

ISSUE FIVE
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The Superyacht

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OWNER

VALENTIN ZAVADNIKOV

The first Russian ambassador for La Belle Classe Superyachts on racing and ownership.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

There is still an opportunity to be smart with your money when buying a superyacht.

ON THE HUNT

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LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

Brian Benjamin takes delivery of *Aegir II* and creates the company that will build its successors.



COME YOU BACK TO MANDALAY

— WORDS BY ANGELA AUDRETSCH AND PHOTOGRAPHY SUPPLIED
BY FRASER YACHTS, THE OWNER AND CREW OF CALISTO

While it may be difficult for a superyacht to make it all the way to Mandalay, Kipling's poetry still holds true in its underlying sentiment. After decades of isolation and brutal misrule, Myanmar is on the brink of a renaissance. Beguiling, exotic and mysterious, this little nation is opening its doors for the first time in half a century to the outside world, and this includes to superyachts. For Eric Merlin, the owner of *Calisto*, a converted 42m 1940s minesweeper, the lure of Myanmar has been too much to resist. *The Superyacht Owner* spoke to Merlin about his love of South-East Asia, his yacht, his family and why the chance to sample Myanmar's charms should not be missed. 📸





“Asia is very special to me,” says Eric Merlin, founder of one of South-East Asia’s leading travel agencies, Exotissimo Travel, who has been living in this part of the world for 20 years. “This region gave me everything I have professionally. It is a region full of energy, of nice people, great food, and it’s still undiscovered in many ways. My wife is Asian, my kids are as Asian as they are European, so really this is home for me. Our lifestyle, especially when we are on our boat, is very old world European, but we really feel at home in Asia.” Merlin’s connections to South-East Asia, both professional and emotional, led him to transport *Calisto* from Antibes on the French Riviera, to Singapore for refit after he purchased her in 2007.

Built in 1944 as a YMS-1 class minesweeper, *Calisto* was originally purchased from the British Navy by Thomas Loel Guinness, a member of the famous Irish brewing family. “He transformed her from a minesweeper into a private yacht, but he did so with a great deal of respect for the vessel’s heritage,” says Merlin. “In some ways, *Calisto* is like a little museum of what yachting was in the Fifties.” Interestingly, Guinness also bought *Calisto*’s sister ship, *Calypto*, in 1950, which he leased to Jacques Cousteau for a symbolic one franc a year until 1997.

Merlin bought *Calisto* from a French family in January 2007. “Buying this boat felt like a responsibility,” he tells us. “I couldn’t imagine this vessel going off to be sunk as a dive site, or being dismantled for other purposes. When

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I thought about those alternatives, I believed that it was my responsibility to buy this boat.” Luckily, Merlin was in a solid position to be romantic about the idea of owning and rescuing a piece of nautical history. Not only was the majority of the refit completed in the more reasonable yards of Singapore, but also keeping her in South-East Asia long term has been much more affordable. “Because I live in Asia, I was in a position to handle this boat in a way that might be cost-prohibitive elsewhere,” he explains. “Such a boat requires a large crew, and such a large crew costs too much in Europe. Older boats, no matter their heritage, don’t make much sense financially in Europe. Even very well-to-do families don’t want to keep a full-time, year-round crew of seven or eight people. In Asia, this is still possible.” Merlin



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Previous page: *Calisto* was originally built in 1944 as a YMS-1 class minesweeper. **This page:** (Clockwise from top) *Calisto* has been based in South-East Asia since 2007; One of the main reasons Merlin has *Calisto* is to have adventures as a family; For Merlin's girls, *Calisto* is the ultimate playground and gives them total freedom in a safe space.

puts it down to successful charter activity that a good part of the cost of ownership is covered but says that he is still a little way away from breaking even. "That is also because I love my boat a bit too much and I am always improving and maintaining to the highest standard across the board," he adds. "On a classic boat, even more than on a modern yacht, there is no way to cut corners in terms of spending."

