come to you, which it mostly does not. Looking back it was truly amazing to grow up the way I did.

*How did you get out of the country?*

We had to fly out and I hate to say it but I have never been back, it would break my heart to see the ravished country that Zimbabwe has become. My father did everything he possibly could to get the family the British passports that would enable us to get to the safety of England. In the first place we stopped, which was in Pretoria, South Africa and using all the strings that he could pull we were each given a Passport. We could not fly over Africa at all so from Pretoria we went on a 747 that carried extra fuel that took us around the big bulge of Africa. By the time we landed in London we were thirsty and exhausted from the long trip.

When we landed at Heathrow my father was met by a cousin who had a cousin who had a big house that they were rattling around in up in Kettering, where we asked if we could stay whilst we got ourselves sorted out. There we lived in the dining room which was a bit of a shock. It was the winter of 1978/9, the winter of discontent as it became known. Margaret Thatcher was taking over from James Callaghan in government and there were riots, miner strikes and all sorts of other strikes going on throughout the country, it was political chaos, high unemployment and soaring interest rates didn't help, it was a hard time for England and we had arrived in the thick of it.

It was also one of the worst winters we had known, I had never seen snow before and it was cold and a great struggle. I can remember how, when at school in Zimbabwe, the teacher would say this is what we are reading 'The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck' and we would study it through and try and get the meaning of where he was coming from, but in England a teacher would come in and say we were doing a certain book and then there would be a debate about it. I could not understand this, the teachers were there to teach and not democratically debate with the class so that they would keep quiet, it was alien to me. I wanted more knowledge and I found that I gained more from reading my own stuff than I was gaining in school, I was again reaching out and taking my own path and learning what was important to my dreams.

I decided to learn navigation, the days were dark by four in the afternoon and there was nothing I could do to occupy my



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**BELOW:**  
SIMON WITH  
RYA STUDENTS IN  
GIBRALTAR – 1986

brain and so I enrolled on a National Marine Correspondence Yacht Master course. At 14 my life was set alight by my maritime studies, my school work I breezed through. My navigation studies assumed O Level maths which at this stage I had not done, I had to learn how to add and subtract to base 6, I had to learn about minutes and seconds and I didn't even know how many degrees there were in a circle, but I had to learn it all and that's what I did. I wasn't that particularly interested in making friends because I had no connections with anybody, they would ask 'who I supported?' and I just didn't understand the question, I wanted to talk about Lions and stuff and they wanted to talk about football, it was just a different language and a different culture – but I was quite happy.

*Did you not feel lost or abandoned?*

No, not at all, I felt that I had had the best that the world could offer me as I grew up, my life seemed so full and yet now empty compared to the young kids I now found myself surrounded by. I cried myself to sleep every night for four months because I missed Africa. It is difficult to describe to anybody how I had evolved to have such a love of such a place, of such a life as I had experienced, I missed it so so very much. I didn't feel abandoned as I recognised the sacrifice my parents had made, I knew that our cards were marked and we would not survive the Mugabe regime – I had met him myself and I did not like him, my memory is of this weak handshake he gave me. His son went to my school and I

did not like him either, we knew these people and what they were capable of and we were right. He killed a lot of his own people and to this day that is how he stays in power. The country that I knew has gone, I do not have a yearning to go back, I will never go back, it is just knowing that the country I was part of has been lost to this world.

*Of the 220,000 whites that were there at the time, how many do you think remain?*

It's not many, maybe 20,000, Zimbabwe has been decimated, we have all lost.

*I assume you passed your Yachtmaster course?*

Yes, I did all my studies for my Yachtmaster, all my theory and then as you can imagine I was desperate to get onto a boat. I knew that spring was coming and I went down to the boats and with all of the pocket money I could muster I paid for and went on my first Competent Crew Course. I really was so excited that I would now have a chance to sail a boat. In fact I was so excited I simply couldn't sleep.

*How big was the boat?*

It was 31 foot wooden boat, a beautiful little thing, it had cost me £45 to go on the course and I had saved and saved from doing odd jobs and cleaning windows etc. I was so excited, my dad had dropped me off and my heart was racing. I stepped on the boat





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and met the crew, I had never seen a tiller, a winch or a proper compass before. In Africa I had only ever been on my little dinghy, I was so excited – this was a real boat, I was touching everything and of course I had never flaked a sail before, that was so much fun, I absorbed everything around me, I was where I wanted to be, it all seemed so natural. I learnt everything, I was so keen. We had a fantastic Captain, we sailed around a little bit on the Solent and then went across to the Channel Islands. I did night sailing for the first time – it was amazing.

I was 14 in 1979 and the Captain was Anthony W. (Tony) Harris, he had recently written a book called 'Master Under God'. He defined my life that man, he is still alive, he was born 18th March 1936. I then hung around the marina and cleaned boats, I just wanted to stay around boats. I traded my cleaning of boats into miles and the story unfolds from there and I soon got the reputation for cleaning boats in return for going out on little trips to build my miles up. I got my Yachtmaster, I was the youngest Yachtmaster at the time and I still hold the accolade of being the youngest instructor before becoming an examiner. Then the very same Tony Harris brought me in as a partner to the business he was running and I set up a sailing school called Scimitar Sailing in Gibraltar. I was soon doing ocean sailing with passengers down to Gibraltar where we started the first ever RYA teaching establishment outside of the UK.

The reason we could set up in Gibraltar was that it was British, it has tidal waters and currents, something you have to have to run an RYA course and we convinced the powers at the time that there was sufficient there to warrant a school. Tony and I set the business up, we were friends of the Governor and he managed to pull some strings to get us some classified tidal stream atlases, classified because of a lot of submarine activity

and we were given tidal streams for every 100 feet which enabled me to draw my own atlas which I presented to the RYA and they then validated our school.

We basically set up this company and it did very well. At 22 years of age I had 20 + boats and all the yachts in the fleet were managed except for four which we bought. Tony and I were equal shareholders and directors and we built the company up to be representatives of Westerly Yachts, which had a range from 29 to 39 feet. People would come out to rent the boats, I would teach sailing on the boats, I loved it, I taught sailing there for several years. At 22 we sold the company.

