

“I COME FROM THE SEA”

*He has no phone or car, doesn't know
his alphabet, works all alone
and is “absolutely not happy”.
Stewart Campbell meets the design
genius behind the world's most
famous superyacht, Motor Yacht A*

Photography – Christoffer Rudquist





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umour has it that it took Philippe Starck just two hours to design *Motor Yacht A*. But that, as it turns out, is way off. “Sometimes it only takes 30 seconds to make a design,” says the Frenchman in his heavily accented English. “I think to myself ‘it is too easy, it cannot be possible’. But 90 per cent of my work is like this. I am a little ashamed. It’s not normal.”

He attributes this ability to suddenly conjure designs to an incredibly powerful subconscious, which he likens to a field of magma flowing just beneath the surface of his conscious mind. When working on a project – always alone and always in view of the sea – the magma field will bubble a design, almost fully realised, into his head. The agony of the struggle, the endless refinement... it’s all alien to him. “People are always surprised when I say I can design something in five minutes, but it’s true and it’s not a sketch – a sketch is ridiculous.”

The design for what would become the world’s most talked about superyacht bubbled into Starck’s mind at his home in Burano, Venice, in 2004. There was no brief beyond an idea of length and a demand for six cabins. “That was the beauty of the project and the beauty and intelligence of the owner,” Starck says. “He just left me completely free.”

Brave owner. By that point Starck had a sailing yacht, 24 metre *Virtuelle*, under his belt and 65 metre Feadship *Wedge Too*, which he took on halfway through its build, but nothing on the scale of *Motor Yacht A* – and nothing in his back catalogue remotely hinted at what he would produce. “If I made it just like the other boats – why? Why spend this money? I am always sad when people copy because they spend the money of that client for nothing. We always have a duty to bring something new and interesting to advance civilisation. When you copy, you regress.”

We meet on board the boat in Abu Dhabi. He and his wife Jasmine have just flown from Japan, pit-stopping here before heading on to Portugal, where they keep a home – one of five across Europe – among the sand dunes in the south of the country. Starck will spend a week, hermit-like, at his desk, a pencil and sheets of A4 paper in front of him. The house (he calls it a “cabana”) is basic: there’s no running water and they generate their own electricity with solar panels. Nothing is allowed to disturb his focus. Jasmine deals with all enquiries, of which there are more than 50 per week, leaving Starck to his trance, and the view of his beloved Atlantic Ocean. “I come from the sea,” he says. “My father had a big wooden sailing boat and the best time in my life was when I would go down and see it in the boatyard undergoing maintenance.”

He once described himself as “amphibian” because as a child he was rarely off the water, racing boats on the Seine and later teaching sea survival off the town of Morlaix in Brittany, home to some of the world’s fiercest seas and the battered lighthouses made famous by Philip Plisson. “I started at a very serious, hard sailing school at the age of 14 or 15. Five or six years later I became a teacher and it was my job to sink the boat and show the students how to survive. That is where I started to love the sea, the real sea, the rough sea – especially the Atlantic sea.” It’s something that informs his boat designs to this day. Forward of the saloon on *Motor Yacht A* is the main outdoor lounging area,





