

HOW TO TURN A FORGOTTEN FISHING BOAT INTO A SUPERYACHT

IT DEMANDS TIME, MONEY AND DEDICATION, BUT THE RESULT IS WORTH IT.
BY STEWART CAMPBELL

TYPICALLY IT TAKES three or four years to build a superyacht, from laying the keel to delivery. Yet when the Dutch-American entrepreneur Erik Vonk started on his, Tony Blair was in No 10 and Lehman Brothers was thinking long term.

Then finally last year, 17 years after he bought a fishing boat with the intention of converting it into one of the most capable explorer yachts afloat, his vessel, *Scintilla Maris*, was launched. It took such a long time, Vonk says with a laugh, partly because of “good old Dutch stubbornness – I wanted to do it all myself”.

He may have outsourced the “hot work” on his 45m DIY superyacht to experts at a shipyard in the Netherlands, and brought in the design studio Vripack to help with the styling, but the rebuild was the nautical equivalent of demolishing a house and giving Kevin McCloud a call. “I spent countless hours shlepping around a folding table and a deckchair to find a place in the bare, stripped hull to position myself, armed with a notepad and measuring tape,” Vonk says.

The result was worth the wait. This is a vessel that can go pretty much anywhere: to the high latitudes and across oceans. Originally a North Sea trawler, it was designed to withstand weather that sends others scurrying for port – which is why Vonk was attracted to it. “These fishing boats represent centuries of evolution in the development of seaworthiness, comfort, strength, safety and efficiency. So why design and build a new hull?”

This kind of boat upcycling is becoming more and more common. One of the first and most famous examples is Aristotle Onassis’s *Christina O*, a Canadian frigate that was bought by the Greek billionaire for \$34,000 after the Second World War and done up at a cost of \$4 million.

Scintilla Maris may not have bar stools upholstered in whale foreskin like the *Christina O* does, but it will still ferry its owner and his family in supreme comfort to the furthest reaches of the planet. Not straying too far from its working-class roots, the yacht’s interiors are minimalist, its five staterooms decked out with Scandi-chic touches. It can be experienced by anyone who is willing to pay \$160,000 a week to charter the boat through *Eyos Expeditions*.

The first stop on its world adventure is London, Vonk says, “then Norway, possibly Svalbard. After that Iceland, Greenland and hopefully the Northwest



Scintilla Maris, the 45m trawler turned superyacht

Passage in August.” Longer-term plans involve the distant archipelagos of the Pacific.

Vonk chairs a global HR firm in his day job and runs a rum distillery in the US as a side project, but he set aside plenty of time to visit his yacht as it was being pieced together at the Damen Maaskant shipyard in Stellendam. “The yard’s flexibility and magnanimity in letting me direct the process are what set the stage for a long journey – a very long journey, because they had to translate my amateur work into executable plans every time I produced a single facet,” he says.

Scintilla Maris competed in the World Superyacht Awards in Venice this month and faced some stiff competition, including the 70m *Jester*, which has been through its own conversion from commercial vessel to private superyacht. It started life as a Soviet spy ship, built during the Cold War to keep an eye on Nato vessels in the

North Sea. Like *Scintilla Maris*, it was built to take on anything the oceans could throw at it and recently proved this pedigree by journeying to Antarctica and back.

Vonk’s advice for anyone thinking of following in his footsteps is to establish exactly what it is you want from a boat before you begin, including “size, type – motor or sail – and intended use”. Then go hunting. The world is full of discounted forgotten fishing boats and discarded commercial vessels begging for a second coming; Vonk picked up his for less than €1 million (before spending a further €18 million on its rebuild).

“Many, many generations of seafarers have done my homework for me,” he says. “Why start something brand new when they have already developed hulls that give me everything I desire from a boat?” So go for it, he says – even if it takes 17 years. eyos-expeditions.com