

LUNCH WITH...

Peter de Savary



THE BRITISH ENTREPRENEUR'S HIGH-PROFILE CAREER HAS EVEN INCLUDED AN AMERICA'S CUP BID. AND AS FOR THE BOATS? HE'S OWNED A FEW...

If you're an Englishman of a certain age and type – one who was for instance an impressionable, sailing-mad teenager back in the early 1980s – then the name Peter de Savary is always going to resonate with one particular long hot summer. It was back in 1983 when de Savary led his Victory America's Cup team to the Louis Vuitton Cup final against *Australia II*. *Victory 83* won a race before the Australians prevailed 4-1 to win the Louis Vuitton Cup from de Savary's team, and went on to defeat Dennis Conner in the most famous of all America's Cup matches, finally taking the Cup away from the New York Yacht Club after 132 years of unbroken success.

Since I am an Englishman of that age and type, meeting Peter de Savary was always going to be a bit special. The inescapable fact is that de Savary's outfit got closer to winning the Cup than any other British team in the post-War era, as Sir Ben Ainslie is certainly aware.

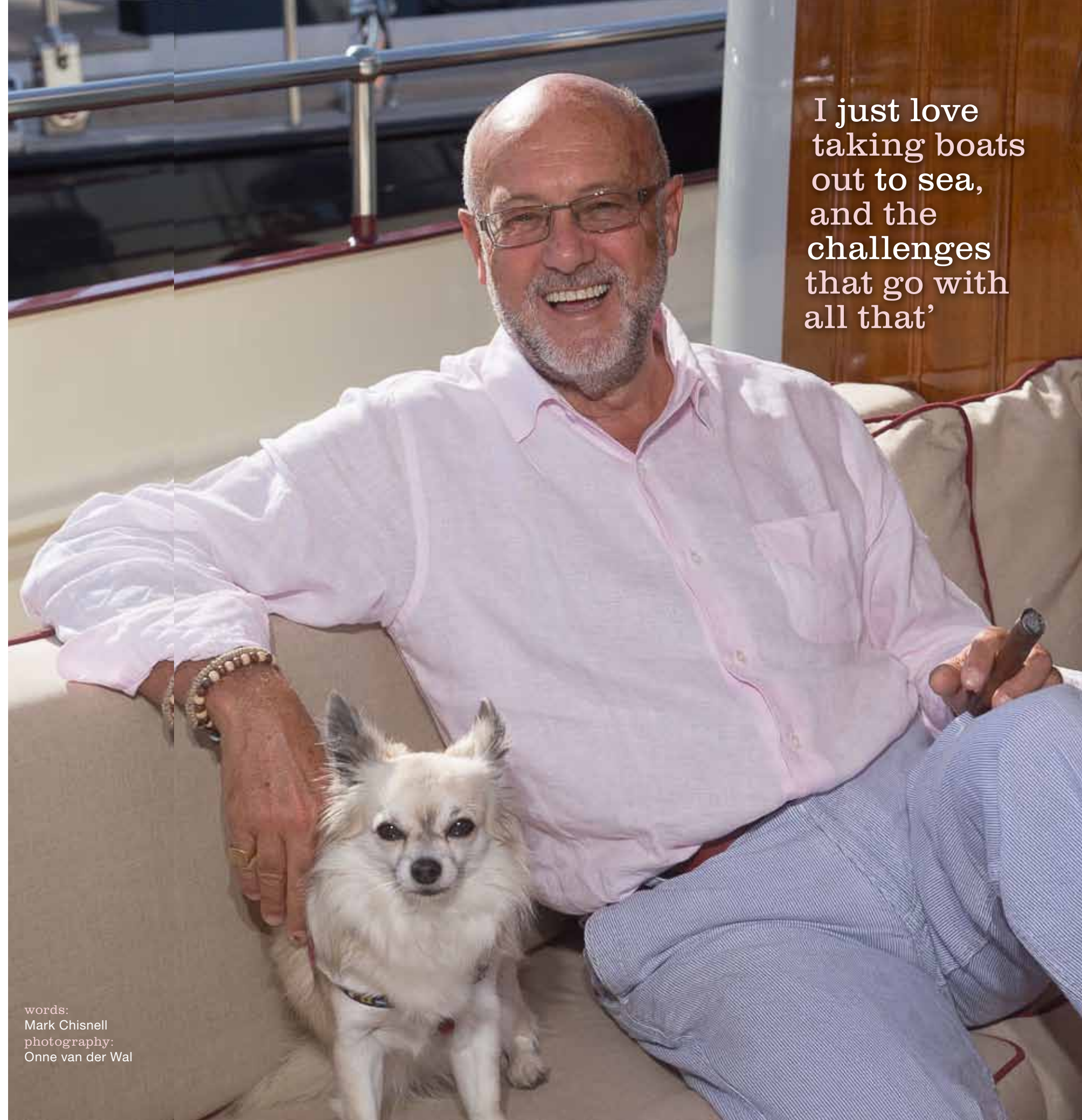
'I'm hugely respectful of, and admire Sir Ben Ainslie enormously,' de Savary says, regarding the recent America's Cup, 'not only his proven sailing abilities, but he's just a really great ambassador for sailing and the UK in every respect. I think that if people are honest, it was because of him that the fortunes of the Americans were reversed in San Francisco. That has done him a huge amount of good in enhancing the likelihood he can get sponsors for a British challenge. The secret is to have multinational sponsors – it would be very hard to find a UK sponsor for \$100 million. That's not to