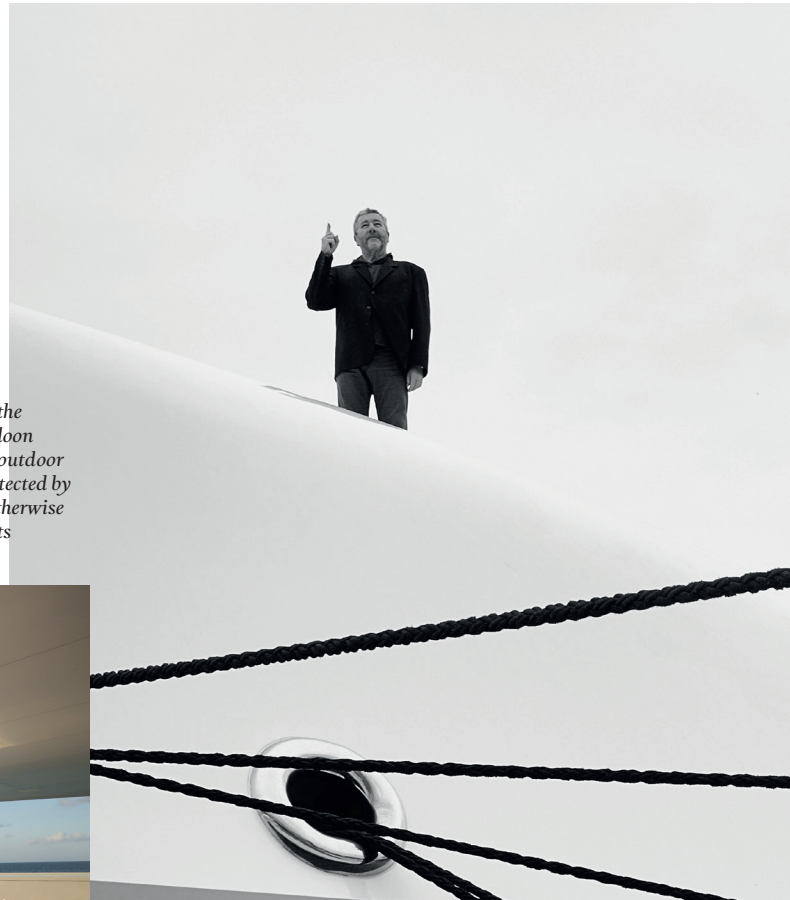
Exterior detailing is kept to a minimum on Motor Yacht A, which can make the size of the boat hard to discern from a distance



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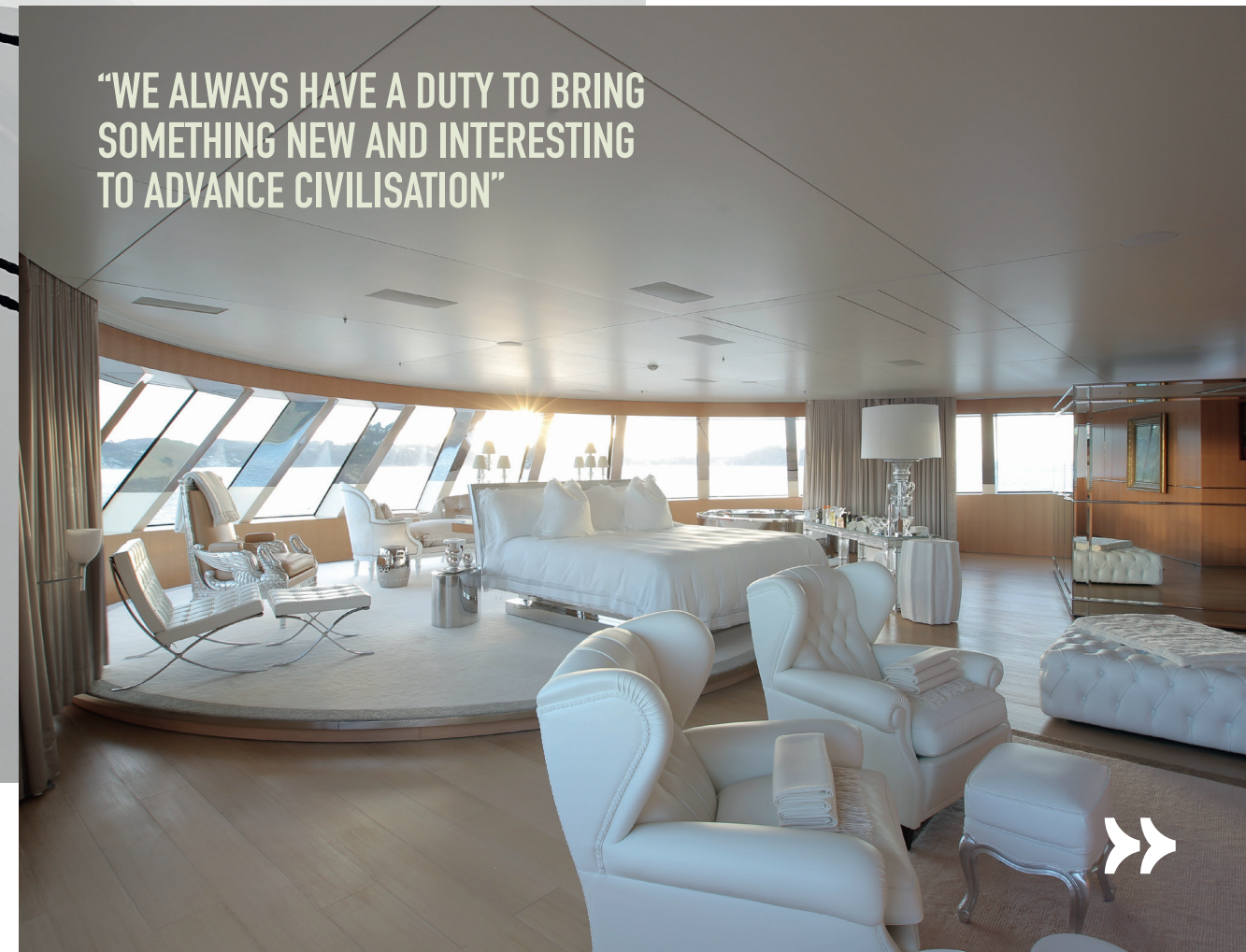
Below: forward of the enormous main saloon (right) is the main outdoor lounging area, protected by an overhang but otherwise open to the elements



