

UK SIBLINGS BUILDING SUPERYACHTS IN THAILAND

The combination of excellent craftsmanship, low overheads and quality marinas made the Land of Smiles the logical place for the brothers Twist to set up shop *By Nina Suebsukcharoen*



An exciting new business has been started in Thailand by two British brothers building high-end yachts in Samut Sakhon province for wealthy people across Asia and the world.

Gareth Twist, the managing director of Yacht Solutions, said the business was initially established to look after yachts for their owners, which also entailed a lot of repair work. Mr Twist set up the company in Phuket in 2001, and brother Simon joined in six years later.

About three years ago the company won the tender for the conversion of an old British vessel into a "superyacht". It was a very big project, with every piece of the vessel having to be removed except the steel hull. The logical next step for the company was to start building high-end yachts in Thailand, and a new company division, Rueda Yachts, was formed for the purpose.

Most major construction work is done at Samut Sakhon, but the company's Phuket team can build vessels up to 45 metres.

"One of the things we know is that the quality of the work here is excellent, but we needed to bring in what we call 'pedigrees' from Europe — the designers, the naval architects [accepted by the] classification societies such as Lloyds," said Mr Twist.

This was done because the company adheres to the code of England's Maritime and Coastal Association with regard to standards for safety. "So we are crafting in the East

AT THE HELM:
Gareth Twist, the
managing director
of Yacht Solutions.



but designing in the West," said Mr Twist.

The big draw card to build in Thailand is the price — on average it is 40% cheaper than in Europe, although this varies from yard to yard.

"In Phuket there is not so much experience in shipbuilding, but there are a lot of very experienced refit teams — painting teams, woodwork teams, interior teams, fabric teams, engineers, air-conditioning and so on. What we do is bring all of those people together. So the Phuket division does major refits, taking vessels apart and rebuilding them," said Mr Twist.

"The Bangkok area has a very good reputation for commercial shipbuilding. If you go down toward Pattaya and Sattahip and the Eastern Seaboard there are a lot of shipyards, very large naval yards to facilitate aircraft carriers and other vessels."

Although Mr Twist admitted that yachting

is not as popular in this part of the world as it is in Europe and the Caribbean, it has grown quite extensively over the last ten years.

"For example, if we look at Phuket, two years ago there were 45 superyachts coming through. Last year there were 50-plus. That is quite a large number of big yachts coming through.

"Let's say 60% of those are probably coming in from Europe and either spending the season in and around the Andaman Sea or deciding to do a two- to three-year cruise around Asia.

"One of the key benefits that we have here is that at the moment the Mediterranean and Caribbean are super-saturated with large yachts. A lot of people are finding that they would like to see less people everywhere. They want a little less crowded, a little newer, more virgin scenery, and obviously Asia offers that in an absolutely perfect way.

"So what we are trying to do is promote the whole of Asia, from the Seychelles to Hawaii down to Australia and up to China, as the third cruising ground of the world, after the Mediterranean and Caribbean."

Although Mr Twist continues to promote his business heavily in Europe, he remarked that rich Asians are also more interested in yachting and that Rueda Yachts is increasingly contacted by Asians and Asia-based customers.

"We met recently with a group of Chinese who are interested in buying yachts. They are talking about very large yachts, 75-80

metres, and they have the money to spend on them."

A 60-metre yacht costs about US\$38 million (about 1.2 billion baht), but one could probably build a 30-metre craft for \$12 million. Mr Twist explained that the smaller yachts on display at the annual Pimex show in Phuket are a lot cheaper because they are much smaller, about 20 metres or less.

"They are beautiful boats. It depends on what you want. Do you want a day yacht, a cruising yacht or do you want a superyacht? Larger yachts like these are ocean-going vessels, you can take them around the world, although you really wouldn't want to take a 70- to 80-footer around the world."

Mr Twist said when he first came to Phuket as a scuba diving instructor in 1994 he found the southern Thai island to be the most well-organised place in Asia. "Bali had tourism but didn't have a great amount of diving. Phuket and the surrounding vicinity is one of the world-class diving areas. That is why I came to Phuket."

Similarly, he chose to start his business in Phuket largely because of the availability of good marinas. He believes that Phuket will become like the Riviera in southern France because it has very good infrastructure, good quality hotels, services, restaurants and, most importantly, world-class marinas. People turn up on their yachts and they have everything they require for the long term.

"Cambodia has no marinas and Vietnam is only starting to build marinas," he said. ■