*Trying to get a link here, you came to the UK, you went to school and also did your navigation course, did you stay on at school?*

What was really interesting in the Spring of 1979 was when I went on the boat and became so invigorated with the Channel Islands and sailing. Back home I had the opportunity offered of becoming a full time boarder at St Georges College, it was a private school. But then fate played its beautiful hand, at that time our family had nothing, my father had died penniless leaving me to look after my mother, which I have done ever since. My Godmother had left me a pocket watch and I went to Christies in London and auctioned it which made me enough money to pay to be a boarder at Elizabeth's College in St Peters Port in Guernsey, I never went home. During school holidays I stepped straight out of my uniform and onto a boat. Tony would pick me up in Guernsey and I would sail. I could merge the two, I did O levels and A Levels and I sailed and sailed.

*After College came to an end what happened?*

It was then that Tony suggested we run the school and I did



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**RIGHT:**  
SIMON THE  
UNIVERSITY STUDENT



my first Ocean trip down to Gibraltar, coming back through the French canals. It was amazing, we set up the school and returned through the Canals and then we did it again. We soon established a reputation amongst people who wanted us to manage their yachts and then I found that I had built a tremendous reputation for delivering them. I found it so exciting; I was the only person, other than Robin Knox-Johnston, who had the insurance cover to sail any month of the year across the Bay of Biscay. I had the best reputation for it because my astro navigation was supreme; I was bang on all the time. It was before GPS and there were very few people that could navigate over long distances confidently; I was doing the Atlantic, I brought all my own charts and was self-sufficient, I would simply bring everything on board and deliver the boat. I had my own crew, they travelled everywhere with me.

*Did you pay the crew, many would, I am sure, have sailed with you for nothing, just the experience?*

Of course I always paid my crew, I charged a pound a mile plus all expenses and I popped deliveries out one after another, it was a hell of a whirl at the time, a lot of the boats in the Med were being delivered by me. By that time I had experienced many

different types of yachts and went on to experience a great many more. I knew inside me that there was something waiting for me out in the world, I was 22 and I could feel it, that's when we put the company up for sale.

I had always yearned to complete my education and with the business sold I went off to Manchester University to do Maths and then two months in, a recession hit. I was high and dry, I had the money to go to university, the whole world was scrabbling about with credit problems and companies were folding and I was sitting pretty, my return to the university was well timed.

When I came out of University I went to an auction where there was a boat being auctioned called Robert Gordon. She had just been caught smuggling the largest amount of Cannabis resin into the UK that has ever been seized, then or ever since. In 1984 she had brought 4.3 tons of high grade Lebanese Gold worth at the time £10.8 million into the country, that's about £31 million today. The yacht had been tracked from Cyprus when operation Bishop was put into place by the British customs who allowed the vessel to come into the River Crouch before boarding her. You can still read about this online. They arrested everyone and found this massive stash of drugs, seized the boat and put it up for auction. I went to the auction, there were quite a few people there, but I bought her for £33,000.

*Was it a big boat?*

22 m, and I owned it and I was thinking what can I do now. I had 86 tonnes of long keeled schooner rusting away and I managed to get friends and family involved who helped me with her refurbishment, I took everything out and needle gunned her and re-plated her where she needed it.

She was designed by John Illingworth, who is noteworthy because he designed Gypsy Moth, he was also the first architect to ever design a yacht which could get up on the plane, which was the J24, a famous Olympic boat, nobody could ever believe that a keel could plane and to this day in the America's Cup they are all running around on the plane, that's where they get the speed from. It came from the board of John Illingworth and was built in Holland by Van Bennekum for the Robert Gordon Institute in Aberdeen. The Robert Gordon Institute is famous to this day and is a proving ground for safety at sea and all that encompasses. It was formed by Robert Gordon himself, who died several hundred years ago leaving a lot of money to set up the school as he believed that men will be made of boys 'through a seafaring and religious education'. The school still exists today, in fact it is a university with a very noteworthy degree. I visited the Dean and discovered that the boat was built along with the philosophy of teaching boys to sail. It was one of the first training sailing vessels in the UK and I now had the honour of owning it. I threw my heart and soul into it and did the refurbishment slightly differently



**RIGHT:**  
SIMON'S BOAT,  
ROBERT GORDON  
AT THE ANTIGUA  
CLASSIC YACHT  
REGATTA IN 2003



from anyone else. I used Colefax and Fowler fabrics, I installed dentil cornice work and water colour paintings on the walls and used Damask linen and Royal Doulton crockery, it was a bit like fitting out an English Mews Cottage. I prepared it for charters in the Caribbean.

She had 3500 square feet of sail and no hydraulics at all. It had cable steering which I took out and kept in reserve just in case, but I designed a system myself, a Seatrack auto pilot system which was important as I could then manage the ship myself. Robert Gordon had been designed to be run by 12 cadets and I needed it to be run by three people, myself, a chef, and one deck crew. I reconfigured the sail handling system and had the new sails made of heavy 15 oz cloth with triple stitching that had UV protection. I prepared the yacht for use in the sunshine of the Caribbean and heavy charter use. When she was finished I brought her across to the hornet's nest of chartering, here in Antigua and started my new venture.

*Where was she refitted?*

I refitted her myself, I did all the plating in Strood on the Medway, then I sailed it bare-hulled around to the Universal Yard on the Hamble. We did everything ourselves, I didn't use the yard workers. My brother in law was the cabinet maker, I had a friend who was a shipwright, my sister helped me with the buying, she bought anything that was under £300 and I bought anything over. I rented a 1000 square foot work-shop, I bought an overhead router, a thicknesser-planer and a mortise and tenon machine. I put three phase into the workshop. I bought the wood, American white oak, maple, sycamore, poplar and re-did the interior from scratch.