The interior of Motor Yacht A reflects the owner's request for "opulence" in the design, especially in the owner's suite (bottom right and top left). Starck says his role is to interpret the ideas of his clients - but never to submit to them. That would be dishonest, he says



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“I LOVE BIG WAVES, COLD WATER, HUGE WIND. I WANT WAVES IN MY FACE”



Above: the pool on the main deck forward, from where you can witness the “majesty of the sea”. Left: the huge tender garage opens on three sides to create a peerless water-level living space





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protected by a deck overhang, but open to the elements from the bow. On other yachts this size, there might be a modest seating area forward but most life on deck takes place to the rear of the superstructure, out of the wind. “When I designed this boat, no one was using the front, and I thought it was a fantastic place because you have the sea and you’re out of the exhaust. But people would say to me ‘but there is wind and there are waves’. Yes! That is why we are on a boat. If you don’t want that, buy an apartment, build a house. We want the wind, we want the waves, we want to see the sea. We want to see the violence, the beauty of the sea, the majesty of the sea.”

Starck still sails singlehanded in one of the 15 or more boats he keeps dotted all over Europe. In truth he’s lost count of how many he owns but none is bigger than 15 metres – small enough for him to take out alone, which is the way he likes it. “I love big waves, cold water, huge wind. I want waves in my face.” If he has a bad habit, it’s building boats: he always has one in production and he’s got ideas for the next 20 stored away. “Some are amphibious with wheels, some are completely solar boats. I have fun with this,” he says.

His favourite space on board *Motor Yacht A* is a monument to these smaller craft: the tender garage. It’s cathedral-like down here, a magnificent place of worship to the runabouts that keep the business of the bigger boat running. “I love this one,” he says, gesturing to the limo tender that we’re sadly not allowed to splash. The sports tender gets wet instead and Starck confidently takes the helm, manoeuvring the small boat around for the photoshoot.

When the owner was presented with the designs for his 119 metre yacht in the middle of the last decade, it took him just 15 minutes to say yes. “It was very simple. We were just three people in the room. I think he said ‘perfect’... or no, perhaps he said nothing. He just took the model and we just did it, and didn’t change a thing.”

There’s one word Starck keeps hitting on to describe *Motor Yacht A*: harmony. “I saw that on many boats it’s always corridors and complicated. The proportions aren’t human. My goal was to make the people who will be on board live, like the old Indians said, ‘in the light’. You live in the light on this boat.” There’s no escaping it, in fact. This is one-deck living on a massive scale, with a main saloon that stretches, uninterrupted, from the foredeck all the way aft. “It’s a beautiful volume and it’s designed to always have the best place, depending on the weather, the sun or your mood. You are free. It’s a free place. Other boats are not free, you are completely constrained.”

The designer understands his role in the process as that of an interpreter – the client’s desires refracted through the Starck lens. He has no time for contemporaries who submit to a client’s every whim. “You have to drive them in the right way. The people who just make exactly what the client wants are dishonest. You have duty in life, whether you’re a journalist, doctor, politician, to raise the level of everything. Some people and some companies think it’s easier to make more money by flattering, but that’s unacceptable. Morally it’s unacceptable. The beauty is to bring everything and everybody to the highest level you can.”

His range is extreme and he compares the interior of *Motor Yacht A*, where the owner wanted “opulence”, to Steve Jobs’ 78.2 metre *Venus*, which is Starck’s version of the extreme minimalism so loved by the Apple boss. “I listen to them, not a lot, but I try to understand them and after, I say ‘I think this will be good for you’.”