preclude raising money in England: I could be interested in being a contributor, and perhaps in some areas I could be helpful, so if they want me to play some sort of small role and bring experience I'd be happy to do that, put up some money – but they need to find a multinational sponsor.'

I have joined de Savary for lunch aboard his beautifully restored 33 metre schooner, *Silver Spray* – built by Scheepswerf Piet Smit and originally launched in 1916. We are moored at the Real Club Náutico de Palma, on a beautiful late autumn day, and enjoy a stunning seafood lunch in the cockpit. De Savary points out, 'By the time you get into October you get nice winds here, and the same in early spring. I start here very early, I'll be out sailing this boat by the first of April, and I'm still here sailing now – there's not another owner on a single big boat in this whole port.'

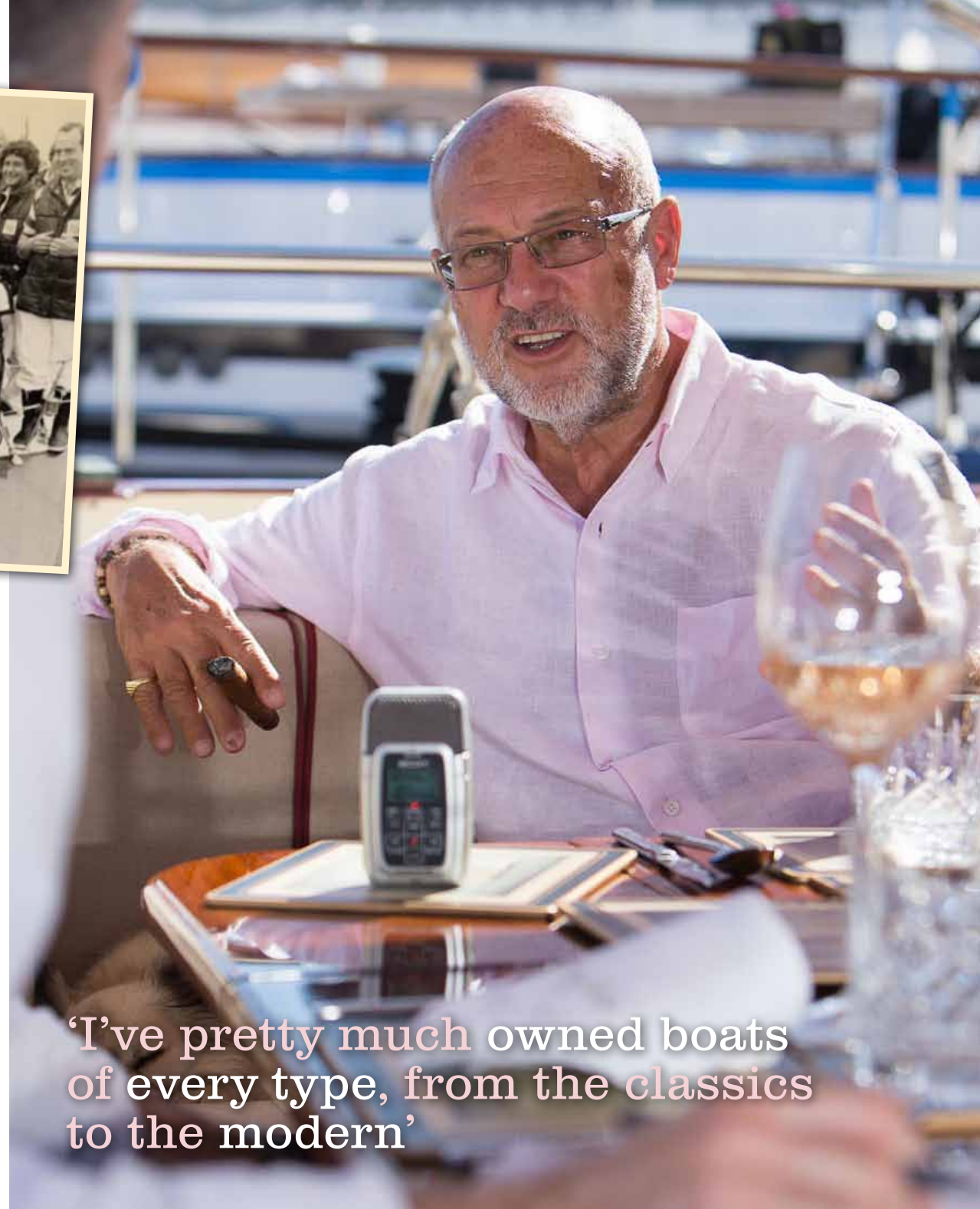
De Savary very much considers himself a sailor. 'If you're a yachtsman – which means you can go out in a 28 foot (8.5 metre) sailing boat and have a three week holiday and absolutely think it's the best thing in your life – the size of the boat is irrelevant. I just love taking boats out to sea, and the challenges that go with all that.' He was born in 1944 on a farm in Essex, but moved to Venezuela with his parents and spent the first nine years of his life in South America. It was here that he found the inspiration for a life filled with boats.