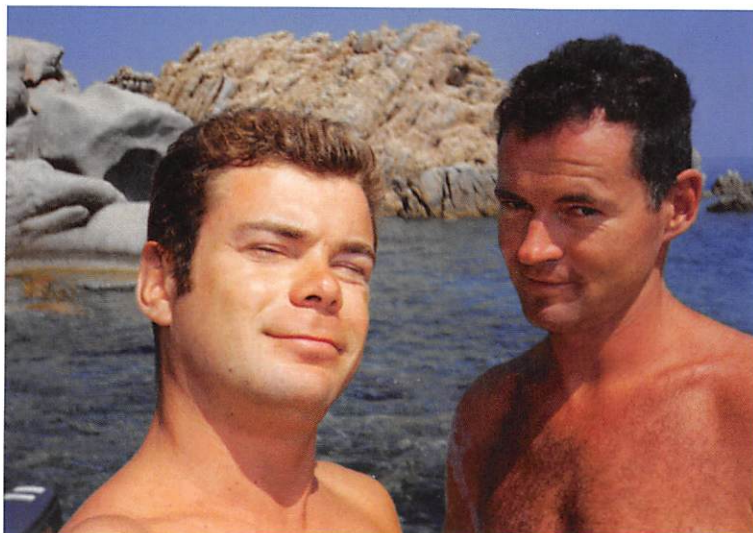
I put the floors down first and then marked the berths, knowing I needed to fit six cabins in, then walled it, then put in bulkheads before the MCA rules came in, it was the Board of Trade to begin with and then it became the Department of Transport before becoming the MCA. I got everything from the MCA, it was still in hand written form, everything I decided on was with the approval of the MCA.

*Did you have any tough experiences with the boat?*

I re-built the boat so that we could survive anything. In those days, before all of today's

modern aids came along, weather forecasting was an art. It was the art of being able to look at what was happening around you, to be able to taste the air, look at the clouds, look at the barometer, read it. Even until this day, as I describe to anyone who cares to listen, you need to start thinking about the weather a week before setting out to get a sense of what is going on. In those days you always planned for being in a storm. Nowadays how people get caught in storms is uncanny as we have so much information. In those days boats were better built and I had picked my boat with that in mind, she was built for around the world sailing. At 86 tonnes, with her big solid masts and rigging, she was built to take whatever was thrown at her, after all she was built up in Aberdeen to handle the North Sea at the worst of times and if she could survive that she could survive just about anything. I didn't have any fear that the boat couldn't cope, it was just making sure the crew could. There were some quite dramatic times when the seas were big, but I cannot begin to describe how

**RIGHT:**  
SIMON WITH GOOD  
FRIEND PAUL COLWELL  
– CIRCA 1993



**BELOW:**  
SIMON WITH SISTER  
TESSA IN 1994

out for each other, generally we had no money, nothing. At one time I had \$68 and had to pay my crew, I was going to write to my past guests and say if you transfer money now I will give you 30% discount on your next visit. I managed to wangle many charters that way, often undercutting Michael Howarth, who was running Red Hackle at the time, the regular charterers would play me off against him. Michael came to me once and said 'I guess you undercut me so much that you did not make any money' I had because I knew I would make enough on the tips to pay my crew. I just had to keep the boat running and it was hard. To run that boat cost \$14,000 on average per month, sometimes up to \$16,000, I was chartering out at \$14,000 per week. I needed two weeks per month, every month, for her keep.

*What did you do if you were out of season?*

I stayed in Antigua, I could not afford to cross and did in-between hurricane charters, it was really tough. Naturally my life involved a lot of very careful decisions about buying, I had to repair as much as I could and it is still a philosophy I use until this day. The



most important decision I make as a Captain is the make or buy, or the repair or buy new decision. To explore the repair right until the end of the road, for example if a pump fails, explore rewinding before committing to re-purchase mainly for two reasons, firstly to see if you can get extra life out of something, for instance the KVA generator I repaired, it only had a faulty oil sender and I ended up with a perfect generator which had cost me nothing and lasted for years and years. Secondly a lot of the new stuff comes from China and it is inferior. You will not get any better than say some of the old Feadship pumps that were built 30 years or so ago that need a simple repair to keep them running. This

philosophy works in my favour now and the reason I do well on boats and stay within budget is because I have this in mind from my days on Robert Gordon and it sets me apart.

*You must have had some interesting charters on Robert Gordon.*

There are so many stories of amazing charters, but maybe one that stands out is where I couldn't get a starter motor, so I ran the whole charter for a month without an engine. I blagged it with the guests saying 'you came on a sail boat to sail and that's what we are going to do'. Whatever it took we sailed, it sounds cute, but it is tremendously challenging because if you sail to Green Island say, there is no 'Plan B', you can put the anchor down, but then I would have to make up a story for the guests as to why we couldn't instantly get it up and go.

During this time I realised that the reason English Harbour is the success it is and the reason that Nelson chose this as his base was simply because it is the only harbour in the Caribbean that you can sail into, which sounds absolutely extraordinary, but all the other harbours are in the lee of the land which sensibly is where harbours ought to be. You cannot sail if you are in the lee of an island, for instance in Martinique you cannot sail, it might be raging 40 knots on the east side when there is nothing in the lee and you will be becalmed for days. That is what is crucial in my appreciation of English Harbour as a strategic centre, not only for that, but it has a hidden entrance. In the old days you could be on Shirley Heights as a look out and see a foreign fleet pass by and they would not see the British fleet, the mast height could not be seen above the entrance.

I have had some great guests, for instance Alan Thicke he married his second wife, Gina Tolleson a former Miss World on my boat and

good it felt to have the Robert Gordon under my feet. She looked big and chunky, but my goodness she took the seas well. She never let me or my guests down during the 20 years I had her.

It was a vibrant time for me, I was one of those guys that had no shoes on his feet as I had no money to buy them, I put everything into the boat. I paid my crew, every week I paid them, I survived that way, I was an impoverished sailor who took great pride in his boat. I was so impoverished that everyone knew me as the guy who went through the bins.