For the past two years, *Calisto's* cruising waters have been the Andaman Sea off Phuket but Merlin has made the decision to turn her towards new waters, for charter through Fraser Yachts, and she is embarking on her first trip to Myanmar's Mergui archipelago this autumn, making this her regular charter cruising ground thereafter as the country emerges from decades of isolation. "The demand for Myanmar is swelling like nothing I've seen since Vietnam opened in the early 1990s," says Merlin. "I have travelled inland many times, for

business and for leisure, though not with my boat – not yet at least. But for next season, I am already fielding many requests for charters in Myanmar. The Mergui archipelago is not far at all from Phuket, and easily accessibly by *Calisto*."

Given the country's relatively recent tumultuous past, Myanmar may feel like a rather bold superyacht destination still but Merlin is quick to explain that despite its reputation, the region is blossoming after recent political changes. "Myanmar does have a difficult reputation, but that is changing as fast as the political changes within the country," he says. "In July, Aung San Suu Kyi made her debut in parliament. Two years ago, a development like that was inconceivable. We're right now at the beginning of Myanmar's future but still, when travelling there today, we're overwhelmed by the country's past. This makes the lure north irresistible." For Philippe

Cathala, who has been captain of *Calisto* since 2008, this is the perfect time to visit Myanmar. “These are the islands that people have been dreaming about for years,” he says. “Think of Phuket and Phi Phi before the tourists descended. That’s Mergui today.”

The Mergui archipelago is located at the southernmost tip of Myanmar in part of the Tanintharyi Region and was closed to the outside world by the Burmese government in the 1940s only to be opened up again just 15 years ago. Consisting of more than 800 islands scattered along 400km of the Andaman Sea, Mergui is an unmatched tropical haven. Captain Cathala tells us that diving and snorkelling are two of the biggest draws for people to South-East Asia and this Burmese archipelago offers some of the region’s best dive spots, with the opportunity to see a variety of sharks, green turtles, different rays and countless colourful tropical fish. To reach this tranquil refuge, *Calisto’s* Burmese itinerary will chart a six-hour course from Phuket to the Similan Islands, followed by another seven hours into Myanmar waters. After clearing customs at Kawthaung, known to the British as Victoria Point, a government tour guide from Myanmar will join the charter and accompany *Calisto* around the archipelago.

The first stop on the itinerary, the Similan Islands, is one of Merlin’s favourite South-East Asian destinations to take his family. While *Calisto* may be chartered out throughout the year, she is still very much a family yacht and the region provides the backdrop for many family adventures, often among the Similan Islands. “Almost every time we go [to the Similans], on the first morning, when we take our breakfast with my kids, a large sea turtle comes around the boat,” he tells us. “Usually, we cannot resist and we all jump into the water and swim with this magnificent creature. This kind of little family adventure is really the reason why I have this boat.”

For Merlin’s little girls, *Calisto* is the ultimate playground. “They tell me that they like to be free within an enclosed area,” says Merlin.





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This page: (Clockwise from above) For the past two years *Calisto*’s cruising waters have been the Andaman Sea off Phuket; Eric Merlin, the owner of *Calisto*, and his family; A typical first morning in the Similan Islands for Merlin and his family is a swim with a sea turtle by the side of the yacht.

“When they are on the boat, they can go anywhere they like because we know they’ll only stay on the boat. So they get this great feeling of freedom, even though there are always some eyes on them. They have fun with the crew during their free time. They go into the galley to try their hand at cooking. I won’t be surprised if some day, one of them wants to get to work on the engine.”

While the yacht is spacious and able to host large family gatherings – indeed, captain Cathala says that *Calisto* is often the centre of family reunions – Merlin is adamant that it is the crew who makes every journey special for his family or for charter guests. “This crew understands the dynamics of a family – that a family needs, at the same time, a lot of space and a lot of attention,” he explains. “They do that so well, and I have to believe it’s partly

because of that that I’m always trying to get us back on *Calisto*.”

As well as Myanmar, Merlin hopes to take *Calisto* to Bali one day soon. “It is a bit far away, and there is no marina, but I would like to show Komodo to my kids,” he says, once again emphasising *Calisto*’s importance for him as a family yacht. “The experience of being a family is somehow heightened aboard *Calisto*. All of life is full of colour, but on board *Calisto*, it’s like we’re living in technicolour. Everything’s a little brighter, more vivid and more memorable.” □



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