He visibly recoils at the suggestion that *Motor Yacht A*’s exterior is making any kind of statement. “Never!” he shoots back. The intention was to make her blend with the sea, to have her live – that word again – in “harmony” with the elements. He became obsessed with the way the yacht moved

through the water, with barely a ripple, “like a whale”. When a designer sets out to make a statement “you are dead”, he reinforces. “You betray your clients because you are designing for you, you don’t design for them and that is the most horrible thing.” He fought hard to keep exterior detailing to a minimum to achieve the ultimate “dematerialisation”; the result of which is a yacht the size of which is hard to discern from a distance. “The less you have materiality, the more you have intelligence, the more you have competence and the more you have harmony with humanity. The only thing which is deeply beautiful is harmony, because it is timeless. Can you imagine that this boat was designed a long time ago, but when you see it it is completely fresh. You don’t want to change a thing.”

The legend of the “two hours” was born because it took that amount of time to print the design, for his team to take his A4 sheets and plug them into a computer. Starck never works with software himself, preferring the old-fashioned way. “You cannot imagine what you can do with a pen and paper. You are free, you are the most powerful guy in the world for creativity. You can make beautiful things on the computer, but you are inside the brain and creativity of the guy who wrote the program. Nobody has written the program for me and my pen.” He eschews technology and doesn’t use cars – the closest thing to an automobile in his life is his amphibious Sealegs RIB. This isn’t for some Jobs-esque asceticism but because he claims not to be able to use technology. “I don’t have a telephone because I don’t know how to use one.” It’s not just smartphones. “I don’t know my alphabet, I don’t know multiplication or division. I don’t know the months in the right order if I don’t start at January. I am, seriously, a little autistic.”

That might explain his ability to cut off the world and apply extreme focus to a project when he retreats to one of his homes. It might also explain why he trails a reputation for sometimes being “difficult”. “I am never happy. When I hear people say their goal in life is to be happy, I say ‘why?’ Who says that? The goal in life is to work and bring something to society, to the species. Why do we have to be happy? It’s a ridiculous question. I am absolutely not happy, you can’t imagine. I never get invited anywhere.” If he’s critical of others, he’s doubly so of himself, relating one story from his early career when he started crying upon seeing a building complete in Tokyo. “I was so, so disappointed in myself.” Despite the ease with which the concepts come to him, all he ever sees are his designs’ flaws; pride is the enemy. “I have a way of thinking that is not fun for me or other people. I always see the mistake, where I was lazy, where I was dishonest, where I was stupid. And every time I see one of my designs, I think ‘shit, shit, shit. That can be better’.”

It’s hard to reconcile this kind of brutal self-examination with the character sitting in front of me. I have obviously caught him on a good day. Or maybe it’s just because he’s on the water – where he belongs. He’s even generous about the state of modern yacht design, where I expected a harsh critique. The past five or six years have spawned some “more intelligent” projects, he says. “Before, the designs were completely focused on ‘show the money’. I am very happy to see the change. I hope it’s partly because of me.”

This sense of duty to raise the level of the design conversation – whether in tech, tenders or even toothpicks – comes straight from his father, who was an aircraft designer. “He made the Ferrari of the skies!” Starck says there was never any direct instruction, more a general father-son osmosis, a gradual appreciation that your duty “is to create”, that if you want something to exist “you have to invent it”. It was a lesson well learned: just look at the boats that have bubbled from the subconscious magma of Starck’s mind. The seas would be a far more boring place without them. ■