*Did you really go through the bins?*

I did, I absolutely did. If I could reuse somebody else's old kit I would. One of the most fortuitous things I did was to find a broken generator sitting in the dock as the crew of the vessel it belonged to could not get it too work. I offered to take it off them, I stripped it down, found out what was wrong, put it back together and put it on my boat – I had it for years. There was lots of stuff I recycled, that's the modern phrase, people can tell you throughout the islands how they would see me going through bins looking for stuff, it must have looked odd but that was how it was. At one time I can remember I had to change the halyards but they would cost \$600 each and I had to pay my crew, it was

either pay the crew or buy the halyards, I needed both. I walked the docks and asked people if they were throwing anything out. I was very good at asking and splicing!

Motor-Boat Yachties can be a bit snobbish but real sailors completely understood me, there is a difference, one is money, one is passion, the motor boat professionals where a bit 'ooh you are wearing a ripped t-shirt can't you afford a decent one?' I was one of the few owner operators out there, I had entered chartering not knowing any other way, but I realised I was a dying breed and I guess today owner operators can be counted on one hand. Then we were a little tight-knit community always looking



**LEFT:**  
SIMON WITH THE  
ROBERT GORDON  
CREW IN 1994

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we had a great time. We have had great charters, the reason why Robert Gordon was so successful was that I always had the very best food, we would have the best chef I could possibly afford to ensure the food would be extraordinary. The yacht also involved a lot of effort, it took two hours to polish the brass every day, every day of my life. I would get up at 6.30 and do the hull and tender, polish brass, lay the table, do the beds whilst guests were having breakfast, take the awnings down, put the sails up – the whole day was a workout, I was as fit as a fiddle. I remember someone coming to the island to set up a gym. 'Are you serious' I told him, 'it will be a flop, no one will go to a gym, like most people here my whole life is a workout', sure enough it failed, us sailors back then, we were as fit as fiddles.

*What happened to Robert Gordon in the end?*

I was exhausted, I was doing 27 weeks of back to back charters,

I was shattered, bearing in mind I had been working so hard what with forming the company and then the chartering. I really couldn't do the bookings but I couldn't afford to say no and I was spending all my money on the boat and the more I used it the



**TOP LEFT:**  
SIMON TRIES TO  
TAKE IT EASY  
DURING THE ROBERT  
GORDON DAYS

**LEFT:**  
SOUTHERN CROSS III



**ABOVE:**  
HANG GLIDING IN  
FRANCE – 1989

**BELOW:**  
SIMON ENJOYS  
A NIGHT OUT

more it broke. I then thought I would work for someone else and slow the pace of the boat right down to work on the bits that needed fixing. There was one time that a deck fitting popped up and it had rusted through, this was the time I knew I had to stop, the final straw if you like. I always had a couple of spare deck fittings so none of the guests knew what had happened but I knew what was going on under the paint and varnish and it needed a serious looking at.

I joined the famous schooner America for a brief while before I went onto the Southern Cross III. Southern Cross III was amazing, Stephen Spielberg, Elton John, Lady Diana, Jeffrey Katzenberg, I met everybody, we did the premier charters, we were the best. I recruited great sailors to work with me, everyone on board was a true sailor, we were the best charter boat in the world, nobody could touch us. It was an incredible opportunity for me, it was high octane, high delivery and the forming of my career.



*I remember one of the parties you held on board her only a few yards from where we are sitting now, that has to go into the history books. You flew in a bunch of Transvestite imitation lookalike stars just for the night, I even met up with the Prime Minister at the time, Lester Bird, on board. I had taught him to ski in 1980.*

Partying on SC III was off the planet, at the end of the year I was able to give the owner a cheque for £1.2 million, the boat cost £3.3 million and we made £4.5 million and I was able to give him that cheque, we were doing double seasons and making money.

*What is your most favourite memory of that boat?*

There were so many stories and so much fun, for example we were in Portoferraio, Elba, and I had a call from the guests as they were trying to have dinner. There were about 1000 people taking pictures from the shore which understandably was annoying them, they just wanted a quiet dinner. I visited the table a few minutes later and it was obvious what the problem was, they could see our main guest. He stood up and they all started shouting 'Sean, Sean, Sean Connery' he went red and sat back down. He simply looked like Sean! I had a plan and arranged for two of my beefiest crew, with me clearing the way, to escort him to the tender alongside the dock, he got in and disappeared into the distance. I then deliberately let it be known that he had gone to a famous bar along the coast and everybody rushed off to find him there. We soon had the tender back and with our guest hiding in it we hoisted him back on board to finish his meal in peace.

It was so much fun, every year I would arrange a crew party at the end of the season. What is important to me is crewmanship, bringing people together and so when we were in Cap d'Ail I said 'guys let's have a party.' During the course of the summer I had taken their measurements and had costumes made for them, all of my 16 crew had something different to wear. They were shocked when they learned the theme for the night, they were all Teletubbies. I was in full leather, I had my harness, my hat and my whip, chains and chaps. You can imagine the scene, a fabulous band, lights rigged around the place and all my crew as Teletubbies and on the back of the boat, just for good measure, I have the biggest, fattest lesbian stripping under flood lights. It was just a random event in my head that I wanted. It was cracking, people were coming from all over trying to get in to this party. Eventually the police came 'We need to speak to the captain!' and I thought they cannot see me like this so I rushed to get changed. 'What is wrong, I have permission from the captain of the port, don't make this a problem', 'No no, we have had complaints' and they told me I had to make a statement and I had to stop the whole party. I sent the crew to Stars and Bars and went to make the statement at which point they said that they thought the party was amazing, but we have to go through the due process.

