

THE PLEASURE BROKER

By Jeremy Lissek

I was expecting stuffy. I was expecting trite and a slick suit and an upturned nose. I was sitting in the Camper & Nicholson's International's (CNI, a subsidiary of the Rodriguez Group) conference room in Miami Beach, awaiting a French superyacht broker, and I was ready to suffer the well-worn spiel of a BS artist. I certainly didn't expect the happy-go-lucky, jeans and short-sleeved, half-popped, Lacoste-collared nonchalance of Eric Lepeingle.

Why wouldn't he be happy? As a former French Olympic sailor, Eric has a lifelong love for the water. So he's turned his pleasure into his business, which translates into his business simply being his client's pleasure. As he says, "We are fully pure pleasure. Luxury. If you enjoy it, then do it...put the money on the water."

And if you're going to put your money on the water, what better way to enjoy it than with a high-end yacht from the Rodriguez Group. The company designs and markets boats with open bridges, which it's the world leader in (it also produces closed superstructure cabin cruisers). Rodriguez's line of offering includes three ranges: Astonda, Léopard, and Mangusta. The Mangusta 165', the largest Open yacht in the world, won the "Design Prize" at the Monaco Yacht Show in September, 2007, and the Leopard 56-meter will top it in size and speed when the first one is delivered in 2010. Through CNI, it also sells and charters yachts and offers services, such as crew placement and technical assistance. For the particularly well-heeled boater, the company can serve as the general contractor for the building of a made-to-order custom pleasure boat over 40 meters in length.

These boats have changed the industry. And Eric understands that the boats have changed, in terms of size and speed, due to a clientele youth movement. "The average age for yachts more than 85 feet is 36 years old", he states. This has also affected the relationship between customer and broker. "They are my age. My generation. We have the same view on things. I know that boats need to be a place where they chill out. Where they don't have any problems. When they're in their office they earn their money. If they have the same problems in their boat, as in their office, then they'll stay in the office and earn more money. I have the tickets to the pleasure. The boat is a platform, a media to think about nothing except having a good time. So on the human and the product side, we collaborate. It's win-win, with whatever luxury they can afford."

Yet the one luxury even billionaires can't afford is time. But when a 50 meter boat can do 40 knots, "we just give them the 25th hour. When someone is based in London, they fly to Nice and they want to enjoy the majority of the weekend, well it's 4 hours to go to St. Tropez in a normal yacht. With one of ours, it's 1.5 hours. At the end of weekend, that means they doubled the time; they doubled their enjoyment. Or say you're in the States. You want to get breakfast in Newport, lunch in Sag Harbor, and be in Manhattan by nighttime to make the opera. It wasn't even imaginable 5 years ago. Because of us, it is now."

Yet even more than giving his clientele base a complete range of luxury yachting products and services, the best and the fastest and the most stunning, Eric gets stoked every morning as he chases the most elusive of *je ne sais crois* – real emotion. "We are like a family. My colleagues. Our partners. Our clients. And it has to be that way, or else I could not care so much for what I do. I sell emotion. How can I sell to someone unlikeable. I can say no. If he won't be nice, I don't want to make a boat with him. I'm a free man. I don't want to be cuffed. But even the richest person, I know the diamond is there, somewhere inside. Just take off your jacket, strip the uniform, and be yourself."

That, of course, is not so easy. But as a case in point, Eric relates a story. "A client, he's got everything; he can buy whatever he wants. He was in Cannes to visit the yachts.

His manager comes in and says he wants to eat at the most perfect French food experience possible. I say yes but you know I'm sure he's already eaten at all the big 3 star Michelin top chef places. He knows where they are. He doesn't need me to bring him to a restaurant. So I call my wife – can you go to the meat shop and buy some *cote de boeuf* and organize everything. I'm coming with 5 people to the pool and we're gonna bbq with the kids. So I tell him, tonight you're going to have a real French experience. He asks what is that? I say, it's called HOME. What? Come home. What are you talking about? Why do you want to stay in your f-ing hotel, only to leave just so you can go to a restaurant with everyone in black and white, and get served in the exact same way it always is. The dress code at my pool is I don't care. The only thing I want is to have a good time. He says, you know what, you're the 1st people I've worked with that have invited me home. And when I pick him up, I show up in a Fiat 500, instead of a Ferrari which all the boys drive. I say come, we'll have fun. His eyes, they don't look the same way they always do. They're smiling. You cannot do that in NY, in the office. You don't smile that way. You work all year for that one moment."