'My first boat experience – where I learnt what the bow was and about port and starboard – was actually in 1952



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in Grenada,' he remembers. 'We went there for a six week holiday from Venezuela, and the only way to get to the beach from the hotel was by boat. A fisherman with a West Indian skiff and an outboard would take us every day with a picnic at 10 o'clock to the beach, and come back [to get us] at 4 o'clock. He let me drive the boat, and taught me about the sea and at the age of eight I was really fascinated by it. I can see it like it was yesterday, [the fisherman] was the inspiration for my love of the sea.'

Once the family returned to England, de Savary made sure that he spent his summer holidays on the water. 'My mother and father divorced when I was one, so I have a step-father; he was not a sailor, but when I was with my mother and him, he was very supportive and enthusiastic for me to go and sail and play with boats. And my real father was a sailor. They both knew that I liked boats and in those divorced situations, when you get your child for a couple of weeks, you tend to try to facilitate that they do things they like.'

'I started sailing down on the Solent (English south coast), at a place called Hill Head, in a clinker-built class boat they had down there called a Jacqueline Class, a 14 foot (4.2 metre) dinghy. My father had a motorboat at that time, but from when I was about 12 he also had a Baltic trading schooner. He lived in Somerset and we kept the boat at West Bay just below Bridport, and usually sail over to France to all the little French ports: Boulogne, Cherbourg, Le Havre, you name it.' The



schooner eventually came to a tragic end on a charter, hitting the rocks while trying to make harbour in a storm. 'My father was devastated, it killed one of the Dutchman's (the charterer) sons.' He fell into the water between the stricken yacht and the rescuing lifeboat.

Family cruising wasn't the only sailing de Savary did when he was young. 'I was at boarding school, I went to Charterhouse and sailed at the school; they used to sail on Frensham Great Pond (near Guildford, in Southern England) in Fireflies. And my parents gave me a little Cadet called *Imp*, my first boat. So I learnt on a Cadet