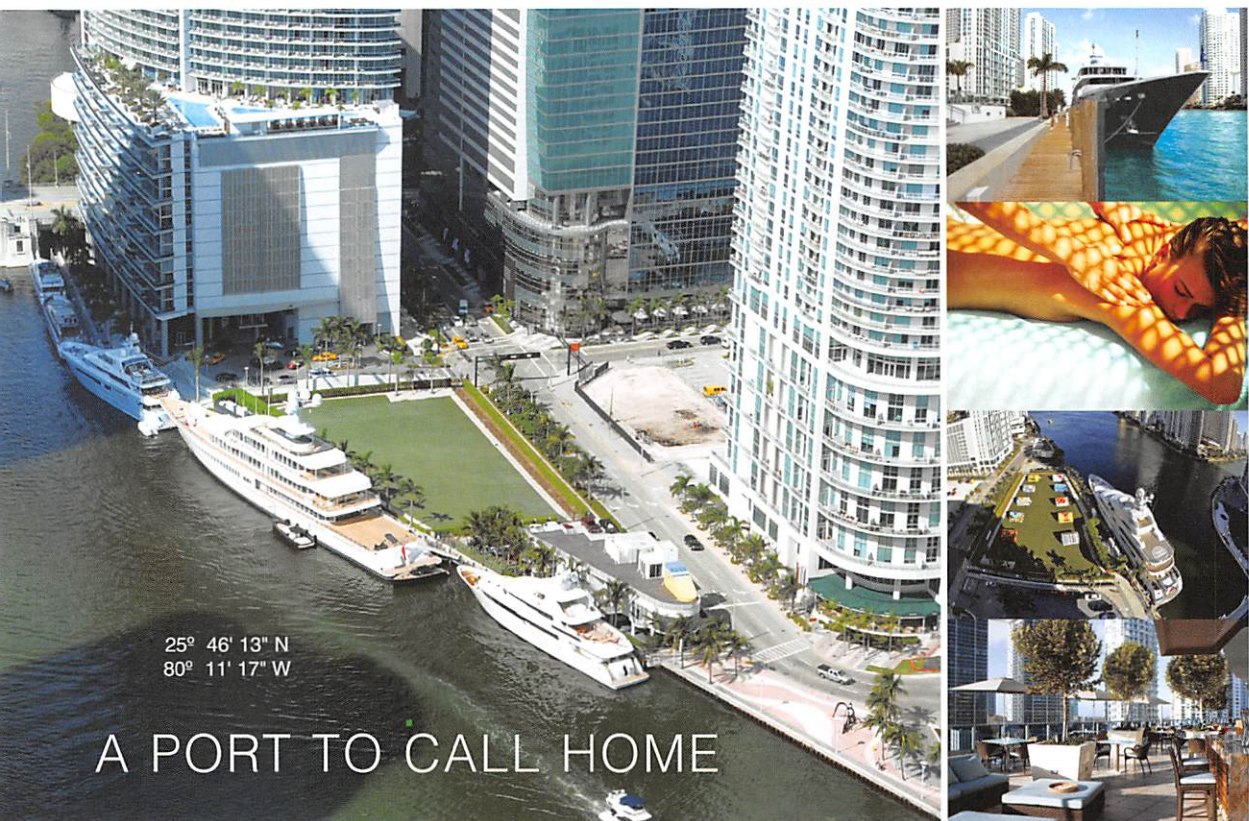
LEFT:  
M/Y SAMAR



They politely asked if I could do them a favour and apologise to the 'German' that they had been nasty to when they first came on board!

There are loads of stories. One time we had a six week charter and on week four we were stuck as one of the MTUs had gone, I had to think, you are only allowed 48 hours

for breakdowns, which upset me as it is either 10% or 48 hours whatever is the least. I said to the guests 'you like Monaco, why don't I rent a Mangusta for you and they will do the out and backs and we will stay on the dock in our privileged berth, you can have the best of all worlds.' They thought this was amazing and had no idea that I had an engine failure, I rented this



25° 46' 13" N  
80° 11' 17" W

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**RIGHT:**  
SIMON WITH THE  
CREW OF M/Y SAMAR

**OPPOSITE:**  
M/Y ELISABETH F

**BELOW:**  
M/Y LADY LAU



Mangusta as I flew the MTU guys in, I knew I couldn't afford to lose the money from the charter.

*Why did you leave Southern Cross?*

The reason I left her was that the Owner's rep wanted a share of the tips, they were averaging \$6000 EACH per month per crew member, I used to split the tips equally amongst them. I said to him that basically he had asked me to open the crew member's wallets and take from them, which would never happen under my watch. I will not have the owner or his representatives taking the crew's money or having the crew unpaid, my resignation comes first.

*What happened after you left?*

I went to the Aga Khan in 2002, I was brought on for Project 305. Built by Devonport Yachts, I was taken on as the Captain, and it has only just, within the last year, left the yard, it is possibly the longest build on record.

I was put in charge of his fleet including Kalamoun, Shergar, Alamshar, in all seven boats. Of course I was taken on as captain of Alamshar but ended up running Shergar, which was great. I wanted jet boat experience, I had two fantastic turbines, 571 Alyson KFs, that did 48 knots if pushed. She was a 47 m Lürssen built boat and at 48 Knots I could go from Nice to Mykonos in 20 hours.

*What was the fuel consumption?*

With the two turbines it was 3500 litres an hour, but one turbine was actually more economical than running the main engine, so I would run on those, it was a very efficient form of power. It can either be zero or full power, this is the difference, turbines have to be run on full power, this is the only way the cooling happens, this is why Project 305 blew up twice because instinctively she was throttled back when she was overheating and what you have to do with a turbine is push more power in.

*Did you get to drive 305?*

No I never got to drive it. I moved from Shergar to do a short spell on Helena C and then almost a year on Midlandia before being headhunted to join the 77 m Samar another Devonport built yacht. I did 30 months on her and by the end of that spell I was exhausted, every time I went to New York to talk to the owner I would sit in the atrium and his PA would come out and say 'He is going to give you €5000 more per month' I didn't want more money I wanted him to find someone to take over the boat so that I could go away and have a break, I had only been off the boat twice, I was running a full office with 24 crew and no management





and no time off. I left Samar, I enjoyed the boat, I enjoyed the owner, but the job was difficult and I left to keep my sanity.

