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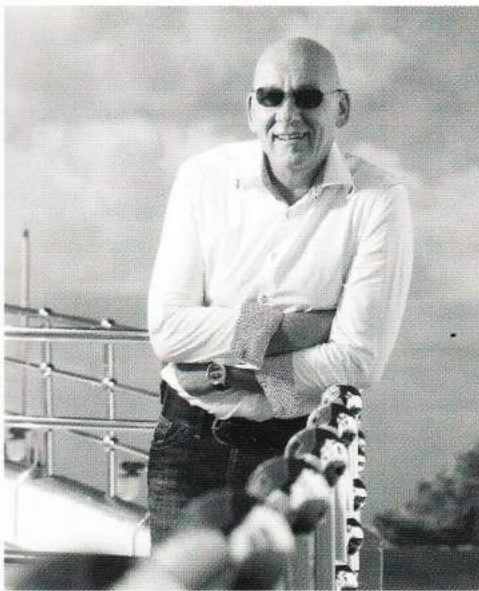
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## On board with **JAN VERKERK**

**Builder, owner, captain,  
engineer, charterer... the  
Dutchman who created the  
award-winning explorer  
*Legend* explains his many  
talents to Dominique Afacan**



*Legend* picked up  
this year's World  
Superyacht Award for  
best rebuilt yacht

JAN VERKERK LAUGHS EASILY, AND LITTLE WONDER – he's making a profit from his passion. As a young boy of eight in Holland, sailing around the waters of Loosdrecht on a wooden boat given to him by his father, he could never have dreamed that he'd end up building and owning superyachts of his own, capable of exploring the world's most remote regions and carrying the world's wealthiest customers.

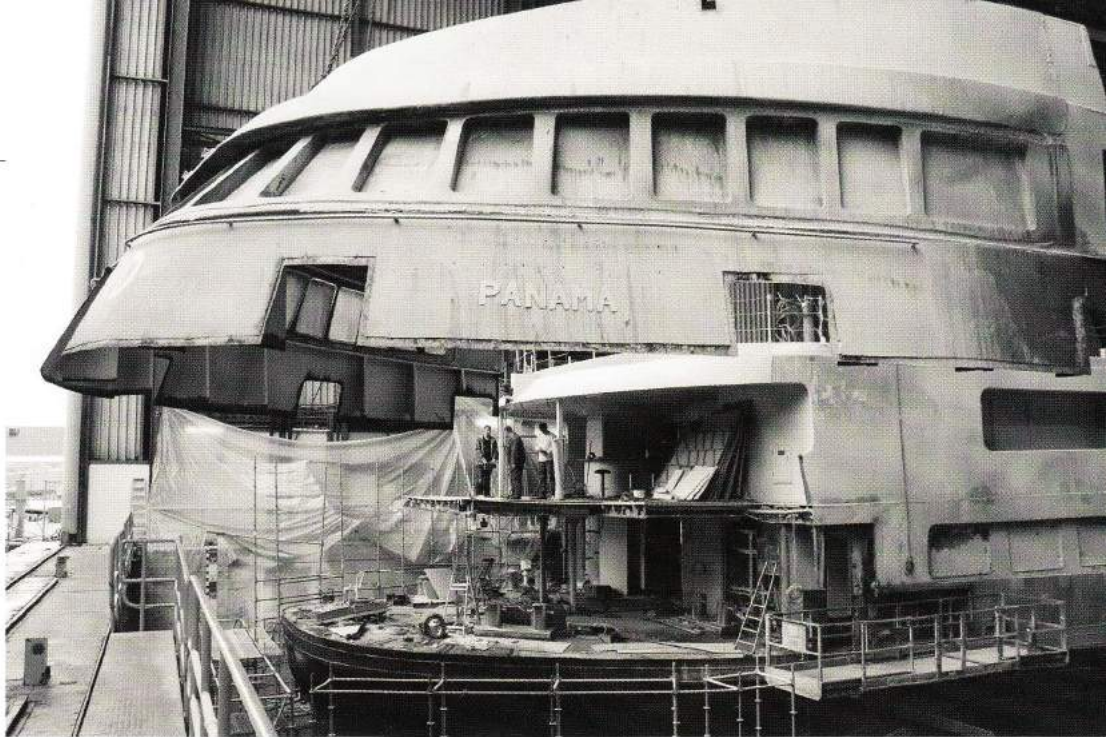
Fast forward 40-odd years and that dream is now Verkerk's happy reality. While many view superyacht ownership as a frivolous extravagance, Verkerk always believed there was money to be made in the charter business. Now he's proving it, one \$500,000 trip at a time. So just how has he pulled it off? "I build my own boats – plus, my technical background makes me very handy," says Verkerk, from his home just outside Utrecht, referencing his decision at

18 to skip university and train as a mechanic. "I used to buy old boats when I was growing up and teach myself how to fix them up for racing. Then the big work began and I was experienced enough to handle it."