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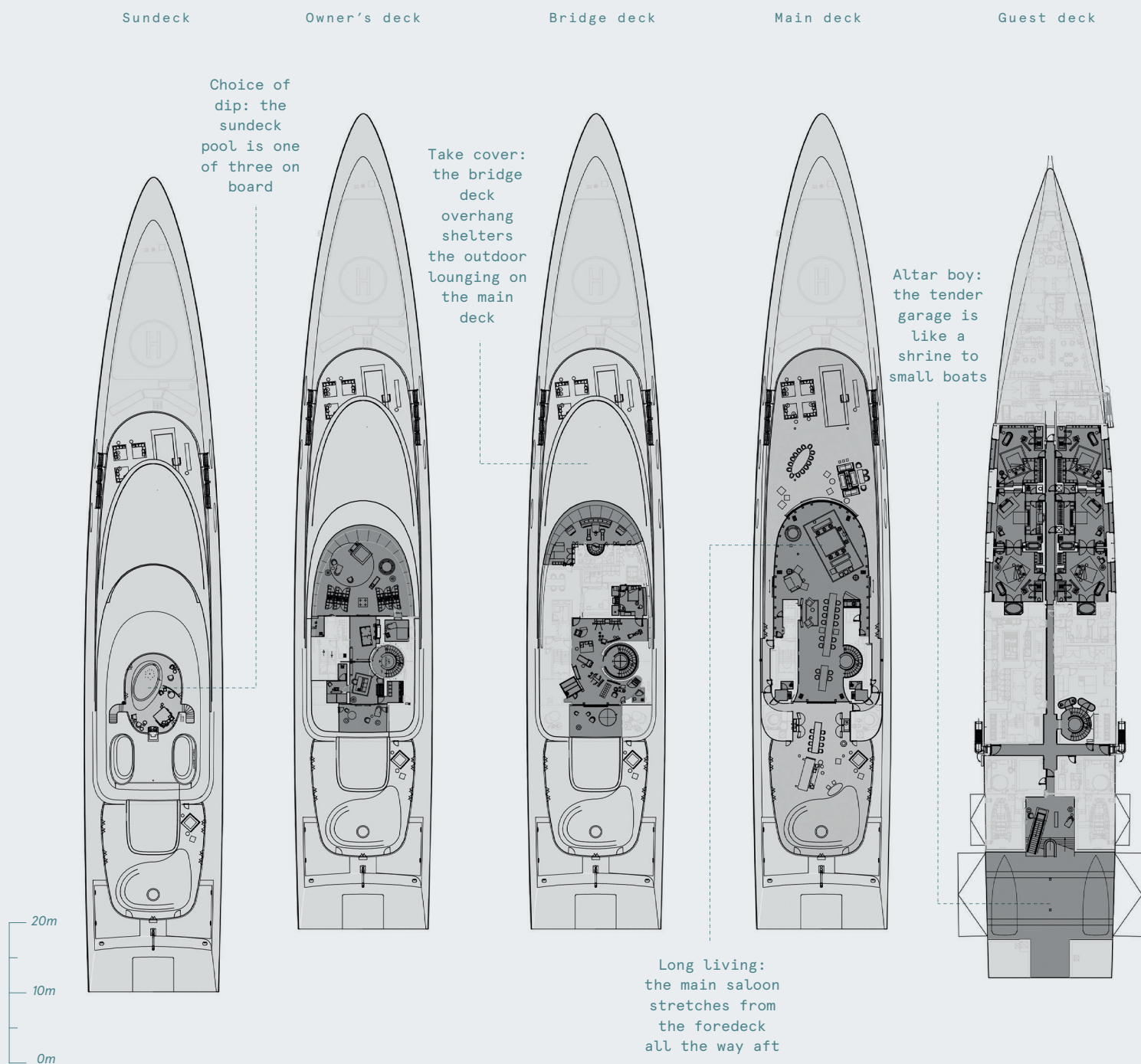
**"YOU CANNOT IMAGINE
WHAT YOU CAN DO WITH
A PEN AND PAPER. YOU
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FOR CREATIVITY"**

*Above: a view into the aft
deck pool from the shrine-
like tender garage (right),
Starck's favourite space
on Motor Yacht A*



MOTOR YACHT A

BLOHM + VOSS



LOA 119m
LWL 118.2m
Beam 18.9m
Draught (full load) 5.2m
Gross tonnage 5,959GT
Engines 2 x MAN RK280

9,000kW (1,000rpm) diesel
Speed max/cruise 23/19.5 knots
Range at 18 knots 6,541nm
Generators 3 x 931kW Cat 3508B

440V 8 cylinder diesel
Fuel capacity 870,000 litres
Freshwater capacity 96,000 litres
Tenders 3 x Vaudrey Millar; 1 x Sealegs

Amphibious RIB; 2 x Zodiac MkIV HD
Owners/guests 14
Crew 35
Construction Steel hull and superstructure; teak decks

Classification Lloyds *100A1 SSC Yacht (P) Mono G6 * LMC UMS PSMR EP SCM
Naval architecture Martin Francis
Interior & exterior design Philippe Starck Design

Builder/year Blohm + Voss GmbH/2008
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