After Samar I slowed down a bit and in 2008 undertook a relief job for three months on board the 82 m Amevi during a dry docking and then took a break before joining the 53 m motor yacht Elisabeth F for three years. After Elisabeth F I joined the 65 m Lady Lau for 18 months and from her I became the Captain of the 61 m St David in the June of 2014. I stayed with her until I joined Lioness IV.

*How long have you been on Lioness IV?*

Around 10 months now, she is Philip Green's old Lionheart, she has never been seen under this name and so being at this show has been the big re-launch of a wonderful yacht.

*Do you have clients that follow you?*

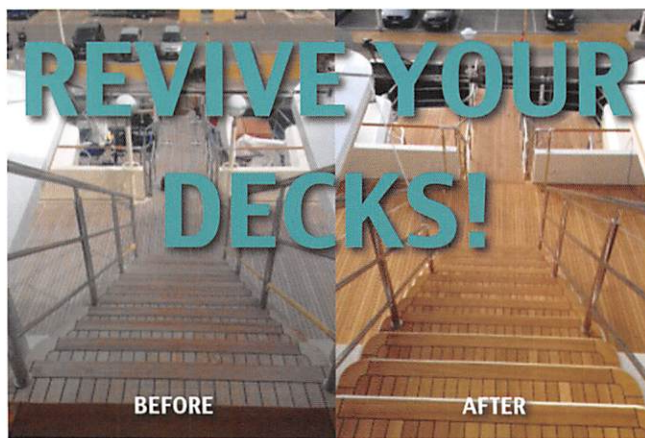
Absolutely, yes they know I am on here and there are already enquiries, we are going to do well. My next challenge is crew training and selection, that is what I am doing, most of my crew are from my past commands; you don't get better crew than that.

*Crew training and selection?*

Crew selection is important, you have to find the right crew that want to do the job and then give them specific training to make them very thorough in everything they have to do. We will get there soon on here, I only felt that we had all bedded down a few days before the start of the show, it is not easy when we are all coming to terms with a new yacht, what is great though, as I said, my crew are mostly all from my previous boats and they know me and I know them and they know their jobs.

*I came on board a few days ago for a party, I liked your attitude, start at 7pm and finish at 9pm.*

Well, I know from experience that you get the freeloaders who want free drink and a good time, I am here to impress the brokers, we can do that in just a couple of hours, that's my job, I need to be cost effective, this party is going to cost me \$15,000 or whatever, just for two hours and if I lose control of the bar it



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MAN AT THE TOP – CPT. SIMON JOHNSON



**ABOVE:**  
M/Y ST. DAVID

**BELOW:**  
M/Y LIONESS IV

will soon be \$30,000. If I had an open account I would happily let the world join in but I don't and I do not see why the owner of the yacht should fund people who are never going to bring us business, in fact they are here to take business from us, they want us as a client.

*Do you see value in the parties; you are certainly the person to ask?* Absolutely, because all the brokers can see how we behave as a team, we have engineers serving drinks, they can see we are a tight team, they are not just renting the yacht for their clients, there are many great yachts available, but they need to ensure their clients are going to be well looked after. Attending a party is far better than just being escorted around the boat, you do not see the teamwork during a tour. I reckon that 60% of the draw of

a yacht is the comfort guests feel when they have to interact with the crew, the style of the crew and how they present themselves; you can see this during a party. She charters out at \$425,000 low season \$650,000 high season a week, if you are paying that kind of money you expect perfection.

*Talking of perfection I know you have a thing about flag etiquette.* Flag etiquette is a code that for me serves as a 'salute' to past history and to seafarers who have given their lives in making things as safe as they are today. It was interesting that at a recent Monaco Grand Prix, we were possibly the only yacht who correctly dressed ourselves overall with code flags. *(In the right order from bow to stern: A B 2 U J 1 K E 3 G H 6 I V 5 F L 4 D M 7 P O Third Repeater R N First Repeater S T Zero C X 9 W Q 8 Z Y Second Repeater).*



**RIGHT:**  
YACHTS DRESSED  
OVERALL IN GENOA

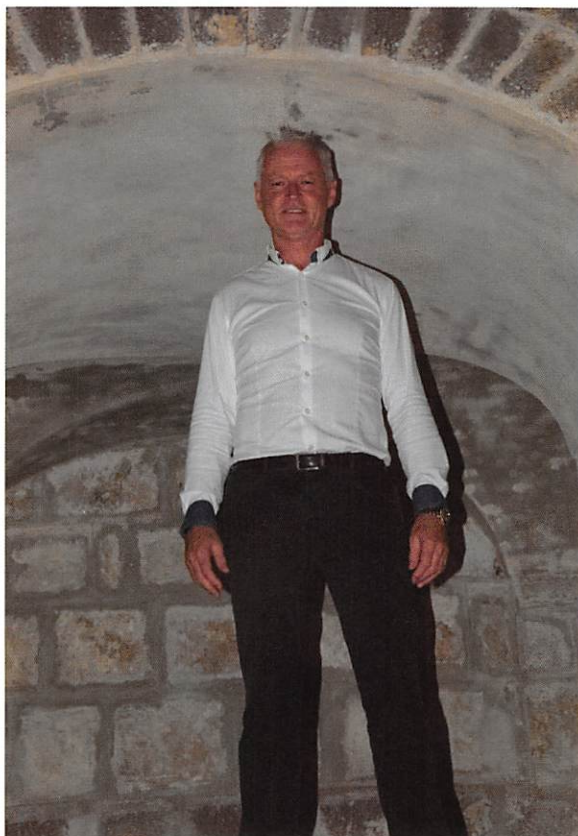
**BELOW:**  
SIMON PARTIES IN  
ANTINGUA – 2016

**FAR RIGHT:**  
SIMON WITH HIS  
STEARMAN

**FAR RIGHT BOTTOM:**  
SIMON'S 28'  
HUNTSMAN



*Not every charter yacht makes a profit, why own a yacht of this size?*  
If you can't afford a boat, or do not want the hassle of ownership, then don't buy one. The point is if I own a boat, which I do because I own a boat plus two aeroplanes and eight classic cars, I know the problem, it is not the value I get out of them but the pride that I have in owning them.