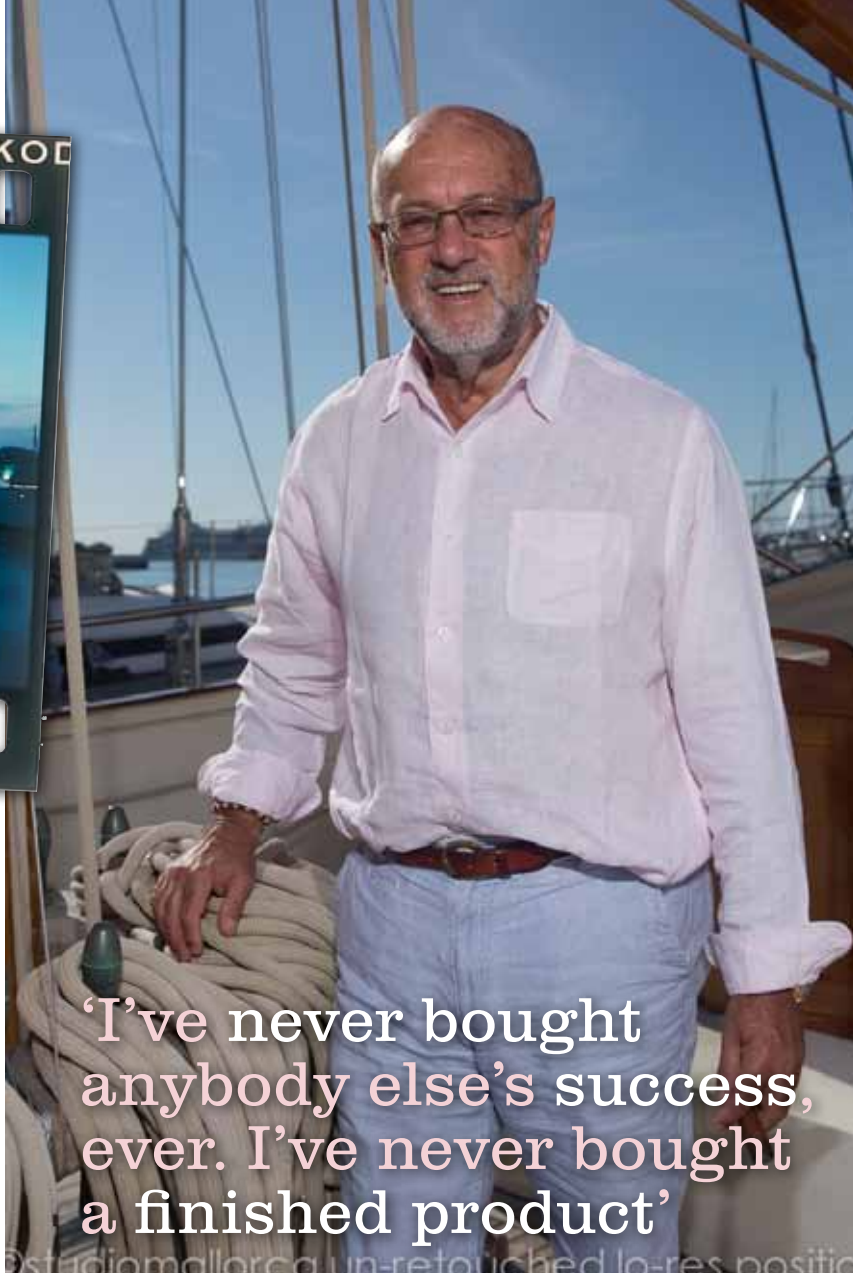
Peter De Savary relaxing aboard his classic 33m schooner *Silver Spray* (opposite), with sumptuous interior (top), and at full sail (above). A scene from his most famous year (opposite top), when his *Victory 83* took on *Australia II* in the 1983 America's Cup

and progressed up to a Firefly and the others.' De Savary's life took a turn away from regular sailing after he left school at 17 and went to Toronto, Canada to work. 'I sailed a bit in Canada, crewing on other people's boats on the Great Lakes,' he says.

He returned to England with his new wife when he was 20, and lived in the West Country. 'I didn't have the money to have a boat – I was working six, sometimes seven days a week. I had hardly enough time for a wife and a daughter, and certainly didn't have any time for sailing.' There was one unsuccessful attempt to get afloat.

'When I was in my early 20s I paid £60 for a plywood speedboat.' After three days of trying to start the engine on a holiday in Cornwall, the boat finally went in the water and promptly sank. 'I abandoned it in the car park,' finishes de Savary with a smile.