It's nothing new to find owners who are heavily involved in the build of their superyachts, but Verkerk's commitment is different. For his latest creation, the 77.4 metre ice-breaker *Legend*, he spent seven days a week at the shipyard for two and a half years, sometimes pushing through until the early hours to stay on schedule. He has an encyclopaedic knowledge of every fitting, down to the last light bulb, such is the level of his involvement and technical expertise. "Because I build my own boats in rented facilities," he adds, "I am able to make them a little more cheaply. It's a clever way of doing business." In the case of *Legend*, Verkerk engaged Dutch shipyard Icon for ▶



“Because I build my own boats in rented facilities I am able to make them a little more cheaply”



Dutch shipyard Icon was engaged to do the steelwork on *Legend* but Verkerk used his own sub-contractors to do everything else. Below: *Legend* is a tough boat – originally a Dutch-built tug



the steelwork, but used his own sub-contractors to do everything else.

His recent successes suggest he is on to something with his DIY strategy. Launched last year, *Legend* was an industry game-changer, taking expedition sailing to a new level of luxury, and picking up the World Superyacht Award for best rebuilt yacht at the recent ceremony in Florence. Charter guests (and there's room for 26 of them) can swim in the boat's heated pool while they sail along the freezing Antarctic Peninsula, or they can climb into the boat's three man U-Boat Worx submarine to find out what's going on beneath the surface. Inside there's a cinema, a gym, a spa and room for a grand piano. This year, she is already booked to go to the Baltic, Antarctica, Norway, the Caribbean, Greenland and the

Med. Charter guests seem to be attracted by the opportunity for adventure, both on and off the boat.

Verkerk's adventures in the charter world, however, haven't always run so smoothly. The first boat he was serious about chartering, *Jaguar*, didn't make any money at all. “She was a 38 metre classic boat and she was highly popular and active but it was difficult to make money with a yacht of this size,” recalls Verkerk. After a chance request to be part of a tandem charter trip with a yacht called *Esmerelda*, it occurred to him that most charter yachts could only host a limited number of guests. “I eventually realised the only way to make money was to scale up,” he explains.

His next boat, the ice-breaking *Sherakhan*, leapt up to 70 metres and was capable of

sleeping 26 guests. Verkerk's gamble paid off. Perfect for a growing market of adventurous charter guests, she sailed (and still sails) everywhere from South Georgia to French Polynesia, with Verkerk benefiting from economies of scale along the way. Sensing an increasing thirst from charter guests for exploration, when it came to buying another boat for his business, a powerful expedition yacht was the obvious choice.

*Legend*, originally a tug boat built in Holland for Russian clients, was an ice-breaker with potential, though she was far from perfect on first inspection. “She had already been rebuilt as a yacht, but not in quite the right way,” admits Verkerk. “At some point there had been a fire on board and the wheelhouse and the master cabin were destroyed.” It was just before 2008 and yachting was at its summit so the insurance company decided to keep it to sell. Then the financial crisis hit. That and the state of the boat meant that buying her didn't break the bank. Rebuilding her, however, was another story.

“We basically built an entirely new boat,” recalls Verkerk. “Ninety per cent of the technology had to be replaced. From light bulbs to steering systems, polar code radios to the right size bed linen. It was a tremendous operation that took two years. The hardest thing was meeting qualifications – everything had to be beautiful, but it was also important that it didn't burn. We needed certificates for every material – that side of things took a bit longer than we expected.”

Verkerk took charge of the interior design, too, adamant that *Legend* should stand out in