*You have two planes?*

Yes, they are beautiful, one I restored, it was an old classic bi-plane, a Stearman that was as close to a Fairey Swordfish as I could find and my yacht is a 28 foot Fairey Huntsman, a wooden boat. You may wonder why I would want them?

*Tell us why?*

It is history, on the 26th May 1941, a Fairey Swordfish strike was launched against Bismark from Ark Royal jamming the Bismarck's rudders with 15° port helm on, making the warship unmanoeuvrable.

The courage of the Swordfish crews was noted by the commanders on both sides: British Vice-Admiral Bertram Ramsay later wrote 'In my opinion the gallant sortie of these six Swordfish aircraft constitutes one of the finest exhibitions of self-sacrifice and devotion to duty the war had ever witnessed', and even a German, Vice-Admiral Otto Ciliax remarked, 'the mothball attack of a handful of ancient planes, piloted by men whose bravery surpasses any other action by either side that day'.

Finding an airworthy Swordfish proved impossible and led me to find a similar aircraft – the Stearman. My particular plane, which is based in an airfield in Derbyshire, had to be CAA certified to earn its upkeep with joy flights, training flights, Bouncing Bomb tours and Wing-Walking.

The Stearman type E75N1 was built in 1943 with a Lycoming R-680-17 Radial engine. They were used as a military trainer aircraft during the 1930s and 1940s and throughout World War II. It is a conventional biplane of rugged construction with a large, fixed, tail-wheel undercarriage and accommodation for the student and instructor in open cockpits in tandem.

Another great story that inspired me was how an architect at the time was commissioned by the War Effort to provide a hull-design to pick up the downed Spitfire Pilots. The design was revolutionary in producing high speeds in all manner of sea states, to rescue them, turn them around and send them back up again to fight in the Battle of Britain. 'Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few'. This formed the start of Fairey Marine.

Fairey Marine Ltd was a boat building company created by Sir Charles Richard Fairey. The design of my own 1961 28' Huntsman was by Alan Burnard and is hull number 11. The planing hull has been copied in various guises since. The hull is a relatively deep V with single chine and spray rails. The construction is of laminated mahogany. Once laminated the hulls were cooked in an autoclave to cure the glue. The two Cummins x 160Hp engines are placed amidships under a sloping deck to the cockpit.

The craft also starred in the James Bond film 'From Russia with Love.' Sean Connery as James Bond can be seen driving a



white Fairey Huntress and being chased by my very own Fairey Huntsman 28!

So my own connection with Fairey Aviation and Fairey Marine has been made. I am very pleased to have finally realised my lifelong dream – since I started my yachting career in 1979 – to be the proud owner of both the Huntsman, and a faux Swordfish of this great British Story. I have always been so proud of the British Contribution to both sailing and flying the world over, and most particularly to the Superyacht Industry today.

*Who did you sell Robert Gordon to?*

I don't ever want to talk about it as it was with sadness and the end of a love affair that I had, I just don't want to know. It was a tough sale. What caused my decision to sell was I had left the boat to get the money from Southern Cross that was basically all of my tips, to finance and keep the boat, I had a Captain on board and so I could use it when I wanted. I would fly in to be an owner with a Captain and do the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta. Every year I entered, I wanted to win, I came 2nd and 2nd and 3rd and 2nd and 2nd and eventually in 2006 I came first. I have never ever been so happy, wow, I had been getting fed up as I had put so much money into this boat to win, I put everything into sailing in those three days, I was the only one that could do the last tightening up.

I was up against these Owners and the loads of money that they could throw in, they would fly in with 30 crew and stay

in hotels and be well fed and there was I haemorrhaging money into this boat and giving everything I had year after year. I will never forget that night, Rob the owner of Valsheda went up on stage first, there was 'Clap, Clap, Clap' then someone else went up 'Clap Clap Clap' all the normal winners all the moneyed people, then suddenly they announced that the winner was Robert Gordon. I couldn't believe it, I had won the trophy. The applause



**RIGHT:**  
SIMON'S PRISTINE  
MGB ROADSTER V8

**BELOW:**  
THE EQUALLY  
PRISTINE MGB GT



could have easily been three-fold that of the others. It was overwhelming support by the sailing community recognising that it's not only money that can win. I walked around for three weeks with the biggest grin on my face. I can remember the applause and cheers to this day.

*Do you have any houses?*

The first time I could get a mortgage was 2002, it was the first time seafaring and yachting were considered a reputable business/career and I could get a loan. When the Olympics in London were announced I looked for properties in Zone one, close to a tube and I installed flat screen TVs with Sky assuming if it were ever a tossup between two different properties mine would always get it as they could get Sky. They are all furnished, I have a great portfolio, they look after themselves and the rental yield has done very well. I love classic cars, as mentioned I have a fleet of them all over 30 years, my oldest one is 58 and is an MGA, I have an MGB, an MG Roadster V8, a Porsche 928, a Jaguar Sovereign and a Camper Van, I have three garages in London and the South of France where I keep them. My toy cupboard is full. When I come home I put my hang gliders on the roof of my Camper Van, pick the weather and drive to the South of Wales or drive to the Peak District. I can also have my planes up in an instant.

*When did you learn to fly?*

At some point, way back when, I was given a scholarship by the Royal Navy and they selected me and taught me to fly. The deal was that if we went to war I would be called up, that was the condition of the scholarship and they paid for everything. My plane licence came first, then my boat and then my car licence,

**RIGHT:**  
SIMON'S  
IMMACULATE MGA



**BELOW:**  
SIMON PREPARES  
FOR ANOTHER FLIGHT  
IN HIS HANG GLIDER

so to fly a plane I had to take a bus to the airfield. I love it, it is so exciting, I can look at the weather and fly to the Channel Islands. The new adventure that is about to happen will be to fly my 1939 bi-plane there.