Then there was a brief move to Holland, living in the Hague. 'I used to sail there on the weekends, that was 1969 to 1971, and in 1972 I came back to England.' By now his career was on track. 'In 1973 I bought a Riva Superamerica, a 48 foot (14.6 metre), fast motorboat.' It was the first of many. 'I've pretty much owned boats of



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every type, from the classics to the modern,' he says, estimating their number at 50. So many boats, and all funded by a long and multifaceted career.

'I've never bought anybody else's success, ever. I've never bought a finished product,' he says. He started in import and export to Africa, and at one stage included shipping in his business portfolio. 'In the '80s we used to run 18 shipyards around the world, from South Korea to Dubai, Greece, Scotland and Wales. Previously, back in 1969, we owned about five 10,000-tonne cargo ships, trampers that didn't run a regular schedule, opportunists for hire and reward.'

These days, de Savary's empire is largely based around a high-profile portfolio of hotels and resorts focused on golf courses and marinas or other amenities, which have included Skibo Castle in Scotland, where Madonna married Guy Ritchie. He is also deeply involved in Grenada, where he is chairman and founder of the multi-million-dollar development at Port Louis, with a wider role as the government's external investment ambassador.

Boat International readers may also know him for starting the Pendennis boatyard. '[That was] years ago now,' de Savary reflects, 'and I got Ed Dubois to design a very beautiful yacht called *Taramber* (a 37.4 metre sloop).' It was named after Tara and Amber, two of his daughters. It was the first boat built in a yard that has gone on to international success.

So from the many boats he's owned, which are his favourites? 'Of the sailing boats it was *Vagrant* (32 metre), the Herreshoff schooner built in 1910 for Harold Vanderbilt – it was a graduation present for school. He went out and won the Newport Bermuda Race. I found her at the bottom of the sea in Antigua, but Herreshoff's grandson had the original drawings and sail plan, so we raised her from the sea and spent a year and a half rebuilding her in the mid-'80s.

'After that I would probably say *Taramber*, purely because we conceived it and built it ourselves in our yard, and it was truly our creation. Of course it was designed by Ed Dubois, but it was an achievement to

Among De Savary's many boats, one of the more famous is *Land's End* (top left and above left), a 49m built in the 1960s. In 1987 he actually purchased *Land's End* itself: England's most westerly point



build a boat like that in a new yard. Then I had a wonderful, very pretty yacht called *White Hawk*, a Bruce King 110 foot (33.5 metre) schooner that I had four years ago. After that the cute little sexy Hoek, *Savvy* (a Truly Classic 65 named after another daughter Savannah), and *Lisanola*, named after the other two girls, Lisa and Nicola, that I sold last year.'

This is just a selection of the sailing boats, then there were the many motor yachts. 'Of the motorboats, I think *Kalizma* [is the favourite],' declares de Savary. This was the classic 50 metre launched as *Minona* in 1906, but most famous for being the boat that film star Richard Burton bought for Elizabeth Taylor in 1967. De Savary owned her during the 1983 America's Cup and



used her as a floating base. 'Then it would be the motor yacht *Land's End*. It was 166 foot (50.6 metres) and built in Holland, one of six whaling hulls, the only one made into a yacht. And then *Fairy Swordsman* (with an interior by Terence Disdale). We shipped it to America and used it as a weather boat in the [America's] Cup racing.'

It's been quite a life, and as we finish up lunch with very fine ice cream and de Savary relights his trademark cigar, there's still enough time to discuss his philanthropic work. 'I'm a subscriber to (19th Century industrialist turned philanthropist) Andrew Carnegie's theory, which embraces two things: to be wasteful is a sin, and to be extravagant is a conscious decision. I also believe that to die rich is to die disgraced. So we make various donations, as discreetly and anonymously as we can.'

'I've never inherited anything or won anything, so realise how lucky I am to have done relatively well and enjoy many lovely things in life. You're an odd kind of person if it doesn't give you enormous pleasure and satisfaction to put some of that back to benefit people, who for whatever reason didn't have the same luck, and indeed have got dealt an awful hand.' De Savary, though, has played a blinder with every card he got. 🇩🇪

De Savary's support boat during his 1983 America's Cup campaign was 50m *Kalizma* (top), once owned by film stars and one of his all-time favourite boats. The Hoek-designed *Savvy* (above), was named after his daughter Savannah. With crew (and lunch) aboard *Silver Spray* (left)