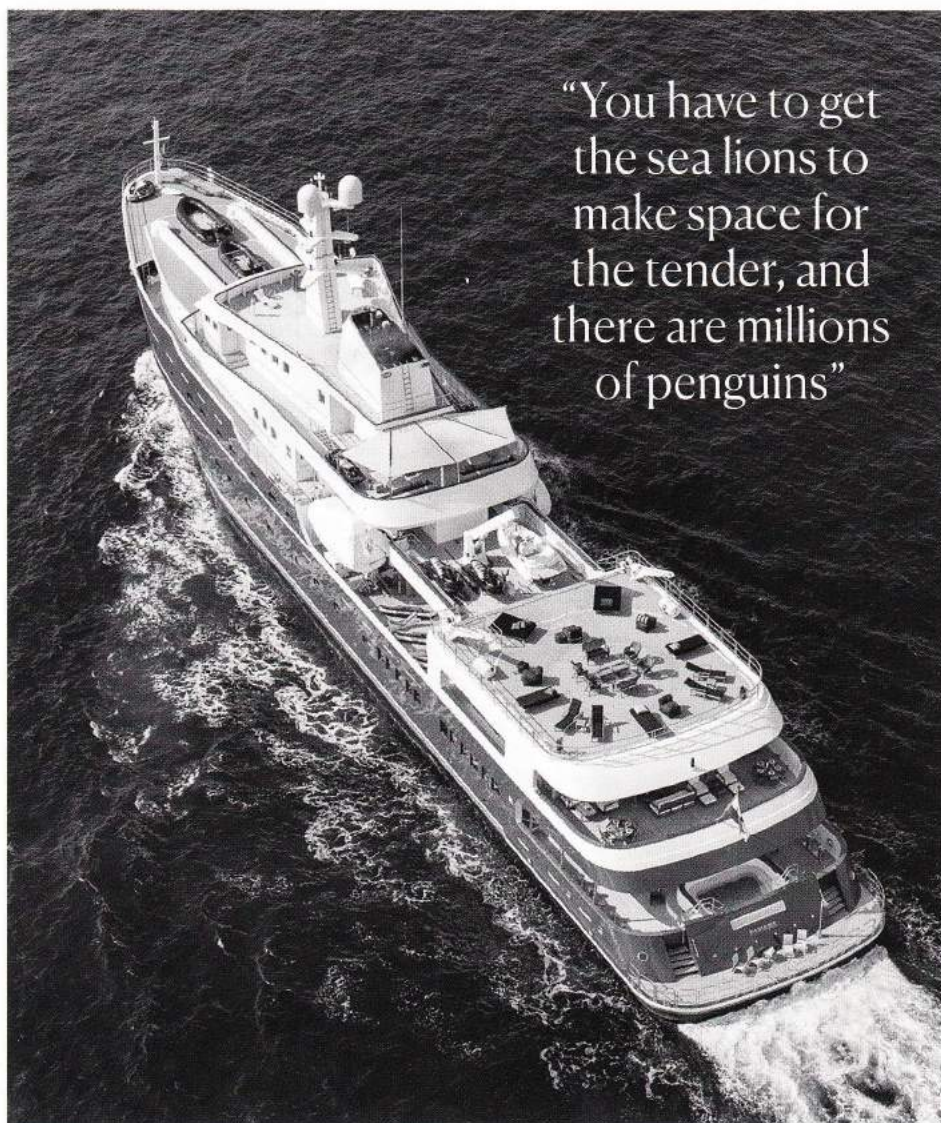


The outdoor swimming pool is heated to 35 degrees so guests can bathe in comfort

*Legend* is an industry game-changer, taking expedition sailing to a new level of luxury



"You have to get the sea lions to make space for the tender, and there are millions of penguins"



the crowded charter market. "The idea was to make the boat as far from boring as possible. In many yachts, there's one style - the design stays the same from the saloon to the master cabin. On *Legend*, we wanted it to be more of an adventure. The hallways might be pretty standard but every time you open a door, you enter a different world. People love it." Verkerk was careful to consider exactly how the boat's space would be used, crucial considering her most popular destinations. "When you go to Antarctica there are a lot of dull moments when you're sailing and there is nothing to do. Most yachts are built with a focus on the exterior spaces but I felt the exact opposite was important with *Legend*."

Regardless, the outside of the ship was far from neglected. "We built a swimming pool outside, which we heat to 35 degrees. It requires a tremendous amount of power and hot water to heat it to this temperature but people do love to swim out there in Antarctica," says Verkerk. There's also a heated barbecue area - but for every exterior design decision, the cold weather had to be taken into account. "It is designed so that when you sit, you're out of the icy wind. You have to stand up to see the scenery." *Legend* enjoys plenty of that and expeditions on the yacht have opened the owner's eyes to some of the most astonishing parts of the world.

"Antarctica is absolutely number one when it comes to scenery and experience. This year we were one of the first boats through the Lemaire Channel and after that we went down to the Ukrainian base," he says. "We were really breaking the ice - the ship was moving fantastically. And then the wildlife, well, what can you say? Nothing is afraid of you. When you experience it for the first time, you don't know where to look, how to react."