*Where do you see the luxury yacht industry going?*

It is not where it is going, it is where the threat is, I have not been asked this question before, but here we go, off the hip. I love all the new rules, lots of brain power has been put into errors and accidents with all the training implemented to ensure they do not happen again. Training to get people to become the best experts possible on sea going vessels is absolutely the quest we should all have. Sadly what this business has attracted, that did not happen when I started, are those individuals who join it with



the intention of taking as much money as they can in as short a time as possible. We, both you and me, were very privileged to be in this business back when because of our pure passion and now we have a situation where people are looking for rock star wages and you have to teach them as well. The threat to the business is not getting the quality of candidates from the outset that will do the job with a passion. Good crew placement agencies are the key. Once you find one of these passionate crew you have to train them to get as far as they can go so that they can become the future. It needs to come from the heart, not 'it's good money and my friend told me I will get good tips' I am not interested in this or those that get a job and then start looking for the next one that will pay a few dollars more.

When I walked into this industry, I did not even know it existed, I walked on a boat and found myself involved in Charter which was a privilege, even now it is, but with the amount of boats around now you are just not going to get enough people with the passion, you are going to get people who want to take what they can before moving on.

There were perhaps some 2500 people in the industry when I joined and it may now be some 50,000, but in terms of me as a Captain when it comes to crew selection I have to go through a great deal more screening than I ever have. I simply need the best crew, if a crew member makes a mistake there is a lot riding on it. Mistakes are not made when you have quality people as they think ahead all the time. I will go to the ends of the earth to make sure my crew are the happiest and most trained glorious people on the planet. Owners need to understand where I am coming from, it is a difficult subject, finding good crew is one

thing, having a yacht Owner who appreciates them is another. Many of the Owners I have worked for in the past have kept their crew for many years, they have realised that good people do not need shouting at and how good it is to keep the same people year after year.

*Are there any particularly good after dinner stories that you like to tell?*

I think the islanders here in Antigua know how much I party and every night I am out I am sure creates another story of my antics. I just love to see people laughing and not just being a stiff in the corner, not getting to know anybody. My mission is simply that my foolishness, my behaviour, is there to make them smile and that is what it is all about, I take my profession very seriously but that does not mean that I have to be a stressed out yacht Captain. It is very funny. For example I have this habit of licking people's calves, I will pick someone's leg up and lick their calf, it is completely random and harmless fun, the boys like it, the girls like it and it always brings a smile.

All the people around here know the stories of my past. I can remember one night when my crew were invited to a club by the Owner, I loved it, the environment was fun and we were having a BBQ by the pool and he said to me 'Would you like to come up stairs, I want to show you the view from my living room'

I went up the stairs and he said 'there you go help yourself' and pointed down to his coffee table and there sat a line of Coke for me, I said 'I don't do drugs, I have never done them in my life and I will never do them, but it is very kind of you to offer me' and he said 'Do you mean to tell me that for the last 20 years you have been coming to my club and partying as crazily as you have without drugs!' I enjoy a great night out with my crew, my team but drugs are a no no.

*What about Owners, you must have been out with a few Owners?*

I can tell you this, most of the Owners do not have as much fun as I do. One time I said to one of the Owners, who would always travel with his bodyguards and tasters, 'Why don't you just come out with me and have a coffee and watch the world go by' I persuaded him to put some old jeans on and that no one would know him. He came, I told him he had to pay and he had never done that before, he had a whale of a time. Sometime you can miss all the fun, the fun is not the amount of money and a display of wealth, it is about being real and getting on with things.

It must be awful, I know a lot of Owners will read this, I have worked for some great people during my career, some of them crave fame and others crave anonymity but I always felt sorry for the people that wished they did not have the money as it had become a big problem to them.



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I admire those that have worked hard and either built their house on the hill or built their fortune, but I am allergic to lazy people that have wealth, I think the biggest challenge is that they do not know who their friends are. I think this must be very scary especially for those that have suddenly gained lots of money. I think that the scariest thing would be to wonder if money is the only thing that people saw in me and that was why they wanted to be friends, it must be awful to live like that, a dark place I would not wish to go.

*Would you like to be as rich as the people you work for?*

I am not interested in accumulating wealth, I have these cars and of course I brag about them, I am very fond of them and passionate about them, every car has a story, I know every single

thing about them. The planes I bought, because they make me smile. I do not follow trends, I simply like to have what makes me happy, everything is an adventure. The other thing I have done is to spread my wealth, I have gold, property, cars and planes, I have spread it out to protect it and maybe at some point I will start cashing it in. My aim is to die poor, but having enjoyed rich experiences.

*But you have many good years ahead of you.*

Yachting is an industry in which the older you get, the more grey hair you have, the more yacht Owners want to employ you. They are getting more experience – I have travelled 315,000 nautical miles which is the equivalent of 15 times around the world and includes a hell of a lot of marinas, ports and bays, and knowing what is safe and what is not, that is what people get when they employ me. Also my relationships ashore are fantastic in Antigua, Monaco, Genoa, Venice, West Palm Beach, the list is endless, I have created real relationships that have been going on for a long while, to run a yacht like Lioness needs these relationships, knowing who to call on to get things done.

If I was going to come back again as a human being I would do this life all over again.

There are a great many Captains that share their passion for the sea with fantastic Owners, it is indeed an incredible life, a yacht Owner has to simply bring in the money and sharing it with genuine crew on board his yacht has to be one of the most satisfying ways of spending it.

I think that my DNA has been pre-programmed to make other people happy and as a result I am happy, looking at one's own DNA is a very deep and personal thing to do and all being well it should help to ensure ones happiness and wellbeing, something that can and should be shared, if that's not achievable then maybe a good psychiatrist could help.

*You certainly have a very special personality, everyone I speak to says fantastic things about you. What thoughts would you like to leave us with?*

I enjoy listening to and telling stories. I am also very truthful. My honesty, however, seems occasionally to be my slight downfall, but it is important to me and that is all that matters. There are two things I always say to my crew, there are two things they need to get as quickly as they can – have passion and opinion. Put your stake in the ground as soon as you can. Make your decision and stick by it, that's what will keep you going. >||

**Photographs:** With thanks to Simon's friends and Family.

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