

Colleagues that become friends

For Simon Johnson being a captain was more fun in the past, but that doesn't stop him enjoying his work today

It was a desire kindled by Arthur Ransom's classic *Swallows and Amazons* that gave a young Simon Johnson the idea of going to sea professionally. "I was inspired by tales of daring-do," he recalls. "I first went to sea as a deckhand on a busy sailing school yacht when I was 14. I cooked, cleaned and learnt to sail on an old 9m (31ft) wooden classic yacht. She leaked and groaned her way across the English Channel and I took soundings using a lead'n'line. I also spliced lines, nursed my calloused hands and slept in a damp bag. I learnt sailing as an apprentice in *Steady Trade* and became her skipper at 18, the youngest instructor in the UK, and I have been a captain ever since.

"Obviously, the sizes of boats have increased considerably, and I've noticed their captains have got younger, some with amazingly little experience. There seems to be a false sense that having paperwork makes you a capable captain. Many years in small boats in big seas makes you a better decision-maker and being able to handle

sailing yachts enables you to handle larger motoryachts with a greater sense of respect. Where once a captain would spend many years perfecting their skills, now it is really more about the earning power. Shoot me down if you like, but to me it also seemed so much more fun in the old days."


Johnson is one of many captains who'd like to see tonnage limits raised for yacht commanders. "I'd sit for the masters unlimited exam, but I'd have to start my whole career again and that's silly. These yachts aren't ferries or ships. This is a personality business in which we deal with a very fragile cargo."

If a new certificate were to be introduced, he'd like to see subjects such as high-speed craft, accounting, law of contracts and

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tendering for works added to the syllabus.

He believes the industry provides a good career path for those who want to succeed, but he advises youngsters to get experience rather than run after higher wages. "I have seen those 'political' careerists who seek out a first officer's position on yachts as soon as they hear the captain might be leaving, and



SIMON JOHNSON

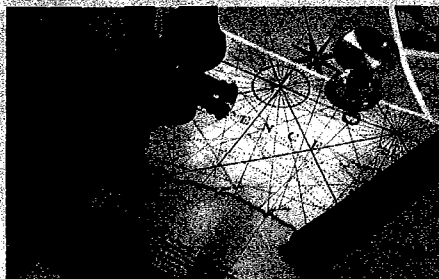
Nationality: British
Qualification: MCA Master (Yachts) <3,000GT Unlimited
Current yacht: Elizabeth F
Previous yachts: Samar, Shergar, Southern Cross III and Robert Gordon
 Simon Johnson started to work on yachts when he was 14 years old and was a captain at 18. He has been in yachting ever since.

then suddenly they get offered the captain's job with little or no experience other than driving a tender — that's frightening. In the old days we worked from smaller to bigger.

He also cautions the younger crew to look after their money. "It's not only what they earn, it's the rubbish they spend the money on. One deckhand I know earned US\$50,000 over a few years and had nothing to show for it at the end. He just had a great time buying drinks for everyone.

"I am not a captain in this industry for the elevation of my own ego, so I find it difficult to let the crew know that I can indeed be their friend, and that I see their friendship as going beyond the work they do for me on the yacht. I actually choose my crew myself because I like them — it's part of the selection criteria."

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simplified for general use on yachts, along with hull stresses and more on emergency and contingency planning.

He enjoys working on charter yachts because guests bring with them their different expectations. He recalls one occasion, saying: "I was very proud to have the honour to prepare and witness the renewal wedding vows made by guests on board. The whole crew participated in dressing the yacht creating amazing table and furnishing arrangements, finished in traditional white. Standing before the beautiful backdrop of Positano in Italy, dressed in full captain's regalia, the ceremony commenced. It was then celebrated with an excellent culinary display prepared by our chefs, complimented by brilliant service from the crew. It was such a pleasure to be invited to dine with the guests and their friends on such a special occasion."

"The Red Ensign has set the bar for most maritime nations' rules and regulations, so I cannot see how some can class it a flag of convenience. It is probably one of the strictest and most well-respected flags there is."

Doyle feels that it is time for the MCA to increase the tonnage limit on the certificate they issue to the master of yachts, which is currently set at 3,000GT.

"They should alter it upwards to come in line with the industry's call for larger yachts."

If there were a higher grade of certificate for him to achieve, he says he would certainly aim for it and believes that in any new qualification the emphasis should focus on more practice in traditional navigational techniques, bridge equipment familiarity, intact and damage stability that has been