For those who have already ticked off Antarctica, he recommends South Georgia.



"You think you've seen wildlife in Antarctica? You have no idea. You have to go to the shore and get the sea lions to make space for the tender. The whales are everywhere and there are millions of penguins – it is truly unbelievable."

For Verkerk, getting beneath the surface of a destination is something he takes very literally and the onboard sub is one of his favourite toys. "Once you've seen Antarctica above the water, what do you think it's like under water? You don't have to go deep or farther than about five or six metres to experience things you've never seen before. I don't want to put people in diving suits in the freezing water, so the submarine is a must as far as I am concerned." Beyond the submarine, the boat is also equipped for ice camping, heli-skiing and snow scooting, a popular choice on Greenland charters.

Although Verkerk sees great value in being able to sail to the world's most remote destinations in the lap of luxury and with all the latest toys, he actually sees good service as the ultimate secret to building a successful charter boat. "It's like booking a hotel," he explains. "You initially get drawn in by looking at pictures of the swimming pool or the rooms online – but by the time you leave the thing you remember most is the staff: how nice they were to you, whether it was clean and whether the food was good. It all comes down to human interaction really."

On board, he splits the duties a little differently from other yachts, hiring extra staff to take care of general management and leaving the captain free to run the boat. "I organise it







*Legend* has an ice-breaking hull and she puts it to good use in Antarctica

like a hotel rather than a ship," he explains. "On normal yachts the captain is very important. That's also true in our case but on *Legend* he is not running the 'hotel', he is simply running the boat. For the service aspect, I tend to hire people with hotel backgrounds. For me it's the only way you can do it."

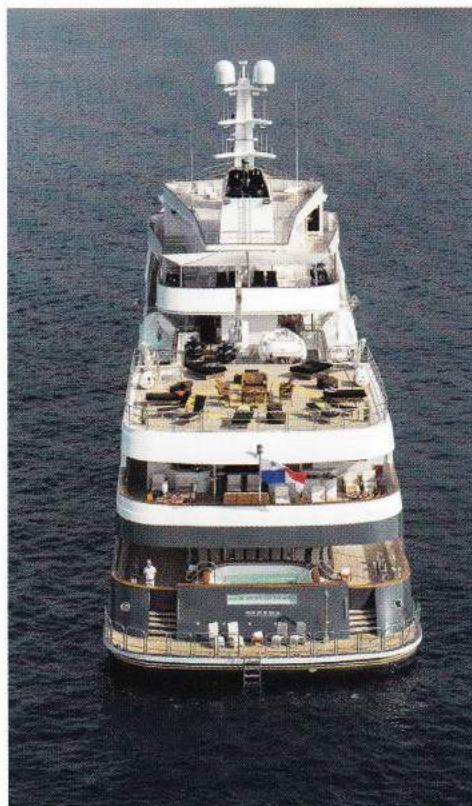
Verkerk got both his captain's licence and his engineer's licence in his mid-30s and often put both to good use on *Sherakhan*. Those days are over now, but he can't resist spending at least some of his time on board in the engine room. "I love to see what is going on in there," he says. "Perhaps that's unusual!" Verkerk's son has inherited the bug too and is already a captain at 28. The two worked together for a while, although his son is now on another yacht. Verkerk's daughter, meanwhile, is studying to be a vet, but will nevertheless often accompany her father on expeditions to Antarctica. "She likes animals," explains Verkerk, "so where else could be more beautiful?"

Surprisingly, given his obvious passion for superyachting, there are currently no plans for more projects. "I am 55 now and I've spent about 10 years non-stop on sea," says Verkerk. "I am starting to want a bit more spare time. I like being at home so now I usually just do one trip a year on each boat."

So how does home compare to life on board an ice-breaking superyacht? "I live in a farmhouse in a village outside of Utrecht. There's water at the front and water at the back. It's not extremely big or luxurious but I love it. Compared to the yachts, my life on land is very normal. Of course, it's all relative!" Verkerk's laugh rings out again. Time will tell whether he'll be able to resist another adventure. ■



Verkerk realised there is an increasing demand from charter guests for exploration



## QUICKFIRE

Jan Verkerk

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**CHAUFFEUR OR CHEF**  
*Chef*

**FIRST THING YOU PACK**  
*Toothbrush*

**FIRST YACHTING MEMORY**  
*Sailing around the waters of Loosdrecht*



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**HOW MANY WATCHES**  
*Three*

**FAVOURITE CAR**  
*Ford GT40*

